



AXON: Creative Explorations

2024 vol 14.1 *Translate | Transform | Transdiscipline*

axonjournal.com.au

Published by
The Centre for Creative & Cultural Research
University of Canberra
Canberra, Australia
ISSN: 1838-8973
ISSUE DOI: 10.54375/001/ji4pg5746a

TRANSLATE | TRANSFORM | TRANSDISCIPLINE

COLLABORATIVE PRACTICE ACROSS DIVIDES

Editors: Vahri McKenzie, Jo Pollitt, Emily Sun



Mapped to the Closest Address Collective (MaCA). An anonymous painting of Mount Fuji and MaCA's double reproduction of Frederic Church's portrait of Mount Cotopaxi. In the background, the rice field. Scenario for *Turn Off the House Lights* and detail of the installation *We Like to Watch Clumsy Seeming Mountains*, August 2022. Scanned 35mm colour film photograph by Alex Viteri (2023).



AXON: Creative Explorations

2024 vol 14.1 *Translate | Transform | Transdiscipline*

axonjournal.com.au

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

DOI: 10.54375/001/5e1qzvv97s
Keywords: Introduction, Boundary object, Interdisciplinary collaboration, Transdisciplinarity, Knowledge translation, Creative research

TRANSLATE | TRANSFORM | TRANSDISCIPLINE

Collaborative practice across divides

Vahri McKenzie, *Western Australia Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University*
ORCID: 0000-0003-4600-0543

Jo Pollitt, *Centre for People, Place and Planet, Edith Cowan University*
ORCID: 0000-0002-2821-7768

E Sun, *University of Western Australia*
ORCID: 0000-0002-4893-940X

Abstract

Drawing on Susan Leigh Star's theory of boundary objects, this article explores the dynamics of collaborative practices across boundaries, focusing on the concepts of translation, transformation, and transdisciplinarity. As artist-scholars and as editors, we examine how the 'Collaborative practice across divides' issue of *Axon* facilitates collaboration by maintaining a common identity while adapting to local needs, and we prioritise process, practice, and relational movement. The integration of feminist environmental humanities perspectives further emphasises the relational and ethical dimensions of such work, and shows how diverse ways of knowing and doing can coexist and foster creative resistance. We reflect on the challenges and synergies encountered in our collaborative editorial process, emphasising the importance of backstage labour and the epistemological implications of our work. Within our framework, this issue of *Axon* itself becomes a boundary object, bridging various disciplinary and social worlds, and inviting readers to engage with the content in a transformative manner. Through this exploration, the article underscores the significance of embracing the uncertainties and relational complexities inherent in collaborative, transdisciplinary endeavours.

TRANSLATE | TRANSFORM | TRANSDISCIPLINE: Collaborative practice across divides

Vahri McKenzie, Jo Pollitt, E Sun

When does collaborative work become transdisciplinary? What arises in the effort of translation? And where and how does the unbordering of disciplinary expertise contribute to transformation? (Here we assert our human intention and note with interest but resist *unburdening*, autocorrected by Word.) This article considers the concept of *boundary objects* as a valuable one for examining collaborative practice across divides, drawing attention to movement as key in crossing between concepts, disciplines, doings. In this issue we take it as axiomatic that approaches which integrate diverse ways of knowing and doing are inherently valuable. This edition of *Axon* is less interested in evaluating the outcomes of interdisciplinary collaborative work, attending instead to the crossings of disciplinary boundaries as unfixed processes of movement and relations. Thus, we focus on the how (process, practice, doing), the what (people, materials, practice) and the where (place, practice, relations) as the groundwork required for doing collaborative practice.

In tending to crossings as imbued with movement and relationality, we draw on science information theorist Susan Leigh Star's proposition of *boundary objects* as things or systems that have different meanings for people from different disciplinary and social worlds: 'objects which are both plastic enough to adapt to local needs and the constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites' (Star and Griesemer 1989: 393). Star's initial motivation for articulation of the persuasive concept was to analyse and understand 'cooperative work in the absence of consensus' (Star 2010: 604), a framework we bring to this edition of *Axon* to both illuminate the edition's concerns with collaboration across divides, as well as to open up something of the process of producing this edition of *Axon* and, arguably, other collective scholarly practices. The article folds our understanding of boundary objects into feminist environmental humanities theorist Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's reiteration of Star's middle worlds; in so doing we are 'fostering a poetics of creative resistance in the middle worlds' (2016: 4). These middle worlds, the crossing grounds of practice, are amplified in the collaborative efforts that make up this themed issue.[1] The collection of pieces we bring together shows that the more ambitious the movements across boundaries, and the more complex the integration of relations (of people, or disciplines, or modes of communication), the greater the challenge to show the work of the artwork, to discursively map 'what it does in the world' (Bolt 2014: 37).

As an ensemble of three interdisciplinary artist-scholars with practices variously jostling in the crossings of writing and performance, dramaturgy and curation, poetry and prose, we are interested in the conditions required for effective and affective collaborative work across divides. Here we amplify the groundwork that needs to be done to accommodate differences in knowledge making approaches, and reflect on the variously synergistic and unruly meetings that arise in the slippage of concepts and agencies between the expert knowledges of collaborating artists and writers. In the behind-the-scenes work of this issue, we prioritised feminist practices of hospitality and care, the tending of which enabled actively recognising the labour evident in the crossings or middle worlds, which Star notes as 'unreported "back stage" work' (Star 2010: 607). These priorities focus our attention on epistemological and ethical matters in collaborative practice across divides. *How* we undertake research work has

a significant impact on what is identified and valued as knowledge. The less visible backstage labour is an essential component of collaboration, yet it is generative of the conditions vital to the doing and effort of transdisciplinary practice. The labour of paying attention to crossings and cultivating relations also takes into account the residual and persistent ‘upsprouting’ (Quinn 2015: 8) of disciplinary expectations within the compost of transdisciplinary attempts. The scale of transformation is thus unfixed and sliding across collaborations, and what we might linger with as a sense of falling short or failure in the output of such crossings is evidence of our own situated expectations. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, herself working at ‘the crossing of science and technology studies, feminist theory and environmental humanities’ (University of Warwick 2023), potently reminds us that ‘we do not know what spaces between *can become*’ (2016: 4). It is in the making, *poesis*, formed through ‘the power of relation-creation’ (2016: 6), and in the transparency of process and practice evident in each article, that this issue finds its form. The issue is, moreover, a boundary object in itself, and we invite a further expansion of relations through the addition of your own reading to bridge diverse perspectives and to foster acts of thought that translate, transform and transdiscipline.

The terrain of the issue roves across what might be described as literary and literary translation studies, the theory and practice of performing ‘place’, education studies, cultural theory, and collaboration studies including art-science and human-AI collaborations. In thinking with and across this wide terrain, the disciplines themselves ‘become (un)disciplined and, in so doing, the terrain becomes transdisciplinary’ (Nordstrom 2020: 216). While acknowledging disciplinary expertise, we are interested in exploring such terrain as it is imagined in the provocation of qualitative methodologies specialist Susan Naomi Nordstrom:

. . . a feminist transdisciplinary terrain does not pledge allegiance to any particular discipline as it moves across academic disciplines . . . hungry for affirmative becomings that generate different enabling conditions for thought’ (Nordstrom 2020: 217).

We work with and offer feminisms (in their purposefully non-divisive intersectional plurality) to think with disciplinary training as a frame similar to one’s specific and unique lived experiences, the edges of which, when porous, work as generative boundary objects to grapple with difference. Just as philosopher of place Edward Casey points out that geographical descriptions of boundaries are indefinite and dynamic (2017: 9), porous and vulnerable (2017: 15), we position such traits as a strength of collaborative and transdisciplinary practice, ‘a strength no longer of resistance or exclusion but of conveyance and facilitation’ (2017: 16). We editors acknowledge that the work we’ve engaged in this last year occurred mainly on Whadjuk Boodjar, and that despite a season of record heat in Boorloo and across Western Australia (Purtill 2024), we have been sustained generously due to the knowledge and care shown by Whadjuk people of these unceded lands over millennia [2]. We imagine similar reports of record-breaking weather events will apply to many of our contributors and extend our acknowledgement and gratitude to these Countries in the continent known as Australia, and beyond. The work undertaken for this issue occurred in real places under strain from human activities, and crossing to the figurative register is troubled by the insistence of the situatedness of each place and its urgent weather. At the same time, when once-separate things are brought together, figured into novel arrangements and reframed with concepts that attend to relationality across difference, new meanings consistent with our place-based feminisms can emerge.

Crossing divides

Axon typically publishes work with an abstract or with a contextual statement. For *Axon*'s readers, these paratexts signal genre categories, where 'traditional' research essays are accompanied by an abstract and 'non-traditional' research is accompanied by a contextual statement. The logic behind such conventions implies that a non-traditional or 'creative' essay which demonstrates or performs its knowledge or its processes of generating knowledge does not necessarily plainly articulate what it is doing; rather, it requires its reader to take on some of that interpretative work. This interpretative work can be supported with an authorial contextual statement that lifts the curtain and shows readers a little of what is going on behind the scenes: *so, that's how I might be reading this work!* An abstract, on the other hand, is a concise summary of a work that draws more or less directly from that work; it is literal, a reflection of the work rather than an extension or interpretation of it. Both textual elements offer a rationale for what the work does in the world according to each discipline.

Our call for proposals attracted diverse responses that appeared to challenge this distinction. As we editors planned to integrate the objects into the infrastructure of the journal, we naively assumed that authors would make editorial decisions that framed their work in a way that made sense to us and invited them to put aside genre considerations of their work. All pieces would be accompanied by an *abstract*, to signal the value we placed on their research contribution. We would distinguish between *essays* (regardless of whether they were traditional, creative or hybrid), and *visual essays* (with images as the primary mode of communication, accompanied by supporting text). Yet once we received and read the full-length submissions, these categories did not serve. Words and images intermingled in different ways and at different levels (are emojis images? How long might an image caption be before it becomes a stand-alone textual paragraph?) Text-dominant pieces, far from sitting together as a neat set, adopted different tonal qualities and varying relations to their precedent texts that demanded significant curatorial framing and care to place them in appropriate relationships that revealed the sense and knowledge being made.

Authors of individual scholarly journal articles have their own agendas and values systems. For example, for some of us there is a meaningful distinction between research and non-traditional or creative research; we have forged careers in this space and insist on the significance of creative research's contribution to knowledge. For others, this is not a meaningful distinction; there is an element of arbitrariness, of 'up for discussionness'. The pieces in this edition of *Axon* might then be considered as a set of boundary objects, in the sense that they represent information used in different ways by different communities engaged in collaborative work (Star 2010).

