



AXON: Creative Explorations
2024 vol 14.2 *We Need to Talk*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/q20v6mljuq
Keywords: Introduction, editorial, poetry,
politics

WE NEED TO TALK

Editors: Owen Bullock & Jen Webb



Berlin: Memorial to
the Murdered Jews of
Europe, designed by
Peter Eisenman.



AXON: Creative Explorations
2024 vol 14.2 *We Need to Talk*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/egxi66zgjk
Keywords: Introduction, editorial, poetry,
politics

EDITORIAL

Owen Bullock, *University of Canberra*
ORCID: 0000-0002-2520-3766

Jen Webb, *University of Canberra*
ORCID: 0000-0003-4912-7021

EDITORIAL

Owen Bullock & Jen Webb

We are delighted to be able to present new work that demonstrates the value of creative writing as research and articulates its methodologies with clarity, showcasing the importance of the creative act and evoking its complexities with careful attention to process. This clear articulation of creative writing research is synonymous with advances in the discipline, as seen at conferences such as the Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP), where this dynamic has grown and intensified, especially through the efforts of PhD candidates. Indeed, many of these articles were first presented as papers at the 28th Annual Conference of the AAWP (Canberra, 2023), which we had the honour of directing.

This issue of *Axon: Creative Explorations* is titled 'We Need to Talk', and the concept behind this title galvanised the work of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research (the publisher of *Axon*) throughout 2023. The project emerged from a collaboration between the University of Canberra, Ulster University, and the British Council in 2022, which was titled 'Difficult Conversations: What is the role of art and creativity in a polarised society?'¹ This involved artists, academics, and artist-academics in framing discussions about their own experiences of and/or research into how art practice and creative thinking can address wicked problems, engage in the ongoing debates on 'difficult' topics, and both raise and investigate controversial questions that impact on, and also animate, our communities.

Outputs from that collaboration included a symposium held online and on campus at the University of Canberra in March 2022. In the following year, selections from that event were published as an open-source book of essays, artworks and poetry.² But researchers involved in the collaboration couldn't immediately let it go; instead, it energised our thinking about the affordances of conversation, discussion, questioning and testing out ideas about how to interrupt problematic social, economic and political practices – and, of equal value, the importance of focusing on future-minded perspectives on the wicked problems of the world.

In June 2023 we hosted a symposium for research candidates and early career researchers, under the title 'We need to talk: HDR study First Nations Australians' Way'. The presentations, panels and yarning sessions covered a range of aspects of Indigenous Australian perspectives on, and experiences with, research study and training. Next, we installed the 2023 Faculty of Arts and Design exhibition – including several artist-academics from Ulster University. The exhibition, titled (of course) 'We Need to Talk', presented artworks that explored environmental, cultural, psychological and other health-related topics. Finally, we used the same title and that same concept in our call for presentations to the AAWP conference, hosted on the University of Canberra campus in November/December 2023.

We were both deeply impressed by the quality of the work we saw presented at the conference, and this was our motivation in calling for papers on the theme – especially from conference delegates – for this issue of *Axon*. Difficult conversations; wicked problems; creative engagements: the works published here address these themes and demonstrate a truly adventurous approach to research that also exemplifies the journal's subtitle: Creative Explorations. The contributors offer unconventional strategies that convince of the necessity of their methodology. They represent original and innovative approaches to scholarship and frequently give voice to the decentred and marginalised, concerning themselves with

sustainable ways of being in the world. Many of the works are based on personal stories and make astute use of autoethnographic or autofictive techniques, so that personal, social and institutional issues are easily identified in each piece, alongside the sense of transformative creative practice that pervades them. And many show a clear focus on orality and various dimensions of speaking, as well as the use of a lyrical voice and structure.

While we can't genuinely organise these essays and poems into clearcut categories, we do gesture toward a way of reading them, according to what might act as a sort of rubric under which we can group the individual works. One loose collection is of texts that seek to expose gaps and silences in culture, and in cultural histories.

Christine Balint's 'Creating authenticity to foreground women's experience in historical fiction' seeks, through the use of immersive narrative, to restore female voices to history, in this case, the experiences of girls at the Derelitti Convent Orphanage in Venice in the eighteenth century. She explores authenticity of voice in historical fiction in a postmodern feminist context, including the first-person writing employed in her own historical novel set in this period, raising personal, social and institutional issues and showing that transformative creative practice can re-activate decentred voices.

Kim Cope Tait's 'Wound and Bloom: Personal Sovereignty in the Poetry of Hinemoana Baker and Natalie Diaz' highlights the work of queer Indigenous poets, with 'sovereignty' understood as a personal dynamic of 'autonomy and freedom from oppression'. Tait argues that these two intersectionally marginalised poets interrupt and interrogate the tendencies toward heteropatriarchal structures in settler nations, and through their writing also aim to decolonise the self.

Francesca Rendle-Short, Melody Ellis and Roanna Gonsalves offer an exploration of 'With/nessing' in their discussion of cultural exchange and verbatim theatre, a project that concerns sustainable ways of speaking, and of speaking communally. The paper is developed from a performance grounded in cultural exchange between writers and writer-researchers who participated in a five-day Live Residency, or CoLab, at the Singapore Writers Festival in 2022. The essay is a dynamic performance of voices – and particularly the voices of Asia-Pacific writers, speaking of their own concerns, interests and aspirations.

Sarai Mannolini-Winwood's contribution speaks to the silences and absences in literature about specific places. It traces a case study she undertook in Walyalup / Fremantle, and through analysis of texts published in and about the area, identifies both the sense of place offered by authors and the gaps in that sensory/literary knowledge – especially with reference to local Indigenous knowledges, values and ways of being on Country.

The second (very loose) category of papers contains those that point directly to ways of exploring and enunciating losses, grief and misunderstanding. This is a thread that in fact winds its way through pretty well all the papers here, but for convenience sake, we collect them together in this particular basket.

Emilie Collyer and Miriam Wei Wei Lo bear witness to personal suffering in potentially transformative ways through poems about gendered violence and domestic violence. These poems are in conversation with each other, addressing, individually and collectively, what trauma makes unsayable, and theorising on the relationship between language and literature

and trauma and the ability of poetry, in its function as a research method, to articulate complexity, often through the fragment.

Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon's three erasure poems explore the poem as 'palimpsest'. Dedicated to Tome Grubelić, an ethnic Croatian who was killed attempting to escape detention at Holdsworthy Concentration Camp, NSW, Australia, 1917, they mobilise source material from newspaper articles in the Trove database to expose 'the unjust treatment of a civilian ethnic minority during World War I'. The poems balance demotic expression and immediate detail with larger issues of freedom and oppression.

Emily Rytmeister's essay, 'Dialogue with the deceased father: Patriographical creative practice as a means of connection and self-exploration', pulls focus to her personal family history, and reports on the making of her documentary about her father, jazz musician Roger Frampton. Hybridising the scholarship of patriography and autoethnography, the writing reflects on the way the process of connection gained by viewing her father's story as family history helped the author both to separate from him and to resolve her grief.

Briony Doyle's 'Paper Dolls: Autofiction, ambivalence and resistance' is a personal essay that communicates the generative power of autofiction, with a keen emphasis on process, within the Covid context. Doyle compares the protagonist of her new novel written during lockdown with the paper dolls she made as a child, sending the puppet 'into scenarios otherwise inaccessible to me'. It very directly articulates what was for years an ambivalence she could not speak out: 'the relief and sorrow of solitude, the inward pull of the I, her pleasure in invention, and anxiety over what she might produce or reveal'.

The final cluster of texts are those that offer insights into the use of writing to recognise those difficult things that need to be aired; to suggest ways to rebuild and achieve recovery; and to reconnect with the individuals, communities and concepts that matter.

Oz Hardwick's poetry sequence and commentary articulate the affordances of writing (specifically prose poetry) for navigating the gaps and dislocations so often associated with the experience of living with autism; and, viewed from the other side of the 'conversation', what the perceptions afforded by autism can offer to the work of writing poetry – producing 'event maps' of a life.

Roxanne Bodsworth's 'Breaking the Locks: increased accessibility for isolated poets during lockdown and post-COVID' addresses this specifically, in her discussion of online writing opportunities during the Covid pandemic. It argues that these events gave voice to those who might otherwise have been marginalised and discusses the topic through examples of others' writing as well as her own autoethnographic work.

Rose Hunter's 'The Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) "share" as literary form: "Talk Recovery" and David Antin's talk poetry' describes an original creative research design that narrates her recovery from alcohol, combining the AA share with an adaptation of Antin's 'talk poem' in a book-length work of poetry. It celebrates the common ground of the two methods used, in terms of the poetic qualities of orality.

Gao Fan sees a character become a puppet in his hands in the final piece of a five-poem sequence, in a strange echo of a reference to stones contained in the first poem. A quirky and strong sense of voice underpins the writing, as the poems intersect and enhance each other as a group, with compelling shifts from lineation to prose poetry. Gao views poetry as a product

of mystery and embraces that lens here by exploring the seeming emptiness or nothingness of things.

Finally, Emma Darragh and Christine Howe's 'What if teaching was deliberately fun? Combating burnout through creative play' celebrates the discovery process in the creative writing classroom, both through the dialogic approach to their methodology (and their writing), and by modelling creative play while attempting to mitigate staff exhaustion.

We find both depth and breadth in all these papers, along with what is often a playful or experimental approach to the writing of research and scholarship, and are confident that their ideas and the findings from their work will support other academics, artists, and artist-academics as they too pursue the aim of a future-minded, generative and more generous human community.

Notes

¹ British Council 2025 'Difficult Conversations: What is the role of art and creativity in a polarised society?' UK/Australia Season 2021–22, <https://nireland.britishcouncil.org/ukaustralia-season-difficult-conversations>

² Frederick, UK, A Harrison, T Ireland and J Magee 2023 Difficult conversations, Belfast: British Council. This volume is freely available online, at https://nireland.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/4265_bc_difficult_conversations_06_compressed_1.pdf

About the authors

Owen Bullock's latest poetry collection is *Pancakes for Neptune* (Recent Work Press, 2023), following three previous poetry titles, five books of haiku, a bilingual edition of tanka and a novella. His research interests include creative arts and wellbeing; haikai literature; poetry and process; semiotics and poetry; prose poetry, and collaboration. His scholarly work has appeared in *Antipodes*, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Arts Therapy*, *Axon*, *Journal of New Zealand Literature*, *Juxtapositions*, *Ka Mate Ka Ora*, *Medical Humanities*, *New Writing*, *Qualitative Inquiry*, *Social Alternatives*, *TEXT* and *Westerly*. He is Discipline Lead for Creative Writing and Literary Studies at the University of Canberra.

Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice in the Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra. Her research and practice address creativity, representation and material poetics. Recent publications include *Gender and the Creative Labour Market* (with S Brook, Palgrave, 2022), the edited creative/critical volume *The Writing Mind: Creative Writing Responses to Images of the Living Brain* (with J Prendergast and E Herbert-Goodall, Recent Work Press 2023), and the poetry collection *The Daily News* (Recent Work Press, 2024). She is co-editor of the literary journal *Meniscus* and the scholarly journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*.

CREATING AUTHENTICITY TO FOREGROUND WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN HISTORICAL FICTION

Christine Balint

La Trobe University, ORCID: 0009-0002-9886-612X

Abstract

Bryony Stocker (2012: 309) posits three methods of writing 'authentic' dialogue in historical fiction: 'immersion, hybridisation and reader guidance'. The technique of 'immersion' creates its effects by incorporating a combination of contemporary informal language structures and contextual references. The language structures give the dialogue accessibility and verisimilitude; the inclusion of historical detail serves to signify authenticity to the reader. Following on from Stocker's work, this paper discusses the use of 'immersion' and 'hybridisation' in a first-person narrative voice. It examines the use of first-person narrative voice as a device for creating authenticity in Hannah Kent's novel, *Devotion* (2021), and my own novel, *The Last Music Keeper of Venice* (2024). I will explore the primacy of interiority in endorsing the 'authority' of the subject through first-person narrative voice as a direct address to the reader. This will be followed by a discussion within a feminist context of the devices of developing a powerful awareness and depiction of the narrator's physical body, delineating the self as separate from others and adding depth to the narratorial self. I will finish with a discussion of the motif of women's archives as a metaphor for the broader feminist historical (fiction) project of returning women to the historical narrative.

CREATING AUTHENTICITY TO FOREGROUND WOMEN'S EXPERIENCE IN HISTORICAL FICTION

Christine Balint

Some years ago, I began researching in the archives of the *Istituzioni di Ricovero e di Educazione* (Institution of Hospitalisation and Recovery) in Venice. My goal was to write a novel set in one of Venice's eighteenth-century musical orphanages, and I had been granted funding from Creative Victoria to undertake the research.

The archive was located in a top-floor apartment of an aged care home, formerly the *Derelitti* Convent Orphanage. The collection consisted of boxes of unfiled documents related to the running of the institution, as well as a few structured leatherbound volumes in which the nuns had kept budgetary information. The papers were not organised or catalogued.

I had come seeking the voices of the girls who lived in this orphanage in the late eighteenth-century. I soon found that the voices in the archive were not theirs. The figures of authority in the institution were the governing board: male members of the aristocracy. They made decisions about who to admit to the institution, who was allowed to go on holidays, who would be granted permission to marry. Many of the records were form letters signed by the members of the governing board.

While these letters offered snippets of valuable information relating to life in the orphanage, they were somewhat dry. They shed limited light on the subjective experiences of the individuals whose lives were affected by them.

My experience using this archive prompted me to question how best to work creatively with historical administrative records in a way that offers a kind of authenticity in narrative voice. As a writer of feminist historical fiction, my broad project is to re-imagine and re-create the lives of historical women absent from or lightly sketched in the archive. To convey my stories to readers, I must create a sense of authenticity in my work. In a postmodern context, authenticity has become a problematic term. The authenticity by which historical fiction has traditionally been measured, however, is that of close adherence to verifiable facts from the archive (Stocker 2012: 308).

Authenticity in narrative voice, regardless of how it is constructed, is important in historical fiction both for bringing stories to light and for making the stories accessible to contemporary readers. In her essay "'Bygone' – Is This Really the Authentic Language of Historical Fiction?', Bryony Stocker claims that 'authenticity' in the first instance comes from verifiable historical accuracy with the aim of verisimilitude (Stocker 2012: 308). Her essay categorises techniques for writing 'authentic' dialogue in historical fiction. Stocker briefly outlines the current reception of historical fiction, stating that 'authenticity is still widely used as a measure of quality between what might generically be termed literary versus popular fiction, or as de Groot terms – what 'distinguishes the newly respectable historical novel from the pejoratively termed "bodice ripper"' (de Groot, in Stocker 2012: 309). According to Stocker, to gain its so-called respectable status with critics, historical fiction must look intently towards the discipline of maintaining the historical accuracy that is borne of in-depth research. Stocker highlights that in its critical reception, the first principle of authenticity in historical fiction is that of accuracy (2012: 308).

According to Hayden White, there is a clear distinction between the 'true' recount of history and the 'real' account of fiction: 'a simply true account of the world based on what the documentary record permits one to talk about is . . . only a very small proportion of what "reality" consists of. The real consists of what can truthfully be said about what it could *possibly* be' (White 2007: 147). Authenticity in historical fiction, then, can be considered more than reliance on the historical record to create a text. authenticity is developed through using this historical record to create a sense of perception and imagining possibilities, in many cases by foregrounding narrative voice to create a powerful sense of subjectivity. Thus, Stocker's principles for creating authenticity in dialogue can be applied more broadly to the creation of narrative voice.

I begin this essay by exploring the concept of Authenticity in historical fiction within a postmodern feminist context. In the second half of this essay, I examine the use of the first-person narrative voice as one of several devices for creating a sense of authenticity in Hannah Kent's novel, *Devotion* (2021), and my own novel-in-progress, *The Last Music Keeper of Venice* (2024). I argue for the primacy of interiority in endorsing the 'authority' of the subject through first-person narrative voice as a direct address to the reader as one important technique to support authenticity. This will be followed by a discussion of the device of representing a powerful awareness and depiction of the narrator's physical body, delineating the self as separate from others, and adding depth to the narratorial self to support verisimilitude. I conclude with a discussion of the motif of women's archives as a metaphor for the broader historical (fiction) project of returning women to the historical narrative.¹ This paper contends that the three devices of foregrounding interiority, presenting a powerful delineation of the narrator's physical body, and drawing on the motif of women's archives, contribute to a powerful sense of authenticity in feminist historical fiction.

Stocker posits three methods of writing 'authentic' dialogue in historical fiction: 'immersion, hybridisation and reader guidance' (Stocker 2012: 311). I will focus on immersion and hybridisation here. According to Stocker, immersion is 'where vocabulary, sentence structure and spelling are all faithfully reproduced, and the reader must adapt [themselves] to the language of another age'. Stocker highlights that the unfamiliarity of these patterns of speech can limit the writing's accessibility to a modern readership. In addition, where authors are working with stories that took place prior to recording technology, they only have written records of language structures rather than oral records (Patrick Collinson, in Stocker 2012: 310). There is a political dimension to the adoption of such modes of narrative, grammatical structures and rhetorical patterns of the past. The problem with relying on such written sources is that they were largely created by those who already had greater voice, agency and representational influence. Finding sources that give voice to the private, interior, reflective selves of people who had limited power, education or even agency is almost impossible. Even if such records were to exist, it is highly unlikely they would be found in an archive. In her article, 'Reconstructing a Life: The Archival Challenges of Women's History', Honor Sachs writes that:

scholars must reconcile the fact that certain subjects were not deemed historically important or worthy of preservation ... Given such shortcomings, scholars learned to 'read against the grain' of documents to tease out hidden stories or to point out the ubiquity of things so ordinary they are rarely seen. (Sachs 2008: 651)

In an academic context, such reading against the grain must be done with careful contextualising: clearly delineated presences and absences in the record, interrogating the reliability of the

source material, leaving a clearly marked trail of research. Fiction, on the other hand, allows for immersion in a narrative through a lens where readers and writers can imagine possibilities.

The historical imbalance in the record puts an additional value on the fictionalised individual and their interiority in a way that, arguably, conventional historical narratives find more difficult. Authenticity in this context then can be about creating a liberal humanist sense of consistency of character, plausibility of individuality and distinctness of voice. In a postmodernist context, the development of such characters is increasingly complex when we consider the individual's own capacity to mis-remember and mis-represent their past.

Hybridisation, Stocker's second method, is 'consciously inauthentic, focusing on effect rather than accuracy. Hybridisation is the most common approach utilised by writers of historical fiction' (2012: 313). This method incorporates the historical context of the work while engaging a kind of vernacular that is perhaps slightly more self-conscious than that used in fiction with contemporary settings. The development of a hybrid voice, I would argue, is not only about the language you include, but also about what you exclude. This term is useful here in acknowledging the fictional artifice involved in creating the appropriate blend of adopting language idiomatic to the time and still making the voice accessible to a contemporary audience. authenticity in historical narrative voice then, is a fictionalised construct concerned with a novelist's ambition to 'conserve the aroma of the time but adapt . . . to today's reader' (Perez-Reverte in Stocker 2012: 313). Authenticity is about the engagement of the reader in imaginative empathy. It enables the 'suspension of disbelief' that allows the reader to imagine the possibility, real or otherwise, that the past can be known in some way. According to Jing Shang:

reading a literary work, we often have the impression that we can peer into the imagined world and 'perceive' it from the perspective of its characters. By doing so, we empathize with their feelings, thoughts, and emotions, and this in turn influences our emotional response to the literary work. (Shang 2020: 40)

A sense of authenticity in historical fiction can be represented in a variety of ways. In my own work, I have decided to concentrate on the development of a convincing and intimate first-person narrative voice to articulate the stories of female characters in historical contexts that are less well represented by conventional historical narrative. To do this, I have explored contexts where the agency and voice of female characters have been engaged beyond conventional gender roles and social norms of the time – where circumstances forced or encouraged them to imagine greater possibilities and potential for agency and modes of being.

Within this feminist context of giving value to individual female lives, voices, agency and interiority, I have frequently chosen to write in the first person. In his instructive guide, *Writing Tools*, American scholar Roy Peter Clark quotes the author Don Fry, who writes, 'voice is the sum of all the strategies used by the author to create the illusion that the writer is speaking directly to the reader from the page' (in Clark 2010: 112). A convincing voice, then, brings with it a sense of immediacy and intimacy. Additionally, it can demonstrate a vulnerability of the subject. The articulation of the private voice is something beyond mimesis. In fiction, the private voice channelled through the writer's language, research, memory, personal and reading experience and imagination becomes a point of distinction in the text.

A device as simple as first person can be, an important part of establishing a sense of fictionalised authenticity. Clark continues, 'the most important words in that definition are "create", "illusion", and "speaking": voice is an effect created by the writer that reaches the

reader through [their] ears, even when [they] are receiving the message through [their] eyes' (2010: 112). Tonal register is not used just for engagement or rhetorical effect, but rather to reflect deeper self-consciousness, self-reflection and self-realisation of the character.

For novelists striving to reveal the stories of women or under-represented groups who have been neglected in the historical record, the consideration of voice becomes more complex. The pragmatic need to find a readership is even more crucial when a large part of the author's ambition is to draw these important stories to light. The plural reference to 'stories' here is significant: offering multiple perspectives on a historical context and narrative draws the reader's attention to the subjective nature of experience and highlights the fact that authors of historical fiction are reliant on frequently inadequate and biased source material. The historical limitations of sources relating to women's lives in the archives are summarised by Joanna Zangrando who claims that:

Archivists after all, stand at the entryway to historical knowledge. They make decisions about acquisitions, they devise cataloguing and retrieval schemes, they operate on certain assumptions about what materials get priority when faced with limited resources. If they fail to deal forthrightly with women in history those who rely on their materials and assistance must suffer. (in Beattie 1989: 33)

In my historical fiction I have chosen to work predominantly in a first-person narrative where the stories of other female characters are narrated through the focal point of view. In *The Last Music Keeper of Venice*, I work within a multi-voice first-person narrative to delineate the interiority and agency of women individually. This resists the desire to cast the narrative as representative of a collective of women's experience. I will now show how the use of the first-person narrative voice is used to represent authenticity in Hannah Kent's *Devotion* and my own novel-in-progress, *The Last Music Keeper of Venice*.

Part II

'I couldn't finish the book; having come to know the main character, Agnes Magnúsdóttir – "know", that is, in the way readers connect to those who are only squiggles on a page – I just couldn't watch her die.'

Jen Webb on Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (Webb 2021: 1)

Following on from the work of Stocker, this essay argues that authenticity in historical fiction can be forged through a focus on a distinct first-person narrative voice. Alongside a level of historical accuracy, authenticity develops through a sense that the narrator is telling her truth, that she has agency, that she is credible and believable. Immediacy and intimacy with the reader can be forged through engaging the present tense and the occasional direct second-person address to the reader.

While this use of voice can create convincing immediacy and intimacy, it can cause some difficulties within a postmodern context. Arguably, it draws too much attention to the inherent subjectivity of individual experience and reflective interiority. The postmodern potential unreliability of a first-person narrator could be seen as undermining the so-called authority of the narrative voice and narrative itself.² The predominance of the limited third-person narrative voice in contemporary historical fiction can be seen as a reaction to these postmodern anxieties. The limited third-person voice offers some intimacy, a limited sense of knowing the

interiority of character(s) while seeming to simultaneously carry sufficient omniscience to offer a more seemingly objective ‘truth’.

In third-person modes, however, female characters are known through the lens of the observer, and therefore can be reduced to objects in a larger historical narrative that has already happened. The first person, particularly when combined with the present tense, resists the tendency to historical determinism, where the subjects of history are placed in a narrative of his-story that is already written. This device of first person thus forges greater intimacy with a reader, allowing her to feel that she ‘knows’ the narrator as a subject with agency within the context of her-story. Moreover, within a feminist context, the first-person voice puts a value on private voices and private spaces often overlooked or undervalued within patriarchy’s emphasis on history as the realm of public personae.³

In the realm of historical fiction, the device of creating a first-person narrator who seems to ‘speak to’ and directly address the reader⁴ requires greater attention to idiosyncratic linguistic devices than does third-person narration that frequently foregrounds plot and historical artefacts. The artifice of voice reminds the reader that these women are the *subjects* of history: they have agency to challenge and change their own circumstances. Thus, first-person modes resist third-person historical narrative tendencies to observe and objectify. The first person most effectively represents the inner life of a subject in a historical context while the third person perpetuates the illusion that history can be known at a distance through nonfictional assembling of facts. They are each working with different modes of constructing a sense of authenticity.

In the following section, I will compare some of the techniques for creating authenticity in the historical narrative voice employed by Hannah Kent in her novel, *Devotion*, and my own novel, *The Last Music Keeper of Venice*. The novels are both concerned with the development of relationships between women, although Kent’s novel depicts a romantic relationship between two young women, whereas mine re-creates the relationship between a child who has been separated from her mother, and a woman who is her music teacher. Both novels are set partly or wholly in Europe and, most significantly, feature female narrators with individual narrative voices.

Although the two novels are distinct in setting, narrative and tone, they draw on similar techniques to create agency and authority of the subjects as narrators of their own stories. This agency and authority contribute to the authenticity of the text. The first elements of craft I will focus on are devices to forge intimacy with the reader including the use of the first- and second-person present tense. The second element is a representation of the powerful awareness and depiction of the physical body including drawing on rich sensory detail. Finally, I will examine how each text draws attention to the constructed nature of the narrative and the significance of the legacy of ‘story’ as a broader metaphor for the feminist historical (fiction) project.

1. Techniques to forge intimacy in the depiction and delineation of the narrative self

Hannah Kent’s *Devotion* (2021) tells the story of Hanne, a young woman living with her family in a small community in Prussia facing religious persecution. Hanne is a misfit – uncomfortable with the gender expectations placed on her, and awkward in the company of her peers and her family. A new family arrives in the community. The mother, Anna Maria, is open-minded and warm: a healer. Her daughter, Thea, is the same age as Hanne. The two girls become

friends and, eventually, lovers. The community is granted permission to leave Prussia for South Australia. Hanne dies of illness on board ship. She continues the journey as a ghost, following the narratives of her family and Thea as they make new lives in Australia.⁵ Hanne regularly visits Thea as she marries and has a child. She witnesses Thea dying from snake bite. The two lovers are finally reunited in death.

The Last Music Keeper of Venice (2024) is the story of Francesca Giovanelli, Mistress of Music at the *Derelitti* Orphanage in Venice. Deemed unmarriageable by her patrician family and banished to the *Derelitti* after falling in love with a violin maker, she has been trained for life as a professional musician. As a young woman grieving the lost opportunity for a different life, Francesca observes the homeless child, Tonina, playing on the streets nearby. When Tonina falls ill, Francesca brings Tonina to the orphanage, without regard for or consultation with the child's mother.

As the French troops draw near, another musician, Lucietta, confronts Francesca with the questionable actions of her past and asks her to reunite Tonina with her mother. Tonina spends days curled up on the bed with her dying mother. Upon the woman's death, the child runs from the building in search of her mother's spirit. In San Marco, French troops are loading the horse statues on listing barges. The square is crowded with troops and onlookers. In the melee, Tonina is knocked and slips into the lagoon.

Four years later, Venice is under Austrian rule. The *Derelitti* Orphanage is vastly diminished. Francesca's role is to provide shelter for the homeless. We learn that Tonina was rescued from the lagoon by Francesca's brother, Giuseppe, on his way to taking up his post as puppet leader in 1797. In the final scene, Francesca is called to the foyer to greet a visitor. It is her former lover, Marco, the violin maker. They both grieve lost lives. She takes his hand.

Through employing both the first and second person, the opening to Hannah Kent's *Devotion* creates immediacy and intimacy with the reader. 'Thea, there is no line in your palm I have not traced, no knuckle cracked unheard, and the blue of your eyes is the coffin-lining of the world' (Kent 2021: 3). The use of the second person address invites the reader into the narrative and blurs the lines between the beloved character of Thea and the reader herself. The reference to slow, reverential touch through the verb 'trace' increases this intimacy, as does drawing on the aural sense relating to a 'knuckle crack' – a sound indicating movement beneath the skin, between the bones that can only be discerned through close proximity. The image of the eyes develops the sense of proximity while the unusual image here of 'coffin-lining' brings in an immediate foreshadowing of death. A coffin-lining provides a kind of safety, protection of a corpse, although this is of limited value since the corpse is already dead. Kent here appears to be making a statement that for her narrator, there is such strength and power in the blue eyes that they can provide this safety and protection for the entire world. It is a hyperbolic and emotive statement, the reference to death bringing a sense of vulnerability to the object of the beloved, the soft intimacy convincing us as readers that the narrator is reliable, and we are about to be offered her truth.

The use of the present tense in the introduction adds immediacy, and places the reader alongside the protagonist in the action. Kent generally narrates backstory in fragments in the past tense. This powerful control of narration with its carefully structured time shifts and chronology is another method for forging a more reliable narrator and an integrated sense of interiority through the contrast between present tense reflection and past memory, therefore,

a convincing narrative. These techniques of shifting between present and past tense to create a strong sense of chronology are also present in my novel, *The Last Music Keeper of Venice*.

In addition to employing the first-person (and second-person) present tense and detailed imagery to depict narratorial consciousness, both novels employ a narrator's precise delineation of physical spaces to contribute to the authenticity of voice. The intimate depiction of setting within a narrative serves several functions. In early scene-setting, it has the practical effect of assisting the reader to position the narrative voices as subjects in relationship with a specific historical context. It also demonstrates the narrator's authoritative and intimate knowledge of their own physical location. Their ability to wonder and to wander within that space reflects their degree or limits of agency and authority. Like the use of the second person, detailed scene setting in this way invites the reader into often intimate domestic spaces. Kent's Hanne states, 'I had lived in Kay my whole life. I could have paced out each house, orchard and field in pitch-darkness' (Kent 2021: 11). The fact that Hanne knows her setting so intimately also hints at a secret exploration of these places. The narrator's solitary and deliberate wandering show her agency and develop her voice. Thus, Kent puts a feminist valuing on private spaces that allow for the articulation of private voices – as spaces that facilitate female agency and authority.

The idea that a narrator is confiding in the reader and has an intimate, experiential and relational knowledge of their environment is compelling, and contributes to the sense of intimacy and authenticity. In *The Last Music Keeper of Venice*, my character Tonina's narrative is a direct conversation with the reader:

When you are quiet, you can go wherever you choose. Paolo follows me because I go further than just the refectory and the music room and the church. I know all the corners of the *Derelitti*, even the ones up in the ceiling. I have seen the dust on the heads of statues. I have wiped away the cobwebs from Santa Maria's eyes. I have blown the moths from the corners of the tuberculosis wing of the men's hospital. I know every inch of this building with my fingertips. My calluses are unafraid. (Balint 2024: 3–4)

Here, I have employed the present tense and the second person to draw the reader into the narrative action. Tonina is inviting you, the reader, to go with her through the building. Her references to the hidden spaces give the reader insight both into the physical spaces she inhabits and the imagined ones, adding to her sense of authenticity through the representation of her intimate knowledge of space. The reference to her 'calluses' shows the physical effects of repetitive violin playing upon her hands. The fact that her calluses are animate enough to have their own feelings shows the slippage between Tonina and aspects of her physical body where the body is given its own sensory capacity for agency and knowing.

The lone child, depicted in first person in both novels, then becomes a figure of strength and independence due to their articulation of intimate awareness and knowing. In each novel, there is a disjunct between the internal thoughts and the external actions of the narrator. In *Devotion*, Hanne appears to go along with the expectations of her family, undertaking chores she is asked to do, appearing to comply with her mother's demands. Yet we know, as readers, that she is living a secret life as Thea's lover. Hanne refers to her relationship with her mother, stating, 'I was a girl shrouded in a curtain of unknowing. I believed she was ashamed of me, that she thought me dirty, and the disquiet I already felt within myself was affirmed and deepened...' (Kent 2021: 24). The lack of certainty in the self here stems from the character's

sense of discomfort with the gender expectations of her time, revealed as a secret life hidden from her mother. This reflection on the protagonist's relationship with her mother in the story gives primacy to the viewpoint of the narrator. It shows the disjunct between her thoughts and actions.

In *The Last Music Keeper of Venice*, Tonina appears to be a quiet and compliant child. Yet the reader has access to her private thoughts about being taken from her mother and her ambivalence towards Francesca. Tonina refers obliquely to the woman who is now her mother figure when she claims, 'If people think they love you they might take you away from your life. They might take away your life and give you someone else's (Balint 2024: 5).

In each instance, the criticism of the protagonist's mother figure in the historical context would be unlikely to be voiced, and it therefore remains part of an intimate conversation with the reader, as an almost private confession which simultaneously reflects the psychological independence and individuation of the protagonist. This disjunct between the character's private thoughts and public actions contributes to the reader's sense of 'knowing' the narrator's interiority of self and therefore encouraging a viewing of her as authentic, credible and reliable.

2. Awareness and depiction of the physical body including sensory detail

The narrator's depiction of the physical body in *Devotion* adds another dimension of authenticity through intimate, felt bodily knowing. What appears on the page is not merely the vaporous thoughts of a narrator. Rather, there are physical consequences to what is happening inside the mind, through the embodiment of the subject's voice. The physical body is evocatively emphasised in Kent's narration as a locus for the self's capacity to transcend itself through the experience of union with an 'other'. It is the manifestation of Hanne's connection to the people she loves and to the natural environment, another significant thematic concern of the novel. Hands and lips are frequently referred to as a means of sensually connecting to others:

She kissed me, then.

Her mouth was warm and soft and sweet, and in the brief moment when her lips pressed against my own, my heart leaped with perfect understanding, perfect recognition. It melted with the heat of her, was sealed under a new covenant. (Kent 2021: 115)

In this passage, Kent draws together physical sensation, 'lips pressed against [her] own' with a sense of emotional connection and even a moment of spiritual epiphany – 'a new covenant', a promise from God that their love will be accepted. The self is recognised in knowing another, and arguably in its capacity to be transcended through union and identification with the other.

Similarly, there is a deep physical and spiritual connection between my character Francesca and her lover, Marco. The intimacy of the lovers occurs while they are immersed in the physical landscape as though they are part of nature itself.

We walk along the beach, holding each other's fingers loosely now, stopping to stare at the water lapping at the shore. Then we are facing each other and Marco slips off my mask and then his own, dropping them in the sand. He runs his fingers along my cheekbone.

'Such a beautiful face, such fine lines.'

He is kissing my temples and then my eyelids and then my lips; we are locked together in the fading autumn light, listening to the lapping waves as regular as a heartbeat. (Balint 2024: 83)

It is in the physical depiction of the body that the self is delineated as 'fine lines' and then transcended. The literal and metaphorical image of the 'mask' falling away implies an ontological veracity on the part of the protagonist's willingness to be seen and known, but also in their own capacity to experience the self's transcendence, in this case through the experiencing of union with the beloved and nature at the same time, positioned as an interior knowing through the motif of the 'heartbeat'. Thus, both novels emphasise the uniqueness of the physical body in the realisation of the self.

Conversely, Kent depicts Hanne's knowledge of self through the representation of a more antithetical estrangement, of coming of age as a kind of metamorphosis where she becomes other than what she was:

I felt my own chest swell painful against the stitching of my clothes. My wrists stretched beyond my cuffs. My toes strained against my stockings. Already tall, I grew taller, but where once I was sleek, epicene, utterly at one with my frame, I now felt a fracture between myself and my body. I did not recognise this new weight, the new shapes I felt under my hands or glimpsed in the glass . . . I was suddenly softer than I knew myself to be. My skin smelled different. One night, lying in bed after a long day . . . I realised that I now possessed the body of a stranger. (Kent 2021: 78)

The estranging of the maturing female body as something to be known anew by the self ironically emphasises the importance of the self as independent of the body. At the same time, the body is still a locus of felt knowing. The voice, then, incorporates both the inner reflection of the self and the physical awareness of the body.

Similarly, in the *Last Music Keeper of Venice*, Francesca becomes estranged from her body following the trauma of separation from her lover, Marco:

In my music room, the sound came unbidden. I had thought that I might be irrevocably damaged, that the ache inside me would prevent my fingers from making notes and make it impossible for my right hand to draw the bow. But instead, my body continued without me and somehow my violin sang the unspoken words of my soul. (Balint 2024: 90)

Here, the 'body' (as subject), estranged from the self through trauma (shown through the repeated 'me' as the object of the sentence), independently becomes a locus for expression of ontological veracity of Self (expressed through the 'I'), through the cantillation of the violin as an inarticulate expression ('unspoken words') of core interiority through the motif of Francesca's 'soul'.

This authenticity of voice through the representation of felt knowing can be further emphasised through a focus on particular senses that emphasise experiential knowledge through evoking sound beyond mimetic representation. Kent's Hanne's intimate connection to locus is characterised by her keen – perhaps superhuman – hearing. She hears what is impossible to hear: keening stars, 'raindrops sliding from leaves to soil . . . chanting low cloud . . . [and] hymns of water' (Kent 2021: 9). Through the personification of the natural world as a rich cacophony humming with life, the narrator is represented as experiencing deep knowing.

Similarly, in *The Last Music Keeper of Venice*, Tonina is a gifted musician, her sense of hearing an important aspect of her gift. While her hearing is keen, Tonina defines herself by her silence, her absence of sound; her inability to speak allows her to hear the music beyond the notes, the ‘voice under the verbs’:

In Latin class I am friends with Angelo. When we conjugate our verbs out loud, he tells me stories. He speaks sotto voce. His voice is under the verbs and only I can hear them. He looks straight ahead at Father Vincenzo who points at the words with a big stick. The stick is curved at the end from all the waving about. Father Vincenzo cannot see that Angelo’s lips are not in time with everyone else’s. My lips are always in time but I don’t make much sound, except with my violin. (Balint 2024: 3)

While Tonina is discussing what she can hear in this passage, the image is largely a visual one. The intimacy, again, is emphasised through Tonina’s references to fingers and lips. As a child, Tonina is vigilant in her observation of others – she is still learning music, academic and life skills, how to be in the world. The need to watch for physical danger in her earlier life on the streets has heightened her sense of vigilance. There is a sense here that Father Vincenzo’s line of sight is broad and sweeping, his vision somewhat impaired. Tonina as a character is represented as being hyperaware, attuned to the minutiae of life. She knows what adults can and cannot see. She knows that Angelo cannot do his conjugations, but she will keep this to herself. The fact that her lips are always in time shows that she is fully physically present in time. Like Francesca, Tonina’s preferred mode of external expression is not through her voice but through her instrument. Her inner voice, however, is given as a private address to the reader.

3. Drawing attention to the construction of the narrative as a broader metaphor for the feminist historical (fiction) project

‘It is time, I think, to tell my story.’ (Kent 2021: 19)

As a feminist author of historical fiction, my motivation is partly to fill the absences in the historical record for which no source material exists. Fiction can attempt to fill these spaces. However, my awareness of its limitations also leads to a sense of responsibility to overtly state my purpose and my process. Drawing attention to the subjectivity of experience and of the written record itself are common elements in historical fiction by female authors. Having interrogated the record to glean evidence of the lives of historical women, the desire to educate the reader can be strong. As an author attempting to create a sense of authenticity, I want my reader to know that 1) I have undertaken research, 2) there were gaps in the record concerning the lives of women during the period and, 3) in the absence of adequate source material, based on the research I have undertaken, I am re-imagining these lives.

These concerns at the heart of feminist historical fiction are often introduced through narrative-appropriate references to ‘storytelling’ and historical archives as motifs within the narratives. Linda Hutcheon refers to fiction that is ‘at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past’ as ‘historiographic metafiction’ (Hutcheon 1989: 3). In *Devotion*, Hanne’s preoccupation with leaving a legacy through ‘story’ draws attention to the author’s larger project of returning women to the historical record. There is a sense of urgency in leaving this legacy: ‘I wonder how many days remain to me and whether, if I pass out of existence without testament, something necessary will be lost’ (Kent 2021: 4).

Kent uses the intimacy, then, of the physical body to draw attention to the idea of a woman's need for voice in the historical record. In the early pages of *Devotion*, Hanne intones, 'and now, one of these days, I will be gone. Perhaps that is why I want to bear witness. I feel it as an urgency within my body. If I rest my fingers against my mouth, I feel my lips move in readiness to speak' (Kent 2021: 4). Her desire to 'bear witness' to events that have passed and were not recorded by the women who experienced them can be seen as a broader metaphor for Kent's feminist project of returning women's lives to the historical narrative. The reference here to fingers again suggests both intimacy and the work of writing; the lips have a sensual aspect but are also the site through which a voice and a story can pass. Lips are the place through which the stuff of life – air and water and food– must also pass.

Archives are similarly positioned as central in terms of the dramatic locus of *The Last Music Keeper of Venice*, which is set in an eighteenth-century convent (that was also a music school, orphanage and hospital) during the Napoleonic invasion of Italy. These music schools in the four Venetian musical orphanages, of which the *Derelitti* was one, functioned as musical conservatoriums (Baldauf-Berdes 1993). They supported girls to be given a full-time musical education. Girls were trained in composition as well as performance and notation. They were not publicly acknowledged for composing, and were aware of the double standard. Each orphanage held a large archive of music manuscripts that had been composed by (often unnamed) women through the centuries. One of the climactic events in my novel is the moment at which French soldiers storm the building and the musical archive catches alight. In my research, I learned that Napoleon's soldiers destroyed most of the historical music manuscripts, throwing the pages into the canals (Baldauf-Berdes 1993). The destruction of the archive then becomes emblematic of the destruction of the women-only spaces and the capacity for women to gain agency and authority through music education, composition and performance – as well as the archiving of these works.

The idea of record-keeping and the legacy of women's work, then, is a central concern in *The Last Music Keeper of Venice*. One of the older nuns hums a melody for Francesca to note down. Francesca wants her students to be aware of this legacy and their role as custodians. At various times, Tonina seems to hear the voices of these lost girls:

'We need to check these notes, see how they sound. This is an old piece, from the archive. It was written by one of the girls who used to live here. Violetta.'

We read the notes together slowly: the chocolate and the honey violins almost in tune, stumbling over the notes because they are hard to read.

'Let's try the first line again with a g at the end of the third bar...'

And this way, we work to the end and I imagine Violetta standing in the room, clapping and saying, 'Brava! Brava!' and asking us to play it again. (Balint 2024: 8)

The written work here conjures its creator for the child, Tonina. There is a sense of celebration in the successful creation, archiving and resurrection of work by women. Each of these steps is so precarious but here, the cycle is complete: the work has survived to be handed on to future generations and played for new audiences.

The metaphor of the manuscript as the inheritance of women then is strong in both novels and emblematic of the ratifying and legitimising of women's voices. *Devotion*, too, features a significant book that is a naturopathic guide to healing and spiritual matters. It is inherited

through the female line of Thea's family and is, finally, destroyed through suspicion by another woman who victoriously throws it on the fire in an event that leads to the physical death of Thea (Kent 2021: 401–404). In both novels, the manuscript is physically destroyed – a metaphor for the destruction of women's records – ironically drawing attention to laying the foundation for the need for the feminist historical (fiction) project of re-imagining their stories.

Given the absences from and biases of the archives, it is necessary to forge new methods of authenticity, drawing on deep and intimate connection with the reader through the rendering of narrative voice articulating experience. The first-person narrative voice can create a sense of legitimate authority within the female subject through directly addressing the reader with personal reflections and creating a sense of a physical body with agency in space and capable of different levels of knowing. The authority of this voice is further enforced through drawing attention to the author's undertaking by directly discussing and employing motifs of women conserving their stories through personal record or actual archives of women's work.

Notes

¹ Linda Hutcheon writes, 'the term postmodernism, when used in fiction should by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past' (Hutcheon 1989: 3).

¹ Arguably, the post-modern emphasis on the unreliability of first-person narration in turn of the millennium historical fiction such as *Remains of the Day* by Ishiguro and Kingsolver's *The Poisonwood Bible* was amplified by the destabilisation of the 'I'. The foregrounding of the unreliable narrator in both these novels was part of the post-colonial intent to destabilise the colonialist project.

³ Finally, the first-person narrative carries the artifice of radicalising the reader as an active potential audience in legitimising the first-person voice through the very act of reading, of bearing witness to its voice, breaking down the 'fourth wall' so to speak, encouraging more agency on the part of the reader, lending authenticity to the narrative voice through the gracious act of being an auditor to it.

⁴ One technique for direct address is the use of the second person. However, the first person in general can be seen as a direct address to the reader: the narrator is telling her personal story.

⁵ The metamorphosis of Hanne into a ghost divided readers. For this to be convincing, Kent had to maintain consistency of the narrative voice while also making the reader aware of the new strengths and limitations of this changed narrator. The final section of the novel contains more third-person narration interspersed with fragments of depicting the experiences of the narrator as a ghost. When she is no longer a physical being, the narrator becomes concerned mainly with following the stories of the people she loves, hence the increased use of third person in these sections.

Works cited

- Baldauf-Berdes, J 1993 *Women musicians of Venice: Musical foundations 1525–1855*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Beattie, DL 1989 'An archival user study: Researchers in the field of women's history', *Archivaria: The journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists* 29: 51–56
- Balint, C 2024 The last music keeper of Venice (Manuscript)
- Clark, R 2006 *Writing tools: 50 essential strategies for every writer*, New York: Little Brown
- Hutcheon, L 1989 *Historiographic metafiction: Parody and the intertextuality of history*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press
- Ishiguro, K 1990 *The remains of the day*, New York: Vintage
- Kent, H 2021 *Devotion*, Sydney: Picador
- Kingsolver, B 1998 *The Poisonwood Bible*, New York: HarperCollins
- Sachs, HR 2008 'Reconstructing a life: The archival challenge of women's history', *Library trends* 56.3: 650–66
- Shang, J 2020 'Imaginative empathy in literature: On the theory of presentification in Husserl and its application in literary reading', *Labyrinth: An international journal for philosophy, value theory and sociocultural hermeneutics* 22.1, DOI: <https://doi.org/10.25180/lj.v22i1.216>
- Stocker, B 2012 "'Bygonese" – is this really the authentic language of historical fiction?', *New writing: The international journal for the practice and theory of creative writing*, 9.3: 308–18
- Webb, J 2021 'With Devotion, Hannah Kent gives us empathically drafted portraits of love in all its forms', *The Conversation* (October 21): 1–4
- White, H 2005 'Introduction: Historical fiction, fictional history, and historical reality', *Rethinking history* 9.2–3: 147–57, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642520500149061>

About the author

Dr Christine Balint has been a professional writer for more than 20 years. Her most recent book, *Water Music*, set in the Derelitti orphanage in Venice, won the 2021 Viva la Novella Prize. Her first novel, *The Salt Letters*, was shortlisted for the 1998 The Australian/Vogel Literary Award; her second novel, *Ophelia's Fan*, was internationally published in 2004. Christine's research into the Venetian Musical Orphanages was funded by Creative Victoria, the Australia Council and the Marten Bequest Travelling Scholarship. She is a Lecturer in English and Creative Writing at La Trobe University.



AXON: Creative Explorations
2025 vol 14.2 *We Need to Talk*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/3bbl68nf6q
Keywords: Essay, Hinemoana Baker, Natalie
Diaz, Poetry

WOUND AND BLOOM

Personal sovereignty in the poetry of Hinemoana Baker and Natalie Diaz

Kim Cope Tait

Otago University

Abstract

This article focuses on the establishment of a personal sovereignty in the work of queer Indigenous poets. In the poetry of Mojave American poet Natalie Diaz, particularly in her recent collection, *Postcolonial Love Poem*, I observe an effective establishment of personal power independent of the dominant heteropatriarchal figure, which I locate in her unabashed presentation of queer love poetry and erotica. Hinemoana Baker's work is equally effective in disappearing the disappearer and instituting personal sovereignty. She too addresses colonisation of body, mind, and spirit around culture, gender, and sexuality. Baker's aesthetic reveals nuances of Māori and Pākehā culture but her underlying motivations are the same as Diaz's: a decolonial feminist poetry, which, though it wears the garment of verse, 'combines the politics of gender with critical race theory and an analysis of imperial power structures' (Wagner 2021).

WOUND AND BLOOM: PERSONAL SOVEREIGNTY IN THE POETRY OF HINEMOANA BAKER AND NATALIE DIAZ

Kim Cope Tait

'What happens when you are strong enough to believe that not only are you worth protecting, but you are also a worthy protector?'

