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**'Me is not a stable reality':**

**Negotiations of Identity in the Poetry of  
Dorothy Auchterlonie, Rosemary Dobson, Dorothy Hewett  
and J.S. Harry**

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**A thesis submitted for the degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy of  
The Australian National University**

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## STATEMENT

I, Marie-Louise Ayres, declare that this thesis has never before been submitted, either in part or in whole, to this or any other university for the purposes of a higher degree. To the best of my knowledge and belief, this thesis is an original piece of research and, except where otherwise acknowledged, all conclusions are my own.

(Signed) M-L. Ayres

## NOTE

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## ABSTRACT

*'Me is not a stable reality':*

Negotiations of Identity in the Poetry of

Dorothy Auchterlonie, Rosemary Dobson, Dorothy Hewett  
and J.S. Harry

In recent years, scholars have paid considerable attention to Australian women's fiction, resulting in a thorough re-assessment of the canon. Many of Australia's most accomplished women poets, however, have not received adequate critical attention, and available statistics suggest that there is still a marked bias in favour of Australian male poets. This thesis considers the work of several poets who, while recognised as significant in our cultural heritage, have not been the subject of a body of sustained criticism. The four poets—Dorothy Auchterlonie (1915-1991), Rosemary Dobson (1920-), Dorothy Hewett (1923-) and J.S. Harry (1939-)—represent a tradition which has seen women publishing poetry of great quality over many years. This thesis adds to an emerging body of criticism which has focused to date on a small number of Australian women poets, notably Judith Wright and Gwen Harwood.

The Introduction to this thesis outlines the critical bias in favour of male poets, and proposes an approach to the poetry which takes into account contemporary feminist and post-structural critical practices. The four chapters examine the poetry of Auchterlonie, Dobson, Hewett and Harry, in order of their dates of birth. Chapter One considers Auchterlonie's poetry, and in particular the ways in which it problematises the more 'public' prose writing and the public persona of Dorothy Green. Chapter Two traces Rosemary Dobson's fifty years of published poetry, arguing that her work has previously been considered too narrowly as concerned with abstractions such as Art and Time. I argue that her work can also be seen as a sustained meditation on connection and the possibilities of translation. Chapter Three examines Dorothy Hewett's poetry, reading it particularly in relation to her drama and prose. In this chapter I demonstrate the ways in which Hewett's writing across several genres sees her reworking and reweaving material throughout her writing life. In Chapter Four I show that J.S. Harry continues the tradition established by the other three poets, especially in her preoccupation with connections between writing and experience. Each of the chapters explores the concept of an 'unstable' identity, and the imaginative freedom which this allows. Finally, my Conclusion draws together some of these threads, and argues again that a body of critical writing on these women is essential to a full understanding of Australian writing.