The emergence of creative research can be seen to reflect Star's cycle of 'standards and residual categories' (2010: 615), where the work of artist-scholars, outsiders in the world of traditional research, gradually established a new category codified as 'non-traditional research outputs' [3]. As examples of boundary objects, creative research remains a marginalised form of research within academies, but during the recent decades of assessed and measured institutional 'research excellence', they have become standardised by conventional processes such as the writing of interpretative research statements that articulate the research contribution in plain language.

To us editors, working within an institutional context with an obligation to frame research contributions within ‘creative’ or ‘traditional’ categories, some pieces appeared to be creative works that could be enhanced with further context and interpretation through a contextual statement, while others were research objects that could be enhanced by adopting academic conventions including concise abstracts. While the contribution each piece was making was transparent to its authors, it seemed to us necessary to push the works back towards *Axon*’s distinct categories, despite our transdisciplinary intentions. Crossing over is hard.

We share this behind-the-scenes view because it effectively captures something about collaboration across divides. Star and Griesemer explain that boundary objects ‘have different meanings in different social worlds but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation’ (1989: 393). Thinking with boundary objects offers us a means of translation – recognising the limits of our situated perspectives and allowing space for movement to a new perspective – and is key in thinking through the elements of our approach in co-editing this issue.

Translate

This issue illuminates points of connection within collaborations across disciplines, their productive frictions and generative integrations. We notice that the greater the gap in our starting places, the greater the need for intermediaries. This journal issue itself can perform such intermediation when cast as a boundary object. Star and Griesemer suggest that for scholars, scientific publications are boundary objects (1989: 396). What happens if we pursue that way of thinking a little further? In ‘Institutional Ecology, “Translations” and Boundary Objects’, Star and Griesemer’s core study of amateurs and professionals collaborating to develop Berkeley’s Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, they found four types of boundary objects that they call *repositories*, *ideal types*, *coincident boundaries*, and *standardised forms* (1989: 410-411). In our case, we consider *Axon*’s online archive a *repository* in which many heterogeneous objects are held together in a searchable database. Users can access individual items without needing to consider how they relate as a whole, so the online archive works in many different ways for different users. *Axon*’s instructions for contributors might constitute the journal’s *ideal type*, with reviewing, referencing and formatting instructions abstracted from specific works but serving as a model or map for all works, regardless of the specific needs and affordances of any one work, or the actual processes that bring a piece to publication. Boundary objects with *coincident boundaries* are shared objects with the same outline but different contents, such as *Axon: Creative Explorations*, which means different things (different opportunities, barriers, audiences and discourses) to different people. Finally, *standardised forms* are ‘methods of common communication’ (1989: 411), such as the scholarly journal articles *Axon* publishes. In each of these ways, thinking with boundary objects as an archipelago of islands shows how it is possible to get collective work done despite a lack of consensus amongst the various stakeholders. By pointing to the various ways in which boundary objects are operating in ways we wouldn’t normally interrogate when seeking to see our work published, thinking with boundary objects brings visibility to the behind-the-scenes groundwork of collaboration.

Translations carry ideas across, and in common usage the crossing is from one language to another. In ‘Translation as an act of love’, Caitlyn Stone (2024) proposes that the act of translation itself is ‘a creative methodology for compassionate engagement with Witness Poetry’ such as that of Nelly Sachs. Through her own translation of Sachs’ ‘Kommt einer von

ferne/*If one comes from afar*' (1959), Stone opens up the event of moving across languages and draws our attention to the ethical responsibility, risk and reward of this relational space, an occasion that is simultaneously 'calling back . . . calling inward . . . [and] calling out'. Stone points to the eventness (the 'act') of translation with its 'temporal and relational spatiality' that frames compassion as movement, crossing over and between text and translation, author and reader. Such a compassionate approach by the translator recognises and maintains a necessary distance that allows the risky work of translation to occur, both 'horizontally (in difference between language) and vertically (in difference between prioritisation of position)'. Here, privileging a compassionate approach, as differentiated from empathy, is important for transdisciplinary practice that is not 'identifying with' (as empathy calls for), but rather ignites a 'witness' of relationality that is always moving.

Cassandra Tytler's 'It hasn't finished: A collaboration with Ron Stone Park across a year-long divide' sets into motion 'the never-ending process of translation of a work in place' (2024). For artist-scholars such as Tytler working in media other than text, the space between a work and its translation into conventional research language can be vast, with the risk that much is lost along the way. Tytler resists and mitigates loss by insisting that 'it hasn't finished'; this visual essay does not reproduce the art event *One Peppercorn (if demanded)*, but rather translates it for this new context: a 'continuation, rather than an interpretation'. Through its focus on events, relations and affective resonances, Tytler's approach can be described as a non-representational research method (Vannini 2015). Rather than analysing information and presenting an interpretation of results, reconstructing the research activity after the fact to represent its contribution to knowledge through discursive argument, Tytler invites us into the *nowness* of the event-that-was, re-presenting 'personal reflections, poetic musings, and excerpts from the art event itself' to produce knowledge translation-in-action. The narrative and visual information, always mediated, draws our attention to the real-time moment and action of engagement and interpretation, as well as its limits. Such approaches implicitly critique the normative modes of representational thought in the social sciences and in creative research with human participants.

Affective resonances are also the focus of transnational interspecies dance collective Mapped to the Closest Address' (MaCA) piece 'Fujifilms: Every picture matters' (2024). It combines a soundscape with images and interpretive texts to recreate, extend, and represent a series of the group's performances at the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale. This festival is supported by the Japanese government's Satoyama Initiative, a program developed in collaboration with the United Nations to promote sustainable land management practices by revitalising these regions and their traditional knowledges, practices, and technologies. Satoyama 里山 refers to the socio-ecological landscapes between villages and mountains that were fast disappearing due to urbanisation, industrialisation, and rural depopulation from the late 1970s onwards. MaCA's work is inspired by audio descriptions of their performance event, *Turn Off the House Lights*, that combined remote landscapes with an audio transmission. Axon's version lets us listen to the original soundscape while we look and read. Other images in this work come from the group's portrait series *Fujifilms, Every Picture Matters* and the installation *We Like to Watch Clumsy Seeming Mountain*. In this multisensory work, the foregrounding of the rice field outside the performance space not only acknowledges this satoyama's cultural heritage and economic resilience, but highlights the interconnectedness of people and other species, art and tradition.

Transform

In her work 'Incorruptible' (2024), Cultural Studies scholar Denise Thwaites deploys the power of Legacy Russell's Glitch Feminism (2020), their manifesto exhorting the freedom found in fissures between gender, technology and embodiment that is so useful in thinking with crossings as unstable and active. Taking Russell's concept of the glitch as a departure point, Thwaites asks, 'How might we approach corruption, not as a failing, but a hallmark of knowledge transformation?' Thwaites' paper performs glitches and slippage in knowledge translation of French theorists, in which 'corruption' is recast as productive transgression and transformation. We are offered layers of meaning that sometimes interpellate a reader – like the author – as a creative research scholar in an academy of corrupted ideals more comfortable with stable meanings. At the same time, the work is composed on the page in a tumble of words, images, emojis and other textual marks that attempt to deliberately and meaningfully undermine any fixed positions. Will anyone 'ever notice', Thwaites asks? Here, the explicit work of the glitch can be read as an on-the-page 'analogue' contribution that renders visible rhizomatic systems. Thwaites suggests that the only thing holding together 'discipline' specific work is the 'punishment' of peer reviewers and the academic system itself, with its reliance on maintaining borders and hierarchical privilege.

Transforming fixtures and identities in the academy continues with the crossings from the field of Education performed in Julian Chen, Wendy Cumming-Potvin, Kim Andreassen, and Bri McKenzie's work, 'Where is the safe space?!', that moves us from a passing 'hetero/cis-normative pedagogy' to more inclusive and authentic personal-professional identities (2024). This disruption of scholarly practice is rendered through a meeting of social worlds where academic collaborators 'critically reflect and face [their] own fear and vulnerability in professional and queer undertaking' with sincere and sometimes funny performances of drag alter egos. The performance is enlivened with their dialogic-collaborative take on a conventional literature review that models a process of playful and supportive inquiry for which they advocate to promote LGBTQA+ inclusive practices. The authors write to and for each other, punctuating scholarly discussion with affirmations like 'I hear you' that draw readers in and contribute a powerful sense of collaborative thinking-together-in-real-time. The generously earnest insistence on transparency in this work offers a timely and relevant example of collaboration as queer activism that unsettles the heteronormative and heteropatriarchal edges of academia, particularly in the field of Education. This transgression against disciplinary convention offers darker and messier ways that call for intersectional vulnerability and positionality over solipsism.

In 'Writing on ice' (2024), Writing scholars Michelle Hamadache and Jane Messer similarly take a nonlinear dialogic approach as they revisit Ursula K. Le Guin's 1982 short story 'Sur'. We travel with them as they crisscross through Le Guin's boundary-crossing speculative, historical, and literary short story, set during the 'Great Heroic Age' of Antarctic Exploration, about an intrepid group of nine South American women who work together to reach the South Pole. They achieve this goal in December 1909, two years before their real life counterparts, Roald Amundsen and his men, beat Captain Robert F. Scott and his men, in their race to the pole. In Hamadache and Messer's piece, we are offered a taste of Le Guin's speculative views of this *sui generis* place, and its current parlous state, through the journey of the women explorers. Situated in the authors' own collaborative practice arising as a consoling project to connect them amid the depths of pandemic isolation, this work explores the notion of 'story [as] the vessel, not the spear', and evidences a collectivist feminist caretaking over spearing (disciplinary-specific) practices,

offering a mode of production that upholds ‘the collaborative practices of the characters in Le Guin’s ecofeminist narrative’. Like the women in the story, the authors of this work are also ‘embedded in friendship and conversation, rather than the solitude and individualism’ of writing typically produced in academic contexts, especially for scholars of creative writing.

Unlike their real-life counterparts, the women in ‘Sur’ forgo colonial marking at the polar site: ‘instead of seeking glory and not recognising their physical limits, three of the women turn back to main camp from the trek to the South Pole. As a result, no one dies’ (Hamadache and Messer 2024). The contrast with Scott’s ill-fated Terra Nova expedition – replete with industrial and corporate investors expecting a heroic return on investment – is profound. ‘Sur’s publication in 1982 is also significant, coming at the beginning of the decade in which the Keynesian economic policies that had dominated the post-WWII world were subsumed by neoliberal policies that have reduced our material, social and creative worlds to measurables that value growth in financial terms above all.