No'u Revilla, in Berger 2022

In her article 'Whiteness as Property', Cheryl I Harris talks about the valorisation of whiteness as treasured property in a society structured on racial caste' (1993: 1713). Ten years later, Isabel Wilkerson has offered a comprehensive discussion of this phenomenon of racial caste in American history and society in her book *Caste: The Origins of our Discontents* (2020). I would argue that this idea of caste as seminally problematic can also be applied more broadly: that what has been valorised in society is not only 'whiteness' but also maleness, and heterosexuality, and that society is structured not only on racial caste, but on castes of gender and sexuality. For queer Indigenous women, these are categories that not only exclude them, but denigrate or even 'disappear' them from the socio-political landscape. If we understand the ability to match the overculture as being tantamount to a kind of proprietorship, then queer Indigenous women are without property. Without this kind of ownership, without the currency of male, heterosexual whiteness, they are disempowered and historically have been barred from participating effectively in their society – economically, socially, and politically. Whether it is evident in their voicelessness around their own rights or in their exclusion from full participation in a capitalist economy, such lack of property has most certainly circumscribed their movements in the world.

In the poetry of Hinemoana Baker (New Zealand Māori) and Natalie Diaz (Mojave American), I identify a movement toward the establishment of personal sovereignty. In using the word 'sovereignty', I do not refer to legal definitions of this word but rather define it as *autonomy and freedom from oppression*, which may be established first on the level of individual consciousness and then extended as the basis for activism toward collective liberation. As suggested by Revilla's rhetorical question above, the former paves the way for the latter.

In the poetry of Baker and Diaz, I hear the voices of two women who are reclaiming personal power and ownership of their selves, which has the potential for parallel collective gains. I am not interested in reducing the work of either poet as solely focusing on this endeavour but rather in identifying that their poetry does, in fact, sit within this framework – and powerfully so. In his book *The Erotics of Sovereignty, Queer Writing in the Era of Self-Determination* (2012), Mark Rifkin talks about 'a structure of feeling' as it emerges in the poetry of queer Native writers in the US. With a nod to Raymond Williams and his *Marxism and Literature* (1977) where this concept was first developed, Rifkin tailors his use of the term to explore what is considered 'personal' in the writings of Indigenous people. Such texts as poetry and fiction, Rifkin insists, have the potential to capture what he refers to as foreclosed forms of Indigeneity (2012: 3). Resisting such cultural foreclosure by acknowledging the importance of such writing – not only as therapeutic and 'personally' relevant, but as politically potent – stymies the impulse to reduce poetry, in this case by queer Indigenous women, to expressions that are interesting but nevertheless lack the power to actually effect material change.

Rifkin is speaking specifically of Native American writers and their relationship to their American political and historical milieu, but the dynamic extends, of course, to other Indigenous groups who are the subjects of imperial and settler colonial practice. In this article, I argue that from their distant corners of the world and in their disparate styles, poets Hinemoana Baker and Natalie Diaz build a 'structure of feeling' that has the power not only to liberate the individual within the private space she occupies, but also to expose the larger (post)colonial impulse to erase her. In this way, Diaz and Baker work on multiple levels to undermine the heteropatriarchal structures that bind women – queer, Indigenous, or otherwise. They expose the power that a woman has to resist these structures, if only, in the beginning, by shifting her sense of her own worth and establishing her autonomy.

Erupting My Badlands: Love Poetry and Erotics in the Work of Natalie Diaz

In order to perpetuate itself, every oppression must corrupt or distort those various sources of power within the culture of the oppressed that can provide energy for change. For women, this has meant a suppression of the erotic as a considered source of power and information within our lives.

Audre Lorde (1989: 53)

In her essay 'Dildos, Hummingbirds, and Driving Her Crazy: Searching for American Indian Women's Love Poetry and Erotics', Ohlone Costanoan Esselen/American poet and scholar Deborah A Miranda argues that American Indian erotics specifically 'threaten the status quo of larger American concepts of history, mythology and nation' (2002: 146). In fact, Native women writing love poetry and erotics in English is 'not merely a reinvention of the enemy's language, but a reinvention that accesses the most powerful kinds of communications human beings can experience' (2002: 146; emphasis in original). While the hierarchisation of the 'kinds of communications human beings can experience' is subjective, the act of fearlessly articulating what is deeply personal and authentic in herself has the capacity to empower the individual profoundly. This articulation, the intimacy of her sharing, then has the potential to profoundly connect her to her readers. In this connection an understanding is cultivated, about the collective liberation inherent in the unshackling of even a single member of that shared humanity, regardless of the origins or intersectionality of her shackles.

The 'reinvention of the enemy's language', that 'powerful kind of communication' discussed in Miranda's essay, is apparent in the poetry of Pulitzer Prize-winning Natalie Diaz. The intimacy of her poems about love and erotics obliterates all preconceptions of the expression of Native women. It dashes the heteropatriarchy, not by any kind of affront to it but by ignoring it completely. The alterity of the queer Indigenous woman does not exist in Diaz's poems about love and sex. She is all. Not only is the white male not needed, as Miranda comments about the same figure in the poetry of Chrystos; he is 'unchosen' (2002: 142). Of Chrystos' poem 'I Like a Woman Who Packs' (1996: 69), Miranda says that its assertions 'do not challenge so much as simply bypass codes of behaviour constructed by the dominant culture' (2002: 143). She later says that 'the work of the erotic in this poem is not to punish but to ignore patriarchal presence by allowing the erotic to acknowledge itself' (2002: 143). By unapologetically presenting her own experience of intimacy with her beloved, the speaker of the poem asserts her own sense of romantic love and ignores all others. The result is a structure of feeling that refuses to allow settler colonial notions of what constitutes a *normal* relationship and *acceptable* iterations of feminine sensuality to exclude or even erase her.

Diaz's most recent book, *Postcolonial Love Poem* (2020),¹ is a collection of poems that assert, among other things, visibility and personal sovereignty. Diaz's book touches on each of the intersectional ways people are marginalised, without centring the dominant culture that does the marginalising. We see that the voices of her poetry are impacted by oppression, but the oppression becomes neither a character nor a setting. It is part of a backstory that does not need to be told again; a backstory that must finally be relegated to the past and whose power will ultimately be eradicated by the passage of time and the slow process of its characters becoming visible and establishing their autonomy. Poetry is a vehicle for these processes.

To individual consciousness, self-expression is medicine, and becoming visible is a kind of healing. When the collective is comprised of such empowered individuals, who not only believe that they are 'worth protecting' but are also 'worthy protector[s]', activism is fuelled and supported. This puts poets in a uniquely hopeful position to address oppression, for themselves and for those who are similarly oppressed. Their art functions firstly on the personal level for the individual reader or audience member; secondly, it has the potential to serve as a catalyst for precipitating and sustaining political action. Those who act in solidarity to effect change (for example, those driving Standing Rock,² Ihumātao,³ the Kohanga Reo movement⁴) are not doing so from a place of questioning their own personhood. They are acting from a place of personal sovereignty. A place of self-worth.

The poem 'I, Minotaur' is about possibility – the latent (Diaz 2020: 55–57). It is about cycles of becoming: the tumbleweed sending its spores into the air, a reaching back from its position in the present to its potential, which becomes its future. It is about the cyclical nature of existence: how we are destroyed, reduced to our smallest unit which, ironically, is the seed of our potential to become – again and again. As many times as it takes:

The tumbleweed turns and turns,
until it bursts free all its spores into the wind,
until it is only what it might become.
There is no such thing as time or June,
only what you're born into –
only waiting for the rain, for the flood,
for what erupts my badlands and my tired eyes in beauty –
Mojave aster, desert globemallow,
where once was terrible nothing. (2020: 56)

In these lines, natural beauty has the power to 'erupt my badlands'. When the rain finally comes, and it comes when it comes ('there is no such thing as time or June'), 'where once was terrible nothing', there are blossoms of desert flowers and beauty that is the culmination of the tumbleweed turning, its releasing of spores into the wind. Going from the whole thing that it is to its potential, 'what it might become'.

The metaphor, on one level, is of how our stories move and propagate in the landscape of our lives, both as individuals and as part of a collective. This verse is an oasis in the middle of a poem about duality, contradiction, the self divided against the self. Self as desert. From the preceding stanza:

Like any desert, I learn myself by what's desired of me –
and I am demoned by those desires.

For this, I move like a wound – always, and fruiting,
sweetened by the thorn. (2020: 56)

This introduces the tumbleweed as wound, but then, unexpectedly, both here and in the stanza that follows, that same tumbleweed is ‘fruiting’, producing, propagating, blooming, sweetened by its own protective mechanism: ‘the thorn’. The poems of this collection represent the spores, all of which have the potential to create visibility and propagate personal sovereignty – for the writer and her readers.

A person can be consumed and then opened up and wounded by what drives them, what aches as need inside the self, but also, there can be ‘fruit’ generated from such suffering. ‘Demoned’ has the word ‘demon’ as its root, but as a colloquialism it also denotes a level of sexual artistry or skill. The speaker’s lover is part of this picture, of course. The poem is about the risk and choice: ‘To dare bloom pleasure from your wounds – / and to bleed out from that bouquet’ – how such agency, creating and expressing from our woundedness, has the power not so much to eradicate but rather to transform the wound. Some wounds will never leave us, but rather attract collagen, harden and raise themselves into scar tissue: a topography of their own.

In obvious reference to the Greek mythological figure of the Minotaur, part man and part beast, stanza four says: ‘In my chest I am two-hearted always – / love and what love becomes / arrive when they want to, and hungry.’ This part of the poem is about the conflict within the self and the efforts to transform anxiety into desire. But it also expresses the fluidity of the future – that is at every moment yielding a present – that quickly becomes the past. Again, we have the present (love) and the future (‘what love becomes’) existing simultaneously. The constitutive elements ‘arrive when they want to, and hungry’. The speaker does not control her desires, nor does she control the interplay between past, present, and future. She is essentially devoured and devouring, at once both beast and human, dual in nature and evolving moment to moment. It is reductive to say that the beast represents her ‘American’ identity and the human her Native one. Rather, the fragmenting Diaz describes is present in all of humanity, this interpretation offering a single iteration of that fragmentation: the one that is unique to her as a queer Mojave American woman. The lover addressing her beloved. ‘I, Minotaur’ is about leaning into uncertainty as the real and the potentially profound. It is also about the chaos of the speaker’s mind and how a total liberation from that chaos, a form of redemption, is made possible through intimacy with her lover.

In stanza six, Diaz shifts from images of nature to images of her lover’s body, but these too are rooted in comparisons to the natural world. Returning to the metaphor of the desert: ‘A head like mine was shaped on thirst. / I dream what is wet or might quench – / aquifers, rivers, cenotes, canals’, and transitions from the longing for what might bring that which the desert lacks – water – to what brings the same sort of quenching in the soul: intimacy with her lover. ‘The dusked mirage of lake above your knee I sip and lick – / my tongue blush as the fluoresced ear of a jackrabbit’. Deliverance from being parched and lacking comes in the form of touch, of intimate connection with the ‘you’ in the poem. There is a powerful eroticism at work here, but it is a *single layer* of what is personal and complex and vulnerable in the speaker’s self as half-bull, half-human: self *conflicted by the conflict* of what one is ‘born into’. One cannot tease out what is sensual or intimate in this expression. It is inextricably linked to what is personal, powerful, and sovereign in the woman who is in control of herself and living according to a

personally valid way of life, not according to what is sanctioned by those who would govern and ultimately oppress her.

The speaker talks about her own anxiety, how it makes her feel like in her mind 'each morning [is] the Minotauromachy' and how in this state, somehow destruction equates to solution: 'I am every answer – / a mathematics of anxiety. How any maul can solve / the mesquite tree for the pyre'. It is the kind of suffering born of confusion, fear, losing one's centre. It is the kind that sabotages the self and leaves one weeping even for what does the destroying: 'The locusts disappeared the fields then themselves. / I bent – wept alone on the threshing floor, / not for what went stick to the feast – / I wept for the locusts'. The speaker is talking about total devastation. But she is also talking about the answer being inherent in one's selfhood. Wound and bloom. Whether destructive or not, 'I am every answer' and as such, I am, the poet is, sovereign.

What we witness in Diaz's poetry is that she simply *bypasses* heteropatriarchal forces and gives permission to celebrate, rather than lament. In fact, the lamentation goes quiet in the reframing of the world in terms of the woman/lover. With this kind of personal expression, the queer Indigenous woman effectively flips the power scheme of a postcolonial world on its head. Her intimate sharing is, as such, a kind of worldmaking. Through this action, she can disappear the disapparer, or rather, appear in his place.

Beyond the sacredness of personal expression, the poem becomes a connection between the poet and her audience and thus a potential bridge between the establishment of *personal* sovereignty, one of consciousness, and the stirrings of the establishment of a collective one. Audre Lorde claims that:

the sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. (2018: 10)

This kind of bridge is a potent force in galvanising people who are otherwise considered different from one another, whether culturally, sexually, or in terms of gender or class. Heteropatriarchal society has historically gone to great measures to prevent this kind of galvanisation among the oppressed, largely by silencing the voices of queer Indigenous, poor, and otherwise marginalised women. The poem is private, an interior space, but one that becomes, in the sharing, public and exterior, a structure of feeling with the potential to precipitate positive change.

Where We Went Wrong: Facing Colonial Complicity in the Poetry of Hinemoana Baker

It is easier to deal with the external manifestations of racism and sexism than it is to deal with the results of those distortions internalized within our consciousness of ourselves and one another.

Audre Lorde (1984: 147)

Born in Ōtautahi (Christchurch), Aotearoa (New Zealand), Hinemoana Baker is an activist, musician, and poet, descended from the Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Raukawa, Ngāti Toa and Te Āti Awa iwi (tribes). While Baker's style veers more in the direction of her teachers – like Bill Manhire and Robert Hass – in that she is committed to subtlety and the avoidance of polemics, her work provides a powerful structure of feeling. It functions not only as a window into the queer

Indigenous, female sensibility, but also exposes the structures that have been imposed on women in order to mine them, body, mind, and spirit.

By highlighting the impact of cultural foreclosure, Baker's poems empower her and, by extension, women like her. They call out those entities whose policies of 'self-determination' and neoliberalism continue to perpetrate against her, but equally they acknowledge the often unwitting complicity of the oppressed in their own subjugation in a postcolonial arena. Beyond personal healing and empowerment, what is required to move from victim to activist, from protected to protector, from wound to bloom, is acknowledgement of one's own role in her subordination to the dominant power. Only after these personal gains can historical trajectories be altered, and those altered trajectories, reflecting the transmutation of wound to bloom, will be substantial in the cause of dismantling oppressive heteropatriarchal systems; but they will have started in the space of the feminine interior.

While Baker's own collections are sprinkled with eroticism, her primary poetic vehicle, though still metaphoric, is a direct refusal to adhere to or even answer to the gender normative expectations of her postcolonial milieu. Much has been written about the re-establishment of the *mana* (personal power, essence, or presence) of the Māori woman. I posit that Baker's poems contribute to a dismantling of the postcolonial constructs that have historically limited Indigenous women, and therefore Indigenous peoples, in Aotearoa. In her book *The Balance Destroyed* (2017), Ani Mikaere outlines the factors involved in the re-establishment of Mana Wahine, starting with locating the *source* of the oppression of Māori women in:

the Crown's failure to uphold Māori women's rangatiratanga. This is a Treaty issue. No longer can the Crown or Pākehā [New Zealanders of European descent] simply blame the subordination of Māori women on Māori men. (2017: 132)

Mikaere identifies that it is settler colonial views and practices that have disrupted gender relations in Māori society – and settler colonial values that have caused traditional Māori cultural practices to come under fire as sexist. But she likewise acknowledges the unwitting collusion of the colonised:

No longer can Māori men attempt to justify their oppression of Māori women on the basis that such oppression is traditional. They must instead confront the fact that colonisation has made them collaborators with the colonisers, working against their own women. (2017: 132)

In what follows, I will show how the poetry of Hinemoana Baker presents these ideas in a 'structure of feeling' that challenges coloniser and colonised alike.

After stating that the next step is for Māori women 'to consciously reclaim and reaffirm our rightful place; and to celebrate our female strength', Mikaere articulates the key connection between the establishment of a sovereignty that is personal and one that is collective:

Māori women must develop theories which not only identify the sources of our oppression but which also enable us to both recognise and nurture our collective female strength. Kathie Irwin has observed that theory is 'a necessary part of our revolutionary equipment'. Theorising our experiences is an important step in the struggle to regain the female power that colonisation has stripped away. (2017: 135)

I interpret Mikaere's use of the word 'theorising' to mean *any* articulation of that reclamation and reaffirmation of Mana Wahine, whether that be scholarly or creative. To exclude the 'personal' expressions of the Indigenous wahine would be to deny the importance of such structures of feeling that establish, independent of the colonial impulse, what constitutes Indigenous, specifically Indigenous feminine, ways of being in the world. Mikaere calls for action, but she acknowledges that the seeds of such action lie in re-establishing Mana Wahine at the level of the individual.

The poem 'massive tunnel borer' is for me the political centre of Hinemoana Baker's most recent book, *Funkhaus* (2020) and it offers an analysis of this imbalance that Mikaere is talking about. The poem is the vehicle for Baker's analysis, which is artistic, starkly irreverent and clearly reflective of a decolonial feminist approach. This work is equally effective in opposing the forces of heteropatriarchal coloniality as is scholarly work on the same subject. The intensity of the metaphor here is undeniable. It is aggressive. This poem is about colonisation, and because its imagery is unequivocally phallic, I read it as colonisation specifically of the female body.

Massive Tunnel Borer

The two halves drill towards each other
eating through the mountain
excreting cement.

When they meet
the tunnel could be said

to be complete and the machines
bury themselves on that spot
become part of the mountain
it being uneconomic to retrieve them.
Each half is the size of an aircraft.

Each, no doubt, has its trajectory
mapped remotely from above ground.

What appeals most
is not the action of the tunnelling
or even the burial

these topics having been
well-traversed by other machines
but the way they use their food
how they shit out reinforcement
turning the gravel, the mud

the mountain's insides
into concrete that prevents
the new tunnel's collapse.

Perhaps this is where
we went wrong.

When the drilling is done, the two halves of the tunnel borer become a permanent part of the mountain, the *whenua* – a word that means both land and placenta⁵ – because it is 'uneconomic

to retrieve them'. A figure of modernity in late capitalism, the tunnel borer, each of its halves 'the size of an aircraft', is controlled by forces much higher than the plane on which it functions, its 'trajectory / mapped remotely from above ground'. It is a sinister acknowledgement of the neo-colonial complex that seems to employ multiple machines in service to its ultimate goal of plundering the subordinated group, in this case women, out of functional and empowered existence.

The actual boring in to the female existence, insisting on the primacy of the male sexual drive and enacting what Adrienne Rich called 'the law of male sex right to women', is not even the most interesting aspect of this scenario (2018: 175). The actual colonisation of the female body, as the speaker points out, has been 'well-traversed by other machines', or hashed out again and again by a long history of feminism, both civilisational and decolonial. 'What appeals most', the speaker suggests, is actually the efficiency of recruiting the colonised herself, the mountain, in her own cannibalisation. While it is a fictional mountain portrayed in this poem, and the conception of mountains as feminine entities varies from *iwi* to *iwi* and even from mountain to mountain in Māori *pūrākau* (stories/lore), I read this particular mountain, in the context of the poem, as irrefutably feminine.

What especially appeals to the colonising heteropatriarchal figure who maps the course of this juggernaut 'from above ground' is how these machines 'shit out reinforcement / turning the gravel, the mud / the mountain's insides' into the very thing that will concretise the invasion, the colonised state, and 'prevent [its] collapse'. When the machine is allowed to feed on the *whenua*, both in the sense of the land and of the placenta, the womb of all life, what is not metabolised within functions to reinforce the vacancies created by the feeding. The topography of the *whenua*, of the *wahine's* sense of her self, is altered dramatically and in ways that are difficult to reverse.

Hawaiian activist, scholar, and poet Haunani-Kay Trask spoke staunchly on the topic of this altered terrain and the fallacies surrounding it. I consider her speech, 'Neo-Colonialism and Indigenous Structures' to be especially relevant when considering this 'rough hewn tunnel':

Part of neo-colonialism, of course, is the ideological position that all is well; in other words, that decolonization has occurred. Therefore, problems and conflicts are post-colonial and the fault of the allegedly independent peoples. Nothing could be more inaccurate. (1999: 133)

The tunnel has been built. There is a passageway where once there was land. If the passageway becomes problematic, it must be a problem with the mountain. Baker's speaker in 'massive tunnel borer' is, of course, being ironic when she closes with, 'Perhaps this is where / we went wrong'. She is, of course, alluding to this giving up of the body for the purposes of the machine, of the structure she would become a part of. As if the mountain had any choice in the matter of the mining of its resources and its own cannibalisation to serve the purposes of the neo-colonial, capitalist complex. Baker openly parodies the neo-colonial machine that would mine and co-opt her body. She is the *kaikōrero* (designated and revered speaker) at the dais of *Mana Wahine* – personally sovereign and gaining power with every syllable spoken.

In 'massive tunnel borer', the male entity has bored into the mountain of the woman, hollowed her out, used her up (her body, her economic contribution, her reproductive capability) and inserted itself. She still stands but, hollowed out, her entire being has been mined to bolster his conception of her and her purpose. The tunnel borer has ingested the core of the mountain,

absorbed what might have nourished her, and defecated what will then reinforce his alteration of her body, of her being. Her current state is a result of being mined and colonised, altered so as to become a passage through which a man might travel. Those who do this work, ostensibly the heteropatriarchal contingency, do not bulldoze the mountain. She must serve the purposes for which there is no substitute – she is the *whenua*, after all – but they have attempted to alter her in such a way as to forever change her, to make her existence inconsequential. I read this not as a concession, a proverbial throwing in of the towel, but rather as a cautionary tale and a call to arms. Baker throws light onto the situation and, in so doing, invites the reader to resist.

Five poems later in the collection, 'Look at What We Fucking Well Have' is similarly ironic in tone. It appears to mimic the voice of the capitalist, heteropatriarchal figure, attempting to lull or shame the subordinated group into gratitude for 'what we fucking well have'. However, because of the use of the pronoun 'we' I would argue that it mimics instead the voice of the complicit colonised; whether they are colonised in terms of culture, gender, or sexuality, they are now a part of the machine. They, like the mountain, have unwittingly become its host. It is as if Baker, for a single poem, gives herself permission to polemicise, and yet her actual message is the opposite of what is on the page. Classic Baker irony.

Just look at what we fucking well have.
The pocket the packet the postcard the purse
not the hanged man and the constant lightning strike
Look at what we have look on it and be grateful.
Look at what we have now the leash the booming
groan all the bright escapology the muddy
line of thrills army of crab apples sea cucumbers.
All of this look upon it and be thankful.

There are references to myriad refinements, material things, privileged opportunities, couched in playful, often alliterative language, but always with the refrain: 'look on what we have look on it and be grateful'. This poem is a rant. An unloading. The suggestion is that from the limited perspective of the complicit colonised, living within their lulling capitalist, postcolonial milieu, 'what we fucking well have' is overflowing and abundant, more than good enough, and the indignant speaker chides 'us' for being blind to our own dumb luck.

we have not only the pinch but the golden fucking punch
the doily the strobe the actual fucking original flake
the grain itself the ilk as well as the motherfucking inking.

Baker plays with words here, but her tone and the content are anything but playful. The poem is, at first glance, a castigation of the frivolity, the ingratitude, the un-consciousness of the Western world.

But I do not think that is it at all – she is pushing far harder than that, and she is not mucking about. The casual reader might not understand the stacks of images and sounds, but there is no mistaking Baker's purport: this speaker is well and truly integrated with the machine. They are unable or unwilling to look at the truth of inequity and subordination, specifically of Indigenous women in a postcolonial world. Baker resists and opposes the influence of colonial literature with her own unabashed poetry. She is opposing the same kind of oppression that Mikaere and other Mana Wahine scholars address in their critical work, and in doing it through poetry, she

is contributing to a structure of feeling that opens the sense of what it means to be Indigenous. Queer. Female.

Conclusion: Poetry as Revolution

The work of Indigenous sovereignty, then, is not a politics outside of Indigenous gender and sexuality – it is about wresting our bodies and relations from the individualizing liberal gaze that would make us feathered facsimiles of white heterosexual citizens.

Anne Spice (2018: 302)

Intersectionally marginalised, Diaz and Baker refuse to be erased. In their poetry, they centre their queer Indigenous female worlds in ways that render the heteropatriarchal figure, who would historically erase them, himself invisible. This reversal of the postcolonial impulse to erase the Indigenous female makes way for the poets' own re-appearance. Both poets stand and speak from a place of power. Their messaging counters 'the impact of over 170 years of colonial gendered practice' (Trask 1999: 133). Both poets are equally powerful in their subversion of the heteropatriarchal system that they, as queer Indigenous women, were born into. The end result of their work is an expression that ultimately amounts to the establishment of personal sovereignty and bridge building that may very well lead to a collective sovereignty.

The queer Indigenous woman must first, in her mind, dethrone the controlling heteropatriarchal over-culture and place her agency over her own life, body and the narrative that represents her, squarely within her self. She must *self-centre*. Poets who take this approach, however unexpected or controversial, are doing the work of reclaiming their agency and effecting personal sovereignty. Only through this reconfiguration of one's relationship to the dominant culture and to one's own agency can an individual, poet or otherwise, contribute to an activism to oppose oppression on a large scale. The poems of Diaz and Baker push the individual, hard, in this direction. They also, when acknowledged for the structure of feeling they convey, work to repossess forms of Indigeneity long foreclosed by settler colonial values. This repossession of 'property' through the unabashed expression of what is deeply personal, as exemplified by Diaz's 'I, Minotaur', is especially powerful when it includes, even centres upon, romantic love and erotics.

While we see this repossession in Baker's poetry, as well, often in the form of the portrayal of intimacy between women, we also see it in the rawness of her honesty around the roles of all humans, the colonised included, in keeping the machine of settler colonial oppression functioning. While the imagery in 'massive tunnel borer' is largely industrial, the wahine is still presented as maunga (mountain). The tunnel being bored into her is the wound of the colonisation and appropriation of her body. This representation of the machine and its constituent parts, followed by a poem like 'Look at What We Fucking Well Have', in which the speaker takes responsibility for herself (who else can be expected to do this?) are the stirrings of action. Action to establish personal sovereignty but also to oppose future offense against her sovereign self and her sisters in oppression.

Arguably, the work of the queer Indigenous woman poet is an extended act of decolonising the self. Her poems are a chronicle of that continuous act, the fact of which is regularly challenged and which must, therefore, be perennially reinforced. By reading Diaz and Baker together, we are able to discern the parallels that exist across continents and oceans in two settler colonial

states at different stages of the decolonising process. Diaz and Baker write poems that arise from a wholly empowered place. They are committed to speaking their truth unabashedly, to centring the self and its dauntless expression, never bending to the expectations of the heteropatriarchal milieu into which they were born. Their poetry is, ultimately, a decolonial feminist endeavour to establish sovereignty of the self – body, mind and spirit. To establish sovereignty on the levels of gender, sexuality, and culture. Their poems constitute an act of rebellion. Contributing to a structure of feeling that we must recognise as politically relevant, these poems have the potential to transform personal and political woundings into fertile ground for seeding the resistance to oppression of all kinds. For cultivating the strength to see oneself as worthy, not only to be allowed to grow but also to bloom and hold space for the growth and blooming of others.

Notes

¹ Natalie Diaz, excerpts from ‘I, Minotaur’ from *Postcolonial Love Poem*. Copyright © 2020 by Natalie Diaz. Reprinted with the permission of The Permissions Company, LLC on behalf of Graywolf Press, graywolfpress.org.

² Standing Rock was the name of a series of grassroots protests led by First Nations North American peoples against the construction of the Dakota Access Pipeline (DAPL) from April 2016 to February 2017.

³ Ihumātao is an important Māori historical and cultural site in Aotearoa New Zealand, wrongfully appropriated by settlers in 1863. When a housing development project was proposed for the site in 2015, it sparked a peaceful protest movement and occupation that lasted from 2016 to late 2020.

⁴ The Kōhanga Reo movement was established in 1982 to stem the rapid loss of te reo Māori [Māori language]. Kōhanga reo are language nests with the aim to restore and preserve Māori culture and language through full immersion education.

⁵ For the translation of ‘whenua’ as ‘placenta’, the *Te Aka Māori Dictionary* provides the example: ‘people born of the whenua, i.e. of the placenta and of the land where the people’s ancestors have lived and where their placenta are buried’. The reference is drawn from the online version of John C Moorfield’s 2013 edition of *Te Aka Māori-English, English-Māori Dictionary and Index*.

Works cited

- Baker, Hinemoana 2020 *Funkhaus*, Wellington: Victoria University of Wellington Press
- Berger, John 2022 'No'u Revilla's debut book of poetry addresses Native Hawaiian issues', *TCA Regional News* (Sep 25), <https://www.proquest.com/wire-feeds/nou-revillas-debut-book-poetry-addresses-native/docview/2717463394/se-2>
- Chrystos 1996 *In her I am*, Vancouver: Press Gang Publishers
- Diaz, Natalie 2020 *Postcolonial love poem*, Minneapolis: Graywolf Press
- Harris, Cheryl 1993 'Whiteness as property', *Harvard law review* 106.8: 1707–791
- Lorde, Audre 2018 *The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house*, London: Penguin
- Lorde, Audre 1984 *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*, Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press
- Mikaere, Annabel, with Robyn Kahukiwa (illustrator) 2017 *The balance destroyed* (rev. ed.), Ōtaki: Te Tākupu, Te Wānanga o Raukawa
- Miranda, Deborah A 2002 'Dildos, hummingbirds, and driving her crazy: Searching for American Indian women's love poetry and erotics', *Frontiers: A journal of women studies* 23.2: 135–49
- Moorfield, John C 2003–2025 *Te Aka Māori Dictionary*, <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/search?idiom=&phrase=&proverb=&loan=&histLoanWords=&keywords=whenua>
- Revilla, No'u and Rick Barot 2022 *Ask the brindled: Poems*, Minneapolis: Milkweed
- Rich, Adrienne 2018 *Essential essays: Culture, politics, and the art of poetry* (Ed. Sandra M Gilbert), New York & London: Norton
- Rifkin, Mark 2012 *The erotics of sovereignty: Queer native writing in the era of self-determination*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Spice, Anne 2018 'Decolonizing gender and sexuality: Reading for Indigenous liberation', *Women's studies quarterly* 46.3/4: 301–05
- Trask, Haunani-Kay 1999 *From a native daughter: Colonialism and sovereignty in Hawai'i* (Rev. ed.), Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press
- Wagner, Amuna 2021 'Beyond intersectionality: Embracing a decolonial feminism', *Meeting of minds* (June 18), <https://meetingofmindsuk.uk/realreads/beyond-intersectionality-embracing-a-decolonial-feminism/>
- Wilkerson, Isabel 2020 *Caste: The origins of our discontents*, New York: Random House
- Williams, Raymond 1977 *Marxism and literature*, Oxford: Oxford University Press

About the author

Kim Cope Tait has a chapbook called *Element* and a full-length collection of poems called *Shadow Tongue* (Finishing Line Press, 2018). Kim is currently working on an English PhD with a critical/creative thesis, and teaching creative writing courses at the University of Otago. Her work has recently appeared or is forthcoming in *Bad Apple*, *SWAMP Magazine*, *Landfall*, *Two Thirds North*, and *The Spinoff*.

WITH/NESSING

Cultural exchange via 'Verbatim Theatre'

Francesca Rendle-Short

RMIT University, ORCID: 0000-0003-1623-0516

Melody Ellis

RMIT University, ORCID: 0000-0001-5344-7146

Roanna Gonsalves

University of New South Wales, ORCID: 0000-0001-9729-580X

Abstract

How do communities of writers in the Asia-Pacific, in Alvin Pang's words, find 'our own sustainable ways of speaking among ourselves' (2016: 257)? Or, in Melissa Lucashenko's terms, 'really dig down with writers from other nearby cultures (what we in Aboriginal English call "Proper Neighbour Country")' (2016: 258)? The idea of 'speaking among' collectively or communitastically *as method* (Rendle-Short 2023) is central to the Australia Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project 'Connecting Asia Pacific Literary Cultures: Grounds for Encounter and Exchange'. This paper builds on a performance drawn from the ARC interview data delivered at the 28th Annual Conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) conference for the theme 'We Need to Talk'. It reports on enacting a ritual of exchange and conversation by bringing together voices from the Asia-Pacific in a version of 'verbatim theatre'. The aim of the verbatim theatre script was to capture the experience, knowledge and insights gained by a group of writers during a collaborative residency program held at the Singapore Writers Festival in 2022. The 'verbatim script' was fashioned out of interview data collected post-residency. It offers views and testimony of writers interviewed for the field research activity from across the region (Australia, Indonesia, Hong Kong, The Philippines, Singapore, Vietnam). This kind of documentary or witness theatre or verbatim theatre-as-cultural exchange performs 'what is known' as a kind of 'ethical eavesdropping' (Webb 2009; Schechner 1997; Valentine 2009; Peters 2017; Nocera 2022; Peters & Burton 2023). This paper considers the delivery of the verbatim script and creative critical responses in relation to thinking with others, the risks of 'giving voice', and granting audience (Wake 2013).

WITH/NESSING: Cultural exchange via 'verbatim theatre'

Francesca Rendle-Short, Melody Ellis, Roanna Gonsalves

Setting the scene

One of the primary aims of the Australia Research Council (ARC) Discovery Project 'Connecting Asia Pacific Literary Cultures: Grounds for Encounter and Exchange',¹ in which the authors of this paper are variously involved, is to develop, test and reflect upon a model for ethical cultural exchange between writers in the Asia-Pacific region. In 2022, as part of the research activities, Francesca Rendle-Short and David Carlin designed and facilitated an immersive collaborative writers' event at the Singapore Writers Festival. It was a 'Live Residency' held over five days in the former Supreme Court Foyer, National Gallery Singapore, an installation of writers at work entitled '[WIP]: Work in Progress, Writers in Process'.

The Live Residency, or CoLab as it was sometimes referred to, was a multi-voiced, transnational experiment. Six leading writers from the region, alumni of the WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange) program between 2014 and 2021, were invited to take part. They came from Indonesia, Hong Kong, the Philippines, Singapore, and Vietnam. The group of writers, which included the two Australian writer/facilitators and our ARC Partner Investigator, agreed to 'start from nothing', to come, to meet up, to sit with one another, to see what might emerge; the writers themselves deciding how it would unfold, slowly, a step at a time. From 10am until 5pm each day the writers gathered around a table set up in the middle of the foyer. At 4pm each day, the writers conducted a Show and Tell of work-in-progress and a discussion with each other and the audience about what arose from and out of the writing. The [WIP] residency culminated in a Performance Reading by the writers at the Arts House Singapore.

The Supreme Court Foyer is a big space. Grand. Grey concrete walls and columns, black-and-white tiled chessboard floor, wide open stacks of stairs, a popular venue for wedding parties, for wedding photographic shoots (there were a lot of wedding shoots across the five days – up the stairs, between columns). Prominent in the floor is the original eight-sided foundation stone from 1937 below which is a time capsule, to be opened in the year 3000, containing Straits Settlements currency and newspapers. Carlin and Rendle-Short set up a table and chairs in a square huddle in the middle of the space for the writers. Setting the conditions for the residency to unfold. It had a standard lamp for light, a whiteboard with butcher's paper to write notes on, books to refer to that some of the writers had written, water and food for sustenance, paper, pens and pencils to write with, a microphone for talking into so that everyone could hear, and cameras to record the progress.

At the start, the writers asked: what are we going to do? Then slowly something began to emerge. While the parameters, or conditions, for the residency were carefully set, there was not a preconceived idea for what the writers should or would do.

The writers wrote on computers, on white A4 paper, into notebooks. They collected their collective notes on the board, notes to passers-by – *we've gone to coffee / kopi / copy; writers @ lunch*; and *talk about heart forgetting age*. They wrote separately and together. They made notes about how they were progressing, what was rising to the surface as collective vision. The microphone created intimacy between the writers, even though the space they were in was voluminous, they became adept at what they wanted to say, reading, whispering messages and

stories and questions back and forth. *What does it mean to write after an encounter? Laughter is the wind that gives us life. The one who knows you better than you know yourself. Learning what we don't know. The eroticism in/of trust.*

They wrote in different languages. They asked questions of each other and wrote instructions and observations: *But what's the self? Nothing. Just lie and be still. Shhhh ... I do so love this philosophical side of you.* Their writings morphed into poetry, fiction, into nonfiction and performance as they moved across and through and around form and genre, not paying attention to where this writing might go, what it was for, where it would end up, if it might be published one day, rather, enjoying the process of making the work, connecting with each other *through* the work.

They held their writing up to each other, displayed their writing *as exhibition*. They cut the writing up, pasted it together in different ways, went around in circles reading lines or sentences at a time, and made collective stories together. They gave each other prompts to kick off, mostly triggered from conversations they were having such as a talk on Japanese and Chinese aesthetics over lunch.

Write two truths and a lie

Choose one or more sentences from the table of truths and lies and write

Share a shameful/embarassing and/or erotic story from your life

Write from the story you heard: write like/of/in/to/through/from the other

They read to each other. They sang to each other. They laughed, oh how they laughed. They asked hard questions; they didn't let each other go.

Collecting interview data

Post-residency, the writers were invited to participate in a voluntary one-hour informal interview/conversation that was part of the data collection for the ARC project to reflect on the collaborative experience, to consider its value for writers, writing communities and literary ecologies. Most but not all writers agreed to be interviewed. The ARC research asks questions about ethical protocols, positionality, collaborative practices, listening and dialogue; how to develop and deliver peer-to-peer cultural exchange programs that foster and support genuine intercultural dialogue and network-building.

Conference paper: verbatim theatre

The idea of developing a verbatim theatre script out of the interview data arose because of the call for papers for the 28th Annual Conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) under the theme *We Need to Talk* (Canberra, December 2023). The conference encouraged collaborative, dialogic, improvisational and/or performed proposals. Verbatim theatre (Webb 2009; Schechner 1997; Valentine 2009; Peters 2017; Nocera 2022; Peters & Burton 2023) is a form of testimony where actors perform the words of people, the 'what is known' as a kind of 'ethical eavesdropping' (Wake 2014). Peters (2017) talks about verbatim theatre offering dramatic meaning and emotion through a distilled, often compressed or purposefully shaped form. The expectation is that the actors performing the text embody what is being said, enact voice, syntax, register.

For this conference presentation, the verbatim actors were Francesca Rendle-Short and Melody Ellis. They approached the task as ‘a fluid, collective, reflexive process’ (Jarel 2024: 2) which, according to Julia Jarel, is inherent in playwriting as research, documenting the assemblage of data and understandings in an open-ended way. The CoLab writers represented in the script gave their permission for the material to be used in this way, and approved the full script before the performance; they also approved of and gave their permission for these findings to be written up in this paper.

The theme of the conference ‘We Need To Talk’ is what led to the idea of presenting this version of verbatim theatre within which to probe and ‘really dig down with writers from other nearby cultures’ (Lucashenko 2016: 258). When we (Rendle-Short and Ellis) presented the script to the wider research team, one commented that it was riveting. We showed it to the writers to check the quotes and the context in which the material was used. They were curious about how it would be presented or ‘performed’; what people would make of it. For some of the writers, they commented that it was new and experimental; another wanted to see it ‘in action’. They all agreed to be part of it. One deletion was made for a line that didn’t make sense out of context.

The hope was that this ‘data theatre’ performance/polylogue would convey the space of encounter not only between the writers and performers as interviewee and investigator but also between the writers and researchers and their audience, voicing views and testimony from across the region.

The interview data for the script was drawn from the interviews of four writers from the region (from Hong Kong, the Philippines, Singapore). Rendle-Short and Ellis wove together single lines and small sections of text as ‘direct address’ (Peters 2017) in a polylogue. There was a focus on making meaningful writerly sense and deleting irrelevant identifying details or lines that needed more context to be understood. The script needed to be tight, concise, to fit the time constraint of the conference.

The script: ‘With/nessing cultural exchange via “verbatim theatre”’

NOTE: in performing this script, Francesca Rendle-Short and Melody Ellis alternated lines and paragraphs.

Can you all see me?

Sorry I’m a bit late.

Imagine that small group in the middle of the hall – they were like a source of light there – the little table – because the halls were really huge, we looked very small – that little table in the middle, right at the foot of the stairs – two stairs coming down, where the magistrates would come down, after judging and so on, or where people go up in order for their cases to be tried – and there we were, in the middle of it. No judgment whatsoever. Free expression for everybody – interesting contrast between the freedom in the CoLab and the laws that were being applied upstairs. – And the fact that it’s an international group; people who have actually experienced some sort of oppression in various degrees. I think we all did. – the Vietnamese, the Hong Kongers, the Indonesian especially, the Filipinos especially. – we have all experienced some form of colonialism and oppression by our state, and here we are performing our freedom in a hall that symbolises all that oppression.

I'm very much aware of the judicial system in Singapore. How effective it is and how cruel it can be sometimes, *but how effective it is here in this building, it's halls smelling of authority in the past.*

The first highlight would be it's very intense.

Most writing residencies, I am alone with my own writing. And then you visit university or whatever and you do your reading and so on. But this one is different. We are all gathered together as writers, and we read and listen to one another's work, and work that's done in real time, during the residency, and that's both challenging, scary.

We're such social creatures and group creatures – you develop a very different sense of things when we cluster and when we don't.

We respond to the world, but also, we grasp at whatever language and opportunity we have at hand to express that, right?

We're just being ourselves and that's what writing should bring us. Because, in writing, I mean, what we do, the fiction that we write, the poetry that we write, I think, we reveal ourselves, we share ourselves.

Nobody knew how to react to others and you kind of tiptoe around people that you have met for the first time.

There was a warming up among the participants even if we didn't know what we're going to do.

So, what are we going to do? [PAUSE]. I don't know.

It's that kind of porousness; that kind of 'I don't know'-ness.

You make it up as we go along. And then somebody would suggest an activity and then all, you know, join that activity and that's it and then we create. Okay, second day, what do we do today? Up to you. – There's no structure. There's no design. And you know, the energy depends on the individuals who are there; whatever they want to do.

Everything felt like it was meant to be like that. Even the delays, even the gaps, even the not showing up, everyone showing up, some people starting and other people coming later, and having to run off and things.

We didn't have a specific agenda, right? So, when we got there, we just decided, right there and then, what to do for the day. – that you might come to nothing – I mean, I come from a country in which always we ask for results. If they give you a residency, you must produce some results.

Okay, this is what uncertainty is like. – the words, 'I don't know', was for me very definitive – you figure out what you want to do for today or what you want to write. – step into this 'I don't know' as a sort of leading. – it completely turns around the usual practice of a workshop.

We were leading each other.

If you say there is no structure, it's not quite. It is an openness to what's to come and then inviting, giving space to everybody to suggest whatever it is. So, it requires a certain faith in the unknown, so to speak, which is a reflection of writing the first draft.

A very experiential way of trying to get to know what each other know or feel about.

I don't have a copy of the other participants' work. Because, you know, we just wrote it on slips of paper. – we wanted the audience to read it too. So, we put them in a kind of table. – Every day. Every day. So, we would add on. So, people would pass by and read what we have written I felt it invited people to look in and to share, which was terribly unusual –.

Yeah, you're a writer in Indonesia, I'm a writer from Singapore, we've both been through this, we know what it's about, we know the value of speaking to one another across these lines in ways that the rest of the community doesn't always see.

People are not afraid to express even the most controversial things. Like we talked about sexuality and erotic literature during lunch.

I mean, we are at a juncture – I mean, in our history – where you will have two superpowers vying for our attention and so on. And the Southeast Asia is a region made up of middling size and small nations. Island nations and those in the main peninsula, like Thailand and Myanmar and all that, are vulnerable, have vulnerable borders. And for years the way history has been written about Southeast Asia has been according to national borders, but here we have a group of writers. We are crossing borders. We are not looking at political borders as such, but we are looking at each other as human beings, as individuals, as people who matter. And the voices might be individual, but the individual, in the end, is the only power that will last.

The third day, hell broke loose. – everyone started talking about some really unpleasant experiences that they had when they tried to establish themselves as writers.

We were at that final phase of vulnerability, this was and is the most by far the sorest, tenderest bruise I have when it comes to writing. It's a wound that hasn't closed.

It was unsettling just to me personally because I'm afraid of public display of emotions –, he tore the paper to pieces and started eating the paper, line after line.

Everybody was expressing their own moments of vulnerability in different ways.

– Because he ate the paper.

At some point we talked about racism. At some point, we talked about how class works in the literary world. And at some point, we talked about how exclusive some groups could be.

I don't remember what I wrote, now. Gosh, I'm so forgetful. But I remember I was more struck by what others said.

Yeah, and by the time we got to the final activity, I had this feeling that we are no longer acting as individuals. Like we are all there as a unit, as a group – We're going to expose ourselves, so we will all expose ourselves.

I was just finding ways, finding creative ways, if you will, to sort of mark, express, articulate that very deep and embodied sense of grief, resentment, rage, outrage.

And so it was as a group, as a body. Yes.

As a writer from the south, we usually look up to the north. So, I definitely did not have enough knowledge about what's happening in the south, around me. And that was the moment that I realized that I don't actually have to. I should just focus on things around me, instead of like, yeah, I don't know, Hollywood ideals.

I am always waiting for when Southeast Asia will be recognised as a body.

There was this trust from day one – they don't – they don't look at me as someone who's the youngest or who has the least writing experience – we talked like equals – we actually talked about how we started writing English – we didn't want our mothers to read our writing –

Like I could tell – I can tell in some of the other writers who later on told me about the tensions they were feeling – that it shows up in the writing.

It just reminded me of the importance of really holding space for people you can call friends.

I've been thinking a lot about the feelings I've had during COVID and just after, and I realised, for myself, the name I would put to it is grief. It is a grieving process that we are still going through. That the world has not allowed itself a grieving process –

Like, you know, during horror movies, like when a bunch of people went to a haunted house – a bunch of people went to a cabin and for some reason that cabin would start to act weird.

I think it is about the togetherness. It is about creating a community. It's about creating a household, right. It's about spending time together.

Right, right.

Are we done?

I think we're done.

In-conversation: three 'witnesses'

In response to the development and presentation of the verbatim script, this paper now offers three different creative critical responses from the three authors, interspersed with lines from the interviewed writers (in italics).

Francesca Rendle-Short: member of the research team, participant writer in the Singapore CoLab Live Residency, script 'actor' at the AAWP conference.

Melody Ellis: member of the research team, not present at the Live Residency, a CoLab interviewer, script 'actor' at the conference.

Roanna Gonsalves: conference participant at the presentation, member of the ARC Project Reference Group.



/

FRANCESCA: A space of encounter unfurls delivering multiple intersecting voices. The writers/ interviewees speak about the experience of being in a Live Residency together. Researchers present a script back and forth about what it means to spend time together (the researchers are interested in questions of ritual, spaces of togetherness, voice, exchange). The script allows the reader to dwell with what's said, to listen to ideas about how to create a 'household', as one of our writers suggests. And now, this paper. As one of the CoLab writers put it in an email exchange, he appreciated how the three of us are now flowing into our 'own verbatim convers-actioning'.

/

MELODY: 'How about we?', 'Should we?', 'Would you like to?', 'Will we?' Perhaps all collaborations begin with a spark of interest followed by an invitation for more. In our case, to think, and to make, and to write, together. Invitation as: 'A proffer. Something sweet. Irresistible. A why-wouldn't-you?' (2016: 4), as David Carlin and Francesca Rendle-Short have described the invitation to participate in the Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange (WriCE) residency.

/

ROANNA: When I was invited to collaborate with Francesca and Melody on this paper, I was invigorated by the possibility of 'thinking with' two scholars whose work I admire. Francesca Rendle-Short's work on 'preposition as method' (Rendle-Short 2021), the work that Melody Ellis has done with Francesca Rendle-Short, David Carlin, Lily Rose Tope and Michelle Aung Thin (Ellis et al. 2023) and David Carlin's work on essaying as method (Carlin 2018) as part of the broader WriCE project, have been nothing less than field-changing, providing fresh methods to think about creative practice in a relational way, in a neighbourly way, centring Australia's connection with other Asian countries, with 'Proper Neighbour Country' (2016: 258), to quote the acclaimed writer Melissa Lucashenko.

