

***OLD AND NEW SOUTHERN INDIA: AN ECO POETIC/PHOTOGRAPHIC
ESSAY***

By Dr Ioana Petrescu

Introduction

Creative and cultural persistence within industrial globalisation is strikingly visible in the colourful creations of Southern India, such as saris and street art at Pongal times. Mahabalipuram is the place of some of the oldest artefacts from Dravidian times (including the Sangam period, 300 BCE – 300 CE). Today traffic controllers wear pollution-tight surgical masks at road intersections, monuments are cleaned/restored frequently and, all along the activities of coping with the massive manufacturing industrialisation, there are festivals such as Pongal that offer the cultural feast of traditional foods and colours.

Photographs taken with iPhone by Ioana Petrescu

Poems inspired by 2016 travel in Southern India by Ioana Petrescu

I. BLUE SKY

Temple in Mahabalipuram



II. THE SKY OF MADURAI

There's a hill in the background behind the smog



III. PONGAL

Celebration of the future year's abundance: street art in front of Mahabalipuram house (chalk on concrete)



IV. COLOURS AND CONCRETE

Mahabalipuram at Pongal Time



V. RURAL CUSTOMS

Decorated oxen 1



Decorated oxen 2



VI. GOATS IN THE PALACE YARD

Tanjore



As John Shoptaw says, as far as we know there is no Planet B

“Ecopoetry is nature poetry that has designs on us, that imagines changing the ways we think, feel about, and live and act in the world. If an ecopoem is only a postmodern or a contemporary nature poem, why ecopoetry? The essential difference between nature poetry and ecopoetry cannot be stylistic. But as Frost, Moore, Spahr, Graham, Roberson, Hass, and many other poets have shown us, the ways of being ecopoetic are increasingly diverse. Let me add what my last decade of reading and teaching confirms: nature poetry, even without broaching ruination or restoration, can also be environmentalist. If Hopkins can get me excited about species acting out their names (“As kingfishers catch fire, dragonflies draw flame”); if John Clare or Emily Dickinson or Snyder or Kay Ryan can encourage me to see

myself in an animal; or if Wendell Berry or W.S. Merwin or Brenda Hillman can place me in and beyond the poem, then they have motivated me to want these creatures and environments to stay. By showing us also that some things must go (dams, oil rigs, plastic bags, animal concentration camps, virtual disconnectedness), ecopoetry doesn't supplant nature poetry but enlarges it. (John Shoptaw, Why Ecopoetry?, in Poetry Magazine, January 4th, 2016)

Mahabalipuram, Trichi, Tanjore, Madurai, Kochi

I.

The ancient rock is muted,
no vibration
of thousands of years and
thousands of people
all having gone past.
No one is casting shadows but me
and my mind.

The sun gilds everything,
in no less than 22 karats,
"No one except western people wear
less than 22 karats," I'm told.
I'm not western enough
and not eastern anymore,
my shiny metal is silver.

II.

The metal monkey watches me
mixing my metaphors.
I see no rats, it's squirrels, striped,
cheeky and bushy-tailed.

III.

A cow comes to me, she's giving me a pet look,
not the "what are you doing here"
belligerent look cows used to give me
in my grandparents' small town.
The city girl in me is not scared of this cow,
the priest in the street temple
had put a red dot on her forehead,
just like the one he had put on mine.
Perhaps this is why she came to me?

I keep walking.
Dirt gets into my shoes,
goats, the new residents of the old palace,
come close to me.
They don't mind my camera.
They also don't mind
they might soon be listed as "mutton"
in a street eatery.

THE LAUNDRY OF KOCHI

Hardworking like bees

In cubicles unlike bees

Hexagonal walls of honey lost.

Cleanliness caustic as lye.



FOR THE OLD MAN FOLDING CLEAN LAUNDRY IN KOCHI

Old man in a loin cloth

your town is waiting

for clean laundry.

Folds on your face mirror

folded colourful clothing.