Transdiscipline

For all of *Axon*’s stakeholders (readers, writers, editors, designers, and other supporters), but, especially when inviting heterogeneity with an issue dedicated to translating, transforming and transdisciplining knowledge, we frequently encounter objects that have different meanings for people from different disciplinary and social worlds: boundary objects. As Star and Griesemer make clear, this is common in collective work (1989: 412). The initial motivation for Star’s articulation of the concept was to analyse and understand ‘cooperative work in the absence of consensus’ (Star 2010: 604), which captures the nature of guest-editing a themed journal issue very well. Producing a themed journal issue is an unusual and highly distributed sort of collective work, as the various contributors to the collective enterprise typically remain unaware of the work of other contributors and do not see how they fit into the whole until publication, often years into the endeavour. Thinking with boundary objects (which we’re claiming here applies to *Axon* itself, as well as to this issue, and all of its individual pieces) is valuable in this situation, as authors and editors tacked back and forth (Star 2010: 605) between object forms (‘creative-research’ or regular ‘research’ contribution? Substantive professional or professional-adjacent activity? Paid work or labour of love?) to realise a publication outcome. Working in transdisciplinary contexts entails navigating a wide range of relations within and without the academy (as teachers, scholars, artists, and postgraduate researchers working across disciplines, affiliated and unaffiliated, paid and unpaid, with fixed term and ongoing roles), and in a context of increased instrumentalisation of creative research in the academy: we speak to systems corrupted by neoliberalism whilst exploring anxieties of validity, authorship, relevance, and social identity.

Andrew Freiband’s ‘Lab/studio/space/place’ (2024) questions collaboration and trans-disciplinarity via studio site experiments evoking (unmarked) lineages of Manning and Massumi’s SenseLab. Through his consideration of Indonesian art collective *ruangrupa*, Freiband transplants his collaboration’s ‘undisciplinary research’ practices to The Soil Factory in Ithaca, New York, foregrounding how artists are able to operate as ‘connective knowledge producers’. His approach draws attention to the social and relational elements central to so much artistic practice but undervalued in much scientific practice. Freiband argues that unlocking shared social practices occurs via shared social spaces and the artistic norms of studios: ‘artists are conditioned by the studio to be relational, ecological, comparative, and in-commoning’. Here

we can understand Freiband's proffering of artists' studio logics as creative-relational work. Director of Edinburgh's Centre for Creative-Relational Inquiry Jonathan Wyatt describes this as 'the force that connects, the force that leans us towards (the) other, towards becoming-other, towards movement, towards change' (2018: 42). As Theatre and Performance scholar Stacy Holman Jones notes, the concept of creative-relational is 'not to pin things down, but to open things up, to ask questions' (2020: 116). Thinking with the creative-relational as being always 'in process' enables disparate contributions to generate a collective that operates as a constellation of boundary objects, evidencing elements of transdisciplinary practice.

Boundary objects might provide us with stepping stones as we navigate borderzones; translating, transforming, transdisciplining, crossing over. One reason such a concept rises to the surface for articulation and description is that change is often easier to resist than to face. When formulating this issue we did not anticipate the impacts of generative AI in academic contexts, neither the radical challenge it presents to pedagogical practice, nor the popularity of incorporating generative AI systems into collaborative human endeavours. However, it has emerged as a key site to unpack different approaches to knowledge transformation for teaching and learning and, arguably, transdisciplinarity, as the excitement and panic around artificial intelligence makes way for augmented intelligence, with systems that leverage machine learning to support human work and creativity.

This is the space carved out by artist-scholars Dan Pitman and Amelia Walker in 'Creativity, Error and Originality: Artificial intelligence and the anxiety of influence' (2024). Although it was drafted not long after generative AI entered public consciousness, with ChatGPT's official launch in November 2022, this piece, to which ChatGPT and neural-love make considerable contributions, is already an interesting historical artefact. Written in 2023 with OpenAI's GPT 3.5, its responses in Walker and Pitman's piece will never be repeated, as GPT 3.5 has already been upgraded with training data that includes everything generated by the earlier edition. A generous interlocutor might reach for glitch poetics to frame the uneven placement of Harold Bloom's eyes 'as novel symbolic commentary' rather than 'erroneous artefact'. But they choose not to extend authorship credit to ChatGPT or neural-love (whilst explicitly revealing – and platforming – their questionable contributions), pointing, rather, to ChatGPT's naivety, 'overly eager to please and unwittingly superficial'. Shrugging off 'the burden of influence in human artistry', their playfully sincere efforts to collaborate across this human-AI divide reveals a 'networked assemblage' framed as 'ambiguously collaborative'.

Despite generative AI's integration into our everyday lives, its use continues to spark public debate in the arts and education spaces within which we work due to concerns around plagiarism and academic misconduct, deep fakes and alternative facts, devaluing human creativity, and the potential undermining of critical thinking skills.[4] Hallucinations created by incomplete, biased, erroneous training data and/or overly confident guesses have real life consequences.[5] Glitches, however, can also create unexpected connections between ideas, as machine hallucinations, like human hallucinations, lead to creative and innovative outputs. If human creativity and cognition are replicable, the question is, what can a human do that a machine cannot? Here Pitman and Walker insist, 'Every step of the process in the creation of any AI artefact is riddled with human inference, be it as software developers, creators or curators of training data, authors of prompts, interlocutors, or subjects of mimicry' (2024).

At our penultimate editorial meeting, we considered this and other philosophical stances raised in the essays that make this issue; our organic bodybrains were exhausted by work, and the

work of making this work work. Comic relief arrived when, in asking ChatGPT what work we three artist-scholars-editors were known for, we were defined as co-creators of the project *Shapeshifters*.[6] Like a good improviser *yes-and-ing* along, ChatGPT manifested this project as if it already existed, which, in a way, it does, now:

Vahri McKenzie, Jo Pollitt, and Emily Sun are connected through their collaborative artistic and academic endeavours. . . . Their relationship is particularly highlighted in the collaborative project *Shapeshifters*. This project blends their diverse expertise and artistic practices to explore new forms of expression.

‘Overly eager to please and unwittingly superficial’ (Pitman and Walker 2024), ChatGPT goes on: ‘a rich, multifaceted exploration of themes . . . to create innovative and thought-provoking works’. The work of this *Axon* issue offers various applications of the human skills necessary to distinguish between description, advocacy and critical inquiry that are not well mimicked by ChatGPT. These skills are developed in social contexts, via relationships, where these are just as – or even more – important forms of knowledge creation as reading and writing along disciplinary lines.

From literary translation’s creative and compassionate decision-making to transformations of performances and collective transdisciplinary conversations, the works in the ‘Collaborative practice across divides’ issue of *Axon* present diverse academic approaches that foster creative resistance through the standardised form of the journal article. Perhaps we are now once more seeing the ‘generation of residual categories, communities of practice of “others” or “outsiders”’ (Star 2010:615) that challenge scholarly conventions such as authorship (consider the practice of sharing academic authorship credit with entities such as rivers and AI systems) and disciplinary borders captured in Field of Research (FoR) codes, with their somewhat arbitrary requirement to proportion percentile weightings to specific sub-sub disciplinary categories.[7] FoR codes ending in 99, ‘Other’, ‘not elsewhere classified’, are said to be fast tracks to irrelevance. Might we reclaim these unloved zones to signal the crossings, the in-betweens, the what-has-yet-to-arise in the relational middling demanded by collaboration? The authors in this collection stay in the work of collaboration across divides, anxieties, glitches and all, as a marker of resisting academic conventions that privilege individualistic approaches and border control.

Notes

¹ Henk Borgdorff has discussed artistic research as boundary work and introduces boundary objects in this discussion (2012) but credits the concept to Thomas Gieryn (1983). Our work instead follows more recent applications that bring Star's feminist work into conversation with artistic and creative research methods, such as Gerber (2022) and Schindler (2020).

² In Australia, acknowledging Country shows respect for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural protocols. *Whadjuk* are the people of the Swan River plains whose country is now occupied by the greater metropolitan area of Perth; *Boodja* and *Boorloo* are the Whadjuk words for Country and Perth respectively.

³ Non-traditional research outputs (NTROs) is the conventional term in Australia and New Zealand; other jurisdictions use terms including 'research-creation' (Canada) and 'artistic outputs' in countries governed by the European Research Council.

⁴ ChatGPT was banned in 2023 in government schools across Australia; only the South Australian government took a more progressive approach in acknowledging the inevitability of AI and the role it already plays in people's lives, and how banning it would disadvantage state schools students (Cominos and Coe 2024; SADOE 2023). At the start of this year, other states followed suit after the Australian government developed a framework for the use of AI in education (Cassidy 2024).

⁵ This year, UNESCO released a report on 'the bias against women and girls in large language model [LLM]' (2024a), and during the final stages of editing this issue, the Policy Dialogue on AI Governance took place in Paris (UNESCO 2024b). This event is the first of its kind for UNESCO and brings together a group of international AI experts to discuss creating a more ethical AI ecosystem.

⁶ We are not co-creators of a project called *Shapeshifters*. ChatGPT 4.0 was prompted with the question, 'What is the relationship between Vahri McKenzie, Jo Pollit, Emily Sun?'. After hallucinating this collaborative project, ChatGPT tirelessly provided further details about *Shapeshifters* when prompted.

⁷ Field of Research Classification Codes are used in the measurement and analysis of research and experimental development (RandD) undertaken in Australia and New Zealand.

Works Cited

Bolt, B 2014 'Beyond Solipsism in Artistic Research: The art work and the work of art' in E Barrett and B Bolt (eds) pp 22–37 *Material Inventions: Applying creative arts research*, London: I.B. Tauris.

Borgdorff, H 2012 *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on artistic research and academia*, Leiden: Leiden University Press.

Casey, ES 2017 *The World on Edge*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

Cassidy, C 2023 'ChatGPT in Australian Schools: Here's what you need to know.' *The Guardian* (23 January) <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2024/jan/23/chatgpt-in-australian-schools-what-you-need-to-know-law-changes> (accessed 28 June 2024).

Chen, J, W Cumming-Potvin, K Andreassen and B McKenzie 2024 "'Where is the Safe Space?'" From drag queen storytime to LGBTQA+ inclusive practice'. *Axon*, Vol. 14 (1), [http://\[link\]](http://[link]).