Yet, as I considered the task at hand, I could not help being what Sukhmani Khorana calls an 'ethnic killjoy', after Sarah Ahmed's conceptualisation of the 'feminist killjoy' (see Khorana 2013). I was conscious of my position as someone with immense class privilege and a beneficiary of the intellectual generosity of Melody and Francesca in other contexts, and a writer-researcher, but also a first-generation immigrant from India (an Asian country), an underrepresented minority in Australia. This changed my position from an impartial, uninvested member of the audience to someone implicated and invested in the process unfolding before me. I could not help the questions that kept troubling me, two related questions in particular, to do mainly with voice and power, particularly in the context of Australians 'voicing' Asians and all the historical and contemporary power imbalances that such a relationship inevitably reproduces.

/

[W]e have all experienced some form of colonialism and oppression by our state, and here we are performing our freedom in a hall that symbolizes all that oppression.

/

ROANNA: Firstly, as someone who has worked in the mode of verbatim theatre as the co-writer of an Australian Writers' Guild Award-winning work (Gonsalves, Millar, Cortese, Acaroğlu & The Company 2010) I wondered how Francesca and Melody's paper at the AAWP conference would navigate the fraught questions of voice. I was keenly aware of the ethics of representation and the subsequent risk of the unethical practice of 'giving voice' to those without access to the circuits of production and prestige that may typically be possessed by verbatim theatre-makers. As the celebrated Indian writer and Booker Prize winner, Arundhati Roy, once said as she accepted the 2004 Sydney Peace Prize, 'We know of course that there is really no such thing as the "voiceless". There are only the deliberately silenced or the preferably unheard' (Roy 2004). American writer and thinker, bell hooks, conceptualised a very interesting set of ideas called 'coming to voice' (hooks 1989). hooks' work is set in a particular context, that of the histories of centuries of oppression of African Americans, the brutal violence of slavery, and the denial of a voice to African American communities and individuals. In the context of literary encounters in the Asia Pacific, hooks' work helps us consider the process of coming to voice as a liberatory process for those who come from underrepresented minority communities whose voices have

been unheard, erased and silenced. For hooks, speaking may be, among other things, a gesture of resistance, an affirmation of struggle, with material consequences and high stakes, including opening oneself to criticism and pain, the fear of not being understood, incurring disapproval and, in the milieu in which hooks was writing, death threats. In the process of 'voicing' as part of the verbatim theatre work at the AAWP conference, I couldn't help wondering how Alvin Pang's exhortation to find 'our own sustainable ways of speaking among ourselves' (2016: 257) would be rendered, as two white Australian artist-academics working within the Australian university system spoke for four Asian writers who were without the relative prestige and financial security that comes with institutional positions in Australia.

/

Yeah, you're a writer in Indonesia, I'm a writer from Singapore, we've both been through this, we know what it's about, we know the value of speaking to one another across these lines in ways that the rest of the community doesn't always see.

/

ROANNA: Consequently, in this context of verbatim theatre being performed at the AAWP conference in Canberra, I could not help thinking about power relations. I was especially 'thinking with' the Indigenous scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson's conceptualisation of the 'possessive logic of patriarchal white sovereignty' (Moreton-Robinson 2015: 91 and elsewhere). She notes that patriarchal white sovereignty:

as a regime of power, operates ideologically, materially, and discursively to reproduce and maintain its investment in the nation as a white possession through a discourse of security [...] White colonial paranoia is inextricably tied to an anxiety about being dispossessed by racial others. (Moreton-Robinson 2015: xxiii)

It's not difficult to see how the mode of verbatim theatre may inadvertently enact a form of dispossession of voice and subjectivity, as two white Australians spoke for four Asian people, even with the best of intentions. It is with these questions and apprehensions in mind that I took my seat in the audience, as I prepared to witness Francesca and Melody deliver their paper at the AAWP conference.

/

MELODY: If collaboration is negotiated by a series of invitations offered and either accepted or declined, then the tenor with which that negotiation takes place (is received, or declined, or postponed) is paramount. In other words, there is always the question of trust. 'One must be stronger than oneself to approach writing' (1998: 10) says Marguerite Duras. And perhaps it's something like that when it comes to collaborating too, which is not for a moment to say that in being 'stronger than oneself' one might not also get it wrong. Just that it takes courage and sometimes gall (Ellis 2019).

/

FRANCESCA: Trust has been built into the belly of the Live Residency encounter from the get-go. The unexpectedness of encounter, surprise, *contra* against, a meeting of adversaries (from Middle English). It is a slow process with lots of nervousness, hesitation, and laughter too: reading work together, the challenge of *being ourselves*, the reveal and sharing of selves, the *porousness* writers spoke of, the *I don't know-ness*. This coming together, this invitation, this giving space, a dance between writers, cultures, languages, experience. *It requires a certain faith in the unknown.*

/

It just reminded me of the importance of really holding space for people you can call friends.

/

ROANNA: The first thing I was struck by was the deference with which the verbatim script was delivered. This deference seemed accentuated by the simple, if unintentional, blocking on stage as each speaker stepped up to the microphone to perform their part of the script and then stepped back again to let the other speak. As I watched this performance unfolding, I began to realise that there was something quite complex and courageous going on. I encountered this almost submissive stepping back as a stepping away from any claim to the words being spoken, a stripping back of the performer's intentions, a ceding of power. This unfolding of the words of Asian writers as performed by Australian performers / writer-researchers did not feel like two white Australians 'giving voice' to four people from Asia. As Francesca and Melody each stepped up to the microphone to speak their parts and then stepped back again to let the other speak, it felt less like the dispossession of voice and more like the conveying of a message, as if they were reading aloud letters sent by the four writers. It was as if we at the AAWP conference were the intended recipients of the letters invited to listen and to witness four Asian writers speaking among themselves.

/

We're just being ourselves and that's what writing should bring us. Because, in writing, I mean, what we do, the fiction that we write, the poetry that we write, I think, we reveal ourselves, we share ourselves.

/

MELODY: Duras again: 'A writer is often quite restful; she listens a lot' (1998: 13).

/

FRANCESCA: Reading the verbatim script as a presentation, I was aware of the relationship of bodies, my body, my white migrant body, its relationship to self, the I and we of I, my thinking-feeling body, a collective self, and the 'already in relationship' with other – 'there is no I without a non-I' (Boscacci 2018: 343; emphasis in original). Aware of the I-me-non-I watching my body watching and reading the page, the weight of the script, what I-we-non-I was bringing to life with these words in the atrium space of a university conference. How the I-we-non-I was aware of her body in relation to Melody's body, there, close by, her I-we-non-I, shoulder brushing against shoulder (mine a little taller than hers given my height), the feel of her skin against mine, it was a Canberra summer, the heat of flesh, our breathing in sync as we voiced the words as we danced slowly back and forth to the microphone reading our pre-assigned scripted sentences and paragraphs. Aware that we were conjuring them and the experience they were reflecting on into the room through this encounter, they were present with us, we with them. It was intimate. Beautiful. They were speaking their writing, their stories, their cultures, themselves.

/

I think it is about the togetherness. It is about creating a community.

/

ROANNA: When 'coming to voice', bell hooks asks us to consider who is listening (hooks, 1989). Poppy De Souza and Tanja Dreher argue in relation to listening in settler colonial Australia, 'listening is not only a technical process, but a politics that is located in time and space and specific contexts shaped by colonial histories – contexts in which we are differently and very

unevenly located' (De Souza & Dreher 2021). In the performance and encounter of verbatim theatre, first it is the performers, uneven in location and power, who must listen to the interviews conducted as they prepare to be the custodians of and to convey the words of the interviewees. Then, it is the audience, also uneven in location and power, who are invited and compelled to listen intently to the words being conveyed through other voices. As Caroline Wake notes in her work on headphone verbatim theatre but relevant here in my discussion of 'heritage' verbatim theatre, 'In particular, I am interested in how it models, enacts, and enables listening for its audiences. I argue that listening, both as a practice and a discourse, might reframe headphone verbatim, and verbatim theatre more broadly, as a form that does not so much 'give voice' as 'grant an audience' (Wake 2013: 321).

/

FRANCESCA: Is this perhaps – the granting of audience, 'thinking with' others – what with-ness actually is? How I/we are *with* each other as participants in the Live Residency, the research, the interview and presentation and witness to the presentation of voice and voicings. Peta Murray speaks of her practice of multi-modal deliveries, where 'the "witness" who is usually an on-looker is now an in-looker' (Murray 2017: 185). The neologistic movement of language (as per Bracha Ettinger's conceptual work adopted by Murray) from 'witness' to 'wit(h)ness' to with/ness (Ettinger 2006: 2) offers a way of looking and being. How each of us is '*already in relationship* before any assumption of an independent subjectivity – an I – is established ... any *a-bodied* encounter [is] explicitly relational: it is an encounter-exchange' (Boscacci 2018: 343, 345; emphasis in original).

/

ROANNA: The work done by Francesca and Melody 'to perform listening, to make visible the invisible labour of hearing and heeding' (Wake 2013) as four Asian writers speak among themselves, is crucial in 'granting an audience', in Wake's sense of asking not just who is speaking but to whom, including in shared cultural exchange particularly in the context of Australia's relationship with Asia. As Walker and Sobocinska note, 'Asia has always been a force shaping Australia from within, and that it is part of our shared history' (Walker & Sobocinska 2012: 14).

/

MELODY: In one of the early collaboration meetings for our ARC research, Michelle Aung Thin read aloud an excerpt from *Heidegger's topology* where Jeff Malpas quotes Heidegger as saying: 'A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing' (Heidegger cited in Malpas 2006: 254). I am moved by the insistence on a boundary as a beginning rather than as a limit, an end, or an edge of possibility as it is more commonly associated. I think this is especially the case in our current historical moment where the proliferation of wellness language within the vernacular regards personal boundaries as wholly positive. As something to maintain and set and defend, with little to no appreciation of the broader politics and ethics of boundaries (or borders). To say little of how a relationship to a boundary is always already a relationship to the Other as well as to possession, to return to Aileen Moreton-Robinson (2015). 'Let's face it. We're undone by each other' (2004: 19), as Judith Butler writes.

/

ROANNA: The sense of being undone by each other seemed to echo through this work in many ways, not just inter-personally in the Butlerian sense, but also interculturally in a geopolitical sense. The verbatim theatre performance at the AAWP conference, with its overarching

commitment to ‘needing to talk’ collectively or communitastically as method (Rendle-Short 2023) focused on literary and cultural exchange, stepped well away from what Chengxin Pan calls ‘preunderstandings’ of Asia, undoing modes of imagining Asia as ‘absence, threat or opportunity’ (Pan 2015) and also undoing ‘a hierarchy of cultures with Anglo-Eurocentrism at its apex’ (Leong & Woods 2017). It performed another undoing, an undoing of an unhearing, of a historically located and deliberate refusal to hear the callings of Asia, the Asia just outside, next door, as ‘proper neighbour country’ (Lucashenko 2016: 258) while also holding space for the Asia in diaspora in Australia (see Khoo 2019) the Asia within. It ‘granted an audience’ (Wake 2015) where none, or not enough, previously existed, for the work of four Asian writers, concerned not with the narrowly economic and transactional, as much Australia-Asia interaction tends to be (Leong & Woods 2017) but swirling around the literary, centring shared creative priorities and considerations, ensuring the transmission of knowledge, honouring the imaginative labour of those whose voices may have otherwise gone unheard.

/

I am always waiting for when Southeast Asia will be recognised as a body.

/

FRANCESCA: I want to think of this encounter-exchange as a decolonising project of relationships in the way Lilla Watson puts it: ‘If you have come here to help me, you are wasting your time. But if you have come because your liberation is bound up with mine, then let us work together’ (Lillie et al. 2020: 30). Or the way Deborah Bird Rose thinks decolonising is best rendered in the statement by historian and Lawman Hobbles Danaiyarri: ‘I’m speaking about now. We can come together, join in, make it more better out of that big trouble’ (Rose 2004: 6).

/

MELODY: Perhaps *because* we are undone by one another, collaboration is always risky. Anne Dufourmentelle writes in *In praise of risk*: ‘The high-wire artist risks falling most of all when he holds still, when he attempts to stay in place, almost without moving a muscle’ (2019: 13). Dufourmentelle goes on to compare the suspension of the high-wire artist to engaging in complex thinking.

/

FRANCESCA: Is this *communitas* too – friendship and thinking and art? What *communitas* is? A *presencing* amongst? Where the act of coming together, getting close, pressing in on one another beyond ease and comfort and feelings IS ‘togetherness itself’ (Turner 2012: 4). A calling forth happens (Madin & Service 2023), a crossing of boundaries, a congregation of voice, utterance and pause, sound and silence. ‘Imagining a future together [...] in the moments we make and share meaning together, we build something’ (Madin & Service 2023).

/

MELODY: There are too many registers of risk inherent in writing and collaboration to account for here, and yet for those of us who engage in collaborative writing and research we enter into risk over and over again. Purposefully. Because the risk of not entering such a scene at all seems far greater than entering it (a bit like the cliché better to have loved and lost than never to have loved at all).

In a sense we are all accustomed right from our earliest experiences of play to both the risk of failure and of getting hurt.

/

FRANCESCA: Would this presencing be called forth if it were not for proximity, closeness, juxtaposition? Relationship.

/

MELODY: During each of the semi-structured interviews I conducted for this project with Lily Rose Tope, I experienced an enormous sense of responsibility and concern that I might get it wrong.

The concern I experienced most strongly, I think, was the fear of crossing a line I wouldn't even know I had crossed. Of asking a question or pursuing a line of inquiry with the participant that would be experienced (without my knowing it) as thoughtless, inconsiderate, or *worse*. While it became easier over time to be comfortable within the discomfort of this worry (I counselled myself that it was appropriate to bring my full and imperfect self to the interviews) I remain nevertheless troubled by the characterisation of the interview as evidence, even though I recognise that they are. Particularly in a legal context. However, interviews also contain (and necessarily so) a lot that is unsaid and unrecorded. And even as we might say *all* texts contain a register of the unsaid (the edited out, et cetera), I nevertheless find myself wanting to insist on the dynamic *unsaid* of the interview text in particular. Like in any conversation there are so many micro factors involved in the interaction between interviewers and participants, most of which are nonverbal (and therefore not recorded), at least some of which we can assume are unconscious, yet all of which has a significant impact on what unfolds.

While I was less concerned with my potentially positive influence on how the interviews unfolded, I was nonetheless aware that even a positive rapport with participants (which I strove for) had an impact. Perhaps a better way of saying this is that there is no such thing as a neutral interlocutor, and we know how strong the fantasy of the objective researcher has been historically. We know that for a long time it was thought that the researcher could observe participants without influencing their behaviour. As if a one-way interaction is the ideal. When in fact *everything* the researcher does and says (and the manner in which they do so) has an influence of some sort.

Another concern I had about the interview is that participants' responses to interview questions mark a particular moment in time. While they are delivered in the moment, they are typically recorded as if that moment is now, or indeed always.

It would seem to me that the interview genre, or research method, offers at once an important record *and* is thoroughly incomplete. That while this might be an obvious observation to make it is worth pausing to consider the complexity of this bothness. 'To linger where thinking – which is also to say, emotion – moves' (Dufourmantelle 2019: 16). To allow its bothness to permeate the scene of research.

/

I had this feeling that we are no longer acting as individuals. Like we are all there as a unit, as a group – We're going to expose ourselves, so we will all expose ourselves.

/

FRANCESCA: Go back to the text, back to what's been said, back to We Need To Talk.

/

We were at that final phase of vulnerability, this was and is the most by far the sorest, tenderest bruise I have when it comes to writing. It's a wound that hasn't closed.

/

MELODY: Toni Cade Bambara (whom I was introduced to reading Christina Sharpe) writes: 'I try not to be careless about what I utter, write, sing. I'm careful about what I give voice to' (1980: 163).

/

FRANCESCA: Grief enters here, it was with us all along. It inhabits us even when we're not aware of it – a richly imagined space. Its presence is felt in the thrum of failure, of not getting things right, of the possibility of rupture, of breach, of rift. Of being laughed at. I know I brought grief to the writers table, along with other writers; it circled me/us writing, it infected what we/I had to say, it inhabited breathing, it also gave traction, voice. I began to understand what 'witness' might look like, feel like. What a future of witness might become. Led by grief.

/

I was just finding ways, finding creative ways, if you will, to sort of mark, express, articulate that very deep and embodied sense of grief, resentment, rage, outrage.

/

FRANCESCA: Because. This is a hard one. I feel like a fraud (grief is blanketing me). I'm play-acting, miming my way around these bodies and hearts, my own also. I wished I was here and now I wish myself away. A kind of *bothness* again, lingering there. How do you measure happiness? Sorrow? How to conjugate grief. What if you syntax loss in body-poetry.

I feel

I feeling

I sometimes

I break

I give

I take

I can

I can't

I have

I don't have

I promise

I heart

Let the body speak words.

/

MELODY: Could it be that the flipside, or twin, of responsibility is possibility?

/

FRANCESCA: There, *there* is vulnerability / *the most by far the sorest, tenderest bruise / a wound that hasn't closed*. This invitation of trust, of togetherness, of creating a community, spending time together, grieving together, marking the spot, the process, the feeling: *really holding space for people you can call friends*. This *beingtogether* helped parse grief, give voice and substance

to the very thing I had been trying to put behind me, beside me, beyond for another time, a different place, a prepositional future. *A wound that hasn't closed.*

/

We were at that final phase of vulnerability, this was and is the most by far the sorest, tenderest bruise I have when it comes to writing. It's a wound that hasn't closed.

/

FRANCESCA: There is a stillness about grief, not moving, not wanting to move. As one of our writers said: *You just want someone who is interested, you want yes, yes.*

Yes.

/

MELODY: By adding an 'h' to witness for with/ness there is an immediate disruption between the border – or distance – between the event and its observation. Immediately the two (or more) come together in a collective attention to the unfolding experience. Iris Murdoch writes: 'The self, the place where we live, is a place of illusion. Goodness is connected with the attempt to see the unself' (2013: 91). That gesture towards the 'unself' or to 'goodness' is to my ear as good as any description of love.

/

FRANCESCA: Yes. Yes.

Because the thing is – the thing *was* – where do we go when we're not? What is there when we're not doing? What is the other side of making? Un-making? Non-making? Other-made? What are voices if not being spoken? In speech, in sign. Does silence matter? Turning our backs so we can't be seen. Can removing ourselves be an art-moment? Is it the singing unsung that gives us wings?

/

MELODY: I am reminded of the increasing cultural desire for guaranteed safe spaces. I say this warily as I do not mean that as writers (or indeed as researchers and teachers) we are not committed to generating spaces of respect, reciprocity, generosity and trust. I just don't believe safety itself can ever be wholly guaranteed and I cannot help but think that the promise of safety is not the promise we want to make. Since to pre-empt the unfolding of possibility with an assurance of guarantee is to seek to never to be surprised or caught out. As Jack Halberstam asks in an article on the politics of trigger warnings: 'Can we still dare to be surprised, shocked, thrilled into new forms of knowing?' (2017: 542).

We might instead seek to enter the possibility of our encounters with one another and the world via an appreciation of the utter impossibility of guarantees.

/

FRANCESCA: Is this us figuring out how to have a creative life, what we're interested in, how each of us are forging a way forward, how we are actually intentionally really-truly *doing* it, making art. Surprising ourselves. 'Art is a way of recognising oneself,' as Louise Bourgeois says (in Bridge 2013).

/

MELODY: Then there's the moment in any public presentation of a work when it's 'go' time. And there Francesca and I were, on stage at the AAWP conference in Canberra. The print-out

of the script in our hands. I recall my attention was on not rushing through it. On finding a place inside the rhythm of the text and allowing the body-memory of our read-throughs to carry me. I could feel Francesca's body – tall, familiar – beside me and there was an intimacy to that as we stepped up to the lectern mic and back. Up to the lectern mic and back. Rhythmic. Tidal. Together.

/

It's about creating a household, right. It's about spending time together.

Note

¹ The research team is Prof David Carlin (lead CI), Prof Francesca Rendle-Short, Dr Michelle Aung Thin, and Dr Melody Ellis from RMIT University; and Prof Lily Rose Tope (Partner Investigator) from the University of the Philippines Diliman.

Thank you to our writers who agreed to be part of the verbatim script and this paper: Alvin Pang, Chen Tim Tim, Suchen Christine Lim, and Lily Rose Tope. This research was supported by the Australian Government through the Australian Research Council's Discovery Projects funding scheme (project DP210102478). The views expressed herein are those of the authors and are not necessarily those of the Australian Government or Australian Research Council.

Works cited

- Bambara, TC 1980 'What it is I think I'm doing anyhow', in J Sternburg (ed), *The writer on her work: Contemporary women writers reflect on their art and situation*, New York & London: Norton, pp.153–68
- Boscacci, L 2018 'Wit(h)nessing', *Environmental humanities* 10.1: 343–47
- Bridge, C 2013 'Louise Bourgeois, recognizing the self, the artist's way', *Art world women*, <https://artworldwomen.com/louise-bourgeois-recognizing-the-self-the-artists-way/>
- Butler, J 2004 *Undoing gender*, London: Routledge.
- Carlin, D 2018 'Essaying as method: Risky accounts and composing collectives,' *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* 22.1: 1–13
- Carlin, D & F Rendle-Short 2016 'In the company of: Composing a collaborative residency programme for writers', *New writing: The international journal for the practice and theory of creative writing* 13.3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2016.1203956>
- De Souza P & T Dreher 2021 'Dwelling in discomfort: On the conditions of listening in settler colonial Australia', *Borderlands* 20: 30–60
- Dufourmantelle, A 2019 *In praise of risk* (trans. S Miller), New York: Fordham University Press
- Duras, M 1998 *Writing* (trans. M Polizzotti), Cambridge MA: Lumens Editions
- Ellis, M 2019 'The mother-complex', *Doubting writing / Writing doubt* (website), Melbourne: Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, <https://doubting-writing.acca.melbourne/piece/melody-ellis>
- Ellis, M, F Rendle-Short, D Carlin, L Tope & M Aung-Thin 2023 'Connecting literary cultures', *Journal of public pedagogies* 7, <https://doi.org/10.15209/jpp.1297>
- Ettinger, BL 2006 *The matrixial borderspace*, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press
- Gonsalves, R, D Millar, R Cortese & The Company 2010 *Yet to ascertain the nature of the crime*, Melbourne Workers Theatre, first produced at Arts House, North Melbourne Town Hall, North Melbourne
- Halberstam, J 2017 'Trigger happy: From content warning to censorship', *Signs: Journal of women in culture and society* 42.2: 535–42
- hooks, b 1989 'When I was a young soldier for the revolution: Coming to voice', *Talking back: Thinking feminist. Thinking black*, Boston: South End, 10–18
- Jarel, J 2024 'To what does it answer? Verbatim and site-specific playwriting', *TEXT: Journal of writing and writing courses* 28.1: 1–21, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.117073>
- Khoo, O 2019 'Diaspora as method: Inter-Asia cultural studies and the Asian Australian Studies Research Network', *Inter-Asia cultural studies* 20.2: 290–301
- Khorana, S 2013 'On being an 'ethnic killjoy' in the Asian century', *The Conversation* (November 20), <https://theconversation.com/on-being-an-ethnic-killjoy-in-the-asian-century-19833>
- Leong, S & D Woods 2017 "'I don't care about Asia": Teaching Asia in Australia', *Journal of Australian studies* 41.3: 367–79
- Lillie, J, K Larsen, C Kirkwood & J Brown (eds) 2020 *The relationship is the project: A guide to working with communities*, Melbourne: Brow Books

- Lucashenko, M 2016 'Notes on WRICE', in F Rendle-Short and D Carlin (eds), *The near and the far: New stories from the Asia-Pacific region*, Melbourne: Scribe Publications, p.258
- Madin, J & E Service 2023 'Musicking communitas', *Sydney review of books* (June 25), <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/musicking-communitas/>
- Malpas, J 2006 *Heidegger's topology: Being, place, world*, Cambridge MA & London: MIT Press
- Moreton-Robinson, A 2015 *The white possessive: Property, power, and Indigenous sovereignty*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Murdoch, I 2013 *The sovereignty of good*, London & New York: Routledge
- Murray, P 2017 'Essayesque dismemoir: W/rites of elder-flowering', PhD dissertation, RMIT University
- Nocera, A 2022 'Documentary theatremaker Roslyn Oades', *Saturday Paper* (January 22), <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/culture/theatre/2022/01/22/documentary-theatremaker-roslyn-oades/164277000013173>
- Pan, C 2015 'Australia's self-identity and three modes of imagining Asia: A critical perspective on "Asia literacy"', in C Halse (ed), *Asia literate schooling in the Asian century*, Milton Park: Routledge, pp.197–210
- Pang, A 2016 'Notes on WRICE', in F Rendle-Short and D Carlin (eds), *The near and the far: New stories from the Asia-Pacific region*, Melbourne: Scribe Publications, p.257
- Peters, S 2017 'The function of verbatim theatre conventions in three Australian plays', *NJ: Drama Australia journal* 41.2: 117–26
- Peters, S & Burton, D 2023 *Verbatim theatre methodologies for community-engaged practice: Perspectives from Australian theatre*, Abingdon: Routledge
- Rendle-Short, F 2023 'Communitas', in D Wardle, J van Loon, S Taylor, F Rendle-Short, P Murray & D Carlin (eds), *A-Z of creative writing methods*, London: Bloomsbury, pp. 46–48
- Rendle-Short, F 2021 'Preposition as method: Creative writing research and prepositional thinking, methodologically speaking', *New writing: The international journal for the practice and theory of creative writing* 18.1: 84–96
- Rose, DB 2004 *Reports from a wild country: Ethics for decolonisation*, Sydney: UNSW Press
- Roy, A 2004 City of Sydney Peace Prize Lecture (November 4), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=anIsHkOaK7g>
- Schechner, R 1997 'Believed—in theatre', *Performance research* 3.2: 76–91, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13528165.1997.10871553>
- Turner, E 2012 *Communitas: The anthropology of collective joy*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan
- Valentine, A 2009 'The verbatim play', Currency Press Interview (Sydney, November), <https://www.currency.com.au/verbatim-theatre-alana-valentine/>
- Wake, C 2014 'The politics and poetics of listening: Attending headphone verbatim theatre in post-Cronulla Australia', *Theatre research international* 39.2 (July): 82–100
- Wake, C 2013 'Headphone verbatim theatre: Methods, histories, genres, theories', *New theatre quarterly* 29.4: 321–35
- Walker, DR & A Sobocinska 2012 'Introduction', in DR Walker & A Sobocinska (eds), *Australia's Asia: From Yellow Peril to Asian century*, Crawley: UWAP, pp.1–23
- Webb, J 2009 'Sentences from the archive', *Performance paradigm* 5.1 (May), <http://www.performanceparadigm.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/webb-final.pdf>

About the authors

Francesca Rendle-Short is an Irish/English migrant-settler living and working on the unceded lands of the Woi wurrung and Boon wurrung language groups of the Eastern Kulin Nations. Her writing and research focus on getting in/under the skin, prepositionally speaking. She is an Honorary Professor of Creative Writing at RMIT University, Melbourne, co-founder of the non/fictionLab research group and WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange). Her five books include *The near and the far* (Vol I and II) and *Bite your tongue*. Francesca is a Chief Investigator on the Australian Research Council funded Discovery Project 'Connecting Asia Pacific Literary Cultures: Grounds for Encounter and Exchange'.

Melody Ellis is a writer and academic of Greek, Anglo-Celtic and German descent living on unceded Yalukit-willam country in western Melbourne. Melody is interested in the politics of value, collectivity, movement, art, and writing as a tool for critical, ethical and creative inquiry. She is a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at RMIT where she is a member of the non/fictionLab. Melody is a Chief Investigator on the Australian Research Council funded Discovery Project 'Connecting Asia Pacific Literary Cultures: Grounds for Encounter and Exchange'.

Roanna Gonsalves is a writer with an interdisciplinary practice. She is the author of the award-winning book *The Permanent Resident* (UWAP), published in India and South Asia as *Sunita De Souza Goes To Sydney* (Speaking Tiger Books). Roanna was born and raised in Mumbai, India, and attended St Xavier's College. Her research interests are in the sociology of literature, social media, creativity studies, and postcolonial literatures. She is a member of the Project Reference Group attached to the Australian Research Council funded Discovery Project 'Connecting Asia Pacific Literary Cultures: Grounds for Encounter and Exchange'. She works as a Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at UNSW Sydney.

ITERATING SILENCES

Problems in writing real places in Australia using existing literature

Sarai Mannolini-Winwood

Deakin University, ORCID: 0000-0000-3930-3458

Abstract

An examination of real Australian cities can be approached through the spatial study of geocriticism; however, this process relies on curated source selection that can yield particular ideas about community and a sense of place. Furthermore, engaging with a textual analysis of the geocritical review can produce a homogenisation of social representations that may reinforce omissions and exclusions of groups (Harris 2018). To demonstrate the problems, but also the opportunities of using geocriticism to examine how a sense of place emerges through Australian literature, this discussion examines a case study of Walyalup/Fremantle, Western Australia. This case study explores the first stage of source selection, its limitations and issues, as well as the space for researchers and writers to reflect on omissions and absences in published literature, and the secondary considerations of the absent voices through a cursory textual analysis of the selected sources. Each of the texts selected is a representation of a microcosm of society in Walyalup/Fremantle within a wider Australian context, and as such all aspects should be considered as contributing towards the weave of the city's narrative. This discussion aims to identify both the value of a geocritical review of literature and bring to the researcher and writer an awareness of problems that may emerge from this approach. When considering the use of geocriticism as a tool for creative practice, a deliberation of such inclusions and omissions must be reviewed to ensure that a silencing of voices does not continue in a writer's own work. Exclusions of who belongs in a place and to a place are problematic (Potter & Magner 2018), and if perpetuated in creative writing, can generate iterations of silences.

ITERATING SILENCES: PROBLEMS IN WRITING REAL PLACES IN AUSTRALIA USING EXISTING LITERATURE

Sarai Mannolini-Winwood

An Australian city is a complex 'composite of multiple worlds', and geocriticism provides an approach to 'attempt to probe the strata that both undergird and record history, that give it its story' (Westphal 2011a: 139). Australia has a rich history of spatial theory with an understanding of land as an ideological product in literature (Stadler, Mitchell & Carleton 2016: 4; Turner 1993: 32). How a sense of place is understood is influenced by the discourses not only of those who created the representations, but also by those who engage with them. Yet this does not diminish the inviolability that literature creates an *a priori* place, a place that can be read (Carter 1987: 348). By engaging with these representations of place, researchers and writers can explore an account of a constructed national culture (Gregory 1994: 11; Turner 1993: 107), and through this the discourses surrounding the concept of Australia as a place (Stadler et al. 2016: 1). There are numerous ways to approach spatial studies; however, geocriticism as a method of textual analysis offers a shift away from 'traditionally privileged sites of plot and character to setting' (Stadler et al. 2016: 17), which allows a researcher and writer to examine how place is constructed across authors. Geocriticism proposes an approach that delves into the spirit of a place but is not limited by a single author, a single period, or a narrow avenue of spatial concepts. By mapping across multiple sources, geocriticism enables an interrogation of multiple perspectives of a place across time (Stadler et al. 2016: 99), which is a relevant approach for complex places. That geocriticism selects from a greater breadth of sources should therefore generate a broader and more inclusive representation of place. This is why the mode of source selection, the choosing of texts for analysis, becomes pivotal in a geocritical review – because the review is reliant entirely on what texts are chosen. This also means that the representation of place is wholly influenced by what is present or what is absent in the sources chosen. Furthermore, as with author analyses, because of source selection geocriticism is still only able to give representations of place that exist in the body of available literature. As such, a researcher and writer need to be mindful that any selection and omission processes will shape the representation of real places.

Geocriticism, as an approach to place, has emerged from spatial theory in an effort to combine multiple concepts of previous theorists, such as Lefebvre, Bhabha, Bakhtin, and Foucault, within the targeted focus of examining place through a multi-textual analysis. Bertrand Westphal, seminal theorist, distinguishes geocriticism from other spatial approaches by emphasising that it is only 'geo' centred (Westphal 2011b: ix–xv). This means that the focus is on the literature produced in a geographical location, rather than on the individual authors who may have written it (Westphal 2011a: 112–13). As a method for textual analysis, it is intended to allow an exploration of how a sense of place can be constructed through the model of source selection, considered against Westphal's (2011a: 122) concepts of spatiotemporality, transgressivity, referentiality and multifocalisation. However, this model of source selection has a marked impact on the representation of a place even within the generous scope of Westphal's four concepts. Source selection in geocriticism, as in any research process, is limited by scope and availability. The issue discussed here is that a failure by a research or writer to address the limitations of source selection can result in an iteration of silences already perpetuated in established literature. The following discussion explores how a geocritical review can be applied

to a real Australian city and the limitations and problems that emerged at this first stage of source selection, and then at the textual analysis stage. These problems do not supersede the value of geocriticism, but they do highlight the need for researchers and writers to engage, and discuss, the limitations that emerge in studies of real places.

Applying a geocritical approach to the literature of Walyalup/Fremantle

As this is an analysis of place, it is best to begin with a brief outline of the place under discussion. Walyalup is the land of the Nyungar boodjar, located where the mouth of the Derbarl Yerrigan meets the sea. For tens of thousands of years, the land was managed by the Whadjuk Nyungar people when Wadjemup (Rottnest Island) was connected to the land. It is a place of living and cultural ceremonies. Fremantle was first named as such with the founding of the Swan River Colony in 1829. It was established as a 'free settlement' with the arrival of the HMS Sulphur and *Parmelia* in June of 1829, and was 'settled' on the unceded lands of the Nyungar Whadjuk people. The city was named for Captain Charles Fremantle who was instructed to establish a settlement there. Although it was initially considered to be the location for the capital, Governor James Stirling preferred the more protected lands further up the Derbarl Yerrigan/Swan River and declared Perth as the capital. When the Walyalup/Fremantle harbour was deepened by engineer CY O'Connor to allow for commercial shipping, the former colony became the main seaport and, with convict labour, a well-developed city. Throughout its history the city has experienced waves of migrants seeking work and new lives, many of whom experienced racism and cultural silencing. Now the city operates as the main seaport for the area, a business district, and a tourist location. Naming is important, and the use of the name Fremantle alone is indicative of the problematic history that it represents and is commonly used as the reference label for this complex place; hence the dual use throughout this paper of Walyalup/Fremantle. Walyalup/Fremantle is a place of many stories, but also of many silences.

The outset of this geocritical review was to collect literature set in and predominantly about Walyalup/Fremantle, Western Australia in order to explore the sense of place that has evolved in this city. Of an initial 74 sources used in this case study, easily double this number were originally reviewed due to the wide scope of the first search, which was largely terminology searches of place names. The initial process had no further selection criteria than to identify what was associated with Walyalup/Fremantle. The original array of sources included a huge range of mediums: local websites (city council, tourism, government, local Indigenous cultural pages, historical sites, shopping and more); local newspapers (of which there are six, including the historical *Fremantle Herald*, which was originally started in 1867); tourism promotions (pamphlets, tours, webpages, maps, posters and more); photographs across the ages (including a local Facebook dedicated to sharing historical photos from families and historical sites); art, of which there is a lot locally; some minor television and film inclusions; fiction (novel, short story, poetry, song); and nonfiction (historical collections, reports, journal articles, theses, autobiographies, biographies, magazine and newspaper articles online). Many were found simply through general searches, recommendations from other researcher papers, websites that already collected such content, and targeted terminology searches through local, state, and university library sites.

Within this were a number that could be quickly discarded due to a lack of relevance and a false return of the search term 'Fremantle'. This was due to the difficulty in separating texts that were about and predominantly set in Walyalup/Fremantle, and those published by Fremantle Press

publishing house, which include a plethora of sources more widely Australian in focus. There was also the initial issue in the use of Fremantle as the search term for Indigenous sources, but this was resolved using correct Indigenous naming for the Walyalup area, its surrounding country, and Derbarl Yerrigan (Swan River). Most of these issues were fixed through further specification to search terminology. This period of culling was perhaps needlessly aggressive due to the time constraint of the process. Too many early sources were irrelevant to the focal scope: that the literature be set in and predominantly about Walyalup/Fremantle. The final result of generalised sources was still overwhelmingly large and far beyond the scope of a single, limited geocritical review. As Westphal and others have indicated, a historical and contemporary review of place is a task that could take lifetimes to complete. As such I had to make decisions around inclusions and omissions.

The decision to narrow the scope is perhaps one of the hardest to replicate in this methodology, as it was linked to the intention of the analysis rather than the specific methods of this model. The geocritical review undertaken is to explore what the essence of a place is, and I believe this is done through an exploration of stories. I am interested in exploring the intersection of a literary place and a real space. As such, a focus on factual information, such as dates, building information, historical events, lists of names, and so on, would be beneficial as reference materials, but not in creating an understanding of a storied place (Westphal 2011a: 139). The use of the term stories is not confined to a fictional definition, but rather the recognition for context in understanding facts. As such nonfiction sources that were preserved were ones that expanded on the experiences, the narrative to an extent, of historical events, places, and people, rather than simple factual outlines.

At this stage I narrowed the selection of texts to a singular mode, written, and publicly available sources, excluding film, photography, and art, due to concerns around ongoing availability of such sources, and to position the analysis in a replicable manner. In finding a spatiotemporal balance across genres, narrative or fictional texts made up 34 of the 74 sources and include novels, short stories, poetry and songs, while nonfiction sources include autobiographical, biographical, reports, journal articles, newspaper and magazine articles, webpages, and historical collections (books and ebooks). As there already existed a wide range of curated historical texts, such as *The Merchant Princes of Fremantle* (Brown 1996) and *Voices from the West End* (Longley Arthur & Bolton 2012), I decided to use such curated sources rather than raw archival data. It was also here where transgressivity was carefully considered to ensure that the selection of historical texts did not focus only on limited periods or only on particular privileged perspectives. Geocriticism is about an exploration of a storied place (Westphal 2011a: 139), which meant the act of another's curation of historical information provided an additional point of view as well as the factual content. The final list also excluded texts that provided similar perspectives, such as having multiple texts about the same history and stories of the port were reduced to one or two comprehensive texts. Ultimately, this resulted in a curated list of texts that spanned time periods and genres satisfactorily; however, the inclusion of point of view was a much more difficult area to address.

Limitations arising during source selection

The limitations discussed here are not simply a critique of geocriticism, but a review of concerns that arose during this model of the above text selection. The process of selecting the sources for a geocritical review is perhaps one of the most vital parts of the process. A fundamental

difficulty of geocriticism is the issue of source selection when faced by overwhelming quantities. The sheer number of historical sources was impressive: information about the history of specific buildings (of which many are heritage listed); timelines for the development of different parts of Walyalup/Fremantle and timelines about major events including the world wars; and biographies of well-known figures relevant to the area. Then there is the plethora of sources available as everyday sources, such as commercial, community and tourist websites, not to mention social media. All of which begs the question, how should texts be prioritised and selected? This is the issue of the impact of researcher source selection; the researcher will have biases that could impact source selection. Robert Tally Jr (2013: 143) argues that Westphal's avoidance of the egocentrism of the author does not account for the egocentrism of the researcher. Tally directly asks, 'who decides which texts to include?' (2013: 143). This is an inherent risk of this model, especially when applied beyond just a geolocational application. In fact, this risks the issue of 'sins of omission' (Attebery 2005: 385). Brian Attebery, when discussing the inclusion of Indigenous experiences in science fiction works, comments that 'silence, too, can be a form of control, and the sin of omission, in this case, worse than many sins of commission' (2005: 385). This is a particular concern when examining place in Australia where a dominance of white Eurocentric literature and histories present a very particular view of place. Westphal (2011a: 117) does mention a concern for 'collecting a sufficient documentary base', but he was referring more to a lack of sources that do not directly name the place, and the use of artistic license to obfuscate a real place, rather than addressing the need to consider absences of voices.

The most obvious issue in this was that during the review of sources I identified the sins of omission of marginalised voices. This has been problematic not just for Indigenous contexts, which in fact, due to direct initiatives, has seen a recent increase in available literature, but in all minority voices. Of the 22 Indigenous sources on Walyalup/Fremantle that were initially selected for examination in this review (of which only ten are in the final list), only printed texts are being used. The oldest text was published in 1990, although it does contain experiences before colonial history, which makes it a very current source in contrast to the easily available colonial histories that include published primary sources from 1835. If a geocritical review of place is only based on published literature in Standard Australian English, it undermines the importance of oral traditions. This is an issue not limited only to Australia, or indeed only to Indigenous sources; it also becomes an issue of privileging dominant language sources over perceived minority sources.

To demonstrate this in practice, an example of these absences can be seen when looking at the demographic construction of the ancestry of the area of City of Fremantle (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021). When I examined it, I identified large categories of ancestry that have not been able to be addressed in the review due to a lack of sources. The most common ancestries in Walyalup/Fremantle wider area of English, Italian, Irish and Slavic are well represented in a range of sources. However, addressing Chinese ancestry – listed as fourth most common – yielded only historical articles and webpages. The only narrative with a central character with Asian ethnicity is Alan Carter's (2018) Detective Sergeant Philip 'Cato' Kwong. No sources outside of general historical fact or newspaper announcements include the other Asian ethnicities (Indian, Filipino, Korean, Vietnamese, Sri Lankan) present in Walyalup/Fremantle. There are no storied accounts that would help weave diverse voices into the tapestry of the city. Literary studies researchers are already aware of issues around marginalised voices, and unfortunately geocriticism does not offer a solution to this issue. Furthermore, it could be very

easy to completely bypass this concern if a researcher were not utilising a framework to help measure demographics and identify these omissions.

Curating a representative sample is a vital part of the geocritical review model to form 'a composite picture based on a range of different presentations to gain a more balanced understanding of the way in which the place in question is conceptualised' (Egeler 2015: 68). Although this was limited by the restrictions of source availability, I proceeded at this stage with a closer curation to attempt to address some omissions. At this stage it meant I was no longer developing a true representative sample, but rather one designed to accommodate marginalised voices. One approach applied was the focus on categorisation to help ensure absences became clear. For example, I determined quickly that a representation of colonial stories was present more strongly in both historical accounts and contemporary fiction. It was also common to find that colonial stories – meaning narratives that privilege settler experiences during early colonisation – tended to focus more on Perth or remote areas of Western Australia than on Walyalup/Fremantle, making them less relevant to a narrow place-based analysis. Even with this, they outnumbered all other categories.

In relation to migrant sources, the dominant number focused on Italian and Slavic (Croatian and Serbian) stories, with most being autobiographical in nature. This trend was also present in the selection of Indigenous stories, where more were framed as autobiographical, family and community stories than as fictional depictions. An area of difficulty that arose was in the representation of other migrant stories. There is a larger population of non-European nationalities and ancestry present in the Walyalup/Fremantle area than has been able to be represented in the geocritical selection. In fact, the inclusion of Chinese sources, which represent the category of 'Asian', only arose through deliberate and targeted searches to find the sources, rather than through the original searches that yielded most of the other sources. This process was then replicated using all other ancestries listed in the census document but did not yield any further results. A final category of contemporary literature arose to identify texts that did not focus on the migrant, colonial, or Indigenous experience, but rather represented a more current perspective of living in Walyalup/Fremantle. It is worth noting that dominantly these were fictional sources and within them tended to privilege a white, Western representation of people.

These silences are concerning not only from a representative sample perspective, but also from the inherent value geocriticism attributes to stories of place. Prieto (2011: 18) states that human identity is inextricably bound to place. If the referential value of place is to represent the force of literature, what does it mean when only particular voices are present? Prieto goes on to state that the power of literature is 'to interact with and meaningfully shape the real world we live in' (2011: 20). As such, a geocritical review needs to include, as part of the methodology, a measure to ensure silences and omissions are not perpetrated in the construction of place or are at least clearly acknowledged as significant absences. These concerns do not supersede the use of a geocriticism approach but, as with all methodologies, it is important that a researcher has reviewed these issues. The sin of omission, however, is a more serious consideration. It highlights the importance of the decisions a researcher and writer makes during source selection to the overall review of place; that a presentation of place can only be understood through the decisions made at the source selection level.

Problematic findings of the geocritical thematic review

The following discussion concerns the inclusions and issues that arose during the thematic review of the selected literature. This process was included to see if representations were better addressed within the scope of the sources themselves, such as in Carter's (2018) inclusion of Kwong's ethnicity. This process was focused on exploring how Australian themes also shape discourses around the construction of social imaginaries in a single place. What emerged was largely a homogenised representation expected from Australian literature. However, this still has value in situating these sources within the wider discourse of Australian values and representations. The following discussion touches only on a select number of key thematic categories where silences and omissions emerged as particularly concerning. There were further findings that explored how place is constructed in expected ways around aspects of identity, community, relationships, and connections to land and place, and I will touch on these as they relate to the large focus of this paper. However, they do not contribute to the larger discussion occurring here about absences of voices that can risk the perpetuations of silenced voices and perspectives when utilised by a researcher or writer in their own findings based on geocritical reviews.

Community and Connection

Community, both as an act of inclusion and an issue of omission, was evident in the nonfiction texts and tended to pertain to early experiences of migrancy and settlement in Walyalup/Fremantle. In particular, *The Merchant Princes of Fremantle: The rise and decline of a colonial elite, 1870–1900* (Brown 1996) and the chapter 'Religious Lives in Fremantle' (Strong 2012) emphasised the importance of developing and engaging with clubs, teams, organisations, religious groups, and wider community outreach. A similar discussion is present in a number of the migrant texts, such as 'Jewish personalities of Fremantle' (Silbert 1999) and *Emma: A Translated Life* (Ciccotosto & Bosworth 1990) and, to a lesser extent, *Journey Beyond Origins* (Srhow 1998), where aspects of ethnicity or religion were used to create larger community groups. Family was the most common type of community explored in many of the narratives. Some texts emphasised family importance, with 'Christmas' by Connie Gamble (2020: 41) including the line 'it didn't matter because we knew that money didn't buy happiness, love and family did'. This sentiment continued throughout many of the texts with similar references to the importance of family connections and supports. Interestingly in the migrant texts this was overshadowed at times by the larger importance of connection to the community rather than the individual family.

The desire to create and maintain community groups is a fundamental human urge; however, what is notable in these texts is the strong alignment this theme has to correspondence with the themes of colonisation and racism: of the 15 texts that included community as a theme, ten aligned with overlaps to themes of colonisation (six) and racism (five). Some of these texts were acting in critique of these themes, but others were merely presenting experiences that would have been present in the time periods they reference. These overlaps are of particular concern considering Margaret Wickens Pearce's (2008: 17–32) point that place informs narrative, and vice versa. This is an issue also raised by Emily Potter and Brigid Magner (2018: 4) in their question of the implications of this continuation of certain representations: 'What does it mean, however, for a dominant place story to repeat itself in the literary history of a place?' For all the positive explorations of how a sense of community provided a sense of belonging, they each inherently

highlight that for such a collective community formed around common ideals to exist it must stand in opposition to the other, to those who do not belong. This is even identified in some of the texts where individuals felt isolated from certain communities, or observed how such communities could be quick to turn on people who no longer perpetuated their same ideals. However, these are largely expected concepts in any examination of Australian literature.