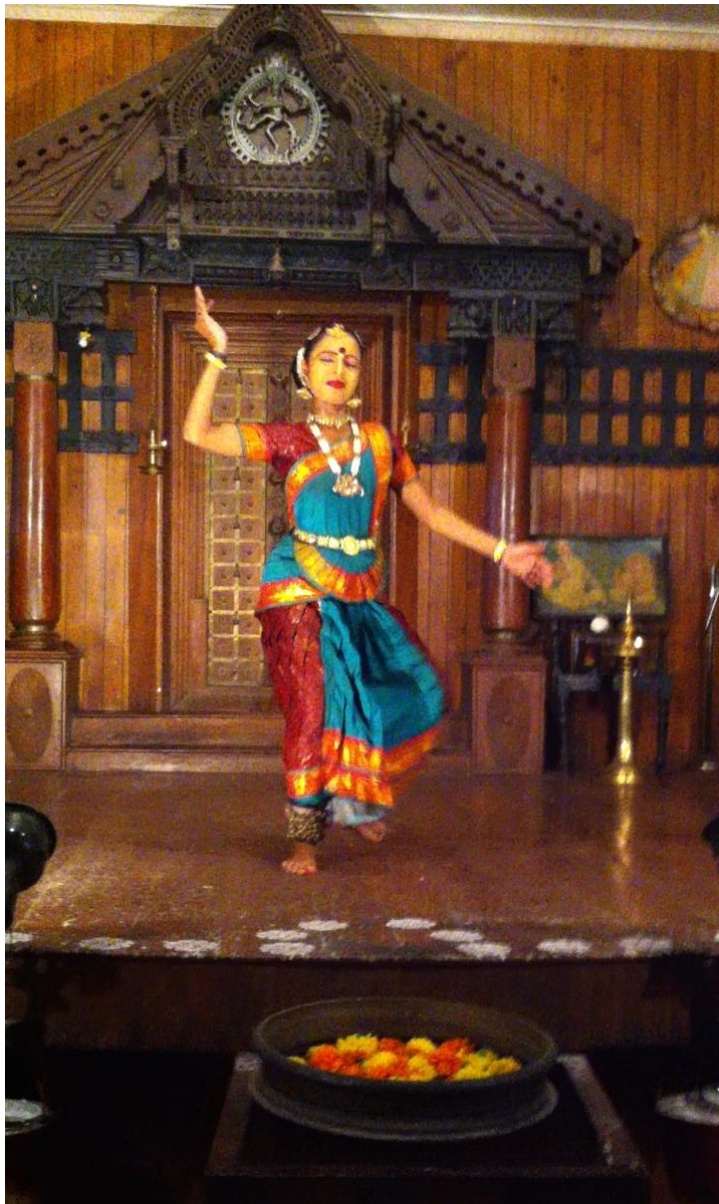
Would you break washing machines

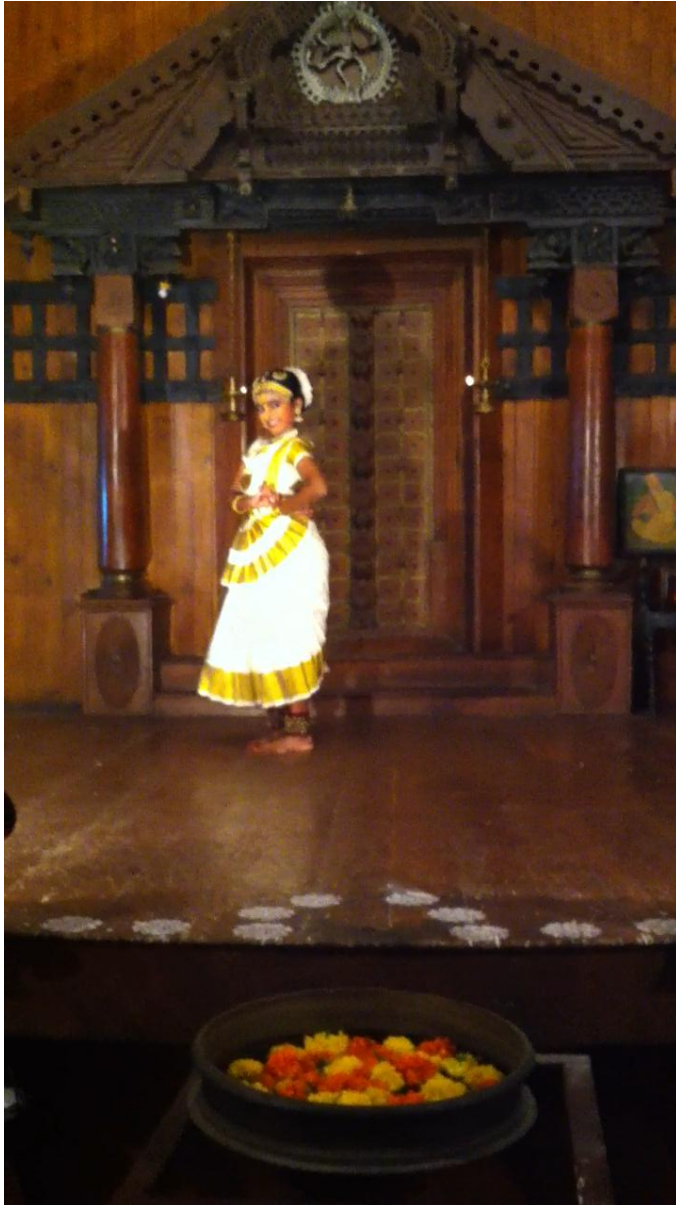
like Luddites broke their new looms?



KATHAKALI DANCING

As we were told at the beginning of the show, in Kochi, by a man reading from a printout, **Kathakali** is a stylized classical Indian dance-drama noted for the attractive make-up of characters, elaborate costumes, detailed gestures and well-defined body movements presented in tune with playback music and complementary percussion. It originated in Kerala during the 17th century and has developed over the years. The themes of the Kathakali typically deal with the Mahabharata, the Ramayana and the ancient Puranas. This is performed in a text which is generally Sanskritised Malayalam.





Long years of training

best dancer in her class

white dove gliding.

THE WORLD IS A STAGE

The many faces of Kathakali drama:



TRUCK RIDE



Going for a ride? Having a good old chat?

Your sharp canine teeth remind me

of my old home, Transylvania.

I like your golden splendour,

and your nice people,

please be kind to them,

don't let smoke and soot

cover their colourful world.

Bio

Dr Ioana Petrescu is a Romanian-born Australian poet and academic. She has published three collections of poetry and has edited numerous poetry books. Ioana teaches poetry and fiction writing at The University of South Australia, where she has also supervised to successful completion numerous PhD, MA and Honours creative writing theses. She can be contacted at Ioana.Petrescu@unisa.edu.au

EPISSTEMA