- Cominos, C and A Coe 2023 'ChatGPT Style AI Bot Trial in High Schools.' *ABC News* (5 July) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-07-05/chatgpt-style-ai-bot-trial-in-sa-high-schools/102563974> (accessed 25 June 2024).
- Freiband, A 2024 'Lab/Studio/Space/Place: Undisciplinary research continued: Artists as connective knowledge producers and reconciling the "where" of undisciplinary research', *Axon*, Vol. 14 (1), [http://\[link\]](http://[link]).
- Gerber, A 2022 'Drawing the Line: Evaluation, boundary work, and boundary objects in a new discipline' in L McCormick (ed) pp 377-404 *The Cultural Sociology of Art and Music: New directions and new discoveries*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Gieryn TF 1983 'Boundary Work and the Demarcation of Science From Non-Science', *American Sociological Review*, Vol 48 (6): 781–95.
- Hamadache, M and Messer, J 2024 'Writing on Ice: An ecofeminist conversation on Ursula K. Le Guin's "Sur" and the fate of Antarctica', *Axon*, Vol. 14 (1), [http://\[link\]](http://[link]).
- Holman Jones, S 2020 'The Empty Space and Creative-Relational Inquiry', *Departures in Critical Qualitative Research*, Vol 9 (2): 114–119 <https://doi.org/10.1525/dcqr.2020.9.2.114>.
- Mapped to the Closest Address 2024 'Fujifilms: Every Picture Matters: Notes on our collective's encounters among rice fields and tree frogs', *Axon*, Vol. 14 (1), [http://\[link\]](http://[link]).
- Murray, F and J Wyatt 2024 'Creative-relational Inquiry: Institutional threat, fortitude, and flying like a brick', *Qualitative Inquiry*, Vol 0(0): Online First <https://doi.org/10.1177/10778004241231922> (accessed 25 June 2024).
- Nordstrom, SN 2020 '(Un)disciplined: What is the terrain of my thinking?', in CA Taylor, C Hughes and JB Ulmer (eds) pp 212–223 *Transdisciplinary Feminist Research: Innovations in theory, method and practice*, London: Routledge.
- Pitman, D and Walker, A 2024 'Creativity, Error, and Originality: Artificial intelligence and the Anxiety of Influence', *Axon*, Vol. 14 (1), [http://\[link\]](http://[link]).
- Puig de la Bellacasa, M 2016 'Ecological Thinking, Material Spirituality, and the Poetics of Infrastructure,' *University of Leicester* <https://hdl.handle.net/2381/36245> (accessed 16 June 2024).
- Purtill, J 2024 'WA Had its Hottest Summer, But Climate Change and Heat-related Health Problems Barely Made the News.' *ABC News* (18 March) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/science/2024-03-18/wa-summer-heat-broke-records-but-media-downplayed-climate-change/103572922> (accessed 25 June 2024).
- Quinn, K [Eades] 2015 'Écriture Matière: A text that matters', *TEXT*, Vol 19(31): 1–12.
- Russell, L 2020 *Glitch Feminism: a manifesto*, New York: Verso.
- Schindler, J 2020 'Negotiation, Translation, And Synchronization? The role of boundary objects In artistic research' in H Borgdorff, PF Peters & T Pinch (eds) pp 103–116 *Dialogues Between Artistic Research and Science and Technology Studies*, New York: Routledge <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429438875>.
- South Australia Department for Education (SADOE) 2023 'Nation Leading Trial in SA Schools Focus on the Safe Use of AI.' *Department for Education South Australia* (5 July) <https://www.education.sa.gov.au/department/media-centre/our-news/nation-leading-trial-in-sa-schools-to-focus-on-the-safe-use-of-ai> (accessed 29 June 2024).
- Star, SL 2010 'This is Not a Boundary Object: reflections on the origin of a concept', *Science, Technology, & Human Values* Vol 35(5): 601–617.

Star, SL and JR Griesemer 1989 'Institutional Ecology, "Translations" and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39', *Social Studies of Science*, Vol 19(3): 387–420.

Stone, C 2024 'Translation as an Act of Love: Ethical considerations in the translation, continuation and transformation of Witness Poetry', *Axon*, Vol. 14 (1), [http://\[link\]](#).

Thelwall, M and Delgado, MM 2015 'Arts and Humanities Research Evaluation: No metrics please, just data', *Journal of Documentation*, Vol. 71 (4): 817–833 <https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-02-2015-0028>.

Thwaites D 2024 'Incorruptible: Glitching translations, sweet mistakes', *Axon*, Vol. 14 (1), [http://\[link\]](#).

Tytler C 2024 'It Hasn't Finished: A collaboration with Ron Stone Park across a year-long divide', *Axon*, Vol. 14 (1), [http://\[link\]](#).

University of Warwick 2023 'Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (Professor).' *Centre for Interdisciplinary Methodologies* https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/cross_fac/cim/people/maria-puig-de-la-bellacasa/ (accessed 22 July 2024).

Vannini, P 2015 'Non-Representational Research Methodologies: an introduction' in P Vannini (ed) pp 1–18 *Non-representational Methodologies: Re-envisioning research*, New York: Routledge.

Wyatt, J, K Gale, S Gannon and B Davies 2017 'Creating a space in between: Collaborative Inquiries' in NK Denzin and YS Lincoln (eds) pp 738–756 *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research 5th Edition*, Los Angeles: SAGE.

Wyatt, J 2018 *Therapy, Stand-Up, and the Gesture of Writing: Towards creative-relational inquiry 1st Edition*, New York: Routledge.

UNESCO 20024a *Challenging Systematic Prejudices: an investigation into bias against women and girls in large language models* <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000388971> (accessed 29 June 2024).

UNESCO 2024b *UNESCO Policy Dialogue on AI Governance* <https://www.unesco.org/en/articles/policy-dialogue-ai-governance> (accessed 29 June 2024).

About the authors

Vahri McKenzie is an artist, educator and scholar whose work frames creative engagement as a model of, and practice for, ways of being together in a complex world. She is Course Coordinator, Arts and Cultural Management at WAAPA (Edith Cowan University). Over 2021-22, Vahri was Research Fellow in Arts and Health within the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research at University of Canberra, where this work began. She developed transdisciplinary applied arts projects with industry and government partners, working with artists, arts-workers and organisations to evaluate creative practices using methods that position artistic contributions as new knowledge.

Jo Pollitt is an artist-scholar living and working on Whadjuk Noongar Country as a Vice Chancellor's Research Fellow with the Centre for People, Place and Planet, and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts, Edith Cowan University. She is the convenor of Dance Research Australasia, co-founder of The Ediths, creative director of #FEAS Feminist Educators Against Sexism), and author of *The Dancer in Your Hands < >* (UWA Publishing, 2020). Her work engages with improvisation as a methodology across performance, choreography and publishing platforms.

Emily Sun is a Western Australian writer who has been published in various national and international anthologies and journals including Meanjin, TEXT, Cordite, Australian Poetry Journal, and Growing up Asian in Australia. Her debut poetry collection *Vociferate* (Fremantle Press) was listed as one of the Australian Book Review's 'Books of the Year', awarded a Highly Commended in the NSW Premier's Literary Award for Poetry, and shortlisted in the WA Premier's Book Award. She is currently a PhD candidate at the University of Western Australia.



AXON: Creative Explorations

2024 vol 14.1 *Translate* | *Transform* | *Transdiscipline*

axonjournal.com.au

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

DOI: 10.54375/001/nmbj91qgz1
Keywords: Transdisciplinary, collaboration,
écriture matière, glitch feminism, écriture
feminine, French theory

INCORRUPTIBLE

Glitching Translations, Sweet Mistakes

Denise Thwaites

University of Canberra, ORCID: 0000-0002-5839-5522

Contextual Statement

Corrupted, cherry-picked, and compromised; three derogatory terms used to describe permutations in knowledge across disciplinary boundaries. Yet some of the 20th century's most lauded 'incorruptible' French thinkers, Derrida, Deleuze and Foucault, were celebrated for their disobedient interlacing of concepts from biology, mathematics, linguistics, and literature. How might we approach corruption, not as a failing, but a hallmark of knowledge transformation?

This hybrid essay engages with the visual and linguistic poetics of much translated French thinkers, Cixous, Derrida, Foucault, Deleuze and Guattari, while activating contemporary creative techniques offered by Legacy Russell in *Glitch Feminism* (2020) and Quinn Eades in 'Écriture Matière: A Text That Matters' (Quinn 2015). Structured in five parts, the text draws on Russell's call to embrace the errant powers of the glitch that destabilise binary systems crossing technology and culture, as they are performed through postdigital bodies entangled in practices both online and 'away from keyboard' (AFK) (2020:15). Building on Russell's proposition, this text considers how glitching can be harnessed across languages and postdigital textualities, using playful techniques of mistranslation to resist closed systems of interpretation enforced through hierarchal systems of knowledge control. At the same time, the text explores Quinn's approach to *écriture matière*, as a "writing of the material, of matter" that seeks to open to "proliferation of *écritures*", or ways of writing the body (2015: 10). Specifically, this essay composes with material fragments of writing circulated through canonical bodies of western thought. Remixing fragments of the photographed bodies of French Theory, 'cherry-picked' citations and typographic overlays, it toys with closed economies of citation that both constrain and seed future ways of knowing and being. Through these creative experiments, the work expands upon traditions of bricolage (Levi-Strauss, 1962), while intersecting with contemporary e-literature practices that navigate the affordances of glitch poetics (see Jones, 2022).

The piece expands the author's transdisciplinary practice, which is informed by her position as multi-racial cisgendered woman, whose writing is heavily informed by a language in which she is fluent, but that is not (and will never be) her own (Derrida 1998) – French. Initially trained in scholarly traditions of abstract theory, her creative research uses text and image across different formats (including curated exhibitions, live programs, poetry and essay forms) to experiment with materialities of thought, where the latter emerges through ecologically, socially and technologically entangled bodies. Inasmuch, this text does not escape hierarchical binaries, but explores her experience of their pervasive operation across different axes of cultural and economic privilege. In doing so, it considers ways we survive within these systems (often to our own detriment), while offering glimpses of resistance, where meaning is yet to be foreclosed.

INCORRUPTIBLE: GLITCHING TRANSLATIONS, SWEET MISTAKES

Denise Thwaites

PART 0: EX LIBRIS [HORS-TEXTE]

Data corruption refers to errors in computer data that occur during writing, reading, storage, transmission, or processing, which introduce unintended changes to the original data – Wikipedia 2023

Incorruptible (Derrida in Birnbaum 2004).



1



2



3

*par métonymie [metonymy]
un ethos d'écriture et de pensée
sans concession*

[NON-REDEEMABLE]



no discounts for
intimidating readers



4

whose strict taste
[goût severe]
for refinement

will produce unexpected results
that

** repress [refouler] **

when unfaithful
to the text.