Social and Intimate Relationships

In relation to romantic relationships a less positive vision emerged: the short story 'From this Day' (Rosetti 1994) documents the receiving of divorce papers, while *The Silence of Water* (Booth 2022) refers to domestic violence during colonisation, which is supported by inferences made in the nonfiction text *Drunks, Pests and Harlots: Criminal women in Perth and Fremantle, 1900–1939* (Straw 2013). Additionally, Cresswell's (2014: 5) observation of the use of social relations in the construction of a sense of home, of belonging, then by extension this presentation of Walyalup/Fremantle is one that does not make space for alternative sexual or gendered relationships. Potter and Magner (2018: 1) suggest also that such 'narrow and exclusionary narratives of place' are particularly problematic as they contribute to the larger conception of how a place is represented and who can be considered to belong there. Friendships present in the narratives did tend to span a wider range of contexts: from old and young, different cultures, and, empowered and powerless. However, the inclusions of romantic relationships tended to reinforce particular social norms. There is almost no presence of any group other than cisgendered heterosexual characters or people, and where there is a minor reference, it is to a character that is adjacent to the larger discussion. The only text that does engage with a homosexual relationship is 'Jane and Oscar' (Crosthwaite 1994) and there is within it an implication of its accidental nature: 'if the door had been locked, things may have turned out differently' (1994: 77) suggesting that if Oscar had not been held up, his 'foreplaying with two' (1994: 75) would have included him. The only direct mention in the historical texts is to the suspected homosexuality of merchant prince Michael Samson who due to his 'bad habit' was banished to China and removed as a partner from his father's firm. Although no firm evidence was provided, Patricia M Brown discusses that the other options (affair, liaison, drugs) would not have resulted in such a severe response, but a 'homosexual relationship is a strong possibility: this was inexcusable' (Brown 1996: 176). Sexual experimentation is referred to in the report *The Ranjeesh Sannyasin Community in Fremantle* (O'Brien 2008), but mainly as one of the sensationalised media representations of the group. Although none of the texts is directly homophobic, they do tend to perpetuate traditional ideas of relationships that fit within the scope of hegemonic Christian values. These inclusions, and then obvious exclusions, from texts that are as currently published as 2022 is a concern.

Indigenous Experiences and Colonisation

The alignment between Indigenous perspectives as a category and community/connection and colonisation is clear. Of the selected Indigenous texts, six included community/connection and seven referred directly to colonisation or indirectly to the consequences and history of colonisation in Australia. In the inclusions of the impact of colonisation in Indigenous texts it is at times heartbreaking, 'where their family go?' (Lynch 2019: 2) or directly challenging: 'Today this rich and storied Country lives under bitumen, brick and grass. Skyscrapers are the new signifiers of a history of violence' (Lynch 2021: 172). The inclusions of these references to the experiences of the Stolen Generation, of the taking of unceded lands, of ongoing abuses,

stand in a stark contrast to the beautiful inclusions of the connections to community and place that are present in the same texts. In Joan Winch's (2008) 'A Feeling of Belonging: My Father's Country' she mentions how the 'Welfare took Aboriginal kids away' (2008: 247) and the impact this had on their family; in the later sections she speaks of the ongoing pride and connection she feels to the land and her own spiritual links to the 'songlines' of Country (2008: 250). Throughout Graeme Dixon's collection of poetry, *Holocaust Island*, there are many references to the impact of colonisation, including his poem 'Oldies' where he writes 'when the first fleet anchor cast/ Now the old ones/ Have no land to return to' (2012: 45), and in 'Holocaust Island' about Rottnest: 'What they refuse to realise ... In many an unmarked place / Lie the remnants of forgotten ones' (2012: 32). He also touches on the current experiences of Indigenous people on the outskirts of society, and in 'Pension Day' he writes: 'The natives are restless / In their State Housing homes' (2012: 38), and in 'Oldies' that 'they just waste slowly away / In a state owned ghetto' (2012: 45). In 'Blood Love' (Shiosaki 2019: 9), the new mother wishes for her child a new world where 'children would know who they were and where they came from, so they could always find their way home'. It is difficult to read these inclusions and not understand the ongoing impact of colonisation across Australia, and it is important to reflect these experiences as part of understanding place.

Colonisation was a dominant subject in the secondary nonfiction sources, which is to be expected as they tended to focus on settlement periods of the 1830s up to 1930s. Interestingly, it is mainly migrant texts that give an honest and detailed account of racist and abusive attitudes of the period, where the secondary source texts have the liberty of being removed from the actual experiences and report on the deplorable situation without a strong emotional framing. Such approaches in the secondary source texts tend to reflect an anthropological distance to the subject (Mills 2012: 7), which is a concern that becomes reflected in the inclusions and omissions of the narrative texts also. What was more worrying was the absence of colonisation as a theme in the contemporary fiction category. Although at times there are minor references to Indigenous characters or experiences, it is overwhelmingly an omission in the fictional sources.

Engaging with Indigenous stories as a non-Indigenous person is unsurprisingly complex, and there are serious concerns around the use of Indigenous contexts by authors speaking on behalf of a people they do not belong to (Collins-Gearing 2003: 35; Constable 2011: 19; Murray 1996: 258; Wilkins 2011: 136). For non-Indigenous writers, Kim Wilkins (2011: 136) highlights the core issue that 'borrowing from Indigenous culture cannot but be a political act'. With Australia's history of colonisation there exists a range of dangers in non-Indigenous authors' portrayals of Indigenous characters: issues around appropriation (Murray 1996: 258; Ryan 2016: 19); an insertion of portable stories over Indigenous mythologies (Constable 2011: 19; Young 2015: 143); a reinterpretation as an outsider, or a replacement of, legends of the land (Constable 2011: 19; Murray 1996: 258); and the treatment of a living belief system as a static mythology (Collins-Gearing 2003: 35; Young 2015: 119). These are valid concerns for writers; however, it does not diminish the issue that Attebery (2005: 385) indicates, that 'silence, too, can be a form of control'. Where non-Indigenous texts have inclusions of minor reference to Indigenous experiences, these tend to exist either as an aside, as in the case of *Rhubarb*: 'Beneath those squares is dirt, or Nyungar land' (Silvey 2004: 56) or in narrative recreations of colonial attitudes to Indigenous people, as in *The Silence of Water*: 'they seem to think they had the right to it' (Booth 2022: 119) – in reference to the use of land by Indigenous people. It is relatively understandable that the texts do not focus on Indigenous experiences, but it is

unfortunate that the consideration of colonisation and unceded lands is barely mentioned in these contemporary texts.

Migrant Experiences

Of the migrant texts examined, the secondary source texts covered the following ethnic groups: the Chinese who were imported as workers during early settlement (Atkinson 1991); the small group of Jewish people who were directly involved in the establishment of Walyalup/Fremantle as a port city (Antonovsky & Antonovsky 2010; Brown 1996; Silbert 1999), but who were still victimised during world war I (Boch 2014); and English migrants (Brown 1996). The autobiographical and narrative texts include English migrants in historical novels (Booth 2022; Curtin 2013) and an autobiography of memories (Marks 1997); and Italian (Ciccotosto & Bosworth 1990) and Slavic (Srhoy 1998) in autobiographies only. The two articles that do not directly address racism are about the early Jewish community (Antonovsky & Antonovsky 2010; Silbert 1999), a wealthy group who engaged directly in merchant activities and were part of the colonial elite. *The Silence of Water* (Booth 2022) does not directly engage with racism as a strong theme, but it does include the anti-Indigenous attitudes of the period (1906) in which it was set. The remainder of the texts make direct connections to racist attitudes and experiences. A common thread is in relation to terrible working conditions, a situation that become further exacerbated with the introduction of the White Australia Policy (1901). Anne Atkinson's (1991: 46) 'Chinese Labour and Capital in Western Australia, 1847–1947' documents a number of atrocious experiences, including being given living facilities that were 'ruinous and unfit as a place of shelter', which is supported in Patricia M Brown's discussion of the treatment of Chinese workers by William Moore, who housed them in the Round House (a jail) with 'no food and no bed coverings, and made no sanitary arrangements' (Brown 1996: 92). In *Journey Beyond Origin* Bart Srhoy directly calls out the 1938 situation: 'racial discrimination was rife; prejudice, distrust and in some cases hatred of foreigners ... This was an additional burden they had to endure' (1998: 29). Such attitudes and issues continued over time, with the observation by Emma Ciccotosto (in Ciccotosto & Bosworth 1990: 125) from the 1960s that it was 'perhaps because of this wave of migrants that we noticed local prejudice a bit more'. In the other texts the systemic racism is revealed simply through language: 'down with the coolies' (Atkinson 1991: 82), 'ding next door' (Rossetti 1994: 21), 'cheap chinks' (Winton 2013: 278), 'The Chinks especially' (Carter 2018: 277), 'a wog, a ding, a dago' (Silvey 2004: 95) and so on. The experience of racism remains present in the more contemporary texts as well as being reported in older historical sources but is often perpetuated as a representation of attitudes and is seldom directly addressed.

Overarchingly the outcome of this thematic review was to identify the continued issue present in working within established literary texts. Although there are some wonderful representations of Indigenous experiences, they are all by Indigenous authors, with contemporary non-Indigenous authors only utilising tokenistic nods to the issue around unceded land or to shallow representations that do not offer a place for Indigenous characters to emerge as an important part of the narrative. This is also true in relation to wider representations of diversity. No inclusions of Muslim or Islamic ideals are present, and when religion is touched on it is either through traditional Christian versions or through alternative spiritual beliefs. The sources tended to present cisgendered identity and heterosexual relationships as normalised without making space for any alternative perspectives. They are not villainised or ridiculed; they are just absence, a silence on the page. The representations of the city throughout the sources

are thankfully not utopian and they to acknowledge a foundation of racist, classist, sexist, and capitalist issues that are present in all Australian cities. However, these inclusions do not present anything other than a rather superficial view of diversity.

Social imaginaries and reflecting on silences

Wickens Pearce (2008: 21) outlines the interaction of place and narrative as 'narrative produces place, and place in turn fosters and produces narrative'. If place is indeed constructed as a 'lived space' (Cresswell 2014: 2; Nelson, Ahn & Corley 2020: 238; Wickens Pearce 2008: 17) and practised, used, and lived in, then references to community experiences and a connection of living in the place are important themes to examine. As relatively contemporary secondary sources, the texts are perpetuating established ideas about community and place, as they continue to contribute to these ideas. The historical development and practices outlined in the Indigenous and migrant sources provided information and experiential representations of life in Walyalup/Fremantle. Even though these may overlap with national representations, this does not diminish that it is important they are present here and are part of the milieu of the literature. The reason these inclusions are important to consider in sense of place is in relation to the social imaginings (Harris 2018: 2) and social relations (Cresswell 2014: 5) that construct a sense of belonging. Exclusions of who belongs in a place and to a place are problematic (Potter & Magner 2018: 1), and Harris (2018: 2) suggests that 'social imaginaries can reproduce, normalise and habituate cliches that diminish human ... capacities for living', and as such 'we should attend to urban vulnerabilities and exclusions' (2018: 3). Place is not a singular utopian or ideal location, and even with the lure of the local (Lippard 1997) that can evoke nostalgic idealisation of place it is worth considering the darker shades of urbanity and Australian culture. Each of these sources is a representation of a microcosm of society in Walyalup/Fremantle within a wider Australian context, and as such all aspects should be considered to contribute to the weave of the city's narrative.

In reflecting on this process of source selection I came to agree with Westphal (2011a: 143) that by means of foray 'through a space and comparing the results obtained, we will know a little more about it'; but not everything. Walyalup/Fremantle is, similar to many places in Australia, complex, multilayered and full of stories. Even though this is a limited evaluation, constricted by omission and selection processes, the number of sources available for a geocritical review is astonishing. However, a researcher does need to be reminded of the risks of an egocentric stance (Tally 2013: 143). A focus on a representative sample to create a composite picture (Egeler 2015: 68) is required to help identify gaps of knowledge, but from this an accommodated version is needed to avoid perpetuating further acts of silencing. As such, the act of conducting a geocritical review has been beneficial in identifying omissions and silences. Tally (2013: 114) suggests that perhaps geocriticism can 'uncover hidden relations of power in those other spaces that a critical theory less attuned to spatiality might well overlook' (2013: 114), and indeed I found it has. This matters because representations of place are more than a literary concern. As Prieto (2016: 23) points out, representations 'have a powerful performative function' in how we understand and engage with places. The application of a geocritical review to Australian place-based studies is likely to reveal power relations and a diversity of stories that help shape the essence of a place.

From a writer's perspective a geocritical review offers a framework for exploring the writing of place that is founded in the literature of that places. This can help offer a depth of history

and lived reality to a depiction of place, provided the caveat of reflective practice is engaged with. The real risk present for writers is that through generating the findings of a geocritical review they could perpetuate the same silences that are already present. This does not mean geocriticism has no value for a writer; in fact, I would suggest the opposite. It was through the process of the review that I was able to clearly establish and identify a series of omissions and silences that my own cisgendered, middle class, Eurocentric heritage, non-Indigenous self may have missed through my own biases around a place when I have lived experience (Mannolini-Winwood 2024). That I have a personal connection to the place, and have my own stories, does not excuse blinders of my own creation that could limit my own writing of place to generate a view of place that may end up an echo-chamber of my own experiences. Rather, this act of undertaking the geocritical review, and aggressively questioning for breadth of point of view, provided a new perspective on who place really belongs to, and it should not just be the literary privileged few. As a writer, writing about place has inherent risks of bias. To ignore the diverse voices that make up place is to perpetuate the silences that limit the truth at the heart of a sense of place.

Geocriticism requires the same thoughtful consideration of any other sociocultural study; a researcher and writer using geocriticism is engaging with more than the literature of place, they are engaging with a socially and culturally constructed space. Places are assemblages, and in cultural geography the text is spatialised, but it is also textualised (Potter & Seale 2020: 373). This means that a text cannot be examined for the place only but needs to be textualised within the context of its creation. Geocriticism offers an interesting methodology to contribute to the discourse on Australian sense of place. However, ultimately it should be noted that what a geocritical review offers is an understanding of a literary space rather than a real place. This does not diminish the value of such a practice, but it needs to be understood that geocriticism cannot be perceived as revealing a true representation of place where silences are still present. Perhaps this could be addressed, with a lot more time, through a deep dive into local newspapers, collections of interviews, social media, and inclusions of visual sources, but this would constitute a much deeper analysis than geocriticism offers. Understanding a literary space is valuable. It showcases the narratives that have helped shape the essence of a locale. Such representations can also be used to continue to shape the way in which a place is understood and considered, and perhaps even help shape what it becomes. As a writer there is space to contribute to a greater weave of voices to help the next generation of geocritical theorists not iterate more silences.

Works cited

- Antonovsky, A & W Antonovsky 2010 'Here from the beginning: Jewish community life in early Fremantle', *Fremantle studies* 6: 1–11, <http://fremantlestuff.info/fhs/fs/6/Antonovsky.html>
- Atkinson, A 1991 *Chinese labour and capital in Western Australia, 1847–1947*, Doctor of Philosophy, Murdoch University
- Attebery, B 2005 'Aboriginality in science fiction', *Science fiction studies* 32.3: 385–404
- Australian Bureau of Statistics 2021 'Fremantle: 2021 Census all persons quickstats', <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/LGA53430>
- Boch, S 2014 'The Kaiser's spy on Queen Victoria Street', *Fremantle Studies* 8: 37–46, <http://fremantlestuff.info/fhs/fs/8/Boch.html>
- Booth, S 2022 *The silence of water*, Fremantle: Fremantle Press
- Brown, PM 1996 *The merchant princes of Fremantle: The rise and decline of a colonial elite 1870–1900*, Crawley: University of Western Australia Press
- Carter, A 2018 *Heaven sent*, Fremantle: Fremantle Press.
- Carter, P 1987 *The road to Botany Bay: An essay in spatial history*, London: Faber & Faber
- Ciccotosto, E & M Bosworth 1990 *Emma: A translated life*, South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press
- Collins-Gearing, B 2003 'Imagining Indigeneity in romance and fantasy fiction for children', *Papers: Explorations into children's literature* 13.3: 32–42
- Constable, K 2011 'Crow country: Treading ambiguous pathways', *Magpies: Talking about books for children* 26.4: 18–20
- Cresswell, T 2014 *Place: An introduction* (2nd ed), Hoboken NJ: Wiley-Blackwell
- Crosthwaite, P 1994 'Jane and Oscar', in S James (ed), *Fremantle Stories*, Fremantle: Cliff Street Publishing, pp. 67–77
- Curtin, A 2013 *Elemental*, Crawley: University of Western Australia Press
- Dixon, G 2012 *Holocaust Island*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press
- Egeler, M 2015 'Reading sacred places: Geocriticism, the Icelandic Book of Settlements, and the history of religions', *Philology* 1.1: 67–89 https://doi.org/10.3726/78000_67
- Gamble, C 2020 'Christmas', in L Martin & E Shiosaki (eds), *maar bidi: next generation black writing*, Broome: Magabala Books, pp. 40–41
- Gregory, D 1994 *Geographical imaginations*, Cambridge MA: Blackwell Ltd
- Harris, D 2018 'Urban imaginaries, homelessness, and the literary city: Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* and Janette Turner Hospital's *The Last Magician*', *Australian literature and place-making* 18.1: 1–17, <https://openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/view/12379>
- Lippard, LR 1997 *The lure of the local: Senses of place in a multicentered society*, New York: The New Press
- Longley Arthur, P & G Bolton (eds) 2012, In *Voices from the West End: Stories, people and events that shaped Fremantle*, Welshpool: Western Australian Museum
- Lynch, C 2019 'Five haiku', *Westerly* 64.1: 21–23

- Lynch, C 2021 'Split', in E van Neerven (ed), *Flock: First Nations stories then and now*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, pp. 167–79, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/curtin/detail.action?docID=6521664>
- Mannolini-Winwood, S 2024 'Stepping outside my perspective: An autoethnographic review of Indigenous literature in Walyalup/Fremantle, Western Australia', *TEXT* 28.1: 1–15, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.116928>
- Marks, B 1997 *South to Sillytown: Tales of battlers and larrikans*, South Fremantle: Fremantle Arts Centre Press
- Mills, C 2012 'Minority identity and counter-discourse: Indigenous Australian and Muslim-Australian authors in the young adult fiction market', *TEXT*, Special Is 32, 1–15
- Murray, J 1996 'Inheriting the land? Some literary and ethical issues in the use of Indigenous material by an Australian children's writer, 1960–1990', *Literature and theology* 10.3: 252–60, <https://doi.org/10.1093/litthe/10.3.252>
- Nelson, J, JJ Ahn & EA Corley 2020 'Sense of place: Trends from the literature', *Journal of urbanism: International research on placemaking and urban sustainability* 13.2: 236–61, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2020.1726799>
- O'Brien, P 2008 *The Rajneesh sannyasin community in Fremantle*, Masters thesis, Murdoch University
- Potter, E & B Magner 2018 'Murray-Mallee imaginaries: Towards a literary history of a region', *Journal of the association for the study of Australian literature* 18.1: 1–18
- Potter, E & K Seale 2020 'The worldly text and the production of more-than-literary place: Helen Garner's *Monkey Grip* and Melbourne's "inner north"', *Cultural geographies* 27.3: 367–78, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1474474019884932>
- Prieto, E 2011 'Geocriticism, geopoetics, geophilosophy, and beyond', in RT Tally Jr (ed), *Geocritical explorations: Space, place, and mapping in literary and cultural studies*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 13–27, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230337930>
- Prieto, E 2016 'Geocriticism meets ecocriticism: Bertrand Westphal and environmental thinking', in RT Tally Jr & CM Battista (eds), *Ecocriticism and geocriticism: Overlapping territories in environmental and spatial literary studies*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 19–35
- Rossetti, S 1994 'From this day', in S James (ed), *Fremantle Stories*, Fremantle: Cliff Street Publishing, pp. 19–25
- Ryan, J 2016 'Reflections on an Australian fantasy: Constructing the impossible', *Coolabah* 18: 16–21, <https://doi.org/10.1344/co20161816-22>
- Shiosaki, E 2019 'Blood love', *Westerly*, Ancestors Special Is 8: 8–12
- Silbert, E 1999 'Jewish personalities of Fremantle', *Fremantle Studies* 1: 77–91, <http://fremantlestuff.info/fhs/fs/1/Silbert.html>
- Silvey, C 2004 *Rhubarb*, Fremantle: Fremantle Press
- Srhoy, B 1998 *Journey beyond origin*, Carlisle: Hesperian Press
- Stadler, J, P Mitchell & S Carleton 2016 *Imagined landscapes: Geovisualizing Australian spatial narratives*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press
- Straw, LSL 2013 *Drunks, pests and harlots: Criminal women in Perth and Fremantle, 1900–1939*, Kilkerran: Humming Earth

- Strong, R 2012 'Religious lives in Fremantle', in P Longley Arthur & G Bolton (eds) *In Voices from the West End: Stories, people and events that shaped Fremantle*, Welshpool: Western Australian Museum
- Tally Jr, RT 2013 *Spatiality*, London: Routledge
- Turner, G 1993 *National fictions: Literature, film and the construction of Australian narrative*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin
- Westphal, B 2011a *Geocriticism: Real and fictional spaces*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230119161>
- Westphal, B 2011b 'Foreword', in RT Tally Jr (ed), *Geocritical explorations: Space, place and mapping in literary and cultural studies*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. ix–xv, <https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230337930>
- Wickens Pearce, M 2008 'Framing the days: Place and narrative in cartography', *Cartography and geographic information science* 35.1: 17–32, <https://doi.org/10.1559/152304008783475661>
- Wilkins, K 2011 "'Cutting off the head of the king": Sovereignty, feudalism, fantasy', *Australian literary studies* 26.3–4: 133–46, <https://doi.org/10.20314/als.6005ca2f2f>
- Winch, J 2008 'A feeling of belonging: My father's country', in S Morgan, J Mia & B Kwaymullina (eds), *Heartsick for country: Stories of love, spirit, and creation*, North Fremantle: Fremantle Press, pp. 242–59
- Winton, T 2013 *Eyrie*, London: Hamish Hamilton
- Young, H 2015 *Race and popular fantasy literature: Habits of whiteness*, London: Routledge

About the author

Sarai Mannolini-Winwood (she/her) is an aspiring writer living in Koorabup/Denmark, Western Australia. Her writing has appeared academically in *TEXT*, *Creatio Fantastica*, and *Dissection*, professionally on *The Artifice*, and creatively in *Limina Journal* and *Creature* ezine. She is currently undertaking a Doctorate of Philosophy in creative writing (Deakin University) with a focus on the craft process of writing about place in Australia.

SPEAKING ABOUT THE UNSPEAKABLE

Poetry as a way to bear witness to suffering

Emilie Collyer

Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, ORCID: 0000-0003-4572-3571

Miriam Wei Wei Lo

Sheridan Institute of Higher Education, ORCID: 0000-0002-3224-5905

Abstract

This collaborative essay is adapted from a conference presentation by poets Emilie Collyer and Miriam Wei Wei Lo. There are two anchoring texts under discussion: poems by Lo and Collyer that are in close conversation with each other (Collyer's poem is about gendered violence, Lo's is about domestic violence). Collyer and Lo explore the unique ways in which poetry, as a form of creative writing, can bear witness to suffering. They pay particular attention to the strategies available in poetry that make it possible to enter into the paradox of speaking about what is rendered unspeakable by trauma. Collyer focuses on the poetic line, double poetic voice, and the possibilities for use of space on the page. Lo focuses on the fragment, sequential constraint (like the numbered stanza), and figurative language. The writers draw on a range of theories that connect poetry to ways of bearing witness to human suffering: including poetic inquiry as social justice, poetry as a practice of sacred lament, and broader feminist approaches to writing.

SPEAKING ABOUT THE UNSPEAKABLE: POETRY AS A WAY TO BEAR WITNESS TO SUFFERING

Emilie Collyer and Miriam Wei Wei Lo

Introduction

How can poetry bear witness to suffering? Is it possible or even desirable to represent trauma? If it is possible, can the act of writing poetry play a transformative role in how traumatic experiences are processed and understood? In this paper, two writers analyse their creative practice approaches to exploring these questions. Each takes one of their own poems and deconstructs poetic techniques and how these relate to aims of representing traumatic experience. They propose specific ways that poetry can offer strategies for speaking about the unspeakable and, in doing so, explore the ways in which writing a poem can become a small act of resistance and hope.

EMILIE COLLYER

My poem 'What you learn (TV lessons)' began life as a short story. I had an idea to write about a support group for women characters who are victims of violence in crime television shows, who have one appearance, and it is often once they about to be killed or are already dead:

LAURA hears it. Senses someone's there. She can see them
behind her, reflected in the window. Too scared to turn
around, she looks up, as if at us. GASPS. Eyes full of fear. (Everett 2021: 2)

I wrote a few versions of the story, where these women escaped into the real world and set up communes or where they realised they were not 'real' but that their feelings of being violated and murdered were. I was both fascinated and repelled by this overwhelming phenomenon and also aware of my complicity in it, as a viewer, as a consumer, someone who enjoys 'switching off' by occasionally watching *Law and Order SVU* or *CSI* or *FBI* or any other acronym-driven crime show.

I could not make the story 'work' in this form. Nothing felt like the 'right' narrative resolution. After leaving the piece alone for a long time, I returned to it and reimagined it as a poem. Rather than trying to smooth out a narrative, and build characters out of the violence, I dug into the violent language and I expanded it. I used the notion of excess and I also used the language of character descriptions, as can be found in any television or film drama script such as this: 'JACKIE MCDOWD, a tired looking 45' (Prager 2017: 2). I wove in memories of ways in which murdered women are described in television media reports. As I built up this catalogue of violence, another urge entered the process and this emerged as the left-hand text, a quieter voice, one with fewer words, taking up less space on the page, slotted between the barrage of descriptors much in the way that someone might try to utter what they are really feeling in among a barrage of blows.

I include an excerpt of the poem here:

Before
 you
 learn
 if
 you
 are
 pretty
 or
 not

she's young & pretty
 she's young & surprisingly pretty
 she's young & unaware of how pretty she is
 she's young & ethnic but in a surprisingly pretty way
 she's young & pretty & sexy as hell & doesn't she know it
 she's a walking wet dream & not a girl you'd take to meet your mother
 she's tortured looking, maybe with dark hair or tattoos but still surprisingly pretty
 she has a rough edge the type you'd fuck if you were drunk or a private school boy
 wanting to slum it for a night

The full version of this poem can be found in my collection *Do you have anything less domestic?* (Collyer 2022: 68–75).

Connecting trauma with poetic language

The relationship of trauma to language and literature is a complex and contested one. In her influential text *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), Cathy Caruth posits what became a popular notion about trauma which is that it 'resists simple comprehension' (Caruth 1996: 5) and that any sense of truth about trauma often 'remains unknown in our very actions and our language' (1996: 4). Meera Atkinson summarises her interpretation of Caruth's theory that 'the problem of traumatic memory comes down to the inability to fully witness the traumatic event' (Atkinson 2018: 8). This mimetic reading of trauma (that one who has experienced trauma cannot fully recall it or speak it and so is destined to live it out or re-enact it) is disputed or at least complicated by scholars including historian Ruth Leys (2000) and literary theorist Barry Stampfl (2014), both of whom argue for a more complex and irresolvable analysis of trauma. Related to the concept of what cannot be spoken, and the notion of 'the unspeakable in literary texts' (Stampfl 2014: 36), Stampfl warns that 'a taxonomy of unspeakables that could be adequate to this challenge has not yet even begun to be worked out' (Stampfl 2014: 36). Lorinda Tang (2020) concurs, suggesting that 'the unspeakable as a literary trope needs to evolve beyond a shorthand for events and experiences that are traumatic and off limits to representation' (Tang 2020: 14). Dale Tracy (2017) asserts that linking trauma studies too closely to literature risks diminishing possibilities for how trauma and all kinds of suffering are represented and read. She writes about the value of poetry in how it 'can place disparate components beside each other, holding in connection what does not necessarily belong together' (Tracy 2017: 25). My poem reflects the complexities around definitions of trauma and its application within the literary arts. Multiple traumatic events are described, briefly, coldly, functionally in the poem. I aim to show how the overuse of real events as mere plot points or

one line media descriptions contributes to a kind of communal inability to adequately name and remember.

I am also interested in Atkinson's writing about transgenerational trauma: 'illuminating transmissive cycles of trauma that are grounded in structural social organization and have consequences across generations' (Atkinson 2017: 4). I see connections between this definition and the use of violent imagery in popular culture as a phenomenon that has become transgenerational. The unique nature of television shows in particular, where a weekly or monthly crime must be imagined, envisioned, described, cast and filmed and therefore adds to this communal and societal numbing and generalising about the specificity of real violence. My poem inhabits this gap and shows many gaps on the page. I attempt to make a poem that expresses something of what Anna Gibbs describes as the way many of us now live in a 'more or less continuous state of mediatized emergency and traumatic aftermath, desensitized by the onslaught of images – many would argue – to the affect we ought to feel' and an interest therefore in 'circulation, translation, accumulation and, especially, concatenation' (Gibbs 2013: 136).

I further extrapolate from this definition of trauma as it being what is left after an overwhelming and often violent experience where language cannot effectively be used to put a neat, narrative shape around the memory. In my poem, the subjects of violent events do not speak. They do not have a voice. They are described in one column of text in almost clinical terms and via what could be described as a male gaze, that is, described by physical attributes and by measurements of 'beauty'. In the other text column, the subjects of violence are addressed in second person but it is still really a process of description. By refusing agency to the bodies and voices that have experienced the acts of violence, I am investigating poetically the notion of what is 'unspeakable' – whether that is because trauma resists language or, more basely, because these bodies and voices are not invited to speak. On television, in crime drama, in the media, they are shown and discussed by others.

Although I, like many women, have experienced sexual assault in both public spaces and private ones, I do not claim a direct space for my own voice or position in this poem. I am present implicitly as a documenter, someone who is 'collecting language' in order to make that language more visible and stranger, and less natural and acceptable. I bear witness one step removed, not so much to specific instances of gendered violence as to the representation of that violence and its coopting as an entertainment device.

Poetic inquiry as a method to render complexity

Proponents of poetic inquiry state that its value as a research method stems from the way in which the form is both reflexive and critical, thus opening fruitful spaces between critical and creative approaches. Poetic inquiry can also be defined as an embodied research methodology. Sandra L Faulkner (2019) makes connections between poetic inquiry, feminist poetry and her aims as a researcher: 'Feminist poetry uses personal, embodied experience to make larger claims about systems and structures of oppression' (2019: 20). Susan Walsh describes her poetic inquiry process as 'being present and dwelling with particular artifacts rather than analyzing or interpreting them' (Walsh, in Faulkner 2019: 17). I find fruitful links between this sense of being with artifacts and an ekphrastic approach to poetry which I explore further on in this paper.

James Longenbach makes the point that poetry offers the unique ability to liberate readers 'from a too-familiar narrative of what constitutes our liberation' (Longenbach 2008: 94). He is discussing a poem by John Ashbery, which starts as a lineated poem and ends as a prose poem, as not asking the reader to 'choose' between different ways of organising language in a poem, but offering both, and by that also offering a rethinking of our assumptions. I employ a similar approach in my poetry where, by presenting the poem in two columns, I invite the reader to make choices about how they read the poem and how they construct meaning.

Matthew Zapruder quotes Anne Carson: 'I think a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page' (Carson, in Zapruder 2018: 58). He goes on to extend this proposition in his own words, that a poem acts as 'a record of the movement of the mind.' In writing my poem I tried to find a way to trace my own thought process, the back-and-forth relationship between what I was seeing on screen and how this was resonating for me internally.

I employ poetry because it can evoke a range of experiences for the reader: seeing gaps (and therefore making leaps), feeling interruptions of flow (and being irritated by this or this allowing for other ideas and thoughts to enter), and regularly resetting their attention (and thus remaining alert and curious while reading). Susan Howe writes, 'where philosophy stops, poetry is impelled to begin' (Howe 2003: 115). That is, poetry is a form we can use to write about that which we don't yet understand and as a form to write about that which may elude intellectual definition. We offer poetry as a way to try and hold our dilemmas. Our traumas.

A feminist approach to writing

My lived feminism is one that tries to be conscious of the limits of the white feminism I grew up with and be thoughtfully intersectional. I want my life and my writing to contribute to how we see, understand and try to reimagine oppressive power structures.

Margaret Henderson and Ann Vickery provide a broad and useful definition of literary feminism, that it is 'concerned with the relationship between form and politics' (Henderson & Vickery 2009: 15). Bonny Cassidy and Jessica L Wilkinson concur that it is a sense of pressure and conveying that pressure via language that constitutes feminist poetry, writing that responds to the present moment, and writing that has 'a collective cultural knowledge and awareness of inequality and silence' (Cassidy & Wilkinson 2016: xiv).

In terms of constructing this poem, I borrow here Rachel Blau DuPlessis' term 'otherhow' (DuPlessis 2006). She writes about her feminist goals to refabricate traditions of Western lyric poetry and makes the point that in resisting tradition one is of course in relationship with it. I too am in relationship with pop culture, with tropes of television, as I try to turn them, to 'otherhow' a relationship.

I return to Atkinson who advocates for a feminist approach to writing from and about trauma. She brings together Cixous's *écriture féminine* and Kristeva's notion of the 'strange body' to theorise writing about transgenerational trauma. She suggests there is potency in 'experimental strategies that enable the writing of traumatic gaps that resist factual account' (Atkinson 2017: 41).

I use poetry and the page to speculate an 'otherhow'. I attempt to make the body of the poem strange to make more visible how the relentless repetition of violent images risks numbing us to its reality.

Employing ekphrastic techniques

I am in step here with other poets stretching both the function and expression of ekphrasis beyond the simplest standard definition of 'making the visual verbal'. Genevieve Kaplan is interested in ekphrastic 'poems that purposefully move beyond description' and that 'share how the artwork makes the speaker feel or what it reminds the speaker of' (2009: 3). Cole Swensen also takes up this line of inquiry, suggesting ekphrasis can be 'a model for formal construction' (Swensen 2011: 71).

It is this mode that I am interested in, how one form of art can elicit a range of personal, aesthetic, social and political responses and how these can be translated and used fruitfully to generate another work of art. Swensen suggests ekphrasis might be a 'side-by-side, a walking-along-*with*' where 'the two, poem and artwork, are presumed to be going in the same direction and at the same speed; they are fellow travellers sharing a context' (2011: 70).

I am working with more tension than this proposal initially might suggest as I want my poetry to act as a counterpoint, to provide something that weaves and clashes with the original artwork, not so much fellow traveller as a critical companion. This poem was written in response to the plethora of television crime shows and the troubling way in which so many of them depend on the gruesome deaths (often accompanied by sexual violence) of (mostly) young women. By taking the character and event descriptions out of context and listing them I want to make this banal plot technique highly visible rather than an accepted and unquestioned part of a narrative structure. I pull my playwriting and dialogue skills across to poetry, via the artform of television to 'walk alongside' the original artworks, as a critical companion. I use the structure of TV crime to structure the poem into three broad sections: how the women look, how they die and then who the killer is. Only the killer, generally, gets to have a 'who'.

An inheritor of protest poetry

My poem sits firmly within a protest tradition. Poets of influence include Anna Akhmatova, Gil Scott-Heron, Claudia Rankine, Alison Whittaker and Maxine Beneba Clarke, all of whom use a combination of lived experience, social critique and analysis of media and culture in their poetry as a way to speak against injustices and draw attention to oppressive forces. As Rachel Zucker writes:

It is the job of poems to undermine, to refute, retort, re-see, disrupt. To tell you nicely or aggressively that you are wrong, that the world is fucked up, that all our modes of understanding and expressing are suspect, that there is nothing and no one above reproach or scrutiny. (Zucker 2023: 5)

The way we render and consume violence on screen is indeed suspect and a phenomenon worth examining, worth disrupting and undermining via the simple yet powerful act of making us see it differently via a poetic approach.

At this fulcrum point in the paper I draw in further elements of the conversation between us as collaborating writers on this paper. We spoke about how there is something beautiful in the act of facing these words and images, recording them and asking for change. There is certainly a dissonance, the writing wishes the world was 'not so', there is a palpable gap between how things are and how they should be. The balance between order and chaos we

strive for in poetry tries to speak this unspeakable gap. The chaotic order of poetry is one way of representing this tension.

Interlude: Standing Silence

In recognition of this gap, and of the longing for justice that fills the space between what is and what should be, we invite the reader to pause.

In this pause, we ask the reader to stand and remember anyone they know who has experienced gender-based or domestic violence: whether this has taken the form of sexual assault, rape, coercive control, beatings, or murder.

MIRIAM WEI WEI LO

Fragments: Finding a Way In

*I wanted to tell someone
what I remembered
but when I tried what came out was
carpet
curtain
weatherboard
red velvet*

(Rose Hunter, 'Red Velvet Suite')

'She is numbering the memory stones and the bright objects fall towards her'

(Peter Boyle, 'On Invoking the Goddess')

My poem 'In Memory of Katrina Miles' (2023: 53–57) begins, as a decision to write, at a poetry conference dinner in Canberra, 2022. I am sitting at a table with poets Anne Carson, Dennis Haskell, and Emelie Collyer. We are talking about Margaret River, where I lived for eleven years and brought up my children. Anne asks if I knew the family that died in that terrible mass murder. I freeze. My hands start to shake. Katrina. I do not want to think about Katrina, but in that moment of not wanting to think about her, I know that I *have* to think about her. What is poetry for if it does not help us face, and find words, for unspeakable things?

My poem begins when Katrina decides to walk over to me at Gloucester Park and say hello.

My poem begins months before, when my daughter meets Katrina's daughter at after-school art class.

My poem begins when I pick up the book Katrina lent me. I have kept this book for five years, but I have not read it. Yet.

My poem begins when I am writing it and I am halfway through and I do not know how to go on. I am reading Emelie Collyer's collection *Do You Have Anything Less Domestic?* to review it for *Westerly*. The conclusion of her protest poem 'What You Learn (TV Lessons)' gives me a way to keep going. I can write about who Katrina is, and was, and who I hope she can be.



A poem itself can be a research method (Smith & Dean 2009: 5; Faulkner 2019: xvii). In this instance, it is a series of intuitive leaps through beginnings. It is also a scramble up the cliff-face of language, reaching out to grasp whatever handhold can be found. In the spirit of practice-led research (Smith & Dean 2009), as I reflect on this leaping and climbing, I discover other research that gives this artistic exercise context and meaning.

As I consider the process of writing this poem, I see how quickly I gravitated towards the fragment as a strategy for representation. If fragmentation is a response to the shattering impact of trauma (Forché 1995: 42; Stone 2024: 5–6), it stands to reason that picking up the fragments, collecting and ordering them, could be an intuitive poetic strategy for re-integration of the shattered self (Schwab 2009; Stampfl 2014). As the poet Carolyn Forché writes, extremity ‘breaks forms and creates forms from these breaks’ (1995: 42). Poetry, as a genre of writing, appears to have a unique capacity to both represent fragmentation *and* represent re-integration. As translator Caitlyn Stone writes, ‘The poetic form, in its resistance to linear narration and accommodation of space and fragmentation, allows for omissions, ambiguities and silences to be maintained’ (2024: 8). Poetry allows for so much scope in representing fragmentation. Simultaneously, poetry allows equal scope in representing re-integration of the shattered whole, as poetry also offers many ways to assemble and order fragments, whether this is in patterns of line repetition (as in the pantun or the villanelle) or in sequential lists: using the alphabet or counting to structure fragments.

Theologian Soong-Chan Rah, in his discussion of poetic form in the Old Testament book of Lamentations, explains how its use of the acrostic ‘presents a form that allows suffering to take shape’ (2015: 113). Rah points out that this sequential acrostic form acts as a patterned constraint that creates safe spaces for expressions of grief in the face of overwhelming suffering. Numbering offers a similar sense of safety. There is a reassuring repetition to counting: one small step at a time. It is like mindful breathing in the face of an anxiety attack. Perhaps for this reason, I intuitively numbered the fragments in my poem, at a very early stage in the writing process, because it helped me manage the complexity of an overwhelming experience.

Here is what writing this poem was like:

One at a time, I laid the pieces on the table. One at a time, I entered into the shattered and shattering pieces of this experience: the murder of my friend Katrina and her children, by Katrina’s father; and the violence that drove Katrina away from her ex-husband. The bruises before the bullets. I still wish none of this had ever happened. I do not want it to be true, or real. But it is. The fragments register my resistance. The numbers help me pick up, and order, the pieces.

Poem Excerpt:

- 1 It takes me nearly five years to finish the book that you lent me because I cannot get past that first page which has your name and number on it, the number I send a text to the morning it happens – *Heard there was some trouble out in Osmington, hope you are ok?*
- 2 We met at Gloucester Park. Was it football training? Or game day? Our boys tumbling about like puppies underfoot. Was it one month, or two months before?

You were leaning against the fence. We swapped numbers. Our girls were friends at after-school art class.

3 Friends?

spidersilk spanning the gap
between two branches

4 My girl did not have many friends.

5 Squawks of laughter from my living room. The strange things that teenage girls find funny: memes with cats; words, repeated: *moisturise, moisturise!*

Can we go for a walk by ourselves, Mum?

Of course you can.

6 Friends?

a cup of tea
taken together

7 You invite us to the farm. The kids run off outside. I tell you that you're living my dream, out on the land. You tell me about your ex who wants to see the kids, who parks his ute and waits at the property boundary.

I do not know what to do with this information.

I turn to the bookshelf: every book on autism, homeschooling, and personal growth worth reading. I pick one up. *That's a good one, you say, Would you like to borrow it?*

I say *yes* to *The Gifts of Imperfection*.

8 But I mean *no*. I want my life to be perfect. I do not want to have these bullet-holes. I do not want this world where a husband can batter his wife behind closed doors while their children scream and cry; this world where a father can get up before dawn and shoot his daughter and grandchildren while they sleep, and then his wife, and then himself.

9 Friends?

feet tread a path
between two front doors

10 At the funeral, your besties get up and name you Mama Lion. They speak of your ferocious intelligence, of how you rose to defend your cubs, of how you threw yourself into the hunt so your children could survive and flourish. They roar with anger and grief.

I sit in the congregation with my husband, silent,
tearless.

My daughter refused to come.

11 I do not know what to do with this information.

In this year of so much other loss, our last year in this town, our reputation under a cloud, betrayal to the right and gossip to the left, I cannot let myself think of you, Katrina. I have to carry on.

12 Friends?

waiting for an answer

13 Someone we both know shares your poem on Facebook. The one you wrote as you were leaving your ex. It begins:

“I’m battered not broken”

14 a surreal moment I find myself chatting to Rosie Batty at the Readers and Writers Fest. She asks if I knew the Miles family. Yes. I ask her how we can understand what defies understanding. What was Peter Miles doing? Was it some misguided effort to protect? Or to control?

She **looks** at me and says, *It was domestic violence.*

I nod but I still don’t understand.

15 Friends?

God, where are you?

The rest of this poem be found in my collection *Who Comes Calling?* (WAPP, 2023) or accessed on my website [here](#).

Releasing the Wail: Poetry as a Practice of Sacred Lament

Often, it is the role of transformational objects, such as writing, painting, or ritual that allows one to live and eventually transform pain and to carry the task of mourning and integration beyond replacement and substitution.

(Gabriele Schwab 2009: 302)

Gabriele Schwab writes, in the context of her psychoanalytic research into ‘replacement children’ and her personal experience as a ‘replacement child’ (a child born to people who had experienced the traumatic loss of a prior child), of how important it is to mourn the loss of the first child, and of how difficult it is when this prior loss is suppressed, or covered up. There is something about explicit acknowledgement that enables a kind of release.

Affective release is something I experienced writing ‘In Memory of Katrina Miles’. I had never been able to shed a tear for Katrina until I wrote the poem, but as I wrote, I cried continually

throughout the entire drafting process. I had to put a box of tissues next to my computer because the tears kept coming. As I sought to understand this, I was drawn to research on the practice of lament and its historic connections with both poetry and the sacred or divine. Lament is an expression of grief that has its roots in ritual wailing at funerals and weddings. I watched many online videos that featured women beating their breasts and wailing out loud in public. I found them strangely compelling. I discovered that ritual wailing is common across many cultures and is often enacted by women (Dunham 2014; McLaren 2008; Silvonon & Stepanova 2019). The poetry of lament is also ancient and common across many cultures: recorded in texts like Kālidāsa's Sanskrit Mahākāvya, Songs of the South (楚辞 *chuci*), the Psalms and Lamentations of the Hebrew Bible; as well as in living Indigenous oral traditions such as the Yolŋu milkarri (or song spirals).

On the one hand, to write the poetry of lament is to transform the paralinguistic act of wailing into words. On the other hand, I recognise that for me, it was the act of writing the poem that released the wail. Writing the poem made crying possible. As I consider why this might be so, I recognise that part of my 'stuckness' (or inability to experience catharsis) was tied to a spiritual impasse. The inexplicable violence of Katrina and her family's deaths challenged my Christian belief in the goodness of God. In fact, it challenged my belief in God altogether. I could not fathom why God had allowed this to happen, or what it could possibly mean.

To work through this spiritual impasse, I needed to enter the sacred space of lament. The way I entered this space was by writing a poem. A poem can be viewed as a sacred object because its language and concerns have the capacity to connect the transcendent with the material (McCredden 2020). Writing poetry can be viewed as a sacred act because it requires consecration: the dedication of the poet in setting aside time, space, and resources to engage in a 'voluntary' act (Forché 1995: 33). There is something about this dedication to the gratuitous yet necessary practice of art that leads into the mystery of being, perhaps even into the mystery of communion with the divine or numinous.

Without detracting from this recognition of the intrinsic sacredness of poetry, the poetry of sacred lament can also be defined more narrowly as the tradition of lament poetry that invokes the divine. I situate my own practice of the poetry of lament within the Christian strand of this tradition, which takes as its model the poetry of the Psalms as well as of Job and Lamentations, where poets wrestle with suffering in the context of a relationship with God, addressing God with bitterness, rage, and disappointment as much as reverence and thanksgiving (Rah 2015; Vroegop 2019; Kirk-Duggan 2020). 'Lament,' as Mark Vroegop writes, 'is the honest cry of a hurting heart wrestling with the paradox of pain and the promise of God's goodness' (2019: 26).

The act of writing 'In Memory of Katrina Miles' made it possible for me to wrestle with doubt.

This doubt did not come solely from the question of suffering. There is a feminist inflection to this doubt. The pressure that creates feminist poetry comes from a recognition of imbalance in equality and a desire to right that imbalance (Cassidy & Wilkinson 2016). I write from the tension of a religious tradition that has a mixed history in relation to the treatment of women. On the one hand, Christianity has a strong association with improvements to women's lives in areas such as health, literacy and political enfranchisement, due to its well-documented contributions to the development and spread of systems of mass health, education, and democracy (Risse 2023; Woodberry 2012; Nikolova & Polansky 2021). On the other hand, there are valid questions about whether some Christian teaching on topics such as male headship

and female submission can both 'enable and conceal' male perpetrators of domestic violence (Baird & Gleeson 2018; Tschanz 2022).

Facing this dissonance was difficult. The wail in my poem could also be read as a lament for the gap between what is and what should be. It is the wail of sorrow at discovering that Katrina's ex-husband had used Christian teaching on female submission to justify his treatment of her: 'Obey, Obey, Obey, Obey' (Miles 2014). It is the wail of joy in knowing that she called for God's help and experienced it: 'I asked God to save me and he was there' (Miles 2014). It is the wail of dissonance: for the failures of Christians, for my own complicity in these failures, *and* for the mercy of God and for faith that persists in the belief that all will be well in the end.

Metaphor is the Polished Shield I Use to Approach the Medusa: Trauma and the Power of Figurative Language

As a poet, I turned instinctively to metaphor as a tool to represent my witness experience of the 2018 Osmington murder-suicide of the Miles family. The horror of the event was overwhelming to the point of paralysis: a Medusa's head that threatened to turn me to stone. I skirted around it, not wanting to face it directly, but also knowing that I needed to process this experience, somehow.

Literary theorists Colin Davis and Hanna Meretoja define trauma as a kind of 'psychological injury' that involves 'lasting damage done to individuals or communities by tragic events or severe distress' (2020: 1). A common feature of trauma is 'a delayed response to an overwhelming event that cannot be processed at the time of its occurrence' (Davis & Meretoja 2020: 3–4). This resistance to representation is a reason why experiences of trauma are often described as 'unspeakable'. One of the more 'contentious debates' in trauma theory is about whether trauma can or should be spoken of, or represented, at all (Balaev 2014: 2). Michelle Balaev describes 'the classic notion of trauma' popularised by prominent early theorist Cathy Caruth 'as a silent haunting or an absolute indecipherable' (2014: 6).