PART 1: SLIPPING

Glitch is derived from glitsh, Yiddish for slippery place – Vespe 2019

Errors in translation are inexhaustible fetish items. They keep giving, as we slide across handbooks and glossaries. Experts intervene, questioning whether we have been fair to Derrida, or Deleuze, or Foucault, or [n+1].

Can you gloss that for me?’ He demands.

She sweats.

‘Do I have to?’

Heads shake

She sighs. The room fills with *faux ami*.

ETYMOL. ET HIST. FAUX AMI:

One of a pair of words in different languages or dialects that look similar and may be related but that differ significantly in meaning.

– Wiktionary 2020

Her mistakes are made in the passive voice. *Des bêtises*.

ETYMOL. ET HIST. BÊTISE

1929 a mint bonbon that is the speciality of Cambrai [Not Combray*, see Proust] Created due to a dosage error during fabrication.

– Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales 2023

Sticky serendipities to freshen one’s breath, mistakes are surprisingly addictive. She tastes them on Derrida’s breath, as he recounts the infelicities of language, and how context is never saturated (1982: 32). But how can that be? Danto said:

Derrida—that’s like going swimming in the ocean. You get batted this way, batted that way. You get swamped. You don’t know where you are. You don’t have your feet on the ground (Danto and Liszka 1997).

Can we swim in Derrida’s context without getting saturated? *Pas possible*—that would require being both wet and dry. Only Schroedinger’s Quantum Bikini, could dress us for this (non) saturation of Derridian thought. His texts are slippery, a place for glitching selves before Russell’s postdigital bodies became ‘joyfully immersed in the in-between’ (Russell 2020:11). Sliding through these texts, embodied binaries now bead like water off a duck’s back, evaporating from pools of new context.

She unwraps her mint bonbon, places it on her tongue.

‘Derrida states that ‘the most rigorous deconstruction has never claimed to be foreign to literature’ (in Attridge 1992: 328).

He leans forward in his chair.

'Gloss, or foreclose – whatever you want to call it. I would never limit your reading.'

Heads tilt

To glitch is to embrace malfunction, and to embrace malfunction is in and of itself an expression that starts with 'no' – Russell 2020: 17

PART 2: HUNTING

Some types of malware may intentionally corrupt files as part of their payloads, usually by overwriting them with inoperative or garbage code. – Wikipedia 2023

She pretends to be a social scientist badly. The vernacular contorts her tongue, as she weaves thin arguments from loose data. Some call this imposter syndrome, but it is, in fact, the reverse. She hunts for meaning so expertly encrypted, she imagines it must be farce.

ETYMOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL FARCE.

late 14c., 'force-meat, stuffing;' 1520s, in the dramatic sense 'ludicrous satire; low comedy,' from French farce 'comic interlude in a mystery play' (16c.) In Old French farce was extended to the impromptu buffoonery among actors that was a feature of religious stage plays. Generalised sense of 'a ridiculous sham' is from 1690s in English. – Harper 2020a

This projective hunt for imposters is a glitch in-itself. Derrida's describes a 'paradoxical hunt':

My feeling, then, is that [he] scares himself [*il se fait peur*], he himself pursues [*il s'acharne lui-meme*] relentlessly someone who almost resembles him to the point that we could mistake one for the other: a brother, a double, thus a diabolical image. A kind of ghost of himself (Derrida 1994: 96).

She is certain that her failure to perform, or non-performance of generalisable conclusions, is their problem. Her glitching is a refusal to participate in an overly determined society of binaries (Russell, 2020: 29). But she is also aware of how her own critical rigour has become overly determined and automated; an elaborate code for machinic interpretations by those in-the-know. When she entered the academy, she traded her *philos* of *sophia* for positive peer-reviews, citations and grant income.

Sometimes this transformation feels like corruption; her philosophical loyalties, pledges and promises no longer serving as a neat deflection. The public loves to hear politicians swear to uphold their office above all else. They agree to be held to a higher standard, undistracted by their inner multitudes (Whitman 1855; Cixous 1976; Russell 2020). They will not err from their oath among others made. Promise as they may, they rarely secure their priorities with encrypted end-to-end integrity.

An oath should be engineered to transform its performer. Utterance as firewall, protecting the role from corruption. When the stakes are high, we assemble committees to hunt out corruption, haunted by the knowledge that we may be hunting ourselves by proxy (Derrida 1997). Where and when does weakness become corruption? She, herself, had tried many times to please her dodgy boyfriends.



MAGUIRE *Yeh but I am the boss, even when you're the Premier.*
 BEREJKLIAN *I know. So therefore it's hard when I had to switch it around.*
 MAGUIRE *Glad even when you are the Premier I am the boss alright.*
 5 BEREJKLIAN *Yes I know.*

Plagiarism, collusion and fabrication of results, are among the most heinous acts of academic corruption. We vow to 'increase the stock of knowledge' through activities that are:

novel
 creative
 uncertain
 systematic
 transferable and/or reproducible (OECD 2015).

There are rules to follow, programmatic methods to ensure the end-to-end security of our stock. Yet as knowledge is transmitted through the slippery palms of disciplines, the rules shift, become blurred or compromised. She knows that her stake in an industry of systematic knowledge production could be jeopardised, if she pursues high-risk tactics with uncertain return-on-investment. Despite this, she cannot escape the thrills of such a gamble:

To live language, inhabit language, what luck and what a venture... language that is rich, full, vibrant with the echoes of the passengers who went from foreign language to foreign language on board their native language, tasting one and the other, writing in one, reading in others, embellishing one with the others, grafting and multiplying (Cixous 1994: xix-xx).

Russell says that 'glitches are difficult to name and nearly impossible to identify until that instant when they reveal themselves: an accident triggering some form of chaos' (Russell 2020: 73). To protect against calamities of unfettered knowledge production, disciplines punish using the surveillant architecture of anonymous peer-review to keep hostile authorities just out of sight (Foucault 1975).

ETYMOL. ET HIST. GAOL

See jail (n.). c. 1300 (c. 1200 in surnames) ‘a jail, prison; a birdcage.’ The form in j- is from Middle English jaile, from Old French jaiole, from Late Latin caveola, diminutive of Latin cavea ‘a cage, enclosure, stall, coop; a hollow place, a cavity’ (see cave (n.)). – Harper 2021

Her collaborators hunt for questionable interpretations of standardised data that litter her drafts. She is not only corrupt, but corrupting, weakening the impenetrable barricade of scientific method.

She behaves, taking the feedback with grace, despite not knowing whether anyone will ever notice.



6

PART 3: WEEDING

Once we have infected, we want to travel outward in every direction. We want to touch everything, caress every-fucking-body, twist the machine. Viral, we want to multiply.

– Russell 2020: 113

She spends her weekends weeding. Her backyard has so much potential, if she could only get the invasive species under control. She hunts them mercilessly, dirt under her fingernails and shoulders sunburnt.

Lily of the Valley (*Salpichroa organifolia*) is a scrambling, sometimes vine-like perennial herb with a stout rootstock and a network of rhizomes

– Weeds Australia 2023

She recently read Sokal and Bricmont’s *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals’ Abuse of Science* (1999). Some years prior, Sokal had staged a hoax in *Social Text*, who published his bogus but stylish submission ‘Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity’ (1996), to poke fun at scholars like Irigaray, Latour, Virilio, and of course, Deleuze and Guattari. Harris describes Sokal and Bricmont’s agenda ‘to delouse

science not only of the parasites from philosophy but the pharisees in physics' (Harris 2000: 27). They drill Deleuze and Guattari's dense, opaque use of scientific terms (Sokal and Bricmont 1999: 141), as they 'display little control of themselves' (Harris 2000: 25). For Sokal and Bricmont, Deleuze and Guattari encrypt meaning by 'infecting it with viruses from other locales' (ibid: 27), resulting in nonsense. She thinks of Sokal and Bricmont as she rips noxious weeds from the clay soil. With each squat she mutters: 'You do not belong here. You are ruining this place.'

The seeds of Lily of the Valley may be dispersed by birds and to a minor extent by rats and ants. – Weeds Australia 2023

The weed had been planted by a previous homeowner, who had admired the snowdrop blooms without knowing the rhizomatous perennial would soon become so strong, it would smother all rival species surrounding it. She thinks of Cixous, as she pauses to escape the spring heat: 'I, too, overflow... I, too, have felt so full of luminous torrents that I could burst' (Cixous 1976: 876). She thinks of Eades, describing how his 'root remnants remained' to flourish a plant-human hybrid body, despite the digging of those that 'want the field for something else' (2015: 8).

Every time you dig, every time you try to plant something new, there they are: upsprouting, sky seeking, shoots that tell you the roots were there all the time. (Quinn 2015: 8).

She looks up to see a pair of wattlebirds arguing in a nearby bush. It is unclear what has started the dispute, but presumably, a matter of theft. Stolen territory, stolen food, a stolen chance to reproduce.

ETYMOLOGICAL AND HISTORICAL VOLER

'flying,' c. 1500, from French volant 'able to fly,' from Latin volantem. French voler, literally 'to fly,' in 16c. acquired a sense of 'to steal,' via the transitive meaning 'to make fly' – Harper 2020b

Cixous says, 'it's no accident: women take after birds and robbers, just as robbers take after women and birds' (Cixous 1976: 887). She considers whether the creative frictions of collaboration, stem from a similar confusion: one person's flight [*son vol*] feels like theft [*un vol*] by another person. She is often warned against misappropriating concepts, so stays close to the disciplinary ground into which she is invited. This is a tether, a promise not to soar.

Just as she's cleared one patch of Lily of the Valley, she notices another, only metres away. Underground, the rhizome sends long shoots to ground new clusters of roots, expanding and strengthening its ties to the ecosystem. Deleuze and Guattari explain: 'A rhizome may be broken, shattered at a given spot, but it will start up again on one of its old lines, or on new lines' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 9). She considers whether she might learn from P2P network attacks, as she struggles against the distributed network of roots. Designed for solidarity, these systems rely on trust between nodes: trust that enabled scores of meaningful millennial teen connections, as she risked downloading viruses to share tracks by Cristina Aguilera through Napster. Could she trick Lily of the Valley into trusting her too?

If she couldn't rid the garden of every weed, she would at least know her triumphant opponents; understand how they managed to steal water, nutrients, and carbon dioxide so effortlessly. She points her trowel at a cluster of lilies poised near a suffering fern. Striking through the humus, she loosens the soil around the plant, before heaving the root ball upwards. Satisfied with her catch, she shakes the plant gently to expose the roots further. The dense mane of tangled fibres falls lightly across her palm. A tawny ponytail that matches her own, she hesitates to throw it in the mulching bin. Instead, she remembers, 'you only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing' (Cixous 1976: 885).