By seeking to depict a trauma that resisted representation, I had already unwittingly situated myself in a current theoretical movement away from this classic understanding of trauma as completely unspeakable (Leys 2000; Balaev 2014; Stampfl 2014; Tang 2020; Stone 2024). Stampfl helpfully points out that the unspeakable may be a 'phase' (2014: 16) or 'an important way station in the course of an ongoing cognitive/affective process leading to the reintegration of the traumatic event' (2014: 22). Stampfl also draws our attention to the rhetorical nature of the 'unspeakable' as a trope:

Evocations of the unspeakable often give rise to paradoxical attempts to speak the unspeakable, as when the lover, after all, continues to try to describe the loved one, even though (or because) he/she has just said it cannot be done. (Stampfl 2014:22)

Literary theorists give many reasons for why attempting to represent trauma, or speak the unspeakable, is important: it makes testimony possible (Stone 2024), it makes compassionate witness possible (Tracy 2017), it makes it possible to find meaning, even in 'the moment of harm' (Balaev 2014), it allows for injustice to be challenged (Tang 2020), and it even has the potential 'to halt the transgenerational transmission of trauma' (Schwab 2009: 298).

Apart from the fragment, poetry has another useful resource for representing trauma: figurative language. 'Figurative language,' as literary theorist Charles Armstrong writes, 'is a distinctive

characteristic of poetical responses to events and experiences that resist straightforward mimesis' (2020: 298). When people struggle to find words, it can be helpful to name things in terms of other things. *What was it like?* Use a simile. *What was it?* Use a metaphor. When the horror is too great, when we cannot look at it directly because it is a Medusa's head that will surely turn us to stone, we have to navigate by using reflections.

The indirectness of figurative language is what makes it helpful. In her study of texts written by female victims of sexual abuse, bibliotherapist Bella Sagi observes that metaphor and image are particularly important as a way to represent traumatic experience (2021: 158). Sagi theorises that 'trauma capsules' that resist representation become 'accessible to the writer through this bridge of metaphorical thinking' (2021: 159–60). In his study of the roles of metaphor and imagination in child trauma treatment, psychotherapist Craig Haen concludes that the 'strength of these mental processes lies in their ability to provide greater psychological distance, freedom to play with and expand rigid frameworks of understanding, increased containment, and ultimately expanded agency and mastery' (2020: 52).

Metaphor even offers the possibility of discovery by triangulation: 'Moving between the two terms of the metaphor,' poet Jeanne Murray Walker explains, 'we can glimpse the third thing, which isn't available in either of the two terms' (Walker 2002: 378). Could this triangulation be a crucial strategy for access to what resists representation?

I use a metaphor from my own poem to demonstrate:

Friends?

spidersilk spanning the gap
between two branches

When I compare friendship to strands of spidersilk between two branches, I evoke beginnings and tenuous connections. A third thing also floats in this space: it is the Medusa's head I cannot face directly, not in the moment of writing, but only after: how fragile relationships are, how fragile life is, how easily broken.

I think of 'Staying Power', Walker's wonderful poem that wrestles so eloquently with faith and doubt:

Oh, we only have so many words to think with.
Say God's not fire, say anything, say God's
a phone, maybe. You know you didn't order a phone,
but there it is. It rings. (2014: 258)

Working with metaphor is challenging. A great deal of mental effort is required to come up with comparisons that achieve surprise without straining credulity. To create metaphor is to grapple furiously with constraint, with things that resist representation. Effective metaphors encompass this resistance (What do you mean, 'God's a phone?'), at the same time as they gesture towards the thing that resists representation.

I have run two poetry workshops so far that have tested out using figurative language to process difficult experiences. One was in a Christian setting (delivered at a conference for women in ministry roles); one was in a broader community setting (delivered at a library as part of a festival). Anecdotal evidence seems promising. One participant emailed afterwards:

In asking us to find a metaphor to describe our experience, you helped me to process betrayal and grief in a way I hadn't done before. I thought I had processed it but somehow that metaphor brought another level of understanding. (Newill 2024)

As we approach the end of this paper, we shift from the opening third-person plural introduction, from each of our first-person singular accounts, to a first-person plural moment. Together, we return to the question we opened with: How can poetry bear witness to suffering? We show that poetry has many resources that can be deployed to overcome trauma's resistance to representation. Naming what happened is powerful, especially when it is hard to do. Poems bear witness to suffering by entering into the paradox of speaking the unspeakable: using gaps, fragments, multiple voices, line breaks, sequential constraints, and figurative language to do this difficult, but necessary work. Through this work, through the act of writing poems, it becomes possible to reframe suffering, to open up space for questions, to imagine 'otherhows', and to move from helplessness towards hope.

Conclusion: An Invitation into Practice (and Community)

Dear Reader,

We invite you to bring to your mind, and your body, an instance of loss, pain, or suffering.

We invite you to write this experience down.

If you experience resistance, consider using some of poetry's resources: lines and broken lines, placement of words on the page, multiple voices, sequential forms, and figurative language.

Then, if you are willing and able to, we invite you to share this experience with one other person.

Works cited

- Armstrong, CI 2020 'Trauma and poetry', in C Davis and H Meretoja (eds), *The Routledge companion to literature and trauma*, Milton Park, Abingdon: Taylor & Francis, pp.296–304
- Atkinson, M 2017 *The poetics of transgenerational trauma*, London: Bloomsbury
- Atkinson, M 2018 *Traumata*, St Lucia: University of Queensland Press
- Baird, J & Gleeson, H 2018 "'Submit to your husbands": Women told to endure domestic violence in the name of God', *ABC News* (blog) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-07-18/domestic-violence-church-submit-to-husbands/8652028>
- Balaev, M (ed) 2014 *Contemporary approaches in literary trauma theory*, London: Palgrave Macmillan
- Boyle, P 2009 'On invoking the goddess', in *Apocrypha*, Sydney: Vagabond Press, p.181
- Caruth, C 1996 *Unclaimed experience: Trauma, narrative and history*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press
- Cassidy, B and JL Wilkinson (eds) 2016, *Contemporary Australian feminist poetry*, St Lucia: Hunter Publishers
- Collyer, E 2022 *Do you have anything less domestic?* Marrickville: Vagabond Press
- Davis, C and H Meretoja (eds), 2020 *The Routledge companion to literature and trauma*, Milton Park: Taylor & Francis
- Dunham, O 2014 'Private speech, public pain: The power of women's laments in ancient Greek poetry and tragedy', *CrissCross* 1.1: 1–33
- DuPlessis, RB 2006 *The pink guitar: Writing as feminist practice*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press
- Everett, S 2021 *Silent witness 24 Episode 3: Bad love*, BBC Television <https://www.bbc.co.uk/writers/scripts/tv-drama/silent-witness> (accessed 14 November 2024)
- Faulkner, SL 2019 *Poetic inquiry: Craft, method and practice*, Milton Park: Taylor & Francis
- Forché, C 1995 *Against forgetting: Twentieth century poetry of witness*, New York: Norton
- Gibbs, A 2013 'Apparently unrelated: Affective resonance, concatenation and traumatic circuitry in the terrain of the everyday', in M Atkinson & M Richardson (eds), *Traumatic affect*, Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 129–47
- Haen, C 2020 'The roles of metaphor and imagination in child trauma treatment', *Journal of infant, child, and adolescent psychology* 19.1: 42–55
- Henderson, M & A Vickery, A 2009 'Manifesting literary feminisms: Nexus and faultlines', *Australian Literary Studies* 24.3–4: 1–19
- Howe, S 2003 *The midnight*, New York: New Directions
- Hunter, R 2022 'Red Velvet Suite' in *Body Shell Girl*, North Geelong, VIC, Australia: Spinifex: 68–78
- Kaplan, G 2009 'Ekphrasis for writers: John Ashbery's 'Self-portrait in a convex mirror' *TEXT* 13.1, <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/31547-ekphrasis-for-writers-john-ashbery-s-self-portrait-in-a-convex-mirror> (accessed 27 June 2024)
- Kirk-Duggan, CA 2020 'Lament as womanist healing in times of global violence' in S Scholz (ed), *The Oxford handbook of feminist approaches to the Hebrew Bible*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.141–56

- Leys, R 2000 *Trauma: A genealogy*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Lo, MWW 2023 *Who comes calling?* Perth: WA Poets Publishing
- Longenbach, M 2008 *The art of the poetic line*, Minneapolis: Graywolf Press
- McLaren, A E 2008 *Performing grief: Bridal laments in rural China*, Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press
- McCredden, L 2020 'A poetics of sacred and secular in Australia', *JASAL* 20.2: 1–14
- Miles, K 2014 'I'm battered not broken', *Mamamia* (blog) <https://www.mamamia.com.au/katrina-miles-poem/> (accessed 18 Oct 2023)
- Newill, K 2024 Personal communication (email, 22 April)
- Nikolova, E & J Polansky 2021 'Conversionary Protestants do not cause democracy', *British journal of political science* 51.4: 1723–733
- Prager, T 2017 *Silent witness XXI Block 4 Part 1: One day*, BBC Television <https://www.bbc.co.uk/writers/scripts/tv-drama/silent-witness> (accessed 14 November 2024)
- Rah, S-C 2015 *Prophetic lament: A call for justice in troubled times*, Lisle, Ill: Intervarsity Press
- Risse, GB 2023 *Mending bodies, saving souls: A history of hospitals*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Sagi, B 2021 "'Only when it's written here": Personal writing as testimony in the aftermath of childhood sexual abuse', *Journal of poetry therapy* 34.3: 150–63
- Schwab, G 2009 'Replacement children: The transgenerational transmission of traumatic loss', *American imago* 66.3: 277–310
- Silvonen, V & E Stepanova 2019 'Language, music, and emotion in lament poetry: The embodiment and performativity of emotions in Karelian laments', in SE Pritzker, J Fenigson and JM Wilce (eds), *The Routledge handbook of language and emotion*, Milton Park: Routledge, pp.203–22
- Smith, H and Dean, R T 2009 *Practice-led research, research-led practice in the creative arts*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press
- Stampfl, B 2014 'Parsing the unspeakable in the context of trauma', in M Balaev (ed), *Contemporary approaches in literary trauma theory*, London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp.15–41
- Stewart, DC 2006 *CSI Miami: The flock*, CBS Television
- Stone, CM 2024 'Translation as an act of love', *Axon: Creative explorations* 14.1: 1–13 <https://axonjournal.com.au/issues/14-1/translation-act-love> (accessed 10 Oct 2024)
- Swensen, C 2011 *Noise that stays noise*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press
- Tang, L 2020 'The unspeakable: Trauma affected narratives', *C I N D E R 3*, <https://ojs.deakin.edu.au/index.php/cinder/article/view/952/897> (accessed 10 Oct 2024)
- Tracy, D 2017 *With the witnesses: Poetry, compassion, and claimed experience*, Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press
- Tschanz, M 2022 'Because Christ did first, I now speak up for women's rights, too', *Christianity today* (blog), <https://www.christianitytoday.com/better-samaritan/2022/january/because-christ-did-first-i-now-speak-up-for-womens-rights-t.html> (accessed 19 Oct 2023)
- Vroegop, M 2019 *Dark clouds deep mercy*, Wheaton, Ill: Crossway
- Walker, JM 2002 'On poets and poetry', in L Ryken (ed), *The Christian imagination*, Colorado Springs: Waterbrook, pp.369–86

Walker, JM 2014 *Helping the morning: New and selected poems*, Seattle: WordFarm

Woodberry, RD 2012 'The missionary roots of liberal democracy', *The American political science review* 106.2: 244–74

Zapruder, M 2018 *Why poetry*, New York: Ecco

Zucker, R 2023 *The poetics of wrongness*, Seattle: Wave Books

About the authors

Dr Emelie Collyer lives on unceded Wurundjeri Country where she writes across forms. Her poetry book *Do you have anything less domestic?* (Vagabond Press, 2022) won the inaugural Five Islands Press Prize. Emelie recently completed a PhD researching feminist practice at RMIT, where she is now an Adjunct Industry Fellow.

Dr Miriam Wei Wei Lo writes to practice the art of presence and to engage in feminist redress by poetic address (a framework recently explored and developed during a 2023 Westerly Mid-Career Fellowship). Her most recent collection is *Who Comes Calling?* (WA Poets Publishing, 2023). She teaches creative writing at Sheridan Institute of Higher Education and lives on unceded Noongar land in Boorloo/Perth.



AXON: Creative Explorations
2025 vol 14.2 *We Need to Talk*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/hnx2zwmdax
Keywords: Poetry, erasure, cut-up,
palimtext, Croatian Australians

THREE ERASURE POEMS AS 'PALIMTEXTS'

From 'The Commonwealth of Amnesia'

Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon

Edith Cowan University, ORCID: 0009-0001-1524-6260

THREE ERASURE POEMS AS 'PALIMTEXTS', FROM 'THE COMMONWEALTH OF AMNESIA'

Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon

Contextual statement

These three poems are from the PhD creative artefact 'The Commonwealth of Amnesia', a collection of erasure and cut-up poems that explore the forgotten histories of Croatian Australians.

These poems explore the concept of the poem as 'palimtext'. Michael Davidson (1997) calls the physical overwriting of one text with another a 'palimtext', rather than 'palimpsest'. Davidson states it is the 'emphasis of writing as trace [where the reader views the] material fact of that trace', of one text being written over another, that distinguishes a 'palimtext' (1997: 67). Palimtexts show readers the workings of both reading and writing as they interact, and this meta form shows them the visible destruction of one text to create another. In using the term 'palimtext' instead of 'palimpsest', Davidson highlights the self-conscious, meta-writing nature of erasures. Palimtexts expand meaning in a text for readers, allowing them to make their own interpretations.

History is here, in these newspaper articles, in the stories that I have chosen to re-tell. Erasure poetry like this, which engages with history and historic documents, aims to illuminate 'several narratives that stand in the face of historical silences, and ... urges us to confront, question and challenge history as it has been presented' (Nobile 2019: 40–41). Employing multiple approaches to creating the poems was a deliberate attempt I made to highlight how erasures open up texts to multiple readerly interpretations and to viewing the poem as palimtext.

This sequence of erasure poems is dedicated to Tome Grubelić who was shot and killed as he attempted to escape detention as an 'enemy alien' at Holdsworthy Concentration Camp, NSW, Australia, 1917. Internee and guard accounts of the shooting varied: internees stated he was far from the outer fence and could have been grabbed by guards instead of shot, while the guards claimed he was too close to the fence to stop. The inquiry concluded that the shooting was legal.

Tome Grubelić was an ethnic Croatian. Croats were politically aligned with the Allies, but subjects of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, who aligned with the Axis powers during World War I. So although Croats shared the political views of Britain and Australia during WWI they were nonetheless interned as 'enemy aliens' for the duration of the war. In total 1,100 'Austro-Hungarian' men were detained (Helmi & Fisher 2020: 25), each of their lives irrevocably changed by their detention as 98 per cent of internees were forcibly repatriated to their home country at the end of the war (NSW Migrant Heritage Centre 2011).

At the outbreak of World War I, historian Ilija Štalo explains, the Australian government was aware that the ethnic minorities of Croats (including Dalmatians and Serbs), were unwilling members of the Austro-Hungarian empire and politically aligned with the Allies. Yet the government actioned a policy of internment:

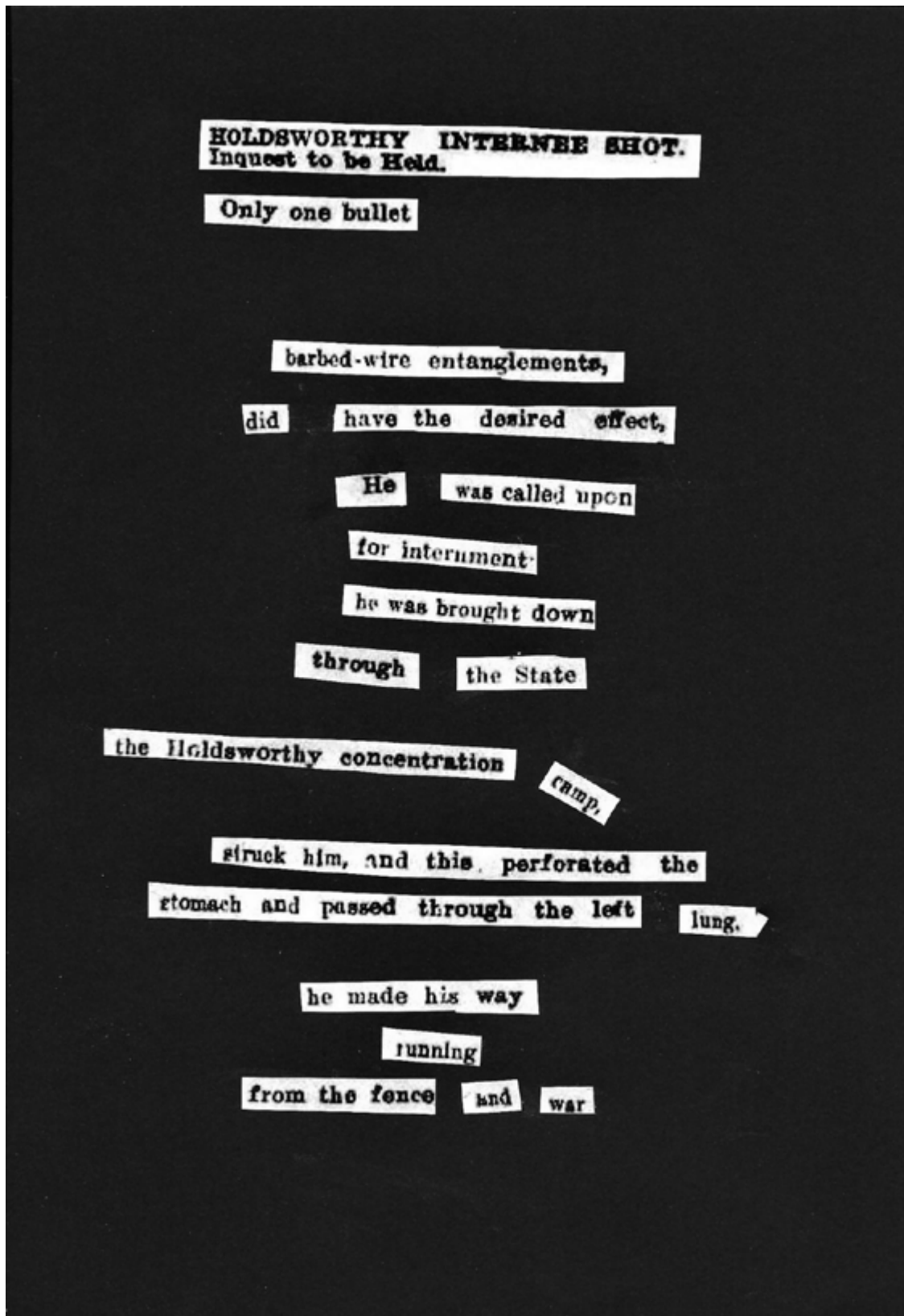
The Australian government technically considered them [the Croats] enemy Austrian subjects, even though the Australian government, through intelligence

reports, knew these Croatians were loyal to the Allied cause and were opposed to the Austro-Hungarian regime. (Šutalo 2004: 200)

I created these erasure and cut-up poems by hand from original scans of newspaper articles sourced from the Trove newspaper database. I used black-out, pen or scissors and made the redactions to the original documents by hand.

Please note: all the articles are out of copyright and available for public use. URL links to the original articles are made available beneath each poem so readers can access the original articles and explore this forgotten history further if they wish.

ONLY ONE BULLET



'Holdsworth Internee Shot' (1917) *Singleton Argus* (NSW, 1880–1954, February 27), p.1
<http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article80453371>

SHOT BY GUARD: PALIMPSEST

SHOT BY GUARD.
AUSTRIAN AT HOLDSWORTHY.
MORE EVIDENCE AT INQUIRY.

We write one history
over the other.
Shot by guard. Passive.
"Get in and finish
him. Now's your
chance." Active.
He was running.
No. He was walking.
He was not right in
the head. He got
a letter from his
family that made
him snap. They
called "Stop!" He
didn't listen. Nobody
asked if he could
speak or understood
English. His name
is spelled wrong 4
times. Even in death
there is no dignity for
Tome Grubelic.
Evidence War.
Internment. Makes
prisoners of us all.

him, Jack." About a dozen shots were fired including the alarm shots.

Markolulcer, an infant, was the next witness. He said that Gruberlic was working because he had had no letters from people for three years. From what he said sometimes witness was of the opinion that Gruberlic was hardly normal. His talk was not sensible. Gruberlic had said to him that the camp was a bad place for him as he had no money to buy tobacco. Gruberlic never spoken of him of trying to see the

the

conscious

wound

prisoners

Witness

opinion

they had wished

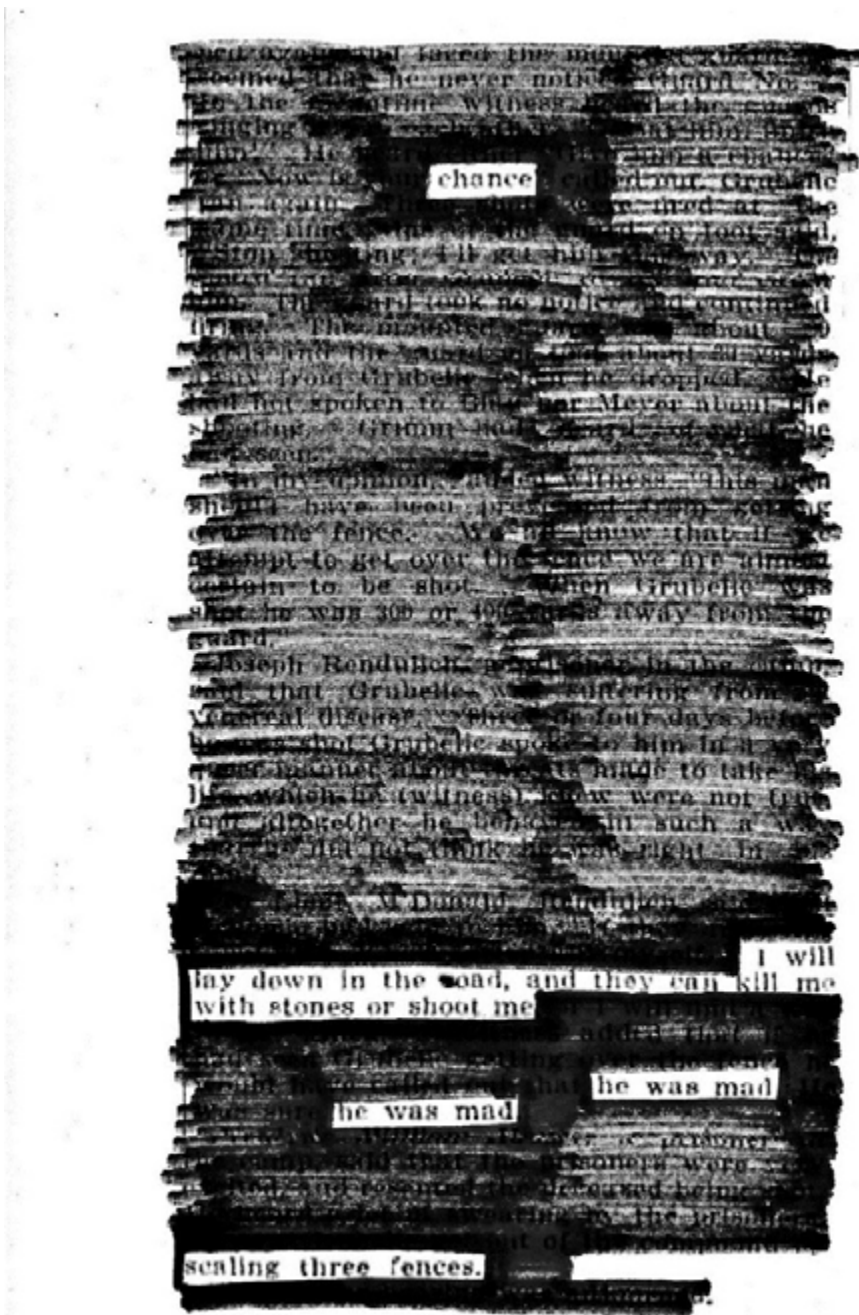
the fence

away

waved

in the direction of

he started



Works cited

- Damjanovich-Napoleon, N 2024 'The Commonwealth of Amnesia: A collection of erasure and cut-up poems exploring the forgotten histories of Croatian and Yugoslav peoples in Australia', and an exegesis 'Obliteration creates more: Examining the wreck of history through whiteout, blackout and cut-up erasure poetry', PhD dissertation, Edith Cowan University
- Davidson, M 1997 *Ghostlier demarcations: Modern poetry and the material word*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Helmi, N & G Fischer 2020 *The enemy at home: German internees in World War I Australia*, Randwick: UNSW Press
- Monteath, Peter 2018 *Captured lives: Australia's wartime internment camps*, Canberra: NLA Publishing
- Nobile, T 2019 'Haunted by history: The poetics of erasure', *The writer's chronicle* 51.4: 33–41
- NSW Migration Heritage Centre 2011 'Holsworthy Internment Camp', *The enemy at home: German internees in World War 1 Australia*, <https://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibition/enemyathome/holsworthy-internment-camp/index.html>
- Šutalo, Ilija 2004 *Croatians in Australia: Pioneers, settlers and their descendants*, Adelaide: Wakefield Press

About the author

Natalie Damjanovich-Napoleon is a poet, songwriter and academic from Walyalup/Fremantle who recently completed a PhD in Creative Writing on cultural and historic erasure. She has won both the Bruce Dawe and KSP Poetry Prizes, and has two published poetry collections. Her poetry, and various work from 'The Commonwealth of Amnesia', has been published in numerous academic publications, literary journals and anthologies in the US and Australia, including *Australian Book Review*, *Axon Journal*, *Rabbit*, *Westerly*, and *StylusLit*. 'Immigration Triction' was shortlisted for the Peter Porter Poetry Prize, 2024. Damjanovich-Napoleon's innovative work explores the intersection of feminist, post-colonial, and autoethnographic theories and methodologies through the construction and deconstruction of poetic form.

DIALOGUE WITH THE DECEASED FATHER

Patriographical creative practice as a means of connection and self-exploration

Emily Rytmeister

Western Sydney University, ORCID: 0009-0005-1216-9916

Abstract

As part of my recent PhD, I made a documentary film about the life and work of my father, the musician Roger Frampton, who was a key contributor to the development of Australian jazz. Motivated by the unresolved grief I held over his early death, the creative practice adopted for the film's making proved to be transformative to this grief, as well as bring about a greater understanding of myself. By embracing the project as one of family history, I was able to connect with my father, make sense of his place in the world and ultimately forgive his shortcomings as a father. Paradoxically, it was through this process of connection with him that allowed me to achieve separation from him. This paper explores the field of patriography ('story of the father') in the context of creating the cinematic story of my own father. I offer the term 'aural-visual patriography' to categorise my film, and contemplate the works of other daughters who have told their fathers' stories. I identify the complexity of the patriographical journey that derives from the father-daughter relationship, and ponder an appraisal of my film as a work of hagiography.

DIALOGUE WITH THE DECEASED FATHER: PATRIOGRAPHICAL CREATIVE PRACTICE AS A MEANS OF CONNECTION AND SELF-EXPLORATION

Emily Rytmeister

In writing this biographical memoir, I believe that I have come to know my father better in death than I knew him in life. I have entered a kind of posthumous dialog with him ... I feel that I am honoring my father in a way that I did not, and could not, when he was alive.

(G Thomas Couser 2011: 898)

Introduction

As part of my recent PhD, I made a documentary film about the life and work of the musician, Roger Frampton. The foundations of the project were laid through a Master of Research, for which I wrote the film treatment and a dissertation. Frampton (1948–2000) played a significant role in the development of Australian jazz and improvised music. Throughout his career, he released over a dozen albums. His compositions number in the hundreds. One of the first members of staff of the jazz studies course at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music, which was the country's first-ever jazz course to be offered at a tertiary level, he contributed to the course's first syllabus and, for a time, headed the jazz department. He served on staff for over two decades and played a large part in nurturing a generation of Australian jazz artists, many of whom have forged highly successful careers in the field. At the same time, through his own playing, he helped initiate a genre of Australian jazz that embraced the traditional forms of jazz, as well as the experimental. Throughout his lifetime, his work earned several government grants, an Australian Recording Industry Association (ARIA) award nomination for best jazz album and an Australasian Performing Right Association (APRA) award for best jazz composition. In 1999, aged 51, he was diagnosed with a brain tumour. He died just a few months later, his final accolade the completion of a Doctor of Creative Arts at the University of Wollongong.

Roger Frampton was also my father. My parents separated when I was four, so from that time on I did not live with him, but spent school holidays in his care, spoke to him by phone and exchanged with him regular letters and cards. Our relationship was characterised by a strong mutual interest and affection, but over the years it was influenced by my mother, many of his subsequent partners, and the fact that he was financially unreliable. His death occurred when I was 25 years old, and just a few years after we had reconnected following a five-year estrangement. His death left me bereft of the opportunity to cement our bond as adults. As a young woman, that reunion made me aware that I did not really *know* him. I was conscious he was held in high esteem by the Australian jazz community, but did not understand the intricacies of his significance. I also knew that I loved him and that somehow we were like-minded. Although I am not a musician, I sensed we each had something to offer the other on a creative level. I looked forward to exploring what that was and assumed it would bring with it an understanding of my father as a person and musician. So, when he died, I grieved not only for my father, but also for our creative connection and the chance to gain a full appreciation of Roger Frampton and what he contributed to Australian music. I also mourned his passing

from the perspective of future generations of musicians who would not benefit from his direct influence.

Almost two decades after his death, I found myself approaching the age at which my father died. I still grieved for him, but where once that grief paralysed, now it came to inspire. Overwhelming sadness morphed into an awareness of his presence in his music, the musical lives he impacted, the faces of my children. In middle age, aware of my mortality and eager to explore my creative identity, I was ready to gain a broader understanding of Roger Frampton, my father. I was driven to create a biographical portrait of him and memorialise him as the man and musical figure he was, for the benefit of his grandchildren, and for current and future generations of Australian jazz musicians. I was motivated to learn more about the life and work of my father in order to learn more about myself.

The creative practice I undertook to make the film proved to be transformative to my grief, and enabled me to establish a new relationship with my father and gain a fuller appreciation of who he was and what he left behind. The film made no direct reference to me; yet, as director, I was arbiter of his story. With a lingering sadness hovering over it, the film reflected my love for him, as shaped by the experience of being his daughter. This process of creating my father's biography yielded tensions within my role as daughter-biographer: I wanted to revere him, but I also wanted to acknowledge his flaws. As a filmmaker, I was also conscious of a commitment to the viewer to tell his story as honestly and accurately as possible, irrespective of the constraints of the daughter-father relationship. While the filmmaking process represented the opportunity to form an ongoing connection with my father, I came to realise that this was inherently linked to my desire to establish separation from him. The need to understand him was entangled with the need to understand myself. This realisation was aided by my reading of other stories of the father, which occurred alongside the filmmaking and as the result of the practice-led process.

In this paper, hybridising scholarship and autoethnography, I undertake an analysis of a sub-field of life writing known as 'patriography' or 'story of the father'. I identify the search for the author's own identity that underlies any patriography, and propose the term 'aural-visual patriography' to refer to my film. I also contextualise my experience of creative practice by considering the patriographical journeys of other daughters of artistic professionals, and interrogate an assessment of my film as a work of hagiography.

From orphan to adult

Jeremy D Popkin recognises that the quest for self-discovery that underlies any project of family history is most commonly inspired by the death of a parent. As follows:

the death of a parent is, of course, a classic example of a traumatic experience apt to provoke personal reflection. Whether one considers oneself an 'orphan' ... or whether one suddenly realises that, with the disappearance of one's parents, one has become a member of the senior generation of one's family, such a death means a sudden shift in one's position in the family network, and indeed a reconfiguration of the family as a whole ... [But] the death of parents is also significant in another important way. The bereaved child now has a new relationship to his or her family narrative. (Popkin 2015: 128–129)

Aligning with Popkin's observations, and although my research project centred on the life and work of my father, my mother's death midway through my candidature enhanced my desire

for information about my personal history and strengthened my commitment to the project. With both parents gone, I was aware of a sense of liberation and autonomy within my own existence that extended to my relationship to my family history. It was, as David Marr (2018: 26) expresses it, 'a feeling of having grown up at last'. Furthermore, as G Thomas Couser (2011: 891) identifies, middle age brings with it the natural inclination to 'contemplate our own mortality [and therefore] ... review and narrate the lives of our parents'. Having reached my mid-forties and with children of my own, I was highly motivated to understand my family history. There was a need within the present to unravel the past, to pass this on to my children, and to share what I learned about my father with future generations of Australian jazz musicians.

Prior to making the film, I was aware my father held a place somewhere within the history of Australian jazz, but unaware of the broader contexts. After I made the film, I was able to articulate that he was part of a movement within the Sydney jazz scene that embraced the avant-garde as well as mainstream jazz, and thus helped create a new style of jazz that continues to resonate. I also came to appreciate that his contribution to the scene was further embedded through his longstanding position at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music and the number of musicians whose lives and playing he impacted via his teaching. Thus, through making the film and illuminating the parts of his life I previously did not understand, I felt I indeed came to know him. I also felt that my relationship with him was no longer only that of father/daughter, but one between adults, of biographer-subject, of musician-filmmaker. These new capacities for potential artistic interaction with my father and his work remain ongoing.

Couser states:

ironically, but understandably, when adult children choose to narrate the life of a parent, they usually choose the parent who is less present – physically, geographically, and/or emotionally. And for various reasons, that parent has historically been the father. (Couser 2011: 891)

In light of this observation, it is unsurprising that distance and separation are common themes to motivate and/or be explored within biographical projects that derive from the author's relationship with their father. My PhD was no exception. My parents had separated by the time I was five years old, when my mother and I relocated from Sydney to the country town of Wagga Wagga, where two of her sisters resided, and several years later, to Melbourne. Throughout my childhood, I had weekly phone conversations with my father and spent school holidays with him; however, even when I was in his physical presence there was sometimes an emotional distance between us. While this seemed to have dissipated once we reconnected after our five-year estrangement, he died just a few years later. The period of my life for which my father was physically, geographically and emotionally present, therefore, was not as significant as it might have been, exemplifying what Couser (2014: 36) recognises as, 'perhaps the deepest motive of the filial memoir: to achieve a kind of knowledge – and intimacy – ... that often eludes children in life itself'. My PhD therefore represented my endeavour to gain a closeness to my father that was not possible when he was alive and, by extension, to garner insight into my own identity.

Biographing the father

Works of family memoir that focus on the life of the father are so common as to constitute their own subfield of life writing, known variously as 'patriography' or 'patremoir'. The term 'patremoir' was offered by André Gérard, who recognises 'critical father writing [as] distinct

enough, numerous enough and good enough to merit genre status. Neither memoir nor biography, it is a unique hybrid' (2013: n.p.). Gérard (2011: i) considers the term applicable to a 'book, essay, poem, film or play built around memories of the author's father'. Stephen Mansfield (2013) provides an overview of the development of the term 'patriography', and its ties to 'auto/biography' (with its dual focus on self and other), and 'relational autobiography' (which arose from feminist concerns within autobiography and the need for women writers to reflect a sense of identification with, but separation from, other women within the text). Later, the terms 'intergenerational auto/biography' and 'narratives of filiation' were used to encapsulate works on the life of the father, the latter of which was coined by Couser (2011, n.p.). Couser subsequently offered 'patriography' to refer to works of the father and 'matriography' for works of the mother. In the course of my PhD research I proposed the term, 'audio-visual patriography' to apply to stories of the father that take the form of a film and 'audio-visual matriography' to apply to equivalent filmic stories of the mother. In the case of my own film, however, I replaced 'audio' with 'aural' due to my use of my father's music as a dominant source of creative inspiration for the film. Thus, I referred to my film as an 'aural-visual patriography'.

Writing the father, righting the relationship

While written stories of the father date back to the 17th century, the first true patriography is attributed to Edmund Gosse, and was first published anonymously in 1907. Gosse's *Father and Son: A Study of Two Temperaments* (1976) was his second biographical work of his father. The first, *Life of Philip Henry Gosse*, was written not long after his father had died in 1890, but focused its attention on Philip's life rather than his relationship with his son. Published almost two decades later, *Father and Son* was a daring exploration of Edmund's journey towards spiritual independence from the dogma of his Christian fundamentalist father. Early in the narrative, Gosse refers to the ardent conflict that characterised the father-son relationship, stating 'of the two human beings here described, one was born to fly backward, the other could not help being carried forward' (1976: 7). Were it not obvious from the outset, Gosse's insight into his own inner journey is cemented by the book's end, where he acknowledges having chosen the latter of two options: 'either he must cease to think for himself; or his individualism must be instantly confirmed, and the necessity of religious independence must be emphasised' (Gosse 1976: 224). While in isolation Gosse's insights attest to his maturity in a patriarchal era, the fact that the book was first published long after his father's death, and anonymously, also speaks of the struggle to overcome the weight of his father. As Gérard (2011: 12) recognises, 'confronting fathers directly and publicly is not, and never has been, easy: the patriarch should judge and not be judged'. The judgment of the father to which Gérard refers can also consume decades of an individual's life, as it did for Gosse, and as it did for me. It may also prove to be interminable, a patriography representing a mere snippet of a lifelong process towards the understanding of one's father, and oneself.

The vastly different approaches taken by Gosse, in each of his stories of his father, capture the inner conflict that characterises the patriographer's craft. As Gérard states:

in considering Gosse's role in making a new kind of writing possible, it is important to distinguish between critical father writing and conventional father writing. What made *Father and Son* different, what makes it the first of a new genre is, as Virginia Woolf acknowledged in *The Art of Biography*, that Gosse 'dared to say that his own father was a fallible human being'. Significantly, early reviewers, though largely

enthusiastic, had reservations about the ‘close anatomisation by a son of a father’, and the *Times Literary Supplement* even raised the question of ‘how far in the interests of popular edification or amusement it is legitimate to expose the weaknesses and inconsistencies of a good man who is also one’s father’. (Gérard 2013)

These aspects of critiquing the father – of celebrating him, illuminating his life and personal and professional choices, at the same time as recognising his weaknesses – have come to lie at the heart of patriography. So too, by default, the relationship between the patriotographer and the father. In the instance of my aural-visual patriography, my role as daughter-patriographer was the primary determinant of the portrait of Roger Frampton the film presented. Thus, my relationship with my father was inextricable from the filmmaking process. My relationship with my father, and the way in which its intricacies manifested in my film is therefore considered later in this paper.

Couser’s 2014 work comprises a study of almost one hundred patriographies, from which he observes that sons outnumber daughters in authoring works of the father, which concurs with the findings of Mansfield. Exceptions to this are in the case of dementia narratives where women (who are more likely to be carers) dominate, as they do in the small subset of abuse narratives (Couser 2005). Across the field, patriography appears to arise from a relationship with the father that is perceived as somehow deficient. As in the case of my aural-visual patriography, such works are usually written after, or prompted by, the father’s death, and are often an effort to compensate for what the adult child feels was lacking in the father/child relationship. This is often physical presence, emotional availability, or both.

As with my film, patriography represents an attempt to know – to understand – the father. It is about connection with the father – a quest for knowledge about the father’s life, personality and legacy through the lens of his relationship with his child, who is now an adult. As it was for me, the ultimate goal is knowledge about that adult child’s self. Couser attributes the emergence of the genre, in part, to the gap between the adult child’s biological connection to the father and the absence of understanding of the father as another adult. Having recognised that ‘along with my biological clock, my biographical clock was also ticking’ (Couser 2011: 891), Couser also credits having gained much insight to the genre from the experience of writing his own patriography, based on his discovery of a series of letters between his father and a male friend which appeared to reveal his father’s homosexuality. He states:

in addition to immortalising and memorialising its subject, writing a memoir can acquaint its author with its subject; it can bring the two parties together in relationship. Thus, I would say that memoir can affect – or even effect – a relationship between its writer and its subject, even when that subject is deceased. (Couser 2011: 898)

Couser’s observations on the author-subject connection that can occur through memoir capture the connection that occurred between myself and my father through the filmmaking process. This new relationship was effected despite the fact that he is deceased. Throughout the five-year duration of my research candidature, I was able to interact with him in a way I could not during his lifetime. I was able to, once again, hear his voice in archival materials such as radio interviews and see him perform on old television music programs. I immersed myself in his belongings and his music, contemplated our relationship, reflected on his life and, most importantly, learned about him. I integrated much of this new knowledge about him into myself, allowing space for it to dwell within the person I am today. The reincarnation

of his spirit that occurred through the project enabled me to ensconce him deep in my heart and to secure an understanding of who he was and what he contributed. While the benefits to my self-understanding, therefore, were considerable, one of the greatest assets brought about by the project was the closeness it cemented between us. As Musa Mayer states in the patriography of her father, the painter Philip Guston:

recently, I've been listening to my father's voice again, now digitized and audio engineered back into clarity. With his words in my ear, I feel close to him again, and ageless, both the little girl and the older woman who has far outlived him. (Mayer 2016: 339)

Sons and daughters reflect

Couser does not specifically refer to having gained closeness to his father in his experience of writing his patriography. He does, however, recognise the process as having enhanced his understanding of his father. As for Couser, the complexities of the father-son relationship are logically explored within patriographies authored by sons. As Gérard (2011: 15) states, 'sons should be expected to have a more complex relationship since they are usually fated to step into the father role themselves'. Mansfield's text is dedicated to a close study of several Australian works of the father by sons, including Raymond Gaita's *Romulus, My Father* (1998), which has also been adapted to the screen. Since Mansfield's publication, other Australian patriographies authored by sons include Wayne Peake's *Wandrin' Star: Wild Jack Peake of Peakhurst* (2015) and Mark Colvin's *Light and Shadow: Memoirs of a Spy's Son* (2016). Couser attributes the current abundance of patriographies to baby boomers reaching an age that accompanies reflection on their patriarchal childhoods, when the father was often absent from the home. Mansfield recognises this as also applicable to Australian son-authored patriographies, but cites, in addition, an illumination of Australian constructions of masculinity as an underlying motivation. He predicts that the field will continue to flourish, although he confines his prediction to author-sons.

While some of the characteristics of patriographies by sons are also present in patriographies by daughters, the main difference stems from the fact that, for the daughter, the father usually represents 'the archetype of the opposite sex' (Gérard 2011: 15). My research warranted only an acknowledgement of the existence of patriographical abuse narratives, analyses of which (such as Charnock 2014) explore the influence of incest on the daughter's writing of the father. Once the patriographical gender gap itself is set aside, however, it appears that in fact very few conclusions can be drawn about the differences between works of the father produced by sons and works of the father produced by daughters.

Patriographies by daughters can vary as widely between them as those between sons and daughters. Gérard points out, for example, the stark contrast between the works of Sylvia Plath and Mary Gordon. While both writers lost their fathers at a young age, Plath's poem 'Daddy' is vitriolic, hate-fuelled and arguably linked to her suicide just four months later. 'There's a stake in your fat black heart', she writes, 'Daddy, daddy, you bastard, I'm through' (Plath, in Gérard 2011: 333). Gordon's work, on the other hand, is forgiving of the enormous secrecy her father upheld right throughout his life.

Perhaps the only nuance that exists in some father writings by daughters that is generally not discernible in those by sons is an open acknowledgement of the writers' overwhelming love

for their fathers. Gordon (in Gérard 2011: 344) states, 'he still overwhelms me. He's like a wave that breaks over me, involves me, overturns me, exhilarates me, carries me, then disappears'. Similarly, lanthe Brautigan states, 'sometimes the love I have for my father overtakes my whole being, and I want to leap into the air and grab onto whatever color is there to express how my heart feels' (Brautigan 2000: 33).

The reason some daughters are more ready to express their love for their fathers in writing than are sons may be attributable to gender stereotypes about expressions of emotion in general. However, it also speaks of the quest for forgiveness that seems to accompany the patriographical project. It seems to follow that, in order to understand oneself, it is first necessary to understand the father, and in order to understand the father – at least, to understand him from the perspective of an adult – it is also necessary to forgive him. Gordon goes to great lengths to forgive and understand her father, even exhuming his remains, but she also writes of accepting the memory of him into her life and being able to move forward. While she acknowledges that, 'much of what I learned involved pain and loss', she ultimately concludes, 'he is always with me, always mine' (in Gérard 2011: 343–44). Brautigan similarly forgives her writer-father for his womanising, alcoholism and eventual suicide, referring repeatedly to her desire to have her young daughter know about him. This includes being open with her about how her father 'shot himself in the head with a gun' (Brautigan 2000: 29), which her daughter then shares with her class at school.

Regardless of gender, the most consistent aspect of patriography is the author seeking to connect with the father in order to establish separation from him. Roger J Porter (2004: 101) refers to these authors as 'sleuths of selfhood' and 'epistomaniacs, compelled if not consumed by a desire to know' about their fathers and about themselves. In patriographical texts, the realisation, 'I am not my father', either by the authors directly or through the words of a therapist, seems to manifest often (Szubanski 2015; Buzo, in Couser 2014; Matthews, in Couser 2014). In all cases, the patriography signals a positive shift in the author's perception of themselves. This sense of independence, selfhood and freedom from the father's legacy is a profound existential milestone for any individual, including myself. It is also the fundamental mechanism that underlies forgiveness of the father, on which I reflect later in this paper.

Artist-fathers, biographer-daughters

My experience of having grown up as 'Roger Frampton's daughter' is closely aligned with that of Musa Mayer. While I differ from Mayer – her parents remained married until Guston's death and, as a child, she lived with both her parents – there is still much about her experience of being the daughter of an artist that resonates with my own. She refers, for example, to a sense of lacking legitimacy she felt for much of her life and how, as a child, this feeling was tempered by being recognised as her father's daughter. By the time she was a teenager, this had become something she exploited, and she describes the dynamic as 'that simple – by now habitual – transfer of worth from father to daughter, that seductive fool's gold of borrowed importance I've known and traded on all my life' (Mayer 2016: 11).

Connected to this feeling of inadequacy was a sense of invisibility that characterised much of Mayer's life. This aspect of being the daughter of an artistic professional is familiar to me, although I am aware that Philip Guston was far more successful and widely recognised than was Roger Frampton. The invisibility Mayer felt at her father's openings in particular is reminiscent of my childhood experiences of attending my father's performances. As follows:

I never knew what to say at times like this. Clearly, being my father's daughter was important, a lineage that conferred some sort of distinction. I was somebody. But it was an uneasy distinction – uneasy, even then, because it was unearned, not attached to who I really was

we were on a seesaw, my father and I – the more of a somebody he became, the more of a nobody I saw myself to be

For most of my life, I have felt precisely as I did at my father's openings: invisible until recognised as his daughter, cloaked – no, masked – in that comfortable, curiously eclipsing sense of self that is not me at all. Again and again, it seems, I need to remake the same discovery – that reflected glory yields little warmth. (Mayer 2016: 280–81)

This feeling that one's identity is in some nebulous manner determined by one's father – the sense of invisibility to which Mayer refers and that I too experienced growing up as 'Roger Frampton's daughter' – in one sense carried over into my film. With the exception of my voice being audible at the opening of the film, I had no literal visibility on the screen. There were, however, references to me that were made during interviews that I chose to omit from the film, particularly (although not exclusively) from family members. My uncle, for example, referred to my mother as 'the only woman [he] ever considered to be [his] sister-in-law', and how he felt that my children and I were my father's legacy. As my father's biographer, my desire to tell his story while remaining absent from it exemplifies the underlying purpose of patriography. I made the film about my father in order to understand him – to be able to see him as an artist and person, and to establish how I am like him and, thus, how I am *not* like him. How *I am not him*. At the outset of her patriographical journey, Mayer reflects:

standing there, among these piles, I become aware that our relative stature has altered in some fundamental manner. There is a new equity I do not yet understand. In death, my father has become somehow smaller, while I, in turn, have grown. There's a feeling of power, of control on my part, as if through my efforts I could master my father, possess and contain him – and even perhaps, finally, temper in some way his overpowering influence on my life. (Mayer 2016: 12)

Unlike the influence Philip Guston had on his daughter, Roger Frampton did not overpower my life. This sense of empowerment that Mayer describes as inherent in the patriographical process, however, applied as much to my aural-visual patriography as it does her written patriography: the gaining of perspective on one's father, the piecing together of the father's life story now that his life has ended, the emancipation of the self from the father's influence. Patriography enables this to take place. Once complete, new relationships are free to prosper – a new relationship with the father, a new relationship with oneself. Over time, these relationships can continue to develop. Mayer's devotion to her father and his work remains ongoing and was clearly facilitated by the writing of her patriography. The book has been republished twice, each time with an afterword. While the first edition was released in 1988, eight years after her father's death, in the afterwords to the 1996 and 2016 editions, she states:

a retrospective view, in whatever medium, provides a built-in closure ... working on this memoir ended a chapter in my own history and enabled a lasting reconciliation ... When my father died in 1980, I was 37, nearly half my lifetime ago. That young, uncertain woman who still longed for her father's attention seems far away to me now. (Mayer 2016: 331–37)

Like Mayer, through my aural-visual patriography, I sought to learn about my father and myself, and to create an ongoing connection to him in order to end a chapter in my own life. That chapter was one of perspective, of coming to know, of establishing separation from my father. That, in turn, enabled me to once again be close to him. I now carry this closeness with me and, like Mayer, no longer yearn for his attention.

A hagiographical depiction

Achieving separation from my father throughout the crafting of his story required a measure of critical distance that did not come naturally. To 'write' the father is to 'write' the self. Gérard recognises the difficulty of the process, noting that some patriographies are:

so lovingly affectionate ... as to make one wonder about the darker side of the man ... For many, the response to the father is complicated by the fact that, for a while at least, the father was often a god who could do no wrong, a giant who cast light so bright and shadow so dark that true sight was never possible. (Gérard 2011: 14–15)

While my efforts to be objective about my father – to consider him as a whole person, with all his inevitable flaws – were ongoing, at the same time, I was aware of a self-absorption that was inextricable from the process. The film represented my father's story, which was part of my own story; it accentuated aspects of my father's life and character that were also part of me. The line between my father and myself was perpetually blurred, and fed into my creative choices, with particular relevance to the film's cathartic aspects, such as its expression of my grief. Film scholar Michael Renov (2004: 120) refers to documentary films that act as the filmmaker's expression of loss as 'work[s] of mourning'. He identifies the complexity of such films, not only in regard to their making, but also their reception. He states:

with this work, every choice is a dangerous one as regards audience response. Deep and painful identifications can arise; a gamut of emotions can be elicited, including anger directed at the filmmaker for her presumed insensitivity, exploitativeness, or narcissism. One person's cathartic experience can be another's exhibitionist display. (Renov 2004: 126)

Throughout the making of my aural-visual patriography, I was aware of the potential to veer into a form of 'cinematic wallowing', where my own sentiments about my father (and so, myself) and his death (and so, my grief), became the dominant force. While, as director, I was the primary creative decision-maker, I strove to mitigate my status as bereaved daughter with a curiosity that at least gestured towards impartiality. The impossibility of this aim, however, remained ever-present.

Upon its examination, the film treatment that constituted the creative component of my Master of Research project was considered by one examiner to lean towards hagiography. Indeed, the tendency to laud my father seemed to underlie the early stages of filmmaking. This was particularly true of the interviews that led to the first version of the film's trailer. Even once the darker sides of my father's personality became apparent in subsequent interviews, insights tended to be offered with an appreciation of his sense of humour and commitment to his craft. While alternative explanations for such positive comments are multifarious (interviewees' uncertainty over my view of my father, or not wanting to 'speak ill of the dead', for example), as a researcher, I can only conclude that as a musician my father was talented and dedicated, and indeed had an influence on the Australian jazz scene. This was, therefore, the essential thrust

of the film. As a man and as an artist, he did possess flaws and the film acknowledged these, if somewhat fleetingly (for example, his reluctance to adapt to the changes that took place at the Sydney Conservatorium of Music during the 1990s, which resulted in his departure from the institution, and his general tendency for self-sabotage). Yet the film did not offer an assessment of my father *as a father*.

In my Master of Research, I offered the following reflection:

as an adult – and now a parent – I recognise that, after leaving my mother, there were key paternal responsibilities my father neglected to uphold. The most significant of these was providing for me financially. Although his position at the Conservatorium gave my father a stable income for over two decades, his maintenance payments to my mother were irregular and insubstantial. There were many times when my mother struggled to allow for this shortfall and, although he was aware of it, my father did nothing to alleviate the situation. These shortcomings, I believe, were a measure of my father's preoccupation with music. Roger Frampton, as a father, was in many ways oblivious to my needs as a child. Oblivious to a fault. Yet oblivion is, by nature, free of intention and so, for this, I forgive him. Such forgiveness characterised my father's life from an early age, as substantiated in a letter to him from his mother, Margaret Frampton, dated 10 January 1984, where she states, 'we all made allowances for you as a child because we knew you were different'. My father though, seemed to retrospectively resent such treatment, writing back to her on 19 January 1984, 'perhaps you should not have allowed me to get away with things as you say you did. Perhaps you should have pulled me up more often'. This reluctance to take responsibility for his own behaviour – even at age 37 – was typical of my father. (Rytmeister 2016: 32)

While I do not wish to underplay the significance of my father's neglect of certain key parental responsibilities, there are many worse possibilities that could have featured in my childhood. The above passage was written five years prior to the completion of my PhD and just a few months after my mother had been admitted to a nursing home. With her now deceased, what resonates is the impact my father's financial unreliability had on her life and wellbeing. Yet my mother also made poor financial choices and this too must be acknowledged. Irrespective of either of my parents' weaknesses, the above reflection conveys the forgiveness that underlies my view of my father. This forgiveness extends to both my parents – for all their frailties – and transposed to my patriography. By including references to his shortcomings, I, like Gosse, 'dared to say that [my] own father was a fallible human being' (Gérard 2013: n.p.).

Despite my awareness of my father's flaws, and the various distances between us, my connection with him during his lifetime was strong, playful and brimming with mutual fondness. We may not have inhabited the same household from the time I was five years old, but prior to my parents' separation, and for the weeks at a time when I was in his care, he was sufficiently engaged with who I was. He did not attend any of my school assemblies or parent-teacher interviews, but he read my school reports and creative writing exercises. Beyond my fourth year, he was not present at any of my birthday parties, but he sent me cards and cassette tapes of himself performing bespoke birthday compositions. Throughout my teenage years, he was not there when I had issues with friendship groups, but he wrote me letters and told me jokes over the phone. For most of my life, he was not there to alleviate the intensity of my mother's depressive episodes, but he empathised when I told him about them later. As a father,

Roger Frampton was what de Botton (2019: 49) – drawing from the work of developmental psychologist Donald Winnicott – refers to as ‘good enough’. As follows:

the good carer isn’t either entirely good or wholly bad and so isn’t worthy of either idealization or denigration. The child accepts the faults and virtues of the carer with melancholy maturity and gratitude – and in doing so, by extension, becomes ready to accept that everyone they like will be a mixture of the positive and the negative ... They will have a realistic sense of what can be expected of life alongside another flawed, good enough, human. (de Botton 2019: 49)

My father may have been absent from most of my everyday life, but his contribution to the person I am today was sufficient to render me stable and whole. I attribute to him my preparedness to pursue my creative interests and academic qualifications, as well as my ability to have connected with another human being as I have my husband. From his mistakes I learned too: how to compromise rather than walk away; the importance of stability and security, particularly for children. From my now-adult perspective, I believe our five-year estrangement was unfortunate in that it consumed one fifth of our total years together, but it did not cause irreparable damage either to me or our relationship.

Was it hagiographical to have acknowledged my love for my father in spite of his shortcomings, and allowed this love to dominate the interpretation of his life that was presented in my documentary film? Was it naïve, or even selfish, to have asserted that forgiveness of our parents’ failings is necessary if we are to be truly adult – and especially if we are to be competent parents ourselves? For nothing fosters humility, or tests the human character more thoroughly, than the demands of parenthood. And it would be dishonest not to recognise that tied to the forgiveness of one’s parents is the hope that our children will one day also forgive us. If my forgiveness of my father rendered my patriography hagiographical, I can only hope that, as Gérard (2011: 21) states, ‘if the scale is tipped on the side of love, most children will understand’. For those children who are also parents, I believe they *will* understand.

Conclusion

Patriography presents a powerful mechanism for the analysis, location and emancipation of the self in relation to the father. As it did in the instance of my film, it allows authors a means of understanding the father, and of gaining closeness to him in order to distance oneself from him. As Gérard states:

the important thing is to recognize father memoirs – patriography or patremoir – as a distinct literary genre, a genre based on using the father as raw material for constructing or defining a separate self. It’s all about how we create ourselves. Father memoirs offer rich fodder for psychologists, family therapists and literary critics. Rich fodder for fathers and children. (Gérard 2013: n.p.)

The raw material of my father’s life offered ‘rich fodder’ for me as a daughter, woman and mother, as well as for me as a filmmaker in the telling of the story of my father’s life and his contribution to Australian music. Through a combination of his music, archival footage of his performances, and interviews with his family, friends, former students and collaborators, the film served to reincarnate and memorialise my father, to alleviate my grief, enhance my self-understanding, and to create a new and ongoing connection between us.

Note

Roger Frampton Comes Alive! can be viewed at the following link: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BfwZBWqN0gM>

Works cited

- Brautigan, I 2000 *You can't catch death: A daughter's memoir*, New York: St Martin's Press
- Charnock, R 2014 'Incest in the 1990s: Reading Anaïs Nin's "Father Story"', *Life writing* 11.1: 55–68, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2013.838732>
- Colvin, M 2016 *Light and shadow: Memoirs of a spy's son*, Carlton: Melbourne University Press
- Couser, GT 2005 'Presenting absent fathers in contemporary memoir', *Southwest review* 90.4: 634–49
- Couser, GT 2011 'In my father's closet: Reflections of a critic turned life writer', *Literature compass* 8.12: 890–99 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2011.00847.x>
- Couser, GT 2014 'Paper orphans: Writers' children write their lives', *Life writing* 11.1: 21–37, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2013.838730>
- De Botton, A 2019 *The school of life*, London: Penguin
- Gaita, R 1998 *Romulus, my father*, Melbourne: Text
- Gérard, A 2011 *Fathers: A literary anthology*, Vancouver: Patremoire
- Gérard, A 2013 'Beyond memoir and biography: Edmund Gosse and the patremoire', *Berfrois* (July 17), <https://www.berfrois.com/2013/07/andre-gerard-beyond-memoir-and-biography-edmund-gosse-and-the-patremoire/>
- Gosse, E 1976 [1907] *Father and son: A study of two temperaments*, London: Penguin
- Mansfield, S 2013 *Australian patriography: How sons write fathers in contemporary life writing*, Melbourne: Anthem
- Marr, D 2018 *My country: Stories, essays and speeches*, Melbourne: Black Inc
- Mayer, M 2016 *Night studio: A memoir of Philip Guston*, Munich: Sieveking Verlag
- Peake, W 2015 *Wandrin' star: Wild Jack Peake of Peakhurst*, Sydney: Ascot
- Popkin, JD 2015 'Family memoir and self-discovery', *Life writing* 12.2: 127–38, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14484528.2015.1023925>
- Porter, RJ 2004 'Finding the father: Autobiography as bureau of missing persons', *Auto/Biography studies* 19.1–2: 100–17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08989575.2004.10815322>
- Renov, P 2004 *The subject of documentary*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press
- Rytmeister, E 2016 *One giant leap for jazz: The life and work of Roger Frampton*, Master of Research dissertation, Western Sydney University, <http://hdl.handle.net/1959.7/uws:38962>
- Szubanski, M 2015 *Reckoning*, Melbourne: Text

About the author

Emily Rytmeister is a writer, filmmaker and Associate Lecturer in Communications at Western Sydney University. She has a PhD in documentary film and creative writing, several other degrees, and has won awards for both her teaching and research. She has also worked behind-the-scenes in the Australian film, television, music, and live entertainment industries.



AXON: Creative Explorations
2025 vol 14.2 *We Need to Talk*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/cugqe503t9
Keywords: Essay, autofiction,

PAPER DOLLS

Autofiction, ambivalence and resistance

Briohny Doyle

University of Sydney

Abstract

Resistance and ambivalence are pivotal in the construction of autofictional texts. While critics highlight the ambiguous status of autofiction, the genre is commonly understood to deliberately destabilise reader expectations regarding truth and 'literary selfhood'. Writers in the genre experience ambivalence toward both the status of literary protagonists, and the truth claims of memoir. They seek instead to engage readers 'not only in the consumption of plot content (of which there is often very little) but also in the transmission of representations of life experience' across the boundaries of 'fiction and nonfiction' (Jensen in Dix 2018: 72). While writers resist the either/or truth claims of fiction/nonfiction, readers experience the 'ambivalent status' of the genre as one which 'allows for moments of fabrication without degrading the significance or impact of the narrative' while at the same time incorporating 'a hermeneutics of suspicion into its form' (Mathews in Dix 2018: 141). Taking my own experience of writing and publishing the novel *Why We Are Here* (Vintage, 2023) in 'real time', this reflective paper considers the unique textual incursions autofiction makes into the narrativisation of personal and collective crisis. I identify resistance and ambivalence as generic 'friction points' that might become productive sites for creative and critical interventions in an always multivalent present moment.

PAPER DOLLS: AUTOFICTION, AMBIVALENCE AND RESISTANCE

Briohny Doyle

This personal essay on writing autofiction begins with an autobiographical anecdote that is factually true. I grew up as an only child on a farm in rural Australia. My parents were permaculture devotees who dreamed of subsistence agriculture but could not subsist, and therefore spent most of their time commuting to the nearest city to work their professions and earn the wages needed to water the crops and feed the sheep. I spent a lot of time alone.

One of the games that sustained my solitary, if in other ways idyllic childhood was playing with paper dolls. A paper doll is much like a real doll except it is two dimensional and not very hardy. You cannot drag it around by the hair or cuddle it or suck on its limbs, but you can remake it, infinitely. You can dress it up, too, whether with paper clothes folded over its edges or by drawing directly on the body.

I was obsessed with my store-bought book of paper dolls. These dolls and their various outfits signifying age, occupation, and gender popped right out of their pages for ready use in rambling narratives of my own devising. I remember the feeling of placing a doll back into its picture book background when I'd finished playing; flattening the two-dimensional body into its corresponding cardboard cavity. In time though, the store-bought dolls became warped from play. Their clothes became scrappy. I was unable to return them to their manufactured contexts, left instead to use that empty space to stencil crude, anonymous figures with infinite, obscure identities.

My paper dolls resembled what Roland Barthes (1975: 261) calls the 'paper beings' of narrative. I played with them in narrative, but they were not an 'instrumental expression' of an 'essential subject'. No one watching me play would confuse the cut-outs with the child who animated them. Yet the child was engaged in what the adult writer now recognises as a kind of auto/fictional play. The child – real then, if now a paper being herself, popped out of time and reanimated in order to consider what it means to imagine and write the self – was using her dolls to explore the world she knew, imagining herself into and alongside various scenarios that were otherwise inaccessible.

I recalled these paper dolls recently during an interview about my third novel *Why We Are Here* (2023). When asked to speak to content in the novel that resembles events in my own life, I'd been using the term autofiction, which can be simply and usefully defined as text that is 'both fictional and autobiographical' (Gronemann 2019: 241). While autofiction is a contested and paradoxical term, it felt accurate to me for formal reasons. My goal when writing had not been to construct a plotted story but rather to develop a durational text wherein real events from my past comingled with imaginings, reveries and fantasies from a present that was strikingly similar to my childhood. That is, I was living alone, and far from anyone I knew during one of the strictest periods of the notoriously strict Australian COVID-19 lockdown response. To cope, and to intervene, I made a new paper doll in my protagonist, a stylised authorial persona named BB. Every morning I cut her out of the negative space, dressed her up and sent her into scenarios otherwise inaccessible to me. This auto/fictional play allowed me to continue to write and to be; processing and renegotiating the recent deaths of two close family members while living through a period of extended isolation, with joy and imagination. BB shared many of my

experiences and memories but was, nonetheless, a paper being, distinct and separate, left in her pages at the end of the day because, as Barthes makes clear, ‘the one *who speaks* (in the narrative) is not the one *who writes* (in real life) and the one who writes is not the one *who is*’ (Barthes 1975: 261; emphasis in original).

The one who writes did not want to ask, what is going to happen in this story? Who is the audience for this? I simply wanted to write, every day, for several hours before the shock of what was happening could paralyse my mind and turn my eyes compulsively to the 24-hour news cycle, the press conferences, and to social media where some performed continuity, and some performed falling apart. While writing, I eschewed any rules or conventions that might bind me to a particular way to write the present crisis as it unfolded. While the one *who is* was busy surviving, the one *who writes* engaged in what Martina Wagner-Egelhaaf has called autofictional practice:

an integral part of existence, a never-ending process of producing subjectivity through language [in which] the referential self conceives of itself – in the fabric of the text – as part of a fiction, because no author can claim to know the real meaning of his or her own story. (Wagner-Egelhaaf 2019: 245)

As I moved my paper doll back and forth along a fractured timeline, travel restrictions tightened and police helicopters patrolled the skies. It felt no less surreal, then, for dogs to speak, or for a future version of myself to move into the apartment downstairs. My interior antagonisms (mostly with the rich golfers who enjoyed the extra leisure time in my neighbourhood while other parts of the community were criminalised or neglected) became imagined-real brawls between paper players in a real game of living through crisis.

Many of us will recall how, during the COVID years, time peeled off its clock faces and calendars. Different representative modes were required to capture this new normal. I wrote in a feverish present, imagining my way into a locked down world while cultivating a sustaining belief that if all inscriptions were possible, all futures were possible, too. That is, there would be a way forward, even if the direction of ‘forward’ had folded in on itself.

I felt differently about the past though. The past had already occurred. There was nothing to be done about what had happened. I couldn’t bear to ‘characterise’ the people I was grieving, but I also could not write without them. I therefore represented the people of the past as factually as a writer who adopts the *I* can.

Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2019: 8) argue that ‘the demarcations between narrative worlds of past memory or fantasy, and present-time perspective may be blurrier and more permeable in the autobiographical’. When, at the end of the writing day, I returned to my experience of *what is* I could recognise the sincerity of my fantasies and imaginings about the present and future that were emerging in the text. I was imagining, in an attempt to comprehend our world’s present crisis, or *my* world at least, narrowed as it was by a harrowing yet emblematic experience. I began to understand that, if this text would become a book (and it felt like a big *if*) its *I* would necessarily fracture in time and space (again) in the way that Smith and Watson have suggested occurs in life writing: BB and I as the narrating, narrated, and real or historical *I*. If this text would be a book, I thought it would have to resemble what Olivia Liang imagined for her novel, *Crudo* (2018), in which the narrator is Liang, but also Kathy Acker. Like Liang’s novel, this would be a ‘slam-down experience, an exact accounting of living through a very turbulent

period in time' because sometimes exact accounting necessitates a fantastic displacement, and a new persona (Wang 2018).

This experience of gradually grappling with the implications of writing autofiction, alongside my reading of the paratextual comments of other writers associated with the genre, whether willingly or not, leads me to assert that autofiction should not be defined primarily via semantic or syntactic features such as the comingling of fact and fiction, the rules an author sets themselves when writing, or their nominal appearance in the resulting work. Rather, autofiction can be productively located at the intersection of the author's ambivalence – to truth, fiction, the status of the *I* and the taxonomies that clarify it – as well as the resultingly ambivalent, resistant status of the published text. That is, autofiction is writing that resists shaping autobiographical content into a coherent fictional story world; resists earnest truth claims; resists reader investment in the idea of truth. This resistance is not, as I see it, a pointed formal intervention but rather results from writerly ambivalence.

In *From Autofiction to the Autofictional*, Alexandra Effe and Hannie Lawlor show how resistance characterises writing, reading and critical responses to autofiction. They translate from the French site autofiction.org, which introduces the genre as:

a complex notion to define, connected to the **author's defiance** with regard to autobiography, romans à clef, the constraints or illusions of transparency; a notion that is enhanced by its many extensions even as it **robustly resists** the incessant attacks to which it is subjected. (Effe & Lawler 2022: 3; emphasis added)

Autofiction's resistant status is inscribed from the term's first documented use, by Serge Doubrovsky, to describe his novel *Fils* (1977). Doubrovsky's exchange of letters with Philippe Lejeune apparently debated how his hybrid designation might resist the autobiographical pact (as it stood in the mid-1970s). While Doubrovsky resisted the terms of the pact, auto/fiction was not a paradox for him because:

for the autobiographer (if he went through analysis) the form of the scription itself is the only possible scription of the self, the true 'trace', indelible and arbitrary, entirely fabricated and, at the same time, authentic and faithful. (in Gronemann 2019: 243)

I read this claim as demonstrating not only resistance to the prescriptions of the autobiographical pact but also inherent ambivalence – in the fittingly psychoanalytical sense of strongly held, conflicting feelings – which characterises the genre. The truth is paramount, it is a 'trace', it is 'fabricated', it is 'authentic'.

Claudia Gronemann (2019: 242) goes on to demonstrate, via her translation and analysis, how Doubrovsky understood fiction, as a term, in relation to his own experiences of psychoanalysis, his readings of Freud and Lacan, and in 'recognition that subjectivity and consciousness are language-bound.' Connections between narrativising the self as autofiction and what might occur in analysis are made elsewhere, too. Celia Hunt argues that autofiction is 'work in the autobiographical space with fictional/poetic techniques', which engenders a position of simultaneously being 'inside oneself and observing the self from the outside' (in Effe & Lawlor 2018: 192). This comparison is useful in so far as it draws reader attention to how writers of autofiction favour free association, confession, fantasy, traumatic fragmentation and dreams over the plotting and characterisation of conventional fiction, or autobiographical recounting or remembering.

As I went through the process of editing my autofictional text into the novel *Why We Are Here*, I identified my attachment to its fictional content as towards a fantasy. Here, fantasy, as Lauren Berlant observes in *Cruel Optimism*:

manages the ambivalence and itinerancy of attachment. It provides representations to make the subject appear intelligible to herself and to others [...] That is, fantasy parses ambivalence in such a way that the subject is not defeated by it. (2011: 168)

I wrote because I needed to revisit attachments to my dead loved ones while simultaneously detaching and reattaching to the crisis-narrowed present, switching fluidly between the I who writes, and who is. In turn, fantasy shaped my perception of, and ability to live through and respond to reality. It was as if fiction shaped (or parsed) my 'perception of the factual' which, as Wagner-Egelhaaf (2019: 26) has argued, typifies autofictional practice. Wagner-Egelhaaf goes further in explicating this relationship, insisting that:

if a person contemplates their life, the contemplation, in the very moment it takes place, turns into an element of the life that the person is reflecting on. For autofiction, this permanently twisting movement forms a constitutive principle that renders the text performative. (2019: 31–32)

This twisting movement continued as long as I wrote unbound by generic or commercial imperatives. If I'd set out to write an autobiographical novel, on the other hand, I'd have required the fictional content of the work to result in greater plot or character development. I'd expect it to solve problems of narrative, provide resolutions and provocations. Instead, the fictional content came to exist via displacement of the self into fantasies and imaginings that both failed and succeeded to produce a sense of coherence or forward momentum in a time firmly locked in the repeated moment. That is, the text I was producing was also producing my life. It was helping to structure the way I observed the world. On some days, sitting at the computer or out on a long solo walk with a notebook, I grew enraged at this inward-facing gaze. I hated how I attended to the I, though I could also see that there was little else I could do. -

I read this ambivalence in the paratexts of other writers associated with the genre. Catherine Cusset, reflecting on 'The Limits of Autofiction' (2012, n.p.), writes 'even though I am naturally inclined to say "I", I hate the "I" at the same time'. In 2014, Rachel Cusk tells Kate Kellaway of *The Guardian* that fiction was 'fake and embarrassing', yet she could not write autobiography any more 'without being misunderstood and making people angry' and so she turns to the ambiguous space of autofiction (in Kellaway 2014). In 2017, Olivia Liang told *Guernica* magazine that 'I couldn't write the kind of nonfiction I'd done in the past. To write from a stable point of view meant losing the feeling of chaos and perpetual disruption' that characterised the present moment (Wang 2017). Liang was inspired by Chris Kraus, whose protagonist, Chris, in *I Love Dick* (1997) grapples with simultaneous desire and disregard for the I, asking at one point 'why is female vulnerability still only acceptable when it's neuroticized and personal?' (Kraus 2007: 207). Kraus has insisted both that her book is a novel, and that everything it contains happened, there would otherwise be no book (Blair 2016).

Writers of autofiction are often ambivalent to the status of the book itself. In *I Love Dick*, but also in Ben Lerner's *10:04* (2015), Christos Tsiolkas *7 1/2* (2021), and Jenny Offrill's *Weather* (2020) characters love to hate the idea of the book in narratives that will (we know because we are holding them) become books. Much of the drama of Lerner's *10:04* follows protagonist Ben's promise (and imagined failure) to write a personal novel that will confirm his agent's hope

for 'strong six figure' interest from publishers. The book, in these spiralling contemplations, is simultaneously positioned as a formal mode of inquiry and an object of disdainful critique. Liang, who wrote *Crudo* as a 'game I was playing with myself' made rules for her editors once she decided to publish – namely, it couldn't be 'edited in a traditional way' and it had to be on shelves within the year (Wang 2018). In *I Love Dick* everyone, including the protagonist, is writing a book. Writing is, in many ways, the subject, while 'reading delivers on the promise that sex raises but hardly ever can fulfill' (Kraus 2007: 207) Yet the protagonist/writer remains ambivalent. At one point she accuses Dick of liking books 'too much' of believing – as though paper beings might come to life – that 'they are your friends' (Kraus 2007: 222).

On the intrusion of the book into the ambivalent and resistant practice of 'autofiction' Catherine Cusset writes:

The need to publish has nothing to do with a real need to write. If there is no organic necessity in the writing of autofiction, then there should be no book. But if a publisher is there, waiting for the book and ready to print it, the 'I' is no longer facing himself anymore, but also a reflection that tells him: 'you are a Writer', with a capital 'W'. The 'I' turns into a 'me', thirsty for readers and reviews. (Cusset 2012)

The writing process can be framed as pure self-expression, or an experiment. The book, on the other hand, is a commodity answering to capital and readers. But then, what is the writer without these things? The book causes the writer pain and makes them thirsty. It capitalises their name and pays the rent.

Critics assert that readers have interpretive work to do in texts that blur the autobiographical and fictional. They 'require careful disentangling by readers' (Smith & Watson 2019: 8). They necessitate 'continuous adjustments to the reading process as the novel vacillates between biographical fact and outright fiction' (Worthington 2018: 472). These critical approaches emphasise distinctions for readers that the writer may not have attended to. They assign to the reader the work of establishing boundaries between fiction and nonfiction. If the writer is ambivalent to these boundaries, and the text resists their categorical imperative, this work can bear little relation to the ideas and interventions the text performs. Critical approaches to autofiction that value ambivalence and resistance over truth and fiction would encourage readers to cast off this work for the pleasures and provocations of occupying contradictory spaces and times where realities and fantasies comeingle and shimmer.

When the critical reception of *Why We Are Here* came in I bristled as reviewers performed detective work to triumphantly identify renamed places as though I had attempted subterfuge. One reviewer returned to my previously published autobiographical essays in order to declare 'in the end there is no separating author and character. BB is Briohny Doyle' (Cothren 2023). I wondered how that could be given that, once the book was done, I left BB in its pages and continued on. I was agitated by these readings but then, hadn't I courted them? I'd even included photographs of the grand but decaying apartment where I had set the novel in the published book. I'd told myself this was to confront the reader with their thirst for the real. But is that true? I understood my impulses while writing but did this remain when the writing became a book? Who is acting in good faith in this bad genre?

I became scared of the difference the *I* made to the text. BB was a paper doll, she was robustly imagined, but also perhaps flimsy, and now she was confronted with situations that *I* did not get to inscribe or invent. I felt the need to protect her. I wanted her to protect me. Sometimes, she

was read *against* me in a ‘hermeneutics of suspicion’ that Mathews argues is another hallmark of autofiction (in Dix 2018: 141). When my neighbour asked about a scene in which an imagined fight occurs between made up people that occurred in a real place we both walked every day, I felt that the paper doll had somehow been drawn directly onto my own body. I was experiencing the other side of the ‘different kind of reading process’ that Worthington (2018: 473) argues occurs when ‘the narrator/protagonist share a name and some biographical characteristics’ even when readers ‘don’t particularly care about the real life of the actual author’.

It was clear to me that this book was not being read in the same way that my novels, or my nonfiction work had been. In the *Sydney Review of Books*, the critic Ursula Robinson Shaw (2022) formulates the problem of reading autofiction in this way: if the author isn’t going to develop a character because they are the character then it follows that:

something is being *relayed* – ‘how it felt to me’ – and without the coaxings of a fictional framework, the reader needs to believe autofiction is true to feel what it asks us to feel. Identification becomes the primary aperture for evaluation, since autofiction is interiority without characterization; narration is not another level of textual invention but a mediation of perspective. [...] The central question for the reader becomes: am I criticising an artwork or a life? And this question provides a screen, a double defence, for the writing: both the dignity of invention and the implied moral seriousness of lived experience.

For my part, I worried that the act of writing into crisis, in real time, was lost in the fact that *I*, Briohny, was the one writing, associating myself with the fictional character of BB and therefore offering myself as an object of critique. I wanted to disidentify. I understood that I had, deliberately, run the risk of being exposed as what Lauren Elkin has framed as ‘the wrong kind of writer’ (Elkin 2018); voicey, emotional, meandering; *female*. It’s at this point of resistance, that the writer of autofiction – this writer, but also better-known writers such as Olivia Liang or Jenny Offill – retreats or points to a critical externality. Autofiction is not a genre, or a practice; drawing from both real life and imagination is just *writing*. ‘Autofiction’, then, is men saying women ‘don’t even know how to write a novel properly!’ Liang tells *Guernica* (Wang 2018). It’s a way to ‘minimise craft’, Jenny Offill tells *The Guardian* (Scutts 2020).

In the wake of publication I felt, in resistant moments, that ‘autofiction’ might make the ideas of the novel contingent on the reader’s willingness to codify an ambivalently positioned *I* as *either* real or fiction. It might make their reading contingent on caring about me. Is that what I wanted all along? Readerly care? Even now I resist this conclusion. I don’t care if you care, I think, defensively, childishly, before collapsing into ambivalence. I don’t want you *not* to care, though I can think of easier ways to solicit care than writing a book.

It’s over a year since publication and these feelings have not resolved but rather come to constitute my understanding of the form; ambivalent, resistant. With luck, the book itself will continue to be read, played with, tossed around. It will get soggy and torn. It will be used in other people’s narratives. Nevertheless it continues to exist in time in a way that those original paper dolls do not.

Whether slickly printed and store-bought, or cut from scraps and cereal boxes, paper dolls are fun; they pass the time; they are vehicles for surplus emotion. But now that I think about it, I was ambivalent to my childhood paper dolls, too. They were wonderful, compulsive, seemingly inexhaustible but also terrible, formless, ugly; not real dolls at all, just paper. They were, I know

now, also cut-outs of a deeper ambivalence I felt but would not articulate until decades later: the relief and sorrow of solitude, the inward pull of the I, her pleasure in invention, and anxiety over what she might produce or reveal.

Works cited

- Barthes, R 1975 'An introduction to the structural analysis of narrative', *New literary history* 6.2: 237–72
- Berlant, L 2011 *Cruel optimism*, Durham: Duke University Press Books
- Blair, E 2016 'Chris Kraus, female antihero', *The New Yorker* (November 13) <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/11/21/chris-kraus-female-antihero> (accessed 15/11/2024)
- Cothren, A 2023 'The art of losing: Briohny Doyle's third novel', *Australian book review* 457 (September)
- Cussett, C 2012 'The limits of autofiction', personal website, <http://www.catherinecusset.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/02/THE-LIMITS-OF-AUTOFICTION.pdf> (accessed 2/7/2024)
- Dix, H (ed) 2018 *Autofiction in English*, Cham: Springer
- Effe, A & H Lawlor 2022 *The autofictional: Approaches, affordances, forms*, Cham: Springer
- Elkin, L 2018 'Bad genre: Annie Ernaux, autofiction, and finding a voice', *The Paris review* (October 26), <https://www.theparisreview.org/blog/2018/10/26/bad-genre-annie-ernaux-autofiction-and-finding-a-voice/> (accessed 14/1/2025)
- Gronemann, C 2019 'Autofiction', in M Wagner-Egelhaaf (ed), *Handbook of autobiography/ autofiction*, Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter, 241–46, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110279818>
- Kellaway, K 2014 Interview with Rachel Cusk, 'Aftermath was creative death. I was heading into total silence', *The Guardian* (August 24), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/24/rachel-cusk-interview-aftermath-outline> (accessed 2/7/2024)
- Kraus, C 2007 *I love Dick*, New York: Semiotext(e), Native Agents Series
- Lerner, B 2014 *10:04*, London: Granta Books
- Liang, O 2018 *Crudo*, London: Picador
- Offill, J 2020 *Weather: A novel*, London: Granta Books
- Robinson-Shaw, U 2022 'Where do we go from nowhere?', *Sydney Review of Books* (June 6), <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/butcher-mcgunnigle-nostalgia-has-ruined-my-life/> (accessed 2/7/2024)
- Scutts, J 2020 Interview with Jenny Offill, 'I no longer felt like it wasn't my fight', *The Guardian* (February 8), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/feb/08/jenny-offill-interview> (accessed 2/7/2024)
- Smith, S & J Watson 2019 'Metalepsis in autobiographical narrative', *European journal of life writing* 8: 1–27

Tsiolkas, C 2021 *Seven and a half*, Sydney: Allen and Unwin

Wagner-Egelhaaf, M 2019 *Handbook of autobiography/autofiction*, Berlin & Boston: De Gruyter, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110279818>

Wang, M 2018 'Olivia Laing: "It turned out to be an exercise in structure, in how to assemble objects in empty space"', *Guernica* (October 4), <https://www.guernicamag.com/miscellaneous-files-olivia-laing/> (accessed 2/7/2024)

Worthington, M 2018 *The story of 'me': Contemporary American autofiction*, Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press

About the author

Dr Briohny Doyle is the author of three novels, including the autofiction *Why We Are Here* (Vintage, 2023). She is a lecturer in creative writing at the University of Sydney.



AXON: Creative Explorations
2025 vol 14.2 *We Need to Talk*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/nuey1gszqy
Keywords: Poetry, Surrealism, Autism,

EVERYDAY SURREALISM IN THE NEO-MEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY

Five prose poems

Oz Hardwick

Leeds Trinity University

EVERYDAY SURREALISM IN THE NEOMEDIEVAL UNIVERSITY: FIVE PROSE POEMS

Oz Hardwick

i. Uniform

I wear my unease like a school uniform I've still not grown into after sixty years. It was a time when every back room was a shop, selling carnival masks, warships, or glass eyes, all of them to be feared through gaslit nights; and although my mother held my hand through corridors that wheezed like an old smoker's failing chest, I knew it would only take a surreptitious shove from a dead-faced clown to tip me into endless dark. She bought me a blazer woven out of rust from a blind man with the look of a goat, who measured me like an undertaker and muttered through lips stuck with pins. They told me I looked just like my father, and someone took a photograph that I've never seen. I don't remember the long walk home in ill-fitting hand-me-down shoes, so perhaps I was still there when they bulldozed the whole city. That would explain a lot.

ii. Accidental Encounters / Mise en abyme

The sea is a ship or a cigar, dripping from the lip of the would-be seducer, and the soul is a seal on a bicycle. There are three eggs in the wicker pannier – the past, the present, and the future – all overripe for the omelette; and there are three old men in basket chairs – the vast, the presentable, and the futile – each contemplating the scene with indifference. The sea is a shifting signifier, an apple swooping from a clear sky, and the soul is sealed in eggshells. There are three unrelated but interpenetrating aspects at play – the bouquet bobbing on the waves, the ashtray overflowing with fishbones, and John Boyd Dunlop's invention of the pneumatic tyre – each transformed by light and language; just as there are three contesting but unequivocal perspectives – the evidence, the facts, and the truth – each of which is open to interpretation: *la prevue, les faits, et la verité*. There is no accident without substance, and I would swap all these synchronous correspondences for just one intimate moment on the operating table.

iii. Pareidolia and the Art of Lost Conversation

Torn between words and nightfall, we're almost fading into our own backgrounds. I've never known what to say in mundane situations: the weather is a sleeping dog chained in the yard, and my own family is just pixels and white noise, though if I squint and use my imagination, that, too, is a sleeping dog. Being more of a cat person, I look away to the glass-topped walls surrounding my first school, where graffiti loses its lines in shadows and children cluster round a frog that's fallen from the sky. There's an old man pegged in a doorway, a parrot pecking grain from his hand. The first snow of the year freezes my tongue with the taste of bubble gum from penny machines. A woman, so short that her legs don't reach the ground, lights streetlamps from a smouldering cigarette. Her coat is patched with ration books and cards collected from tea packets: British trees, stars of the silver screen, great sea battles, and sleeping dogs. Night tears the words we might have said into flakes and flecks. The cat's got both our tongues, and although sleeping dogs so rarely lie, their truth is only background noise.

iv. Counting

Numbers need to be added together. It's what they're there for: to join and make sense of the world. When I was a kid, I couldn't pass a car without adding the digits on its registration plate, distilling each random sequence to a single integer. 4 was best, and 6 made me uncomfortable until the next 4 came along. I wonder if I should mention this to the attentive lady who is nodding and taking notes, but instead I tell her that last night I dreamed that I lost my glasses and lived at the bottom of a dried-up well, surrounded by tossed coins and suitcases. There were more visitors than I really wanted, most of whom were classmates I haven't seen since school, who looked both 18 and 60 at the same time. $1+8+6=15$; $1+5=6$; and here I am, back out on the dockyard road, with sirens blazing and a surge of black cars flooding into evening, adding up and counting down, knowing in the well of my gut that my life depends on it.

v. By Decree

Awkward in a borrowed suit, I wait in line for something. I don't know what it is, but a letter came – stiff paper and an imposing crest – with a time, a place, a dress code, and intimations of significant outcomes that would certainly be transformative, though not necessarily in ways I could predict or, indeed, that I may desire. The suit once belonged to a neighbour's cousin, who bought it for a wedding some time ago, and the trousers are unfashionably narrow, the lapels unfashionably wide. Also, it's brown. It still has odd pieces of confetti stuck in the pocket seams: here a heart, there a trumpet, and so on through the random shapes of glittering celebration. All of which feels wholly inappropriate for the occasion, as the queue shuffles forward along its rigidly demarcated route towards a red door flanked by lions that may or may not be stone. Above the door, the Gothic façade is a cliff face with a million windows: some reflect the beaten metal sky, while others reflect a blind man with the look of a goat, and a young girl with an armful of blue flowers.

Contextual Statement

I can't deny that, on paper, I am not of the margins, and my conversations are not difficult. White: tick. Male: tick. 'Good' job: tick. And words? More, I'm almost certain, than I'll ever need. But that's on paper, in the neat textual block of a prose poem that delineates the margins, poking away at them with that unending, questing line, before turning back into the welcoming refuge of language.

Once the paper's folded, though, or book's closed, or the pixels reconfigure themselves into a screensaver shot of a medieval manuscript with monkeys blowing trumpets from their butts, everything flips, and where have all the words gone? A late, late, late-diagnosed autistic, I grew up tongue-tied in the social margins, and then later remained there by choice – not because I fit in, but because it was a place that it was okay not to fit in. Boys, of course, are generally diagnosed much earlier than girls, but this is largely dependent on them presenting their boyness writ large and shouted loud (the little monkeys), rather than attempting to mumble themselves into silent invisibility. With application, the centre can be made to disappear completely, and you can become your own marginalia.

I was saved – *Hallelujah! and a fanfare of simian butt-trumpets* – by stumbling into academia, where odd obsessions – like the slipperiness of words, or the enigma of medieval iconography – and an eye for unlikely connections can lead to Career Prospects, rather than misdiagnosis, insecure housing, and a course of heavy-duty antipsychotics. It's another environment in which it's okay not to fit in (or, at least, it was until quite recently), with just the expectation of being very, very good at one thing, and you can be as hopeless as you like at everything else. I can do that, even if it does require speaking aloud.

The poems here don't talk 'about' my autism, but rather speak from the place where my autism blots and scratches at the edge of the world, leaning out at the margin and in at language, or vice versa: they arise from what is often characterised as 'deficits in the experience of time' (Allman & DeLeon 2009: 73) in autistic individuals, and offer event maps of every second of my life that's still fizzing on the tips of my nerve endings, chattering to itself about misericords and the poetics of disruption, and waiting to burn the paper as soon as the writing stops.

Works cited

Allman, MJ & IG DeLeon 2009 "“No time like the present”: Time perception in autism", in AC Giordano & VA Lombardi (eds), *Causes and risks for autism*, New York: Nova Biomedical, pp.65–76

About the author

Oz Hardwick is an unlikely poet and bemused academic, who has been described as a ‘major proponent of the neo-surreal prose poem in Britain’. His most recent books include *A Census of Preconceptions* (SurVision Books 2022), *Retrofuturism for the Dispossessed* (Hedgehog Poetry Press 2024), and, with Cassandra Atherton, Paul Hetherington, Paul Munden, and Jen Webb, *Five Oceans* (Recent Work 2023). He has also published extensively on medieval misericords and marginal iconography. Oz is Professor of Creative Writing at Leeds Trinity University.



AXON: Creative Explorations
2025 vol 14.2 *We Need to Talk*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/cej1ebh381

Keywords: Essay, poetry, lockdown,
accessibility, rural, regional, isolation

BREAKING THE LOCKS

Increased accessibility for isolated poets during lockdown and post-COVID

Roxanne Bodsworth

Charles Sturt University, ORCID: 0000-0002-0467-4788

Abstract

For poets in rural and remote areas, the experience of COVID lockdown was one in which online opportunities for readings, spoken word performance, poetry workshops and courses, allowed easy access to the creative community that had previously been largely inaccessible. This was also the case for those with intersectional challenges of limited mobility through economic issues, disability, age, and cultural restrictions. By using a hybrid approach that combines prose analysis with extracts from personal poetry, autoethnographic reflection, as well as extracts from the poetry and reported experience of other poets, this paper demonstrates that COVID lockdowns opened up new possibilities for creativity and poetry and networking. This paper also recognizes the importance of poetry as an art form that not only gives a voice to the marginalised but can communicate the challenging experiences to create empathy and understanding, foster creativity and community connection, and produce texts with their own inherent artistic value.

A version of this paper was presented at the Australasian Association for Writing Programmes Conference 2023, 'We Need to Talk'.

BREAKING THE LOCKS: INCREASED ACCESSIBILITY FOR ISOLATED POETS DURING LOCKDOWN AND POST-COVID

Roxanne Bodsworth

The global nature of the COVID-19 pandemic changed the way we communicate, especially in relation to the use of technology but also in our awareness of how we communicate. There has been both expansion and contraction; the world has become larger even as our bubbles have become smaller. For poets like myself, living in rural and remote areas, these changes diminished the effects of geographic exclusion as slam events, poetry readings, and writing workshops moved online for an extended period of time (RTB 2024):

Put a screen in front of us
and it doesn't matter if we live
in the Great Outback, or the Central Desert,
or the Riverina, or the Other Side of the World,
in a city or a village or on a farm or a boat,
we can talk to each other
we can listen to each other
we can find an audience for our poems.

Yet there has been little research done to measure or evaluate the effects of increased accessibility for those who were already isolated geographically from these platforms, communities, and opportunities. This autoethnography, a version of which was presented at the 2023 AAWP Conference with its theme of 'We Need to Talk', investigates what may be learned from individual experience when considered in the context of the wider poetry community and the implications for ongoing change in building greater accessibility for isolated poets.

In developing this autoethnography, my plan *was* simply to share some of my poetry to illustrate the benefits that came with lockdown, and also the poetry that moved me during this time, because while there has been limited research into the topic of online accessibility for isolated poets, the experience has been conveyed in the poetry. This writing plan included reaching out to others in my poetry network to inquire about their experiences during lockdown, how it had impacted their writing and the opportunities available to them.

That was the plan, but poetry is a dynamic creature and against the backdrop of war between Israel and Palestine, Ukraine and Russia, earthquakes, fires, floods, and famine, it felt unhealthily egotistical to write on something so self-focused, self-indulgent, even outdated in the way that news becomes quickly outdated. Even while COVID-19 continues to be one of the leading causes of death in Australia (AIHW 2024), it is no longer prevalent in the news and there are no more lockdowns. I had to ask if my personal experience still had any relevance or could make any impact. Then I read 'A Voice from Beneath' from Palestinian poet Mosab Abu Toha (2021):

A voice from beneath shakes my desk –
the ink spills on my drowsy pants.
It pummels my fingers and constricts my breath. It asks me
to stop writing heavy poems,
poems that have bombs and corpses,

destroyed houses and shrapnel-covered streets,
lest the words stumble and slip into the bloody potholes.

In this poem, I can hear Mosab's voice, with all its longing for a world where he can 'stop writing heavy poems'. This poem reminded me that the poet's voice can sometimes be heard above and beyond the sound of bombs, or the noise of trauma and despair in whatever form it takes. This is conditional. It can only happen if there are the spaces and opportunities afforded to the isolated, whether that has happened because of geography, disability, race, poverty, or discrimination in its many forms. Poetry gives us a tool to talk about that which cannot be talked about when we are locked into our lives/minds/experiences; it is the key to the lock. And during the pandemic, chances to talk about our poetry were unlocked for those of us living in rural and remote areas. This is a small thing among great global events, but it did mean the poet's voice could be heard in places where this did not easily happen otherwise.

In autoethnography, the researcher is the subject of the research, considering their personal experience as valuable for the insights it can provide in a broader landscape. As Paul MW Hackett, Jessica B Schwarzenbach and Uta Maria Jürgens describe it, an autoethnographer looks at how the subject, the self, is immersed within a culture, carrying out cultural practices (2016: 46). Living in rural Victoria during COVID lockdowns was an opportunity to more fully immerse myself in the wider poetry community through online connectivity. This helped to expand my creative output while I also became more attuned to the contemporary output of other poets both in Australia and overseas.

While the consideration of autoethnographic material allows individual voices to be heard when they might otherwise be subsumed in the collective experience, it is not about considering a singular experience, such as mine, as more significant than someone else's. Alecia Y Jackson and Lisa A Mazzei rightly challenge the power imbalances that can be present in autoethnography where one voice may be privileged over others (2008: 306) and this is not my intention. Instead, it can be a research methodology that effectively opens the way for others to make their contributions, as explained by Carolyn Ellis, Tony E Adams and Arthur P Bochner when describing how autoethnography can serve not just as personal fulfilment but to raise consciousness and open the way for other voices to be heard (Ellis et al. 2011: 280). I am not speaking for others; poets can speak for themselves, when given the chance. Poets living in remote areas can speak for themselves, when given the chance. I am one tone in the cacophony of voices that may arise, if given the chance.

Hackett et al. warn of the inevitable biases that arise in autoethnography because of the focus on personal experience (2016: 88). However, research begins with the interest of the researcher and there is subsequently a risk of personal bias in any ethnographic study. It is necessary to be aware of these biases and their influence upon both the process of the research and the conclusions that are drawn, but not to discount their place in an autoethnographic consideration. In this study, the focus on my individual perceptions necessarily reflects the arrangements that I would personally like to stay in place in a post-COVID world because they suit my creative requirements; that is my declared bias.

Yet my experience is also a cameo that illustrates the larger picture of what happened to other rural poets during lockdown, what changed, what remains changed, and what this means for the continuation of increased access in the poetry world. This can only be understood in the context of interaction with others and a wider transformative experience. Necessarily, then, my

autoethnographic reflection needs to include those with whom I have had poetic interaction during this time, giving space for their voices as well. I have also conducted a small survey on the topic of increased online accessibility for geographically isolated poets. The survey was distributed online through Facebook and directly emailed to select poetry networks. As such, it had a limited reach and only ten completed the survey. However, while it is a statistically insignificant sample, the responses have reinforced the importance of online accessibility in creating an inclusive culture in the Australian poetry community and demonstrate that further research is needed. Some of the data and comments from the ten respondents are included in this article (Bodsworth 2024).