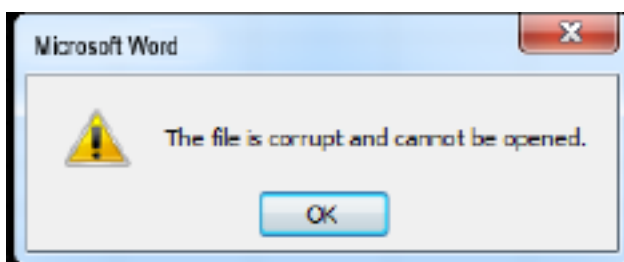
PART N+1: THIS FILE IS CORRUPTED AND CANNOT BE OPENED

When you start writing, it magnetises the world. Because the world is a huge book with a million signs . . . the work that you're in the middle of collaborating with captures those signs that relate to it.

– Cixous 2004: 120

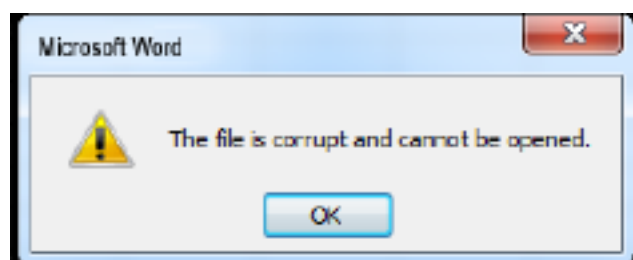
The file contains images of 'the incorruptibles' – the giants of French Theory that had shaped her journey. Not their faces (which were circulated through her many teaching slides), but their hands. Hands that held pens and read books, transmitting questions from place to place, Algeria, France, the USA; from linguistics to physics, botany, art, and history. Those hands were always corrupting, leading her to places she was not welcome. And although they were now old and gnarly, she cannot not deny the comfort of feeling cradled by them each time she cites Derrida, Deleuze, and Foucault.

She is still not sure what to do with this file. Perhaps the images could be useful one day, when submitting an article on the Anglosphere's reception of 'the incorruptibles of French theory' (Derrida 1994). As she sits down to her laptop, coffee in one hand, the other hovering over the trackpad, she clicks open the file.



7

Odd. She restarts her computer and tries again.



ibid

Ok, let's try: File → 'Open and Repair'.

The hard disk purrs.

#####



8



9

#####

Par métonymie [metonymy]

Incorruptible (Cixous in Derrida 2004)



whose ### taste

for unfaithful text

[un ethos d'écriture et de pensée]

will produce unexpected results

#####

She ponders the scramble, barely recognisable from her earlier document. She googles 'corrupted file.' Wikipedia explains how corruption occurs: through reading, processing, storing, or writing.

She rules out storage issues—her rare-earth magnets live well away from the device, pinning water bills and medical prescriptions to her cluttered fridge. Her google search continues:

Hard drives use magnetism to store information in a layer of magnetic material below the surface of the spinning disk (Ismail–Beigi 2023)

She has heard the murmur of her hard--disk on many occasions, as it responds to TIFFs, PDFs and over-burdened DOCXs, writing them into formats that could be transmitted through undersea cables. The hard disk works hard, like her.

My feeling, then, is that [she] scares [her]self [*elle se fait peur*], [she] [her]self pursues [*elle s'acharne* [elle]–meme] relentlessly . . . a [sister], a double, thus a diabolical image. A kind of ghost of [her]self (Derrida 1994, corrupted 2023).

A hard disk, working hard at corrupting the materials it reads and processes. Perhaps her writing is too magnetic? It pulls with too much force, corrupting the signs, images, words, and ideas into an encrypted garble. It becomes a ghost in her machine (Russell 2020), corrupting with a viral appetite. The glitch does not foreclose but offers her a new vernacular (ibid: 85).

She reads on.

#####

sans concession

[UNREDEEMABLY]

intimidating readers



10



11



12

#####

Following the contours of the file's new images – lithe fingers, arms, braids and snakes that curl, grasp and twist – she recalls once more: she's not deadly.

Cixous corrupts. She is the invisible gorgon that haunts the incorruptibles, her desirous writing in torrents bursting with multiplicity. Russell glitches the unstable binary of her systems, inviting us to self-encrypt through loops that spiral across virtual and physical spaces. Saved on a hard disk, words magnetise our world, interlacing serpentine phrases to form an 'infinite curve that touches at an infinity of points an infinity of curves' (Deleuze, 1993: 24). As Eades says: '[T]here is no centre. It is a spreading story that finds its way into all other stories...It is the opposite of escape' (Quinn 2015: 8).

She unwraps a mint bonbon, placing it on her tongue. Her finger hovers over the ESC button.

On her desk, a mason jar of lilies emits a gentle perfume. Scrambling her tastebuds, the noxious perennials combine with candied menthol; a serendipitous synaesthesia of lily-bonbons. She recalls Russell's words:

We are the most fantastic and beautiful mistake. Never meant to survive, we are still here. (Russell 2020: 147)

Her file overflows, corrupted. It tastes sweet, and she laughs.

Work Details

- 1 Gilles Deleuze's hand 2023. Original photo taken c.1984 <https://deleuze.cla.purdue.edu/seminars> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 2 Michel Foucault's hand 2023. Original photo 'Foucault' (1978) by Martine Franck <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/130812> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 3 Jacque Derrida's hand, 2023. Original photo 'Jacques Derrida Portrait Session' (1988) by Ulf Andersen <https://www.gettyimages.com.au/detail/news-photo/jacques-derrida-french-philosopher-poses-during-a-portrait-news-photo/156441717> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 4 Medusa's eyes 2023. Original image 'Haupt der Medusa' (1618) by Peter Paul Rubens, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien <https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/1626> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 5 Images from the corruption inquiry into former New South Wales State Premier Gladys Berejiklian, 2023. Composite image combines transcript extract courtesy of The Independent Commission Against Corruption, Government of NSW, Australia, 'The private conversations between Gladys Berejiklian and Daryl Maguire exposed in ICAC report' <https://www.9news.com.au/national/gladys-berejiklian-icac-findings-daryl-maguire-phone-taps/ba433c0e-20a5-4165-8eb7-dfa7e6743826>) and 'Gladys Berejiklian put her case to the ICAC on Monday' <https://www.smh.com.au/national/nsw/key-quotes-from-icac-s-grilling-of-former-nsw-premier-gladys-berejiklian-20211101-p594zt.html> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 6 Panopticon 2013 by Adam Simpson. Artwork originally created for Tom Shone's New York Times book review of The Panopticon by Jenni Fagan <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/07/21/books/review/the-panopticon-by-jenni-fagan.html> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 7 Screen grab of error message featured in 'Top 4 Methods to Fix 'The File Is Corrupted And Cannot Be Opened' Error' by Kumar Raj, SysTools: Simplifying Technology (January 23 2022) <https://www.systoolsgroup.com/updates/fix-the-file-is-corrupted-and-cannot-be-opened-error> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 8 Hélène Cixous' hands A 2023. Original image 'Helene Cixous in her Apartment in Paris' photographed by Olivier Zahm, Purple Magazine, F/W, Issue 24, 2015 <https://purple.fr/magazine/fw-2015-issue-24/helene-cixous> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 9 Hélène Cixous' hands B 2023. Original image 'Photo prise le 24 Novembre 1969 de la romancière Hélène Cixous qui a reçu le prix Médicis pour son roman 'Dedans' paru aux éditions Grasset.' Photographed by Agence France-Presse (AFP) <https://www.gettyimages.com/detail/1228700660> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 10 Medusa's snake 2023. Original image 'Haupt der Medusa' (1618) by Peter Paul Rubens, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien <https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/1626> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 11 Legacy Russell's hair and hand 2023. Original image featured in 'The Home of Avantgarde Art has a New Leader' in Departures, photographed by Lelanie Foster <https://www.departures.com/arts/legacy-russell-the-kitchen-nyc> (accessed 21 November 2023).
- 12 Medusa's snake's bite 2023. Original image 'Haupt der Medusa' (1618) by Peter Paul Rubens, Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien <https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/1626> (accessed 21 November 2023).

Works cited

- Birnbaum, J 2004 'Jacques Derrida: «Je suis en guerre contre moi-même».' *Le Monde* https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2004/08/18/jacques-derrida-je-suis-en-guerre-contre-moi-meme_375883_1819218.html.
- Centre National de Ressources Textuelles et Lexicales 2023 'Bêtise.' <https://www.cnrtl.fr/etymologie/Bêtise> (accessed 18 November 2023).
- Cixous, H 1994 'Preface' in S Sellers (ed.) *The Hélène Cixous Reader* pp xv–xxiii London and New York: Routledge.
- Cixous, H 2004 *Writing Notebooks* translated by S Sellers, London and New York: Continuum.
- Cixous, H 1976 'The Laugh of Medusa' translated by K Cohen and P Cohen, *Signs*, Vol. 1 (4): 875–893.
- Danto, A. C and J Liszka 1997 'Why We Need Fiction: an interview with Arthur C. Danto,' *Henry James Review*, Vol. 18(3): 213–16.
- Deleuze, G and F. Guattari 1987 (1980) *A Thousand Plateaus* translated by B. Massumi, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Deleuze, G 1993 *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* translated by T Conley, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Derrida, J 1992 'From Psyche: Invention of the Other' in D Attridge (ed) pp 310–343 *Acts of Literature*, London: Routledge.
- Derrida, J 1994 *Spectres of Marx: the state of the debt, the work of mourning and the new international* translated by P. Kamuf, New York and London: Routledge.
- Derrida, J 1998 *Monolingualism of the Other* translated by P Mensah, Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Derrida, J 1982 *Margins of Philosophy* translated by A Bass, Chicago: Chicago University Press.
- Foucault, M. 2020 [1975] *Discipline and Punish*, London: Penguin Modern Classics.
- Harper, D 2020a 'Farce.' *Online Etymology Dictionary* <https://www.etymonline.com/word/farce> (accessed 18 November 2023).
- Harper, D 2020b 'Volant.' *Online Etymology Dictionary* <https://www.etymonline.com/word/volant> (accessed 18 November 2023).
- Harper, D 2021 'Jail.' *Online Etymology Dictionary* <https://www.etymonline.com/word/jail> (accessed 18 November 2023).
- Harris, PA 2000 'Using Knowledge: Denuding the deluded, including the excluded,' *American Studies*, Vol. 45(1): 23–32.
- Ismail-Beigi Research Group 2023 *Hard Drives Methods and Materials* <https://volga.eng.yale.edu/teaching-resources/hard-drives/methods-and-materials> (accessed 18 November 2023).
- Jones, NA 2022 *Glitch Poetics*, London: Open Humanities Press.
- Levi-Strauss C 1968 *The Savage Mind*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- OECD 2015 'Frascati Manual 2015: Guidelines for collecting and reporting data on research and experimental development.' *The Measurement of Scientific, Technological and Innovation Activities* <https://doi.org/10.1787/9789264239012-en>
- Quinn, K [Eades] 2015 'Écriture Matière: A text that matters,' *TEXT*, Vol. 19(Special 31): 1–12.
- Russell, L 2020 *Glitch Feminism: a manifesto*, New York: Verso.