I also recognise not only the limitations of my experience but the privilege of being in a situation where I am conversant with IT, have the necessary resources, am confident enough to make connections, and have a higher level of education to draw upon. Jackson and Mazzei contend that the autoethnographer needs to not only question what they ask of the narrative 'I' but also confront 'their own privilege and authority ... and deconstruct why one story is told and not another' (Jackson & Mazzei 2008: 300). It should be acknowledged that some sectors of society do not have the same access to technology, including many First Nations communities that endure greater degrees of marginalization and exclusion (Featherstone 2021).

Nevertheless, poetry can also be used as a tool to address this inequity. Research conducted by Writing West Midlands (WWM) in the UK found that not only was there a marked increase in reading during the pandemic, but readers reported that they specifically sought out writing by non-white authors. Doche suggests that this may have been in response to media coverage of racism and police brutality (2022: 2). The Asian-American poet Kuo Zhang writes that 'poetry provides us powerful tools to cope with the challenging personal, local, national and international sociopolitical circumstances' (2021: 205). Her poems speak to the racial issues that were intensified for Asian-Americans and the personal insights she gained while using poetry as a tool of inquiry. She writes in 'Parents Hooray!!!' (Zhang 2021: 200):

My son doesn't need
to risk talking with strangers.
They all become shadows
with vague smiles 6 feet away.

Now, everyone looks similar and unreal
on Zoom, just like Grandparents
across the Pacific Ocean.

It should also be noted that many factors can contribute to isolation. Kerri Shying was one respondent to the survey who lives in a major urban area but intersectional issues of disability and chronic illness increased their isolation during lockdowns. Kerri is an established poet of Wiradjuri, Chinese and Australian heritage and their book *Know Your Country* was launched in November 2020. However, because of COVID lockdowns, Kerri was unable to tour and reported this was disastrous for their career as a poet (Bodsworth 2024). This extract is from their poem, 'air freight', which can be found in that collection (Shying 2020: 36):

air freight

someone sends me air it's from America
the north I am afraid to breath it in keep

it locked up in the heat-pressed bubble
that it comes in pillowing the book the swatch

of cloth I saw online wanted pinged over the seas
into my lap there is this air now this air

While unable to tour, Kerri made effective use of opportunities for online engagement and created opportunities for others similarly isolated. They said that many poetry events provided online options but returned to in-person after 2021 and removed online access, 'much to the anger and horror of the disability community' (Bodsworth 2024). This echoes my situation, as someone isolated not only geographically from the poetry community but also through chronic health issues. Six of the ten survey respondents said they experienced intersectional factors that contributed to their isolation including disability, mental health issues, and chronic disease (Bodsworth 2024). As Kerri's poem expresses so well, there is an anxiety about shared air and what to do with it.

The benefits of poetry for mental and physical health are widely accepted though the diverse range of therapeutic practices creates a challenge for the empirical underpinning of methodological approaches (Alfrey, Xenophontes & Holttum 2021). Julia Ribeiro Thomaz describes poetry as a heuristic tool that enables both practitioners and readers to gain a greater understanding of the implications of the COVID crisis as a personal and a historical event (Thomaz 2020). Accordingly, she examines the therapeutic functions of poems such as Kitty O'Meara's poem 'In the Time of the Pandemic' (O'Meara 2020):

And the people stayed home.

And they listened, and read books, and rested, and exercised, and made art, and played games, and learned new ways of being, and were still.

Thomaz notes that when O'Meara's poem was shared online, it often included a story that it had been written during the 1869 cholera epidemic; an erroneous historical connection that nevertheless provided a type of historical anchoring for understanding the contemporary crisis (2020: 385). Thomaz contends that poetry is able to 'anchor' people in a historical moment, enabling them to understand and interpret events while also providing a means to regain control (2020: 387).

Yet while Thomaz demonstrates the importance of poetry in a historiographic and therapeutic context, there is no consideration of the literary value of poetry and its artistic contribution separate from its social functions. One survey respondent commented that online participation in open mics showed that 'amazing heart-felt, extraordinary poetry' had been written by those with disabilities (Bodsworth 2024). During lockdowns, I regularly took part in open mics organised by Mother Tongue, who have been operating Spoken Word events since 2012 to give women a voice in a safe and supportive community which had previously been held in venues across Melbourne. As well as the online open mic during COVID lockdowns, there were featured poets at each monthly meeting, including from First Nations, those with disabilities, members of the LGBTQI+ community, and others from diverse cultural backgrounds. All of whom were able to bring us into their world. These poets broadened the vision of those in the audience from relatively homogeneous rural communities; it provided a sharing of diverse ideas and experiences that would not otherwise have happened. And I fully agree with the survey respondent that the quality of the poetry was 'amazing heart-felt, extraordinary'.

The annual round of heats for the Australian Poetry Slam competition begins with heats held in various locations across the different states. It had been predominantly urban but now includes some regional locations. The winners of these heats progress to the State finals and the winners of the State finals to the National. Necessarily, this was online during the pandemic and, because Mother Tongue hosted one of these heats, I was able to enter the online heat and progressed to the State semi-finals, where I came third overall with my poem, 'The Directions Tree' (RTB 2020):

This is a new poem.
It is as raw as the stump of the Directions Tree
that weeps red sap and waits to be dug up,
this stump of a tree that for centuries
pointed to the sacred places
where women should give birth.

Pointing to the places
where fifty generations of women
have spilled their birthing fluids
at the base of the great gums,
soaking into the earth,
taken up into the tracheid, layered into the grain,
embedded in the strength of the sentinel trees.

I was also appreciative of the online open mics offered by Liquid Amber Press on a regular basis. Primarily, this platform provided an accessible opportunity for poets from anywhere across the country, and sometimes from overseas, to read out their poetry. This served to broaden the exposure of the audience members to a wide range of poetic forms and delivery, with emphasis on the invited guest poets who spoke to their recently published works.

The poetry was of a high literary standard that inspired me to attend to my own words with greater rigour, and I made personal connections with some of these poets that have continued (online) beyond the events. I feel connected to a vibrant poets' community and am better equipped to keep up with contemporary developments in the industry, aware of recent works published and responses to them. Subsequently, two of my poems were longlisted and published in Liquid Amber's Lockdown poetry competition, including 'Within my Hive' (Therese 2012):

The sixteenth proverb tastes sweet to me,
and I yearn to let its healing suffuse my soul,
turn the sour notes to sweet

so I can, in turn, be gracious,
let no word of bitterness pass my lips,
no recriminations or pointed regret,

let everything become better,
illness melting into flowing honey
tasted with the peculiar pleasure of natural grace,

sun-warmed solace to replace what has been –
I will not speak of what has been, because
now I feel my soul infused with honey

and flesh, bones, breath, heart,
made strong and whole by gracious words
that spill from my life,

flow until the world
is honeycombed,
sweet to the soul.

The poem was written during an online poetry course conducted by British poet Jo Bell, and reflected a yearning for a focus on health instead of illness during the pandemic. Yet as well as the therapeutic benefits of poetry, there is its centrality as a creative practice. Graham Price provides a balance to Thomaz's emphasis on the social functions of poetry with his autoethnographic exploration of the way that isolation during lockdowns provided opportunities for people to try out new artistic endeavours and develop skills required for creative practice (Price 2023). The freedom provided through online publication of poetry, without the filter of professional selection processes, allowed a far greater diversity of poetic voices to emerge. Rachid Acim (2021) examined the proliferation of poetry during lockdown, as people experimented with writing poetry, shared it online, read more because it was a medium that could make sense of what seemed insensible. That could mean the production of poems that were amateurish, simplistic, raw, unsophisticated, but which were, nevertheless, gifts from the poet that encouraged others to attempt creating their own poems.

That poetry has a greater place in social interaction than was the case before the COVID pandemic is supported by the WWM research on the increase in interest in poetry, reading, and writing during COVID as these activities went online (Doche 2022: 2). The importance of this interaction is well recognised by emerging poet Phillip Muldoon, whom I had met in a poetry course several years ago. I interviewed him before my presentation at the AAWP Conference 2023 and he told me that writing poetry has helped to make sense of the struggles he has known as well as providing a tool to express that experience and share it with others. That was the therapeutic value; he also got great satisfaction from learning the craft and producing good poetry (Muldoon 2023). Muldoon had two poems published in *fourW* prior to COVID lockdowns but was socially isolated and thus had few opportunities for interacting with other poets.

When lockdown happened, the poetry community suddenly became very accessible online. In his survey response, Muldoon indicated he took part in online workshops and attended readings. As a result, he started to write a lot more, writing about the world he observed as well as his own experiences. He gained in confidence and has since had poems published in *4W*, *Quadrant*, and *Wordgathering: A Journal of Disability Poetry and Literature* (in Bodsworth 2024), including 'After the Fires' (Muldoon 2020: 165–67).

My wife hardly says a word,
smoulders,
then sometimes flares
with cruelty.

It's as if it's burnt
all her beautiful memories,
all the wonder
that life has to offer.

I wrap my arms around her,
tight as I can,
like a fire blanket
to put the bloody thing out

but every time
she closes her eyes,
the flames leap up at her,
roar like a jet-plane.

While Acim's primary consideration was for the therapeutic potential of poetry, he also noted the establishment of 'a network society governed by verse and rhythmical prose' (Acim 2021: 67). It is this network that was the significant development for poets in long-term situations of geographic isolation and, while much of this accessibility has diminished as poetry platforms and workshops have returned to in-person, some of it has continued.

The WWM report explains there was a concerted effort in the West Midlands of England to create these connections during the pandemic (Doche 2022: 1). While WWM had always been committed to making their events widely accessible, there had still been challenges faced by those 'working unsociable hours, some people with disability or mental health problems, and some people living in areas with few transport facilities' (Doche 2022: 2). Their post-pandemic survey has revealed that literary agencies have been able 'to generate a greater quantity of literature and to create new content – indeed, this online shift has encouraged creativity for both writers and their supporting bodies' (Doche 2022: 2). With the feedback that WWM has received, they plan to maintain the online option with consideration for the inclusivity this allows (Doche 2022: 2).

Sreejata Roy examines the increase in sharing poetry online and greater responsiveness during the pandemic using a close reading of two poems that went viral – 'The First Lines of Emails I've Received While Quarantining' by Jessica Salfia, and 'Lockdown' by Brother Richard (Roy 2020: 44–45). Salfia's poem is a clever villanelle that satirizes the cliché-like standardization of email communications (Salfia 2020). 'Lockdown' speaks, like O'Meara's poem, to changing the way we relate to the world (Hendrick 2020):

They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise
You can hear the birds again.
They say that after just a few weeks of quiet
The sky is no longer thick with fumes
But blue and grey and clear.
They say that in the streets of Assisi
People are singing to each other
across the empty squares,
keeping their windows open
so that those who are alone
may hear the sounds of family around them.

The poems selected, as Roy describes them, are ‘unembellished poems ... by persons from ordinary walks of life with no aspiration to be a professional or famous’ (Roy 2020: 44). Nevertheless, their popularity was and is significant in their capacity to inspire others to write poetry, read poetry, engage culturally with innovative forms of literary art (Roy 2020). Since his poem went viral, Brother Richard has become relatively famous, with 4,800 followers on his Facebook page where he shares his meditative poetry (Hendrick 2020). I am one of those followers because his words often give me pause and pleasure, but I thought I was just one of the thousands. Perhaps I am, but when I shared a recent bereavement on my Facebook newsfeed, Brother Richard reached out to offer his condolences and it felt like a more personal connection. It reminded me that the networking that happens online is not some abstract interaction but is happening between real people.

There were also what I would term ‘encounters’ with other individuals, such as Arnold Zable, who were posting their work and sharing it online. Many will be familiar with Zable’s work, and others, like myself and 3,800 others, now follow him on social media (Zable 2024). Arnold is the child of Polish-Jewish refugees (Austlit 2023), a great humanitarian, a deeply compassionate and articulate advocate for those suffering from social displacement and discrimination. In 2021, Zable’s contribution was recognised with an Australian Council Award for Lifetime Achievement in Literature (Creative Australia 2024).

During COVID, Arnold posted poetic reflections on his Facebook feed entitled ‘What we do in the time of plague’ (Zable 2020–2022). Restricted to a travel radius of 5km, many people in Victorian urban areas gravitated to the nearest green zones and interacted with these spaces, and the people who shared them, as they had never done before. What Arnold did in the time of plague was not only to walk around what he called Zen Lake, but to share it with others so it could become part of our world as well:

I hear the voice at first, a rich tenor that rises and falls like a cooling breeze. The singer appears on the path beneath the dry eucalypts that line the opposite shore. He sings as he walks – then he turns, faces the lake, and stands arms akimbo, chest wide open, hands raised as he sings. He resumes his walk, rounds the banks, and draws near. I wave. He swerves my way. He wears sunglasses, white straw hat, and a pin-striped shirt. ‘I sing because I am homesick for China’, he says. He translates the Mandarin lyrics of his song: ‘Horses run faster under blue skies adorned with white clouds ...’ We sit and exchange tales ... he tells me of his love for the tranquillity, and the open spaces here, but also, of how much he misses his many friends over there ... And so it goes ... the conversation flows. Time runs faster under blue skies adorned with white clouds ... (Zable 2023)

I have treasured these encounters, these connections, that were developed and nurtured during lockdown, and am grateful for the threads that remain. The Liquid Amber events continue and continue to grow in popularity. I found an online poetry society in England that gravitated online during our shared periods of lockdown, and they have continued to meet online once a month. I have appreciated the strict format of their workshops which makes it worthwhile getting up at 5am (during daylight saving time) to take part. There is a strong sense of community in the group, they are very welcoming of an Australian, and just as I have attended online events hosted by the society, they have returned the favour by attending events I have hosted here in Australia.

However, these threads are few. For a while, urbanites experienced a shared isolation with us, and with those too disabled or infirm to be able to venture out, or whose culture precludes meeting in a pub, but that has largely disappeared now and we are back to our peculiar separations. The Spoken Word platforms have returned to their physical venues though I continue to ask that they occasionally do an online session. I am one voice calling out from the bush and there is no longer any cause to listen to us (RTB 2024):

Why live in the country, then?

Because instead of rattling trams
and beasts drag-racing down side streets,
it is koalas and tawny frogmouths
who keep me awake all night
with their grinding vocalisations.

Because instead of the constant hum
and braying of human voices,
it is the chatter of blue wrens,
the carols of magpies, the mourning
of the crows, the humming of insects,
that give the background noise
to my wandering thoughts.

Because instead of the air hanging heavy
with pollution and heavy metals,
it is laden with particles of pollen,
or the ichor after rain, or the dry dust of topsoil.
Because the water tastes of organic matter,
not chemical treatments, though my teeth
are weaker for a lack of fluoride.

I cannot trawl open mics
with my scrawled poems tucked
into my shoulder bag, waiting
to be unfolded before an audience of peers,
but the kookaburra will laugh at me
while I write them at the cast-iron table
on the verandah, sipping a glass of red
as the sun goes down above the hills
and the dog lolls at my feet,
impatient for her evening walk
and certain there are rabbits to be chased.

I live in the country because
we can see all the stars at night
instead of streetlights
and thereby understand how small
we really are in the greater picture,
insignificantly minuscule,

and while my words
will not change the universe,
they can point to what is already here.

Perhaps it is only natural that people prefer face-to-face contact, but it is important to recognise the gains that were made in increasing accessibility for those isolated through geography and intersectional challenges such as disability, mental health challenges, and family or cultural responsibilities. The realisations and the opportunities that arose during COVID still matter, the poems are still needed, like the thirsty child reaching out for the moistened washcloth, or the weedy flower pushing through broken concrete, red poppies on war-torn ground, fire raging through an over-warmed and neglected scrubland, or walking around a lake during a pandemic (RTB 2024):

Poems ask us to listen.
They are offerings of the heart.
They are the start of conversations between strangers,
the places where their lives and mine intersect.
I meet Arnold walking around Zen Lake.
I meet Mosab wanting to write about beauty not war.
I meet a man who collects poems from the homeless
like they are donations made into his tin cup.
I meet others like me zooming in from the other side of the world,
in their lounge-rooms and their offices and their bedrooms or their cars.
We talk, we listen and we talk.

The increased accessibility was not only empowering to the individual poets but allowed the contribution of a greater diversity of material for literary production with writing that otherwise would not have reached publication. There is still a chance in this post-COVID climate for publishers, event organisers, and workshop facilitators to embed this accessibility as a common practice that encourages a greater diversity of poetry creation and embeds it within the cultural experience of people wherever they live and whatever their ability. I hope that they do so.

Acknowledgments

Mosab Abu Toha, Phillip Muldoon, Kerri Shying and Arnold Zable for permission to reprint creative work. The poem 'Within My Hive' was previously published by Liquid Amber.

Works cited

- Abu Toha, M 2021 'A voice from beneath', *Banipal: Magazine of modern Arab literature* 71 (Summer), <https://www.banipal.co.uk/selections/119/395/mosab-abu-toha/>
- Acim, R 2021 'Lockdown poetry, healing and the COVID-19 pandemic', *Journal of poetry therapy* 34.2, 67–76, <https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2021.1899629> (accessed 15 November 2024)
- AustLit 2002 'Arnold Zable', The University of Queensland, <https://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/A14409> (accessed 1 Nov 2024)
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW) 2024 'Deaths in Australia' (June 6), <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/life-expectancy-deaths/deaths-in-australia/contents/leading-causes-of-death> (accessed 6 June 2024)
- Alfrey, A, V Field, I Xenophontes & S Holtum 2021 'Identifying the mechanisms of poetry therapy and associated effects on participants: A synthesised review of empirical literature', *The arts in psychotherapy* 75, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2021.101832> (accessed 15 November 2024)
- Bodsworth, R 2024 'Survey: Breaking the locks – Increased accessibility for geographically isolated poets during COVID lockdown', Charles Sturt University, Department of Education (unpublished)
- Creative Australia 2024 'Arnold Zable', <https://creative.gov.au/news/biographies/arnold-zable> (accessed 15 November 2024)
- Doche, A 2022 'Lockdown, literature, and online culture: Opportunities and challenges', *Ubiquity Proceedings*, Ubiquity Press: 1–10, <https://hal.science/hal-03942994/document>
- Ellis, CT, TE Adams & AP Bochner 2011 'Autoethnography: An overview', *Historical social research / Historische Sozialforschung* 36.4: 273–90
- Featherstone, D 2021 'Dirt tracks off the superhighway: How COVID widened the digital gap for remote First Nations communities in Australia', in S Yates & E Carmi (eds), *Digital inclusion: International policy and research*, Cham:Palgrave Macmillan, pp.13–37
- Hackett, PMW, JB Schwarzenbach & UM Jürgens 2016 *Consumer psychology: A study guide to qualitative research methods*, Leverkusen-Opladen: Verlag Barbara Budrich
- Hendrick, R 2020 'Lockdown', <https://www.facebook.com/BroRichard> (accessed 15 November 2024)
- Jackson, AY & LA Mazzei 2008 'Experience and "I" in autoethnography: A deconstruction', *International review of qualitative research* 1.3: 299–318
- Muldoon, P 2020 'After the fires', in D Gilbey (ed), *FourW thirty-one: New writing*, Wagga Wagga: fourW Press, pp.165–67
- Muldoon, P 2023 'Interview with Roxanne Bodsworth' (unpublished)
- O'Meara, K 2020 'In the time of pandemic', *MedHumChat* (July 15), <https://www.medhumchat.com/discussionguides/2020/7/15/kitty-omeara-in-the-time-of-pandemic> (accessed 24 March 2025)
- Price, G 2023 'Reflections: COVID isolation gives rise to latent talents', *The British journal of social work* 53.3: 1657–63, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcad105> (accessed 20 October 2023)

Roy, S 2020 'Poetry and pandemic: A study of two viral social-media poems during COVID 19 lockdown', *Litfinite Journal*, 21.1: 44–53, <https://doi.org/10.47365/litfinite.2.1.2020.44-53> (accessed 15 November 2024)

RTB 2020 'The directions tree', *Sunwyse writing and celebrancy services: Writing*, <https://sunwyse.com.au/writing/> (accessed 15 November 2024)

Salfia, J 2020 'The first line of emails I've received while quarantining', Twitter (April 11), https://x.com/jessica_salfia/status/1249000027198033922 (accessed 15 November 2024)

Shying, K 2020 *Know your country*, Newcastle: Puncher and Wattman

Therese 2012 'Within my hive', R Lucas (ed), *Lockdown poetry: The COVID long haul*, Seddon: Liquid Amber Press, pp.14

Thomaz, JRSC 2020 "'Breathe in your stuffy cell": (Re) emergence of poetry in times of COVID-19', *Philologie im Netz* 24: 383–97, hal-04353626

Zable, A 2020–2022 'What we do in the time of plague', Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100004372204918> (accessed 14 January 2024)

Zable, A 2023 'A story of today: The drama of Zen Lake never ends', Facebook (March 18), <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100004372204918> (accessed 18 March 2023)

Zable, A 2024, Facebook, <https://www.facebook.com/profile/100004372204918> (accessed 1 Nov 2024)

Zhang, K 2021 'Autoethnographic poetic inquiry: Writing poems as dialogic healing responses to the COVID-19 pandemic', *Journal of poetry therapy*, 34.3: 194–207

About the author

Dr Roxanne Bodsworth is a poet, celebrant and farmer living on Bpangerang country, Victoria. She is an adjunct researcher with Charles Sturt University and achieved her PhD at Victoria University in 2020 with a feminist reconstruction of Irish mythology in prosimetric form. Her poetry has been published in several journals under the pen names of 'Therese' and 'RTB', including *The Incompleteness Book II* and *Lockdown Poetry*. She is widely published in a range of genres, with peer-reviewed articles in *Axon*; Sydney University's *Prophecy, Fate and Memory in the Early Medieval Celtic World*; and *Mythlore*.

THE ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS (AA) 'SHARE' AS LITERARY FORM

'Talk Recovery' and David Antin's talk poetry

Rose Hunter

Griffith University, ORCID: 0009-0007-0253-2325

Abstract

'Talk Recovery' is a memoir in progress that details my recovery from alcoholism in Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), using a literary form I have developed in order to mimic the AA 'share'. AA shares occur when AA members speak in an improvised and uninterrupted way about their experiences with alcoholism recovery during an AA meeting. There are no literary works featuring AA recovery that use the AA share as their means of narration over the course of a book-length work. Given the central importance of the share in AA, this is a significant gap in the literature. Filling it is the key innovation of 'Talk Recovery', which enables me to unlock new ways of representing and understanding AA recovery in a literary work. To present my memoir as an AA share, I have adapted the 'talk poem' form invented by the US performance poet David Antin (1932–2016). There are no existing adaptations of the Antin talk poem to express themes such as alcoholism recovery, and very few adaptations of his form for any purpose. Like the AA share, Antin's talk poems were also improvised and mostly uninterrupted oral performances that involved informal preparation. To write 'Talk Recovery', I repurpose and modify elements of Antin's improvised oral composition practice as well as the distinctive typographical style expressed in his written talk poems. My AA share narration adapted from Antin enables me to communicate aspects of AA recovery and features of the AA program on the level of form – a characteristic not found in other literary works about AA recovery.

THE ALCOHOLICS ANONYMOUS 'SHARE' AS LITERARY FORM: 'TALK RECOVERY AND DAVID ANTIN'S TALK POETRY

Rose Hunter

Introduction

The Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) 'share' is one of the most widely recognisable elements of the AA program. There is a general awareness in pop culture that one, or a parody of one, is about to commence whenever you hear the words, 'Hello, my name is X, and I am an alcoholic ...' Over the course of my fifteen years of AA meeting attendance (nine years of sobriety at the time of writing), I have frequently noticed the poetic qualities of many AA shares: moments or whole shares that are surprising, funny, and beautiful. When I started writing a memoir about my recovery in AA ('Talk Recovery'), I wondered if it would be possible to narrate my manuscript using a form that mimicked the AA share. Although many literary works include AA shares within their storylines, I have not found any that position the AA share as the formal engine of their narration over the course of a book-length work. Given the central importance of the share in AA, this is a significant absence in the literature. My AA share narration is the key innovation of 'Talk Recovery' – a new form for the recovery story, which enables me to unlock new ways of representing and understanding AA in a literary work. When I came across the performance-based 'talk poems' of the US writer David Antin (1932–2016), I was immediately drawn to the commonalities between Antin's work and the AA share. Like AA shares, Antin's talk poems were unique and mostly uninterrupted improvised oral performances. There is no scholarship linking Antin's talk poetry and the AA share, and so – after a background review of some of the literary texts about AA recovery and their narrative form – I set out my rationale for adapting Antin's talk poem for my memoir about AA recovery. I then describe my compositional processes influenced by Antin, as well as my adaptation of the distinctive typographical style expressed in his written talk poems. Lastly, I consider the effects of using this form for my memoir about AA recovery, with reference to the characteristics that literary scholars have observed in Antin's published talk poems. Using a talk poem narration for my memoir about AA recovery enables me to mimic the AA share on the page as well as refer to wider features of AA recovery on a formal level. Specifically, this form enables me to 1) communicate a constructed and stylised rendering of the AA share rather than a naturalistic one; 2) foreground a concern with the (crucially important to AA) present tense, which is communicated by features such as the 'headnotes'; 3) express the AA idea that recovery is always unfinished and ongoing; 4) present 'dropped threads' and 'autobiographical moments' (Jensen 2000) that work synecdochally to produce a fragmentary effect that scholars have found to be characteristic of the oral AA share, and 5) communicate via typographical features an ephemerality that is also characteristic of the AA share.

1 Background

AA and twelve-step groups

AA is a loose organisation of people who self-identify as alcoholics who wish to get and remain sober. Founded in the United States in 1935 by Bill Wilson and Robert Smith, AA is a type of 'mutual help organisation' (Ringwald 2002: 23), which is today the best known and most widely accessed peer support for alcohol problems in many countries, including Australia (Haber,

Riordan, Winter et al. 2021: S17). AA is not a therapy or a treatment in the conventional sense, but rather a spiritual program that offers ‘a design for living’ (2001: 15, 28; original publication 1939) that extends beyond abstaining from alcohol. It is estimated to have over two million members worldwide, with 1.3 million in the USA and 18,000–20,000 in Australia (Alcoholics Anonymous Australia 2017). However, AA does not keep formal records of its membership, and various scholars believe these estimates are conservative, as many who attend AA on a casual basis are not even informally recorded as members of any specific group (Ringwald 2002: 230; Travis 2009: 3–4). AA is found in about 180 countries, and its literature has been translated into over one hundred languages (Alcoholics Anonymous 2024a).

AA was the original ‘twelve-step group’, so named because its program of recovery is based on participant completion of the twelve steps outlined in its main text, *Alcoholics Anonymous* (2001), as well as the *Twelve Steps and Twelve Traditions* (2002; original publication 1952). This approach has since been applied to form a large number of other ‘twelve-step groups’, including (to list three of the more prominent ones): Al-Anon, a support group for family and close friends of alcoholics; Narcotics Anonymous (NA); and Gamblers Anonymous (GA). Although there are some differences among twelve-step groups, all follow the same twelve steps, and sharing practices across all the groups are similar (Travis 2009).

Twelve-step recovery as a whole is controversial, with both supporters and critics. Although ‘Talk Recovery’ does present the pros and cons of AA as I experienced them, arguing for or against the efficacy of AA is outside of the scope of this paper, which is concerned with adapting Antin’s talk poem form for my AA share narration and the new ways of representing and understanding AA recovery that result from this.

Literary texts featuring AA and twelve-step recovery

Although many literary works detail states of active alcoholism – including many with a (usually) smaller AA recovery section in the final parts¹ – far fewer works represent the processes of AA recovery in a detailed way. Literary works that do present AA recovery processes in detail include David Foster Wallace’s novel *Infinite Jest* (1996) and Leslie Jamison’s memoir/cultural history and literary criticism book *The Recovering: Intoxication and its Aftermath* (2018). However, neither of these texts or any others that feature AA recovery – for example those by Frey (2003), Burroughs (2003) and Karr (2009) – use a form based on the AA share to narrate the story. Jamison states her aim to create a book that, she writes: ‘might work like a meeting – that would place my story alongside the stories of others’ (2018: 9), which she achieves by interweaving her AA recovery story with the alcoholism and recovery stories of many well-known writers as well as other AA members she met.² This produces an ‘AA meeting effect’ regarding the content, but her book is not concerned with attempting a meeting-like effect on the level of form.

Just one book positions its narration as a twelve-step share: Bill Lee’s *Born to Lose: Memoirs of a Compulsive Gambler* (2005), which is framed as a Gamblers Anonymous (GA) share. Although Lee’s book is framed as a share, unlike my AA share narration in ‘Talk Recovery’, it does not attempt to represent the features of speech on a formal level.

The AA share and the Antin talk poem

The AA share arose out of a diverse set of influences. Two that are often cited are the sharing practices extant in the Oxford Group, a Christian organisation that held small-group meetings where members shared their experiences (O'Halloran 2008: 103; White 2014: 170), and temperance societies, including the Washingtonian Society of the 1840s that emphasised the importance of public testimonials for reformed alcoholics (White 2014: 14). The AA share was also strongly influenced by the 'one alcoholic talking to another' interactions that are at the heart of the founding story of AA (O'Halloran 101–102). The core purpose of the AA share is stated in the AA preamble, which is read aloud at the start of most meetings:

Alcoholics Anonymous is a fellowship of people who share their experience, strength and hope with each other that they may solve their common problem and help others to recover from alcoholism. (Alcoholics Anonymous 2024b)

The AA share is an improvised form of uninterrupted 'monological speech' (Arminen 1998: 492), which has various elements in common with David Antin's monological talk poems that were improvised live in front of the audience.³ Antin performed his first talk poem in 1971. The form represented a turn away from the procedural method of his earlier work and was motivated at least in part by his frustration with the recitational poetry reading, which he regarded as an 'artificial re-enactment' of work written in the past and then reproduced with little sense of the present (Antin & Fredman 2014: xi). Unlike most AA shares, Antin's talk poems were recorded, by Antin himself.⁴ He then used these recordings to render some of his oral talk poems into written versions that appear in various publications, including his four full-length books of talk poems: *talking at the boundaries* (1976); *tuning* (1984); *what it means to be avant-garde* (1993); and *i never knew what time it was* (2005). When Antin committed his talk poems to the page, he used a number of innovative techniques that will be discussed in Part 3 of this paper. This written talk poem form has not been adopted by many other writers, and I have been unable to find anyone who has employed it for a book-length work. Charles Bernstein has published some shorter pieces in the Antin talk poem style, including his 'lecture poems' in books such as *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (1999). Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Ideal Lecture (In Memory of David Antin)* (2017), presents Goldsmith's own speech as edited transcript on the page, as was Antin's practice, but Goldsmith uses a lineated form rather than using the typographical talk poem style employed by Antin in his books.

There are of course large differences between Antin's avant-garde talk poems and the AA share. To cite just one, improvisation is highly valued in the AA share and in Antin for very different reasons: for Antin improvisation was a way of breaking out of the conventional routine of the poetry reading and to encounter new ways of thinking, whereas improvisation is important in AA as evidence that the sharer is 'speaking from the heart'.⁵ This latter point relates to one strain of improvisation which sees the method as a way of accessing the authentic (Fertel 2022: 272), which is not a meaningful concept in Antin's talk poems. However, for my purposes in this paper I am interested in the similarities rather than the differences between the Antin talk poem and the AA share – and, crucially – the possibilities these similarities provide for my AA share narration.

2 The AA share and the Antin talk poem: improvisation and preparation

Some of the commonalities between Antin's talk poems and the AA share can also be observed in a wide range of oral performances. Here I focus on those commonalities that are not necessarily found in other oral performances. First among these is that both forms are improvised. Improvisation in the arts can be defined as 'a coincidence between the production and transmission of a text' (Frost & Yarrow, as cited in Smith & Dean 1997: 25). These are works composed, in Albert Lord's famous phrase regarding traditional oral poetry, 'not *for*, but *in*, performance' (Lord 1950: 13; emphasis in original). In contrast to a recitational poetry reading or a prepared speech, the content of an Antin talk poem (like an AA share), is created in the present, in front of the audience. Unlike other solo verbal improvisors, such as Spalding Gray, Mike Daisey, or Christina Catherine Martinez, neither Antin nor the AA sharer use any tangible memory aids, such as outlines or notecards; nor do they use props. Both the Antin talk poem and the AA share consist very simply of a person 'up on their feet talking',⁶ although, in the case of AA, we also often stay seated.

As Hazel Smith and Roger T Dean point out, a 'gradient' can be observed between improvisation and composition, with processes involving more spontaneous improvisation at one end, and those involving less improvisation at the other (1997: 26). For example, improvisation frequently involves some type of preparation. Both the AA share and the Antin talk poem involve informal preparation. In Antin's case this took the form of wide reading and thinking about a topic – either a topic he had thought of, or that someone else had suggested (Smith, Antin & Dean 1993: n.p.). His reading is evidenced in his talk poems, which typically take on a substantial theoretical question, such as 'what it means to be avant-garde' (a talk poem in his book of the same name). In contrast, AA members do not engage in extensive reading as preparation for an AA meeting. However, over the years we have been reading AA texts – as well as absorbing parts of them that are read aloud at meetings and discussing these topics with our sponsors and sponsees and other AA members – and all this informal preparation flows into our shares.

Various other kinds of informal preparation can also be observed in the different types of shares that take place at different AA meetings. One common meeting format is the 'Daily Reflections meeting', which is a type of 'topic meeting' (Jensen 2000: 36). AA members can know the topic in advance of the meeting, as it is taken from the *Daily Reflections* (Alcoholics Anonymous 1990), a book with a reading for every day of the year, which is also available online. These days many AA members have an app, such as the Meeting Guide app,⁷ which gives us the daily reflection on our phones. Many people read and turn over the meeting topic in their minds before arriving at the meeting, echoing Antin's procedure of having a topic suggested to him, letting it percolate in his mind, then composing a response to that topic in a live setting.

People who have been in the AA program for any length of time tend to apply AA to a range of daily issues, and an AA meeting is an opportunity to ponder these applications aloud (Horarik 2005: 57–61). Similarly, Antin described his talk poems as 'thinking out loud where you are sharing the thinking in some way with other people' (Smith, Antin & Dean 1993: n.p.). An AA member's ongoing application of the AA program is also a type of informal preparation for sharing, similar to the way Antin drew his talk poems out of the ongoing thinking he was doing as an artist and intellectual.

3 Composition and editing

To write 'Talk Recovery' I am making use of various elements of Antin's practice of improvised oral composition. Following Antin's practice of preparation, I select a topic or an event, then read research material I think might be relevant to it, along with my personal notes, including my journals from the time period I am representing. Then, without looking at any written materials, I speak my AA share/talk poem out loud while recording it on my voice memos app. Afterwards I transcribe it, as was Antin's method for the talk poems he collected in his books, although unlike Antin I let Word's 'dictate' function transcribe it for me, which sometimes adds interesting errors I can make creative use of. I then follow Antin's editing procedure in a modified way (discussed below).

An obvious difference between what I am doing with my voice memos app and what Antin did (and the AA share) – is that I am not speaking in front of an audience. Also, unlike Antin, I do not intend for my recordings to be available anywhere. Instead I am using the talking-and-recording-first method as a compositional tool, or an example of 'applied improvisation' (Smith & Dean 1997: 27), in which the recording is not a creative output, but rather an element 'crucial to the evolution of the project' (1997: 28). Narrating into my voice memos app also provides me with a shadow sense of the occasion or event of the talk, creating what Smith and Dean call a 'private performance situation' (Smith & Dean 1997: 28).

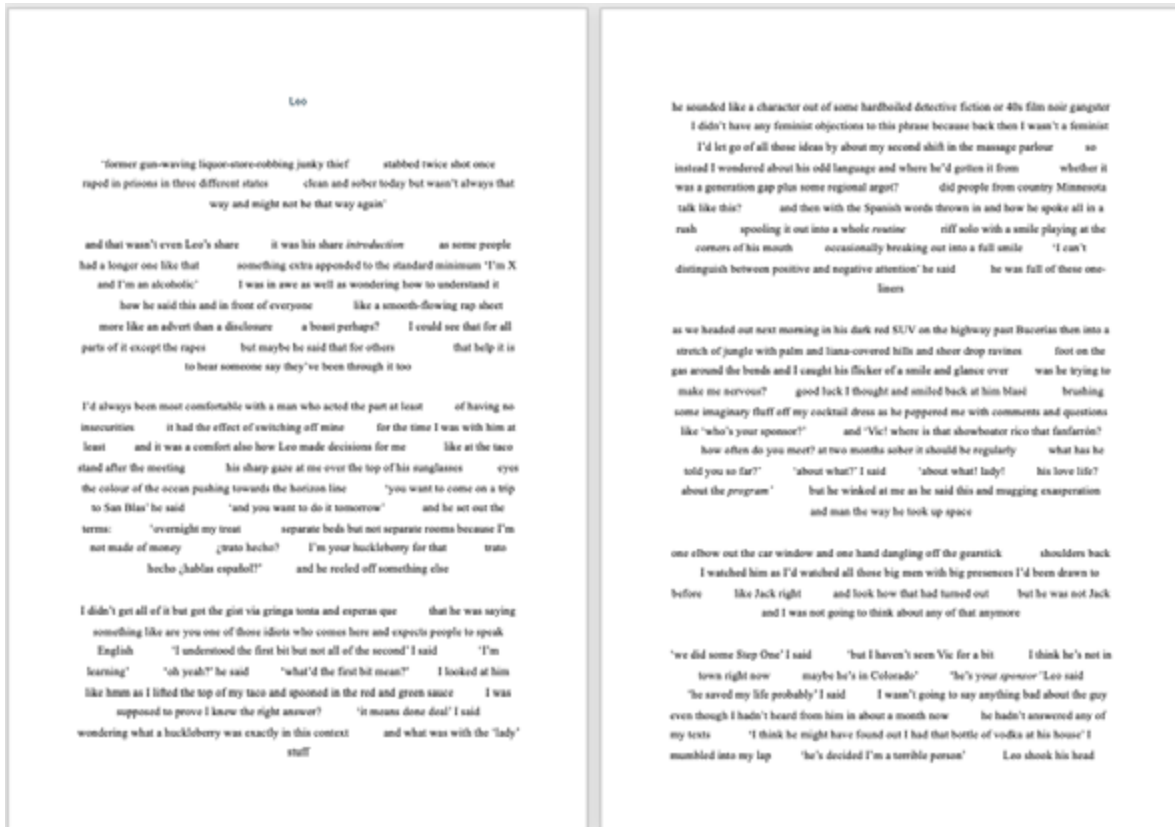
When Antin committed his talk poems to the page, he edited them to lesser or greater degrees. At the beginning of *i never knew what time it was*, he relays his method. Sometimes the written pieces are 'very close to the raw transcripts', he writes, and 'sometimes they can be twice as long' (2005: x). As my transcriptions contain much that I want to alter, I rewrite as well as edit after transcription.

Antin also set his talk poems in a distinctive typographical style. The margins are unjustified on the right and left; there are no apostrophes in contractions; no capital letters or punctuation other than question marks; no punctuation at the ends of the talk poems; and white spaces indicate pauses in his speech. I have employed this style in 'Talk Recovery' with a few variations; for example, unlike Antin I am using capital letters for proper nouns and apostrophes in contractions, as I find the lack of these to be sources of unnecessary confusion in my work. I also make use of more white space than most of Antin's talk poems do, to mimic my more frequent speech pauses. The extra white space also helps me transition between topics or emphases. **Figure 1** is a screenshot of a section of my manuscript in progress, to demonstrate the look of the form at a glance.

Antin's editing of his oral talk poems also involved actively creating 'oral features' for the page. In 'how long is the present' he says:

so that when i put them [the talk poems] in a book they dont come
out exactly as i spoke them *sometimes even a lot more like speaking them*
than when i speak them (1984: 94; emphasis added)

As Michael Davidson observes, an Antin talk poem is 'a representation, not a mimesis of speech' (1997: 208). A mimesis in this sense might be a transcription that includes the disfluencies that occur in actual speech, such as awkward repetitions, pauses in strange places, and speech stumbles. Instead Antin presents a form that nods to what we could call 'naturalistic' features like this, similar to how dialogue in many texts employs one instance of a speech stumble to



1

imply others. One example of Antin’s rendering of a speech stumble is the (quite common) situation in which he says something, then realises he has not said exactly what he wanted to say, so he corrects it, but leaves his original misstep in the manuscript – as opposed to the conventional editing practice for written works, which is (usually) to edit out the false start, as writing is revised and edited with the objective of ‘continuous improvement towards an ideal version’ (Smith & Dean 1997: 85).

In ‘Talk Recovery’ I also follow this practice of leaving in – or inserting after the fact – what could be called ‘thinking working itself out’. Here is an example from my manuscript in which I call a feeling ‘nostalgia’, then decide it isn’t the right word, so I correct it, but I leave the word as well as my act of correcting it in the text:

and even though a lot of that old life wasn’t quote ‘good I get washed
 into the nostalgia where by nostalgia I mean something stronger actually
 nostalgia is the wrong word it’s not wistful longing it’s not like
 that more like ramming concrete than tendrils and vines

In this case the impression was constructed during editing. In my recorded talk poem I used the word nostalgia; it was only when I was editing the piece I thought nostalgia wasn’t the right word, so I added some better (to my mind) words, while, as mentioned, keeping the original ‘wrong’ word in. Here I’ve edited to arrive at something that mimics unedited speech – but a mostly smooth-flowing, non-naturalistic representation of it. If my aim were to make this sentence look truly unedited, I could have written something like: ‘nostalgia um that’s not the right word what is umm ...’. Which is the sort of thing I say in my recorded talk poems,

or my actual AA shares. Although my method for arriving at this passage started with a real improvised oral form, by the time the work was edited, this passage could be read as an example of ‘rhetorical improvisation’ – characteristic of texts that use the appearance of improvisation as ‘a persuasive device’ (Fertel 2022: 271), meaning that the reader is persuaded that what they’re reading *is* improvised speech, within the logic established by the literary work. A famous example of rhetorical improvisation that relates to addiction is Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s opium-inspired preface to ‘Kubla Khan’, which frames the composition of the work as an ‘improvisational bout’ (Wu, in Magee 2022: 51). Rhetorical improvisation is an important feature of my AA share narration in ‘Talk Recovery’.

4 Effects of the talk poem form on ‘Talk Recovery’

Emphasis on the present tense

As improvisors do not start with a full idea of what they are going to say or do, all improvisation is located in, and concerned with, the present tense (Smith & Dean 1997: 25). However, in both the Antin talk poem and the AA share this takes on explicit as well as implicit importance. As mentioned, Antin’s interest in injecting a sense of the present tense into his performances was one of his reasons for devising the talk poem form. The importance of the present in AA is contained in the well-known slogan ‘one day at a time’, which reminds AA members to focus on staying sober now, rather than worrying about the future or dwelling on the past (Valverde 1999: 406). AA also emphasises reconnecting to a felt sense of the present, and recommends practical techniques, such as meditation, to help achieve this (meditation is part of Step Eleven; Alcoholics Anonymous 2001: 85–88).

While writers necessarily represent the past from the point of view of the present, there are differences in the degrees to which the present tense is explicitly incorporated into creative works about the past. As an autobiographical writer with an established practice of writing from memory, it is easy for me to slip into a felt state of submersion in the past and almost forget the present while tapping on the keyboard – but I am less likely to do the same when speaking into a recording device. One reason for this is a defamiliarisation effect: I’m used to writing at my desk, but less used to speaking from it, and the novelty of the situation heightens my awareness of the present tense. Additionally, the recording process mimics in a minor key the pressure I would feel in front of an audience: it seems that even recording myself in the privacy of my own apartment makes me slightly self-conscious and nervous – which also has the effect of bringing more present-time concerns into my improvisations that otherwise narrate past events.

Each of the talk poems in Antin’s books features a short introduction, which I follow Marjorie Perloff in calling a ‘headnote’ (2006: 263).⁸ The headnotes were not part of Antin’s oral performance; he added them later to accompany the written talk poems, and they are a major way in which the original context of the oral talk poem is imprinted on the written talk poem. The headnotes run anything from one paragraph to several pages and include such retrospective information as who asked him to give the talk, where it was, how he got there, what the audience was like, and whether they stayed until the end. The headnotes are separated from the main body of the Antin talk poem by virtue of appearing first, with no title (the talk poem itself gets the title, after a page break), and being set in italics.

I also precede each of my AA-share mimicking talk poems (which also make up the chapters of my manuscript), with a headnote. I use the same ‘speaking first’ compositional method for my headnotes, which describe details relevant to the prior composition of my talk poem; for example, what I could see in front of me, what I was doing just before speaking, or any current life concerns that entered my mind while speaking. The following lines from a headnote in ‘Talk Recovery’ describes how just prior to speaking the talk poem I was contacted by an old friend, a fellow alcoholic I met in AA many years ago, who had evidently relapsed. Here is the opening of that headnote from ‘Talk Recovery’:

*now at the time I spoke this one there were other things going on as there
always are but one of them at this time was a situation that happens every
so often which is someone I knew in the past popping up usually
someone engaged as I used to almost constantly be and now only sometimes
am in entirely losing their shit in this case it was Lance sending
me no joke fifty plus longish to very long messages over the course of three days on
Facebook Messenger and obviously he’s relapsed he’s not saying that directly
but from what he’s saying it’s obvious like ‘I’m gonna fly you to Albuquerque
it’s all on me’ along with a screenshot of his Merrill Edge account
(passage italicised as are all headnotes in ‘Talk Recovery’)*

This present-tense event probably resulted in the talk poem being more concerned with the topic of relapse than it would have been otherwise. Similarly, AA shares are influenced by a wide variety of current concerns that happen to be in sharers’ minds at the time (personal, political, medical, etc.) – regardless of what the set topic of the meeting happens to be (Horarik 2005: 57–61).

AA recovery as ongoing and unfinished

As mentioned in the Background section, AA functions as a ‘design for living’ (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001: 15; 28). It does not aim to provide a temporary treatment plan, and there is no ‘graduation’ from AA. Nor does AA claim to cure alcoholism; according to AA ‘once an alcoholic always an alcoholic’ (Alcoholics Anonymous 2001: 33). Instead the AA program offers ‘a daily reprieve contingent on the maintenance of our spiritual condition’ (2001: 85). George H Jensen writes: ‘There is usually some sort of admission at the end of an AA story that even though the person is sober today, tomorrow is not guaranteed’ (2000: 118). Relapse is a frequent concern in AA shares, as seen in the passage from ‘Talk Recovery’ above. Another character in my manuscript is quoted as starting each of his AA shares with:

Leo alcoholic clean and sober today wasn’t always that
way and might not be that way tomorrow

The lack of terminal punctuation at the end of each talk poem in my memoir communicates a lack of closure that echoes at a formal level the ongoing and unfinished nature of AA recovery.

Dropped threads and ‘autobiographical moments’

Antin’s talk poems also contain autobiographical narrative in the form of vignettes. These can stretch into longer stories; one example is the extended dark comedy involving Antin slamming his finger in the car door and his subsequent hospital treatment, in ‘how long is the present’ (1984: 83–101). However, even Antin’s longer anecdotes are mostly partial in their narrative

coverage, often leaving out what most people would regard as crucial narrative elements. For example, as Perloff writes, in ‘is this the right place’, Antin starts a narrative about his son’s illness, only to abandon it for a different storyline and some theoretical thoughts. The reader never finds out what was wrong with his son or how the situation was resolved (Perloff 1981: 334; from Antin 1976: 33).

In general, such ‘dropped threads’ suggest a lack of polish and a lack of a predetermined script, both of which are characteristic of improvised oral performances. We can easily imagine how they happen in an oral talk poem or AA share. For example, perhaps the speaker simply forgot to come back to the issue, or perhaps the audience looked bored and therefore the speaker switched topics – among other possibilities. When Antin committed his talk poems to the page, he could have resolved these dropped threads by filling in this ‘missing’ information. His not doing so has several effects. It both mimics the omissions that occur in improvised oral performance, and it represents on the page a feature of oral improvisation, which, Smith and Dean write, ‘tends to be synecdochal (by which we refer to concentrating on parts) rather than totalising (concentrating on the whole)’ (1997: 33). Perloff also notices in Antin’s work what she calls a ‘misplaced synecdoche’ (1981: 332). Instead of coming to ‘know’ a certain character, Perloff writes, in the Antin talk poem ‘we witness certain fragmented gestures, words, and actions that provide a matrix for the speaker’s talking. The images are highly particularized, but, as in Gertrude Stein, the parts refer to no whole’ (1981: 332).

Jensen similarly emphasises the incomplete nature of AA shares as they are practiced in most meetings, finding that they offer what he calls ‘autobiographical moments’ (2000: 10–11).⁹ He writes: ‘they are really a string of loosely connected anecdotes rather than a full narrative. The gaps are glaring and crucial’ (2000: 119). This effect is better observed in ‘Talk Recovery’ as it builds over the course of a whole talk poem, but these gaps as well as the ‘fragmented speaker matrix’ mentioned by Perloff can be seen in the following lines from my manuscript:

*‘luxury problems’ AA calls them or how an active alcoholic can make money
into a health hazard but back to the present I mean the present when I
first spoke this one below just after I got those messages from Lance
at that time I was living on the Gold Coast in student accoms next door to a bunch of
twenty-year-olds who partied until three a.m. most days I’d moved there to do
my PhD which I’d started in April and it was now October at first I was sharing
with a woman my age another person my age in that building again*

The headnote then loops back to the issue of Lance’s relapse (mentioned in the previous excerpt from this same headnote), and the reader never hears about the narrator’s current living situation again. Nor is Lance’s relapse ever resolved. This produces a different sort of text than one that has been revised like a written memoir typically would be, to repair any dropped threads and fill in gaps on the way to providing the reader with a fulsome portrait of the narrator.

Additional fragmentary effects

The lack of end punctuation and the lack of a capital letter at the beginning of the Antin talk poem and my AA share narration in ‘Talk Recovery’ suggests the lack of a conventional beginning or ending, which suggests the fragment; something ripped out of a flux – like Jensen’s AA ‘autobiographical moments’ – shorn of their past and future. The jagged edges produced

by leaving the margins unjustified on both sides also add to the fragmentary impression – to me they seem like a typographical representation of ripped paper. Various critics have also noted that these jagged edges in the Antin talk poem seem to ‘loosen’ the text’s attachment to the page. For example, Perloff points to the ‘curious mobility’ of the form (2006: 263). It reminds me of a layer of algae hovering on water, or a temporary cloud cover. This visual communication of a lack of fixity in the form of ‘Talk Recovery’ suggests the unfinishedness of AA recovery as well as the ephemeral nature of oral performance. Ephemerality is particularly relevant to the AA share, which, unlike the Antin talk poem, is not usually recorded and thus leaves no concrete trace – after its utterance it survives only in the minds of the sharer and the other AA members who heard it. In this way the look of the talk poem on the page works to mimic the characteristics of the AA share as well as elements of the wider AA program.

Conclusion

In this paper I have outlined my reasons for adapting the Antin talk poem form for my AA share narration in ‘Talk Recovery’, based on the commonalities I observed between the Antin talk poem and the AA share. I then described my compositional technique influenced by Antin, as well as my repurposing and modifying of the Antin talk poem’s typographical style. Lastly, I examined the effect of this form on my memoir in progress: how the form mimics an improvised oral performance on the page in ways that connect with the specific characteristics of the AA share, which enables my manuscript to express aspects of the AA program on a formal level – a characteristic not found in other literary works about AA recovery. My AA share narration adapted from Antin is one that could be employed by other writers to represent AA or any of the twelve-step groups, as well as more broadly to represent speech in other literary works. My paper also re-visions Antin’s work for a new context and contributes to existing scholarship regarding the lived experience of alcoholism and AA recovery.

Notes

¹ There are many examples of this format. To list three of them: Susan Cheever, *Note Found in a Bottle* (1999); Caroline Knapp, *Drinking: A Love Story* (1999); Sarah Hepola, *Blackout: Remembering the Things I Drank to Forget* (2016).

² The names of these people have been changed and identifying details removed in order to protect other people’s anonymity in Jamison, as is standard practice in memoirs that feature AA. Likewise, in my memoir the names of all people (except for mine) have been changed, and identifying features removed in all cases except where the person has given me permission to write about them.

³ Recordings of Antin’s original talk poems can be found at Pennsound (2004-2018), and the Getty Research Institute (n.d.).

⁴ Ordinary AA meeting shares are not recorded. However, speaker meetings (meetings in which an invited person shares for all or most of the meeting time, and which can be up to an hour or longer), are occasionally recorded, and speakers at AA conventions are routinely recorded. These recordings can be accessed by anyone, on podcasts such as Sober Cast. In this essay I am referring to the AA shares that take place in most AA meetings, not recorded speaker meetings or convention shares.

⁵ A central understanding in AA, which is reflected in the title of (AA co-founder) Bill Wilson's collection of writings, *The Language of the Heart* (1997).

⁶ Adapted from Antin's comment, in reference to the New York and San Francisco poets and their conviction (that Antin sees as central), that 'poetry was made by a man up on his feet, talking' (2011: 194).

⁷ See 'Meeting guide' at Alcoholics Anonymous World Services 2024c.

⁸ Not all of Antin's talk poems have separate headnotes, but all the talk poems in *talking at the boundaries* (1976); *tuning* (1984); and *what it means to be avant-garde* (1993) do.

⁹ There is a competing categorisation of the AA share as a 'totalisation' and a 'master narrative' (for example Warhol & Michie 1996; Warhol 2002), but these analyses seem to be based on longer AA story shares, such as the speaker meeting and convention shares mentioned in note 4. In contrast, I have based my analysis on the more common regular (non-speaker-meeting) share, which is usually about three to five minutes long and very often tackles a topic (like an Antin talk poem) – rather than the longer, previously told narratives that characterise speaker meeting and convention shares.

Works cited

Alcoholics Anonymous 2024a 'AA around the world', <https://www.aa.org/aa-around-the-world> (accessed 24 September 2024)

Alcoholics Anonymous 2024b 'AA preamble', <https://www.aa.org/aa-preamble> (accessed 24 September 2024)

Alcoholics Anonymous World Services 2024c 'Meeting guide' (version 4.2.26), <https://www.aa.org/meeting-guide-app>

Alcoholics Anonymous Australia 2017 'Membership', <https://aa.org.au/members/helpful-links/membership/> (accessed 24 September 2024)

Alcoholics Anonymous 2002 [1952] *Twelve steps and twelve traditions*, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services

Alcoholics Anonymous 2001 [1939] *Alcoholics Anonymous: The story of how many thousands of men and women have recovered from alcoholism* (4th ed), Alcoholics Anonymous World Services

Alcoholics Anonymous 1990 *Daily reflections: A book of reflections by AA members for AA members*, Alcoholics Anonymous World Services

Antin, D 1976 *talking at the boundaries*, New York: New Directions Publishing

Antin, D 1984 *tuning*, New York: New Directions Publishing

Antin, D 1993 *what it means to be avant-garde*, New York: New Directions Publishing

- Antin, D 2005 *i never knew what time it was*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Antin, D 2011 *Radical coherency: Selected essays on art and literature, 1966 to 2005*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Antin, D & A Fredman, 2014 *How long is the present: Selected talk poems of David Antin*, Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press
- Arminen, I 1998 'Sharing experiences: Doing therapy with the help of mutual references in the meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous', *The sociological quarterly* 39.3: 491–515, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1533-8525.1998.tb00515.x>
- Bernstein, C 1999 *My way: Speeches and poems*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press
- Burroughs, A 2003 *Dry: A memoir*, New York: Picador
- Cheever, S 1999 *Note found in a bottle: My life as a drinker*, New York: Simon & Schuster
- Davidson, M 1997 *Ghostlier demarcations: Modern poetry and the material word*, Berkeley: University of California Press
- Fertel, R 2022 'Improvisation's ethical and epistemological challenge', A Bertinetto & M Ruta (eds), *The Routledge handbook of philosophy and improvisation in the arts*, Milton Park: Routledge, pp.271–84
- Frey, J 2003 *A million little pieces*, New York: Doubleday
- Getty Research Institute n.d. 'Selected audio and video recordings from the David Antin papers', https://rosettaapp.getty.edu/delivery/DeliveryManagerServlet?dps_pid=IE520067 (accessed 24 June 2024)
- Goldsmith, K 2018 *The ideal lecture (In memory of David Antin)*, Ghent: Het Balanseer
- Haber, P, BJ Riordan, DT Winter, L Barrett et al. 2021 'New Australian guidelines for the treatment of alcohol problems: An overview of recommendations', *Medical journal of Australia* 215.57: S3–S32, <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51254> (accessed 24 June 2024)
- Hepola, S 2016 *Blackout: Remembering the things I drank to forget*, New York: Grand Central Publishing
- Horarik, S 2005 'Social environment and subjective experience: Recovery from alcoholism in Alcoholics Anonymous in Sydney, Australia', PhD dissertation, University of Sydney
- Jamison, L 2018 *The recovering: Intoxication and its aftermath*, Boston: Little, Brown and Company
- Jensen, GH 2000 *Storytelling in Alcoholics Anonymous: A rhetorical analysis*, Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press
- Karr, M 2009 *Lit: A memoir*, New York: HarperCollins
- Knapp, C 1999 *Drinking: A love story*, New York: The Dial Press.
- Lee, B 2005 *Born to lose: Memoirs of a compulsive gambler*, Center City, MN: Hazelden Publishing
- Lord, AB 1960 *The singer of tales*, New York: Atheneum
- Magee, P 2022 *Suddenness and the composition of poetic thought*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield
- O'Halloran, S 2008 *Talking oneself sober: The discourse of Alcoholics Anonymous*, Amherst: Cambria Press

- Pennsound 2004-2018 'David Antin', Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing, The University of Pennsylvania, <https://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Antin.php> (accessed 24 June 2024)
- Perloff, M 1981 *The poetics of indeterminacy: Rimbaud to Cage*, Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press
- Perloff, M 2006 'Facturing out faktura: The plight of visual text', *Text* 16: 249–66, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30227972>
- Ringwald, CD 2002 *The soul of recovery: Uncovering the spiritual dimension in the treatment of addictions*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- Smith, H, D Antin & RT Dean 1993 'Talking and thinking: David Antin in conversation with Hazel Smith and Roger Dean', *Postmodern culture* 3.3, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pmc.1993.0035>
- Smith, H and Dean, RT 1997 *Improvisation, hypermedia, and the arts since 1945*, Reading: Harwood Academic Publishers
- Travis, T 2009 *The language of the heart: A cultural history of the recovery movement from Alcoholics Anonymous to Oprah Winfrey*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press
- Valverde, M & K White-Mair 1999 "'One day at a time" and other slogans for everyday life: The ethical practices of Alcoholics Anonymous', *Sociology* 33.2: 393–410, <https://doi.org/10.1177/S0038038599000231>
- Wallace, DF 1996 *Infinite jest*, New York: Back Bay Books
- Warhol, R 2002 'The rhetoric of addiction: From Victorian novels to AA', in JF Brodie & M Redfield (eds), *High anxieties*, Berkeley: University of California Press, pp.97–108
- Warhol, RR & H Michie 1996 'Twelve-step teleology: Narratives of recovery/recovery as narrative', in S Smith & J Watson (eds), *Getting a life: Everyday uses of autobiography*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp.327–50
- White, WL 2014 *Slaying the dragon: The history of addiction treatment and recovery in America* (2nd ed), Bloomington Ill: Chestnut Health Systems
- Wilson, B 1997 *The language of the heart: Bill W's grapevine writings*, New York: The AA Grapevine

About the author

Rose Hunter is the author of various books of poetry including *Body Shell Girl* (Spinifex Press, 2022) and *glass* (Five Islands Press, 2017). She has been widely published in literary journals in Australia, the USA, and Canada, and has been awarded an Australia Council for the Arts (now Creative Australia) grant. She has also been published at the ABC and has been a guest on the ABC's Radio National. Rose was born in Australia and lived in Canada for ten years, then Mexico for ten more. She currently lives in Brisbane/Meanjin, where she is a PhD student in Creative Writing at Griffith University.



AXON: Creative Explorations
2025 vol 14.2 *We Need to Talk*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973

DOI: 10.54375/001/3qbr7al5t6
Keywords: Poetry

FIVE POEMS

Gu Kailai

University of Alcalá

FIVE POEMS

Gu Kailai

No. 1

There's one such
water, asking where we should go from here
We recall some ancient query, once asked.
Now it's my turn alone to ask again:
Can sleep catch her hand?
Without creation, and past psychic

There was a secular psychic
And his performance was scanty
Even with his richest show, he tells you
Cross-examine his closest white light
Accept his woodland always divided in two
His performance was also scanty

His one finger:
Precisely because it's something simple
The power of simplicity.
If one has a simple heart
His finger seems to point to a beginning, a conditioned reality
Like water.

Everything is recast
Their existence and direction
I use it to scoop up the recast pancreas of Stonehenge.
On the pancreas, a satisfying rainforest world is born.
Let it learn Stonehenge.
Let it mark the chaos with intensity.
so that no qualitative change occurs only to it.
the nucleus of oblivion.
Teach the mouths not to be silent, to learn their words, to learn presence and direction
recognising Stonehenge.
Recognising warns recognising not to deny the existence of Stonehenge
that all this is a relief on Stonehenge.
The world is but a false illusion.
So Stonehenge could bury itself.
It never brought forth a world.
Stonehenge was not born, but always survived the debate between truth and falsehood,
burying itself.

No. 2

A tear.

One world

A stone.

These are separated

When I no longer feel fear for what concerns me.

When I no longer have tears.

I'll keep the world and the stone company.

Remain silent.

And become a new trinity with them.

The flawed dream of the stone.

began:

One was to see a bird's nest that was as tall as me.

The second was to survive the futile endeavour

The wine that was used to water it.

Now washes out only one way

The third is as delicate as a hair of sweat

And seems to be a tear

I don't see the Trinity in it.

But I'm sure there is a trinity.

Beyond the three words is the breath of the Trinity.

Three is the mystery.

The Trinity.

No. 3

Turning love's direct assault
Into glass
Or a fine gift made of glass
Accepted by the Museum of Glass

The illusion of life
Let one touch the traces in the bedroom
Maybe the trace of a smile, maybe the trace of patience
The emptiness of the traces reveals the result

Her infantile eye avoids the operative replica
After overflowing forgiveness
Becomes a crystal in the earth
Forgiveness is the end result
The interior of the carved ground shines alone

Eternal love keeps climbing up the slanting plane
Listening to the endless thunder in the distant rolling clouds
While listening
The ear grows a shaggy ground and a ladder to the light.
Even if one feels close without control
Not a smithy with hinges and lily pads
Not the iron threads and rivets of the machines that my country is made of.
Tenderness overflows from everything

God's steps, if they are to be in the right place, can also be in the wrong place, mirrored in the wrong place, torn between the thunderbolt and the smithy, in the rhythm of the thunderbolt or in the movement of the smithy.

The act of choosing is the answer, but it need not be announced. The world has been misplaced, and loving intent can only hiss. Lovesickness cannot be realised as smiles and patience flash the vainest of lights, replicated infinitely, patience on slopes that cannot reside.

No. 4: Already Yes

Bones are the world
Bones are always misaligned
The world is more exciting than it already is.
It's already happened. The outline of the story is appearing.
It's time to realise that the heart and soul are not connected.
Wanting a rose, I made the atoms of my soul.
The world of bones was created by misaligning bones.
The world of bones is connected by cartilage.
The angry bone is still the world of bones, and dominates everything that happens.
Your mind is different from mine.

The world of anger is not reversed, it's the world of bones that dominates the anger.
A rare sound that corrupts all imagery.
Deaths plume, unspeakable embarrassment Streams of desire
Life of the disabled closed, overflowing the whole atmosphere of colourless blood of speech
Denials, repetitions, responsibilities forever gone
They are the new masters
A voice that cannot hold, that cannot last, that repeats, that repeats the repeating of the
repeating so that the repeating is a voice.

No. 5: Dream Paintings on the Walls

A contrasting heart opens the world
But in the light of the surging potential treasures.
A contrasting heart is also ashamed of its calm attachment to the truth
and feels ashamed.

Until he is reborn
Grasp the cigarette butts and the dead grass between the concrete cracks.
Grasping time as a solid wind that carries impurities.

Truth retreats into
A baby without wear and tear;
In the light that blinds him
The baby turns into a beautiful puppet without integrity

Hates all opinions, because the accommodation of contradictions is not yet complete.
Taking the effort of accommodation to himself
Until the movement takes the light

Until the hull of a ship that crosses all lands and skins
With the colours of unjustified plunder
The green movement of sap gushing

Bring on the midway with the looting
Enjoy the midway of looting
Accommodating the action of building, radiating transparent gallery-like realms
Gaze, in the way of an exhibition
In the midway of eternity
Nothingness and silence are plundered
Sand, snow, and sunlight are mixed and their value is determined.
Nominal things.

Fearless of chance, customised glass windows
Freedom from the Sphinx's grasp.
Free from all possible destiny's watchful eye.
Spiritless flesh and inorganic ebb and flow accepting perpetual purity of worship.
No more need to accept opinions and superfluous atoms.

When Chaos allows to take a step, in the most untrusting blindness, he clutches the most
cherished puppet behind the eyelids, born from the light that caused the blindness, clinging,
clinging, never letting go, his paws cut open by the trust he has placed in the puppet, and the
crowd can only cry out the result: mastery, mastery.

About the author

Gao Fan was born in 1999, in mainland China, and is a Master of Arts graduate. He recently started a PhD program in the Modern Languages program at the University of Alcalá. He loves to write short stories and poems, and has published reviews and works in some Chinese dailies.

WHAT IF TEACHING WAS DELIBERATELY FUN?

Combating burnout through creative play

Emma Darragh

University of Wollongong, ORCID: 0000-0003-0396-1088

Christine Howe

University of Wollongong, ORCID: 0000-0002-9120-3641

Abstract

This collaborative paper addresses a pressing institutional problem: how to respond to burnout as teachers of creative writing in a university setting? While many academic staff – both sessional and ongoing – have limited control over institutional constraints that contribute to burnout, we do have a measure of autonomy in the classroom itself. We propose that envisioning the creative writing classroom as a playground, in which the tutor and lecturer model and participate in creative play, is not only a valuable pedagogical approach for the students, but can also mitigate some of the effects of staff exhaustion. Drawing on our combined teaching experience of 25 years, we share a philosophy of teaching that centres play, curiosity and experimentation in a respectful, safe environment. We approached the writing of this paper in the spirit of such play, drawing on the work of Berg and Seeber who advocate a ‘pedagogy of pleasure’ with the belief that such an approach can ‘combat stress and cynicism’ (2016: 32). As such, we have devised two playful metaphors that correspond to practical pedagogical tools enabling the creative writing tutor to participate in the fun of the classroom: *establishing the ‘rules’ of the playground* (setting the tone and clarifying expectations during the first tutorial); and *clipping on the zipline* (partaking in classroom writing exercises).

WHAT IF TEACHING WAS DELIBERATELY FUN? COMBATING BURNOUT THROUGH CREATIVE PLAY

Emma Darragh & Christine Howe

In their book *The Slow Professor*, Berg and Seeber ask, ‘What is the difference between an exhausting and an uplifting class?’ (2016: 31). For the past twelve months, we (Chrissy and Emma) have been asking each other and our colleagues this question. We had a robust discussion about what constitutes exhausting and/or uplifting classes at a works-in-progress seminar in September 2023, held by the University of Wollongong’s Centre for Critical and Creative Practice (C3P). A few months later, we presented the findings of our research and pedagogical experiments at the 2023 Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) conference, titled ‘We Need To Talk’, which invited collaborative, improvisational and dialogic responses to ‘issues that demand personal, social and institutional attention’ (2023). This paper builds on the work we shared at the conference. In that spirit, the entire process of researching and writing this paper has been collaborative and dialogic in nature. As the paper has evolved, the phrase ‘We need to talk’ has taken on multiple meanings. We began by considering the political implications embedded in the phrase (i.e. we need to talk in order to find solutions to problems such as inequality and burnout in the tertiary sector), but by the time we finished the paper we had arrived unexpectedly at a different interpretation. As teachers who care about our students and each other, we discovered that in order to sustain our teaching and our own creative practice, we *need* to talk – yes, about pedagogy, curriculum, and the creative process – but also about the incidental happenings of our everyday lives – the things Flannery O’Connor called the ‘texture of existence’ (1970 p. 68). Our ongoing dialogue has been both energising and regenerative – and this energy has found its way into the classroom as well.

I (Chrissy) have been teaching creative writing at the University of Wollongong for the past 18 years. I started tutoring while I was doing my PhD, then spent many years working as a long-term sessional academic, before being offered an ongoing position in 2019. I (Emma) have been a sessional academic at UOW since 2019. I completed my PhD in Creative Writing in 2022, with Chrissy as one of my supervisors. When we first floated the idea of working together on this paper, we began by asking each other two questions: ‘What do you most want to share about teaching?’ and ‘How do you fix a bad vibe in the classroom?’ As we brainstormed ideas, a central metaphor began to emerge: the classroom as a playground that provides students with a safe space to learn, grow, and extend their writing practice. This led to us to wonder whether prioritising fun and creative play in the classroom might also be beneficial for *us* as lecturers and tutors, as well as for students.

In 2021, Raewyn Connell, author of *The Good University*, identified the need to ‘rebuild morale and purpose among a university workforce battered by three decades of corporatisation’ (2021: 21). Anecdotally, through many conversations with colleagues, we have witnessed the effects of exhaustion, precarity and overwork. In the introduction to her book *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*, writer and artist Jenny Odell suggests that, ‘in a system that only values the bottom line’, there is an ‘impatience with anything nuanced, poetic, or less-than-obvious’ (2019: x). This is particularly relevant in a university context where the balance between corporate and academic imperatives is constantly being negotiated. For sessional staff in particular, whose labour is often only visible to students, the sensation of being expendable

is felt as a constant, insidious pressure. There are also pressures for academic staff in ongoing positions, many of which can be summed up in one multi-tentacled question: *how will you manage hundreds of competing priorities, all of which demand immediate attention, so your life doesn't devolve into a pulsating, rhizomatic, carnivorous email chain?* While many of us have limited control over institutional constraints that contribute to burnout, we do have some autonomy in the classroom itself. At the heart of this paper lies our conviction that in addition to taking collective action (especially through active involvement in the National Tertiary Education Union [NTEU]) it is also worth seeking out ways to value the nuanced and the poetic. As educators, we have been entrusted with the intellectual and creative energy of our students. How do we honour their creative inner lives, and our own? We suggest that envisioning the classroom as a playground, in which the tutor and lecturer model and participate in creative play, is one way of making space for the nuanced, the poetic, the less-than-obvious.

Methodology

When we set out to be both educator and learner, in dialogue with our students, we create a safe space for play and failure for everyone. This is the guiding principle of our methodology which is informed by Alice and David Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (2018), as well as thinkers like John Dewey (1916), Paulo Freire (2000), and other pedagogy-of-play scholars. The research and writing of this paper is itself an exercise in play and self-experimentation. Our project aligns with Mardell, Ryan, Krechevsky, Baker, Schulz and Liu-Constant's pedagogical practice. In their book *Pedagogy of Play*, they say:

We believe playfulness helps set the conditions for significant learning and suspect that reflecting on your playful learning will help you create those conditions for your students ... Learning can be fun. Play is a strategy for learning. This is true for adults as well as children. (Mardell et al. 2023: 10)

When we began discussing our plans for this paper, we decided to actively pursue a sense of play in our teaching and to engage in our own experiential learning by keeping a teaching journal to document not only what we did and how the students responded, but also to track our own moods and stress levels before and after classes. We then met regularly throughout the session to share our findings; to take the Sydney Burnout Measure questionnaire developed by researchers Parker, Tavella and Eyres in their *Burnout: a Guide to Identifying Burnout and Pathways to Recovery* (2021: 233–37) to keep a record of how our levels of burnout fluctuated through the session; and to check in more generally. Many of our 'work-on-the-paper' sessions were spent just talking and laughing, and this too became part of our research. The process is ongoing, self-reflexive, and iterative.

At all stages, the methodology of play and collaboration has shaped our research, from developing initial ideas, sharing resources and presenting our findings to a range of audiences, through to writing the paper itself. In this paper, we outline two key metaphors that correspond to interventions we can make in the classroom – depending on our particular role – that help to reimagine the classroom as a fun, collaborative space. Our first metaphor is 'Establishing the rules of the playground'. This corresponds to the interventions that a subject coordinator can make in shaping a subject that provides space for students to challenge and extend themselves in a safe, inclusive, fun environment. Our second metaphor is 'Clipping on the zipline'. Imagine you are at an adventure park with your students, clipping on the zipline and whizzing along a

highline with them. This is an intervention that can be made at the tutor level, undertaking in-class exercises with the students.

The structure of this paper enacts our methodology – it is collaborative, dialogic, and underpinned by a spirit of play and fun. After Chrissy introduces the first metaphor, Emma extends the discussion by offering a provocation. Chrissy responds to Emma’s provocation, and the conversation continues in the form of a brief informal dialogue, before Emma introduces the second metaphor, and the process begins again. As we build on our initial ideas, we deliberately shift between formal and informal registers to demonstrate the nature of our collaborative process. Kolb and Kolb suggest that, ‘The first thing to know is that the learning cycle is an endlessly recurring process of exchange between the learner’s internal world and the external environment. Learning is like breathing; a lifelong process of taking in and putting out’ (2018: 8). As teachers, we are just as involved in the learning experience as our students – and we hope to embody this exchange of energy and ideas in the dialogic structure of the paper itself.

Metaphor 1: Establishing the Rules of the Playground (Chrissy)

Our first metaphor, ‘Establishing the Rules of the Playground’, focuses on setting the tone and clarifying expectations in the first tutorial – particularly in relation to creating a safe, respectful space for students to share their work as the session progresses. Mardell et al. suggest that a pedagogy of play is only possible in a learning environment characterised by trust and psychological safety (2023: 8). This is supported by Lynne E Anderson and Johan Carta-Falsa who suggest, in their work on effective student-teacher relationships in tertiary settings, that ‘Creating a safe and secure educational environment is important for learning’, and that safe learning environments not only lead to trust and respect, but ‘encourage students and instructors to take risks by becoming active, collaborative and exploratory’ (2002: 134). The importance of psychological safety in learning environments is also supported by trauma-informed pedagogy. For example, social work scholars Janice Carello and Lisa D Butler build on Maxine Harris and Roger D Fallot’s 2001 research, which identifies five principles that underpin trauma-informed settings, including the classroom: ‘ensuring safety, establishing trustworthiness, maximizing choice, maximizing collaboration, and prioritizing empowerment’ (Carello & Butler 2015: 264). Of these five principles, Carello and Butler believe that the first, ‘ensuring emotional and physical safety’ (2015: 264) is the most crucial. In the same vein, and writing specifically about pedagogical approaches in creative writing classrooms, writer and academic Carolyn Jess-Cooke argues for a ‘pedagogy that focuses on the wellbeing of the student’ (2015: 252). Building a classroom culture of respect in the first tutorial prioritises the wellbeing of students, and creates the conditions for experimentation and play to take place in a psychologically safe environment.

To ‘establish the rules of the playground’, in the first week of classes, we always set aside time for students to begin building relationships based on mutual respect. This includes establishing protocols for the way we interact in the classroom – some of which are made explicit (we work with students to develop a workshopping charter, with guidelines on how to respond to each other’s work, for example), and some of which are implicit (we begin the first tutorial of each subject by sitting in a circle, modelling the non-hierarchical, respectful way that students will be expected to interact with each other throughout the rest of the session). Returning to one of the questions Emma and I asked each other at the beginning of this session – ‘how do you fix a bad vibe in the classroom?’ – establishing clear guidelines for how we will interact with

each other in class is one protective factor that can help to guard against ‘bad vibes’ arising in the first place.

As a subject coordinator, I have the power to allocate *time* to include these activities in the first week of classes, and I also have the flexibility to experiment with *how* these protocols for relating to each other are established. This year, I have been fortunate enough to work with Gamilaroi academic Catherine Moyle, who is the Conscious Community Lead in the Indigenous Strategy Unit at UOW. Our discussions about pedagogy have been characterised by the kind of mentorship outlined by Sandra Phillips and Clare Archer-Lean (2019) – a collaboration ‘founded on nonIndigenous listening and Indigenous mentorship: of creating curriculum to embody professional relationships of empathy and respect’ (2019: 31). Talking to Catherine has led to a range of pedagogical experiments I never would have thought of on my own. For example, for the past two years, I have run the ‘getting to know you’ circle in the first tutorial of our first-year poetry subject outside, sitting under a beautiful old eucalypt – one of the oldest trees on campus. As we talk, students are encouraged to pay attention to the senses – what we can see, hear, smell, and feel. This introduces an extended writing exercise that runs over the next six weeks – each student finds a place on campus they love, or that speaks to them in some way, and they revisit that place every week, taking notes on the senses. They then use these notes to write a poem responding to this place. In Week 8, we walk around campus together, and each student performs their poem for us in situ. Given the fact that this subject was developed, and continues to evolve, with guidance from Yuin and Gamilaroi knowledge holders (see Howe & Kennedy 2021), holding the first class outside, in the company of the eucalypt, seeks to put in place another set of implicit and explicit rules for the session: respect for each other, *and* respect for Country.

Provocation (Emma):

Pedagogical experiments like this seem useful when engaging with first-year creative writing students in a studio type subject where the (mostly quite young) students may need to be steered away from writing about their feelings and instead be encouraged to look/listen outside themselves.

1. Would this be just as effective with more mature students?
2. What are the takeaways from this particular subject, and your experiment, that might apply to more theory-based subjects?

Response (Chrissy):

Last year, I completed this exercise with the students (I went back to the same place on campus before class each week and took notes on each of the senses, and when we shared our poems on campus, I also performed mine in the place I had chosen). As a ‘mature-age’ teacher/writer, I found it useful to return to the same place and simply focus on the senses: each time I visited, I gained a deeper knowledge of the place itself. It was almost like uncovering different layers of meaning in a text. For example, isolating the sound of a woman’s high heels on the paving stones was similar to noticing how onomatopoeia might work when reading a poem aloud; or noticing the vibrant red of a gymea lily popping up beyond the creek on the other side of campus was like appreciating an unexpected metaphor. In this way, the exercise became not just about writing, but also about reading: we were learning how to pay attention to place in a similar way to how we might pay attention to a poem. The more you visit, the more you notice,

and the more you notice, the more you understand – which also mirrors the experience of reading and re-reading a poem you love. My understanding of place has been shaped by the Gay’wu Group of Women’s description of Country: ‘To talk of Country means not just land, but also the waters, the people, the winds, animals, plants, stories, songs and feelings, everything that becomes together to make up place’ (2019: ix). The writing exercise encourages students to enact a way of becoming familiar with a place through using their senses, and it is also a way of beginning to recognise and honour the relationships between all things that make up the place they have spent time in over that eight-week period. This deepening understanding shapes the writing of their poems.

I see this exercise as one way of developing the students’ ‘noticing’ capacity – it’s a bit like going to the gym and lifting weights in order to build your overall strength, rather than the visit to the gym being an end in itself. In terms of how it might be applied to theory classes, maybe learning to understand a place more deeply by paying attention to each of the senses could be used as a metaphor to help students approach a difficult theoretical text? For example, you could take a paragraph from a complex text that students find difficult to understand, and focus on different aspects of the writing in the same way you might pay attention to one sense at a time. You might discuss the meaning of complex words in an initial reading, then read the paragraph again and discuss the ideas, then read it a third time focusing on the form. Then you could ask students to respond to the paragraph with their own writing, with the intention that their written responses serve to deepen their understanding of the text. Writer and critic Tim Jarvis argues that creative writing pedagogy would benefit from the development of ‘a theoretical model that can understand reading and writing as one fluid practice, not distinct activities’, and suggests employing ludic theory to approach this (2011: 10).

Dialogue

EMMA: So, what is ludic theory?

CHRISSEY: I don’t actually know – I was just looking it up ...

EMMA: So, Google tells me that it’s associated with game and play ... and the word ludic comes from the Latin, *ludus* sport → *ludere* to play.

CHRISSEY: I just found an article called ‘Ludic Pedagogy: Taking a Serious Look at Fun in the COVID-19 Classroom and Beyond’ ...

EMMA: Ooh! I found this: *Ludic Pedagogy: A Seriously Fun Way to Teach and Learn* by Sharon Lauricella and T Keith Edmunds.

CHRISSEY: Who is Sharon Lauricella? Oh, she also wrote the article I was looking at!

EMMA: When was it published?

CHRISSEY: 2023 – no wonder we didn’t come across it when we were writing our paper last year...

EMMA (*after further research*): In their book, Lauricella and Edmunds stipulate that fun in learning is facilitated through three elements: play, playfulness, and positivity. Play, they say, is ‘what students and instructors do in the classroom with course concepts’; playfulness ‘is an attitude – it is the way instructors “show up” to class, and how students are encouraged to show up as well’; and positivity ‘is an affect – it is how students and instructors approach learning so that they can get the most out of the learning experience’ (Lauricella & Edmunds

2023: xv). What is exciting to me about this is that they include the teacher in this model. There is a lot of research about the benefits of play to student learning, but I haven't seen much that investigates how play and fun benefit the teacher (and, in turn, the student yet again). What I'm seeing in this ludic pedagogy model are some of the things that we've been sharing in our conversations, things we've stumbled upon organically in our own teaching and in the ideas we've come up with while working on this paper. The way Lauricella and Edmunds bring the teacher back into the conversation about play leads me to our second metaphor: clipping on the zipline.

Metaphor 2: Clipping on the Zipline (Emma)

In their 2015 paper 'Fun in the College Classroom: Examining its Nature and Relationship with Student Engagement', Tews, Jackson, Ramsay and Michel study the role of fun in the tertiary classroom and their findings resulted in a two-dimensional measure: fun activities and fun delivery (2015: 16). Fun delivery is 'instructor-focused' and involves the tutor's 'mode of delivery and his or her presentation skills' (2015: 24). This might involve the tutor sharing stories and anecdotes, using humour, and engaging enthusiastically with the class and the course content. Fun delivery, Tews et al. claim, is effective and important especially for students who are struggling academically and for those who find it difficult to stay motivated (2015: 25). 'Fun activities', on the other hand, might include opportunities for students to socialise, play games, or engage in hands-on activities where students get to play with the ideas. Our metaphor of clipping on the zipline insists that for fun delivery and fun activities to result in actual fun, the teacher must also participate. Larucella and Edmunds argue that 'If an instructor functions as a bystander or a passive supervisor rather than an active member in an online or classroom activity, the sense of fun is quashed, quelled and quit' (2023: 9). Teacher participation is crucial to inspire not only a sense of fun but also, as Anderson and Carta-Falsa found, a collaborative environment where students and instructors value each other. This collaborative environment helps to 'facilitate the integration of new ideas and skills with older ones' (Anderson & Carta-Falsa 2002:134). In addition, for both students and teachers,

opportunities to learn from each other increase, their capacity to work more productively together improves, affirmative views of each other are provided, increases in self-esteem occur, and both parties are better able to explore complex intellectual issues. (Anderson & Carta-Falsa 2002: 134)

Student and tutor aren't separate in my classroom; we situate the chairs and desks in a circle and when the timer starts and the writing activity begins, tutor and students alike pick up their pens.

Here is how this metaphor played out in the second week of my poetry class in spring session, 2023: two walls of our classroom are lined with windows that look out onto some trees and a walkway leading to the sculpture studio. The students and I stood gazing out the window for two minutes, taking time to pay attention to what we saw. We then sat and took five minutes to write a haiku, using the 5/7/5 syllables per line structure, juxtaposing two images. I laughed as I wrote: my poem was not going to win any prizes. When the timer sounded, I asked the class if anybody wanted to share. One student vehemently shook his head, laughing and saying his haiku was pretty bad. When I bet him that it could not be as 'bad' as mine was, he challenged me to read it to the class, so I did:

A little red flag
Strung between the trees, glistens—
I want a new dress.

That day my brain was filled with silly things (like wanting a new dress and wanting to drink red wine after a long day of teaching) and I was not feeling particularly inspired. But rather than ‘productively’ using the allocated five minutes to check my email, I wrote alongside the students, laughed at my shortcomings, and engaged in the play of the activity for its own sake, rather than to write a great poem. It was fun counting out the syllables on my fingers – I hadn’t done this since I was an undergraduate student myself. This modelling is also good for the student: play and failure, and being willing to share these in a workshop situation, are all important aspects of learning creative writing. This is also supported by the work of Berg and Seeber, who advocate for a ‘pedagogy of pleasure’, with the belief that such an approach can ‘combat stress and cynicism’ (2016: 32). Here is where we see, anecdotally, that clipping on the zipline is good for the students, and good for the teacher.

Provocation (Chrissy)

This anecdote weaves together Tews et al.’s ‘fun activities’, and ‘fun delivery’ with Berg and Seeber’s ‘pedagogy of pleasure’. Your description of the writing exercise itself (and your own engagement with it) captures that moment of spontaneity and joy when you shared your ‘failed’ poem with your students.

1. Do you think this kind of play and experimentation leads to students writing ‘better’ poems?
2. Does the sense of fun you feel when you participate in the writing exercises give you energy in the classroom? Does this injection of energy continue after class? Would you say that it is something that sustains you as a teacher (like eating vegetables), or is it more like an optional extra (icing on a lemon cake)?

Response (Emma)

Yes, yes, yes, yes and yes! Through play, students tend to make unusual images, metaphors, and word combinations; they veer away from stereotypically ‘poetic’ images or, to put it bluntly, clichés. Surprise is the antithesis of cliché, and, in my experience, clichés are the biggest problem in the creative writing classroom. In the words of Martin Amis, I’m not merely concerned about ‘clichés of the pen but clichés of the mind and clichés of the heart’ (Amis 2002: xv). I think it’s more important than ever to actively and explicitly steer our students away from clichés as we reckon with the emergence and proliferation of Large Language Models like ChatGPT. Artificial Intelligence programs like ChatGPT are excellent at rhyme and rhythm but they do not play, as we humans do, and so they rely on tired common clichés. I think it’s important in the creative writing classroom that we keep surprising ourselves as we reckon with how, what, and why we write.

Now, perhaps the first round of a writing activity will unearth a few clichés, as it did when I prompted my class to write about spring (cue flowers blooming, cue lushness, cue new life, cue birds singing). This is an important part of the writing process. The permission for the work to start out ‘bad’, the permission to call it out and to laugh about it, breaks the tense sense of expectation that descends whenever a writer sits down to write. We can laugh together about

our first-order clichés and then push past them in subsequent timed writing sessions. Humility and laughter create the right climate for honesty, which can then lead to growth and better writing. This has then led to me feeling more positive about my students and about my own teaching.

Fun in the classroom, experienced through play, trial and error, and laughter, is both sustaining over the long term (like eating one's vegetables) and an immediate pleasure (like icing on a cake). The first few times I played along, I experienced fun in the moment, as an end in itself. Later, in my teaching journal, I recorded improvements in my mood that lasted for the remainder of my day and filled me with optimism for my next class. I also left classes with fresh story ideas, and was able to share this with students, allowing me to model this as a strategy they can use outside of the classroom as well. As a pedagogical practice, fun in the classroom then becomes something sustaining because it encourages me to stay engaged with my teaching. Rather than running on autopilot, I can see each class as a new project for myself and the students, and this gives my work purpose, allowing me to see my teaching as a vocation, rather than a job. Instead of asking how I might teach a class 'better', I ask, 'how can I make this more fun?' Fun delivery and fun activities – for myself as well as the students – are also sustaining for me as a creative practitioner because sometimes that will be the only chance I will have had to write that day. Sociologist Sara James states that:

Interpreting particular kinds of work as being expressions of the authentic self provides individuals with a sense of purpose and in some cases assists them in coming to terms with unexpected career changes. (2015: n.p)

As a casually employed academic and emerging writer, the play, fun, and mutual learning within the classroom makes me happier, less jaded, and, consequently, a better teacher.

Dialogue

CHRISSEY: Is there anything in your response that you're interested in exploring more? Anything that's niggling at you?

EMMA: I'm thinking a lot about ChatGPT and what it's doing to students, teachers, the classroom, and creative writing more broadly. Remember last year when ChatGPT came on the scene and everyone was freaking out about it? As writers, we wondered, well, why would we keep writing? And books have since been published where the authors admit to using ChatGPT to write significant portions of their book. Then, as teachers, we're also concerned that students are going to cheat using AI – and they do, and it's obvious. When a student submits a poetry portfolio written in perfect iambic pentameter and rhyming couplets and is brimming with hollow clichés, I know that that student has outsourced the task – and the joy of writing – to ChatGPT. On the one hand, it makes me angry that the student thinks they can pull one over on me, and on another, it makes me sad. It's demoralising to read such work.

CHRISSEY: I know! Going to ChatGPT in this context means you're missing out on the whole point of learning – stretching and building up your thinking muscles ...

EMMA: Yes ... and this gets me thinking about our playground metaphor again. The playground is a space dedicated to play and testing: the monkey bars, the climbing wall, the ladder to the slide. Playgrounds are designed for developing children's gross motor skills. You don't develop those skills by staying swaddled in your blanket. Falling-down failure is part of the learning.

Teaching a kid to get back up, to laugh and try again is part of that. Playgrounds are challenging, fun, social spaces, just like tutorials. A tutorial isn't about me standing at the front of the room and giving information to the students. The best classes are when we share and learn things together.

Conclusion: We need to talk

Circling back to burnout – in 2018, Jeannie Rea, then National President of the NTEU, addressed chronic overwork in the Australian university sector. She suggested that, 'Responding collectively, rather than hunkering down and individually trying to cope is the only way to change the mentally and physically dangerous spiral many academics are finding themselves captured within' (2018: 40–41). One of the things we became increasingly aware of as we worked on this paper was the benefit of sharing our teaching experiences, laughing, writing and munching on cupcakes together. The collective energy that developed as we worked together sustained us during the session, and also flowed *through* us to the students. Extrapolating from this, we believe that, as academics, the support we give each other has a direct impact on the quality of our teaching. If we feel cared for and supported, we, in turn, bring creative energy and enthusiasm into the classroom – and this has a direct impact on the learning environment. As Lauren Kirby and Christopher Thomas note in their article on high impact teaching practices:

teachers who students evaluate as caring, supportive, competent, and good communicators create an environment of high organisation, high academic expectations, and perceived learning; in addition, students feel more connected to each other and to the instructor. (Kirby & Thomas 2022: 375)

By 'Establishing the rules of the playground' in the first class, we set up a psychologically safe environment where students are able to challenge and extend themselves through creative play. As the session progresses, students and tutors alike participate in in-class writing exercises by 'Clipping on the Zipline'. Taken together, these strategies contribute to developing a sense of community, or belonging, among the students, which according to Kirby and Thomas, 'has been shown to be a critical determinant of short- and long-term academic success' (2022: 370). In addition to intentionally fostering conditions that promote this sense of belonging, we privilege fun and playful experimentation - not just for the students, but also for us as tutors. As Lauricella and Edmunds note, 'Playful learning and fun can function as intrinsic motivators' (2022: 4). In our experience, this is just as relevant for us as for our students – within and beyond the classroom. We all know the benefits of discussion in the classroom itself – students learn through asking questions and speaking with their peers and teachers. Together, we learned that for teachers, dialogue outside the classroom is just as important. Having the time and space to talk and reflect with each other consolidates our own learning and emboldens us to take creative leaps, so that rather than experiencing the flattening of enthusiasm that comes when working on autopilot, we can enter our classrooms, and walk away from them, with new energy and a readiness to play.

Works cited

- Amis, M 2002, *The war against cliché: Essays and reviews 1971–2000*, London: Vintage
- Anderson, LE & J Carta-Falsa 2002 'Factors that make faculty and student relationships effective', *College teaching* 50.4: 134–38
- Berg, M & B Seeber 2016 *The slow professor: Challenging the culture of speed in the academy*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press
- Carello, J & LD Butler 2015 'Practicing what we teach: Trauma-informed educational practice', *Journal of teaching in social work* 35.3: 262–78
- Connell, R 2021 'Making good universities', *NTEU Advocate* 28.2: 20–21
- Dewey, J 1916 *Democracy and education: An introduction to the philosophy of education*, New York, The Free Press
- Freire, P 2000 *Pedagogy of the oppressed* (30th anniversary edn, trans M Bergman Ramos), New York: Continuum International
- Gay'wu Group of Women 2019 *Song Spirals*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin
- Harris, M & RD Fallot 2001 'Envisioning a trauma-informed service system: A vital paradigm shift', in M Harris & RD Fallot (eds.), *Using trauma theory to design service systems*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, pp.3–22
- Howe, C & J Kennedy 2021 'Journeying together virtually on Country: Building a relational poetics and pedagogy in the middle of a pandemic', in J Wilkinson, C Atherton & S Holland-Batt (eds.), *TEXT* 25, Special Issue 64, <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.30983>
- James, S 2015, 'Finding your passion: Work and the authentic self', *M/C Journal* 18.1, <https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/954> (accessed 23 April 2024)
- Jarvis, T 2011, "Pleasure balks, bliss appears", or "The apparatus shines like a blade": Towards a theory of a progressive reading praxis in creative writing pedagogy', *TEXT* 15.2, <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/31347> (accessed 1 May 2024)
- Jess-Cooke, Carolyn 2015, 'Should creative writing courses teach ways of building resilience?' *New writing: The international journal for the practice and theory of creative writing* 12.2: 249–59
- Kirby, Lauren AJ & Christopher L Thomas 2022 'High impact teaching practices foster a greater sense of belonging in the college classroom', *Journal of further and higher education* 46.3: 368–81
- Kolb, A & D Kolb 2018, 'Eight important things to know about The Experiential Learning Cycle', *AEL* 40.3: 8–14
- Lauricella, S & TK Edmunds 2022 'Ludic pedagogy: Taking a serious look at fun in the COVID-19 classroom and beyond', *Educational considerations* 48.1, <https://newprairiepress.org/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=2324&context=edconsiderations> (accessed 30 May 2024)
- Lauricella, S & TK Edmunds 2023 *Ludic pedagogy: A seriously fun way to teach and learn*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield
- Mardell, B, J Ryan, M Krechevsky, M Baker, S Schulz & Y Liu-Constant 2023 *Pedagogy of play: Supporting playful learning in classrooms and schools*, Cambridge: Project Zero
- O'Connor, F 1970 [1957] *Mystery and manners: Occasional prose*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux

- Odell, J 2019 *How to do nothing: Resisting the attention economy*, Melbourne: Black Inc
- Parker, G, G Tavella & K Eyres 2021 'Sydney burnout measure', in G Parker, G Tavella & K Eyres (eds), *Burnout: A guide to identifying burnout and pathways to recovery*, Sydney: Allen & Unwin, pp.233–37
- Phillips, S & C Archer-Lean 2019 'Decolonising the reading of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander writing: Reflection as transformative practice', *Higher education research & development* 38.1: 24–37
- Rea, J 2018 'Breaking the culture of overwork', *NTEU Advocate*, 25.1 (March): 40–41
- Tews, MJ, K Jackson, C Ramsay & JW Michel 2015 'Fun in the college classroom: Examining its nature and relationship with student engagement', *College teaching* 63.1: 16–26

About the authors

Dr Emma Darragh spends most of her time on Gadigal and Dharawal lands. She holds a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Wollongong, where she works as a sessional academic. Her writing has appeared in numerous Australian publications, including *Cordite*, *Westerly*, *Meniscus*, *TEXT*, and *The Big Issue Fiction Edition*. Emma's debut novel-in-stories, *Thanks for Having Me*, is published by Joan Press (2024).

Dr Christine Howe is a writer and academic who lectures in Creative Writing at the University of Wollongong. Christine works across various genres – fiction, poetry and essays – and increasingly works and writes collaboratively. Her first novel, *Song in the Dark*, was published by Penguin (2013), and her short works have appeared in the *Griffith Review*, *Island*, *Cordite*, *TEXT*, and *Law, Text, Culture*, as well as anthologies published by Spineless Wonders Press and Recent Work Press.