Sokal, A and J. Bricmont 1999 *Fashionable Nonsense: Postmodern Intellectuals' Abuse of Science*, London: Picador.

Sokal, A 1996 'Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a transformative hermeneutics of quantum gravity', *Social Text*, Vol. 46(47): 217–252.

Vespe, J 2019 'It Was John Glenn Who Popularized the Word 'Glitch.' *Smithsonian Magazine* <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/air-space-magazine/just-right-word-180973113> (accessed 18 November 2023).

Weeds Australia 2023 'Pampas Lilly of the Valley.' <https://weeds.org.au/profiles/pampas-lily-of> (accessed 18 November 2023).

Wiktionary 2020 'Faux Amis.' https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/faux_ami (accessed 18 November 2023).

Wikipedia 2023 'Data Corruption.' https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Data_corruption (accessed 18 November 2023).

Whitman, W. 1855 'Song of Myself.' *Poetry.org* <https://poets.org/poem/song-myself-51> (accessed 18 November 2023).

About the author

Denise Thwaites is Senior Lecturer in Interdisciplinary Arts at the University of Canberra. Her transdisciplinary research (re)configures text and image to explore the imbrications of cultural, ecological and technological networks. Her work has been published in journals such as *Cordite Poetry Review*, *Meniscus Literary Journal*, *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Art*, *Culture Theory and Critique*, *Artlink*, and *Derrida Today*. Her creative research has also been presented by Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (Melbourne), Institute for Network Cultures (Amsterdam), Sherman Contemporary Art Foundation, Museum of Contemporary Art Australia, Artspace, Firstdraft (all Sydney) and Next Wave Festival (Melbourne)



AXON: Creative Explorations

2024 vol 14.1 *Translate | Transform | Transdiscipline*

axonjournal.com.au

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

DOI: 10.54375/001/64nzb02d6n
Keywords: Essay, Drag queen storytime, LGBTQA+, Queering Narrative, Intersectionality, Social Justice, Human Rights, Gender Studies

‘WHERE IS THE SAFE SPACE?!’

From Drag Queen Storytime to LGBTQA+ Inclusive Practice

Julian Chen

Curtin University, ORCID: 0000-0001-7788-0462

Wendy Cumming-Potvin

Murdoch University, ORCID: 0000-0002-4961-9379

Kim Andreassen

Curtin University, ORCID: 0000-0002-1767-3813

Bri McKenzie

Curtin University, ORCID: 0000-0003-4595-7028

Abstract

Drag queen storytime (DQS), also known as drag (queen) story-hour, has been implemented in selected libraries and schools across North America, Oceania, and the United Kingdom, to open safe spaces for drag queens to read children’s books that may involve LGBTQA+ characters or subject matters. Unfortunately, despite its popularity with many children and families, DQS has faced intense public protests regarding the perceived LGBTQA+ themed texts, and violent threats against the performers and organisers. Underpinned by queer, transgender, and feminist theory as well as intersectionality, this creative essay probes the current affairs of DQS as it relates to LGBTQA+ human rights. As a platform to highlight LGBTQA+ digital, visual, and print texts, this essay channels the authors’ ‘inner drags’ and draws on queer narrative inquiry to critically reflect and face our own fear and vulnerability in professional and queer undertaking. Using a recent DQS incident as a case in point, we demonstrate how unleashing our inner queerness through drag can empower us as queer academics and allies to counter ‘dragphobia’ and celebrate gender and sexuality diversity. This creative work aspires to provide provocations for further exploration of queer inclusivity across social, cultural, and political intersections, with the intent to promote LGBTQA+ inclusive practices.

'WHERE IS THE SAFE SPACE?!': From Drag Queen Story Time to LGBTQA+ Inclusive Practice

Julian Chen, Wendy Cumming-Potvin, Kim Andreassen, Bri McKenzie

Introduction

Drag queen storytime (DQS), also known as drag (queen) story-hour, is a program that encourages children's literacy development through reading and drag performance in a safe, family orientated environment, such as a library or book shop (Ellis 2022: 95). Originating in San Francisco in 2015, DQS has been implemented successfully in libraries and schools across North America, Oceania, and the United Kingdom, opening safe spaces for drag queens to read LGBTI+ themed books to children. As DQS' visibility and popularity has increased, with shows such as RuPaul's Drag race introducing 'drag beyond niche audiences' (Ellis 2022;2023), so too have protests and resistance against DQS in the form of online and face-to-face intimidation and harassment with protestors conflating 'gender fluidity, same-sex attraction and transgender identity with deviance to justify hateful conduct' (Ellis 2022:104).

The ongoing protests, which include hate speech, physical violence, and property damage (Ellis 2022; Martiny and Lawrence 2023) are associated with an intensification of polarised politics worldwide and the growth of the alt-right movements through social media; some of these groups now classified as extremist (Ellis 2023: 48). In the US, protests against DQS have include hate speech, violence, and property damage (Ellis 2022: 95; Martiny and Lawrence 2023).¹ Protestors also pathologise same-sex attraction and gender expansiveness. In the UK, angry protesters outside libraries brandished signs saying, 'Welcome Groomers' and shouted at parents who took their children to DQS (Jonze 2022), and protests in Canada also include 'slogans that compare drag to paedophilia, sexual exploitation and grooming' (Zoledziowski and Sheldon 2023). DQS events in Boorloo/Perth (Western Australia), have also attracted protestors and the police to ensure the safety of children and general public. After reading Kate Emery's piece in *The West Australian* (2023),² we decided that, as research practitioners living and working in Boorloo/Perth, it was paramount to express our support as queer academics and allies for the artists who facilitate, the families and children who attend, and the staff who organise these DQS events.

Positionality: Who are we as practitioner researchers?

To provide the personal and professional contexts for this essay, we consider it pivotal to share our authentic intersectional identities as queer academics and allies and why we joined forces to contest anti-DQS homo/trans/dragphobia, setting the stage for our queering narratives:

Kim's True Self: *a trans, non-binary, queer, neurodivergent, and chronically ill parent of two young children and an education officer in the intersection of sexuality and disability who spends their time researching sexuality and gender.*

I am ever aware of the large trough of labels that are assigned to me and that 'other' me. Contradictorily, these labels affect my capacity to do, to achieve, and to be, yet are why I can do, can achieve, and can be who I truly am. I worry that changes to the law could take away my basic human rights as they have for others like me across different parts of the world. On top of this, as a parent, I must handle many

judgmental comments, and questions that hetero parents do not. For example, my young child recently was asked ‘which is your real mum?’ by a gaggle of children who are not yet ten.

Most parents aim to maintain their children’s innocence. Let them remain in their magic, made-up worlds where all people are kind, and they do not have to deal with the sobering ‘adult’ realities of discrimination and oppression. Children of queer parents learn quickly about the cruelty and hurtful ignorance in the world. They learn fast that their family is not accepted in the same way as others, and that others can not only judge their family negatively, but promote these views as the norm.

Now here I am diving into the discomfort of exposing myself with a fabulous team of individuals all advocating for acceptance and beyond. Although, I worry about revealing myself and putting a target on my family. Wendy, Bri, Julian, and I all come from different backgrounds and have different perspectives on the rolling waves of oppression towards the LGBTQIA+ community. The most recent onslaught of hate has been directed towards drag queens who provide joy, understanding, acceptance, and a break from the heteronormative patriarchy.

Julian’s True Self: *a queer academic of colour in Applied Linguistics and Inclusive Education*

‘It’s scary to be vulnerable in a public space like this. Queer identity is something that I have never dodged, but I never wear my rainbow flag deliberately’ (McKenzie, Chen and Veliz 2024).

The vignette above is from the first trioethnography of queerness in TESOL education, which I co-authored with my my colleagues Bri McKenzie (also a co-author of this paper) and Leo Veliz and exemplifies how I faced my biggest fear and vulnerability in openly declaring my sexuality as a queer applied linguist and educator in academia. During the project, I realised that my training and teaching practices had been conditioned by textbook-perfect, Eurocentric, and hetero/cis-normative pedagogy. It was not until an opportunity presented itself during the pandemic for me to collaborate with Bri and like-minded colleagues on queering the curriculum and building allyship in education, did I start soul searching for who I really was as a (queer) academic. Since then, I have started using they/them pronouns and updated my academic profiles to reintroduce my queer identity to my professional community. It feels liberating to embrace queerness by bringing light to the darkest and most vulnerable side of my academic pursuits and practices. Enacting queerness in my academic and professional life, rather than masking it or using it as a tokenistic gesture, has shed light on advocating queerness in (language) education from this new home base. Now I am picking up momentum to dive deep into another queer journey with our new Fantastic Four: Wendy, Bri, Kimberley, and me. The recent news article about a DQS session at the City of Perth library in March 2023 being stigmatised and protested against triggered our justifiable anger to fire back at this unjustifiable bigotry and social injustice that is wrong on so many levels. It is also vital for queers, and allies to advocate for humanising pedagogy and queering curriculum through creative and inclusive performance such as DQS. I am channelling my inner drag queen, ‘Sayuri THE Fab’, to contest this injustice in education, and to stand with my drag sisters and

brothers. The audience will see her sashay on the runway in the section below where we introduce our drag personas.

Bri's true self: *A late 30s, White, straight, cisgender woman and queer ally working in Higher Education.*

Channelling my inner drag-queen' was not something I thought I would ever do. My performance of gender has not regularly entered contested space. I did perform gender in a marginally contested way as a teenager. For me, this meant not shaving my legs, not wearing makeup, dressing in bright-coloured flares I bought from the op shop and actively not engaging in the 'girly' space of fashion or hair styling. This led to the perhaps inevitable question from classmates 'are you a lesbian now?' As an adult, my performance of gender has been considerably more muted; I aim to blend in, not stand out. I do not wear bright colours – blues, greys, blacks, and cream for me and I shave my legs on special occasions. When I first watched RuPaul's Drag Race I found myself confronted by the over-the-top performance of stereotypical 'woman-ness.' The bright clothes, the avant-garde designs, the loudness, the nails, the makeup, the mock outrage, and the judgement. This wasn't really my scene; it was all so performative.

But of course, this is the exact point of drag as it forces us to see gender as a performance. My muted gender presentation is still a performance even if it's saying, 'nothing to see here'. Understanding that drag allows us to access parts of our identity that are not easily available to us was how I channelled my inner drag king. Maybe this was a pathway that might enable me to feel confident to take up more space, be a little louder and stand out more?

Wendy's True Self: *A straight, cis-gender ally*

In Cumming-Potvin (2023), I shared my narrative as a straight, cis-gender woman, who identified as an academic ally in support of LGBTQA+ human rights. This professional positioning emerged through a research project showcasing diversity in families and segued into a study exploring how schoolteachers used literature to approach (or avoid) diversity in gender and sexuality. Collaborating with ingenious queer colleagues to contest the othering of expansive genders and sexualities, we critiqued the narrow conceptions of diversity and equity that pervade many institutions. My academic work also allowed me to unearth my childhood memories of becoming an 'imperfect' ally in family, community, and school settings.

Expanding on my previous research, this exciting collaboration with Julian, Bri, and Kim provides a rich opportunity to unpack how my gender identity and expression have been shaped through rigid policies, institutions, and more. I reflected on the ways that my secondary school education in Canada enforced strict gender binaries and codes of sexuality where 'hyper-masculine' boys who played for the football team were revered, and 'hyper-feminine' girls were encouraged to cheerlead and strut their 'stuff'. The rare occasions when a student expressed gender creatively were met with disdain. If a boy practiced ballet, he would be ostracised, and if a girl dressed or acted in a 'masculine' way, she was strewn with derogatory comments. As a teenager, I implicitly understood the rigidity of these codes, and like most students, surveyed my physical demeanour and clothing. Across Canada at that time,

homophobia, transphobia, and discriminatory laws were rampant; apart from inner-city gay clubs, drag shows were generally unheard of. When someone cross dressed at school or community events, it was slapstick comedy where a man would play the character of a large breasted woman in a tight dress to mock the character, not laugh with her.

Queering and dialoguing the literature

Although drag shows have historically been associated with evening theatre in hidden gay bars, the gestural, vocal, and bodily genealogy of these performances is reminiscent of the late nineteenth century (Horowitz 2020). Over the past few years, drag performers have expanded their entertainment circuits to include daytime drag story hours in well-lit classrooms and libraries (Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess 2021). In a complex political context whereby marriage equality and military inclusion have been won, oppressive legislation and gender and sexuality-based discrimination continue to impact LGBTQA+ people, especially those of colour and those living in poverty (Duberman 2020). Drag story hours create opportunities for children and rainbow families to creatively engage in safe spaces through play-based learning and aesthetic transformation (Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess 2021). In this way, a pedagogy of drag serves to authentically communicate queer lives through a destigmatising narrative that connects learning to community.

A pedagogy of drag goes beyond media representation, such as RuPaul's Drag Race, which has gained immense commercial success with mainstream, heteronormative audiences (Horowitz 2020). Due to the global popularity of this televised series, the term drag has often been equated with 'glamorous queens in bedazzled dresses and outrageous wigs', who confidently strut stages in 'impossibly high heels' (Horowitz 2020: 2). However, as Horowitz explains, this stereotypical representation of drag, which is dominated by cis gender, gay men, is a mere fraction of the panoply of drag expressions. Examples of the endless queer characters include drag kings (usually queer cisgender women or trans men performing as men), bio femmes (cisgender women critically performing feminine stereotypes), and bio males (cisgender men critically performing masculine stereotypes).

Given the queering, transformative, and creative nature of our piece, we have decided to deconstruct a conventional 'literature review' section. Instead, we aim to bring the literature to life by weaving our own queerness, and co-construction of knowledge and understanding of the related literature through collective conversations. Truth be told, none of us had been avant-garde enough before this piece to disrupt academic conventions, so this debut is our rebellious trial to challenge the status quo and acknowledges that it is only when we bring our queerness to the fore can we do this creative essay justice. If readers are still with us, we seek your openness to how we approach queer theory while advocating queer narrative inquiry as a legitimate research approach for conducting our own scholarly work related to LGBTQIA+ issues. We hope that readers will appreciate how we turn our own emotional vulnerability into transformative experience by revealing our drag selves through queer narrative inquiry, in our collective responses to a 2023 anti-DQS protest in Borloo/Perth.

Julian: Richard Sawyer (2021) advocates queering narrative theory as a method of queer self-study, an approach which differs from conventional 'storytelling' or self-studies regulated by Eurocentric standards set by Whitewashed institutions and journals. Queer narrative inquiry disrupts the hetero/cisnormative structure, which is linear,

fixed, authoritative, and focused on individual self who is not part of the LGBTQIA+ community. If in this paper we only followed the same Eurocentric model to spin a yarn about DQS, we would be doing it an injustice. Rather, we need to centre on queerness on all bases, and use it to 'evok[e] the doubt, uncertainty, and blurred vision attendant upon the articulation of queer lives and a caveat against taking 'clarity and precision', as methodological goals potentially inadequate to 'messier and blurrier' (queer) textual performances' (Warhol and Lanser cited in Sawyer 2021).

If this line of queer reasoning also speaks to you all, I would suggest enacting queer narrative inquiry in our DQS piece by queering our own stories as academics and allies. Recall the quote above that queering is not always clean-cut, smooth, and linear, and cookie-cutter? The unjust discrimination, prejudice, marginalisation, and bullying against our LGBTQIA+ community daily makes it less rosy. It is much darker and messier, as this queering approach could sometimes make us feel uncomfortable, uncertain, and even fearful yet isn't it also a real world in which we live now? Informed by queer narrative theorists, Sawyer provides some strategies for queering our narratives such as 'nonlinear plurality, the open sense of temporality' (Matz, 2015:242), 'revers[ing the] positions of speaking authority' (de Villiers, 2012, p. 11), 'spinning positionality in different directions' (Sedgwick 1993), and 'breaking with causal, deterministic, natural, and pre-ordained plot lines' (Roof, 2015 cited in Sawyer 2021: 27).

Bri: I hear you Julian, and I relate to the points you make about the 'messiness' of queering our practices. When I consider queer approaches to learning, I orientate towards practices and ways of being, as both educator and learner, that are 'deliberately disruptive' and that purposefully destabilise cultural, political, and social structures (Whitlock 2010). Looking at this through a theoretical teaching lens, queer critical pedagogy extends the dynamics of critical pedagogy by insisting on the exploration and deconstruction of hegemonic and normative ideas, particularly as they relate to sexuality, gender, and bodies (Hackford-Peer 2019). But let's also deconstruct hegemonic expectations of how we might design this piece itself and how we might, as queer academics and allies, come to explore DQS through queer narrative inquiry as our own drag personas.

Kim: The critique of hegemony Bri mentions reminds me of a paper written by Earles (2016) exploring gender in children's books. A rich subject line and one that as a non-binary parent I have not been able to ignore. Earles noted the binary nature of children's books and the reinforcement of gender stereotypes. They disrupted this process by changing the gender of book characters confirming that girls' characters were more able to dabble in masculinity, whilst male characters became unrecognisable without the traditional masculine tropes. Noting the research indicating the link between family and domestic violence and traditional gendered stereotypes, it is easy to see how the queering of research and education is vital (Our Watch, 2021). The intersection of the queerness of DQS and exploring our own drag personas also creates a shift that allows us as researchers to break down what the narrative allows us to explore and plan in a way we haven't before – and that is truly exciting.

Bri: I love how DQS as a queer project, interrupts and destabilises the ordinary activity of an adult reading to children in a library. It does this in part by doing what drag

always does, drawing attention to gender as a performance. I feel that narrative inquiry as a research approach is ideal for us as researchers because using narrative research methodologies allows for the construction and reconstruction of our stories as they evolve with our developing identities. Narrative inquiry is ideal for research that deals with the complexity of (un)knowing our ways of being in the world. We assert that our narrative inquiry is queer because we consciously seek to embody and better understand queerness through our drag alter egos. We also seek to destabilise normative approaches to research by handing over some sections of this piece to those alter egos as they explore their identities and responses to DQS.

Wendy: Bri, I agree that queer epistemologies and the narrative form can support our re-imagining of research inquiry. I am reminded of the work of Bradway (2021) who pondered the relationship between queer theory and the narrative. Bradway suggested that far from being reductive, queer narrative forms can involve multiple, threaded lines of conflicted temporality, which can be characterised by surprise, tension, and parallel intrigues. Significant to queer culture are (re)imagined possibilities, such as stories of coming out and spilling the tea. A vivid example argued in Bradway is Gloria Anzaldua (1987) who has written in Spanish and English about their conflicted narrative of *Borderlands/La Frontera*, which involved being a queer mestiza, who was raised a Catholic. However, as Julian has argued, much queer, scholarly work has been whitewashed, thereby eclipsing diverse ethnic, and linguistic voices. Similarly, Hames-Garcia and Martinez (2011) highlighted the often-forgotten narrative of Sylvia Rivera, a Latina transgender woman, who played a significant role in the New York Stonewall riots and advocated for transgender rights in the United States for approximately three decades.

Let's spill the tea: Our queer narratives

All: In the following, we take it up a notch by demonstrating how to champion queering practices through creating and dialoguing our inner drag personae; in this we are playful, free, and give creative expression to our inner drag selves. Motivated by queer/feminist theory (Anzaldua 1987; Bradway 2021) and aiming to subvert authoritative, hetero/cisnormativity, our queering approach liberates us to enact our queerness by awakening our inner drag identity and transforming into drag queens, drag kings, or in between so that we can vicariously and collectively connect to the lived experiences of drag performers/storytellers. Whilst we Fantastic Four are holding a safe third space for each other throughout the process of dialoguing this creative essay, our drag personae are at different stages of development and are thus expressed in different formats. Truthfully, most of us are drag newbies, except for Sayuri THE Fab who was only in full drag once at a friend's birthday party. Despite our 'noviceness' in physical drag form, we are emboldened to unlock our creativity and audacity to experiment with play-based pedagogy by juxtaposing our selfies with drag filters, afforded by digital technology such as Instagram and Snap filters. Thus, you see our four fledgling drag queens/kings trailblazing, blurring, and blending the physical, virtual, and queer spaces whilst disrupting the normative academic genre by bringing drag performance, queering narrative, criticality, and creativity to life. Our intention is to experiment with play-based pedagogy and creative transformation

(Horowitz 2020; Keenan and Lil Miss Hot Mess, 2021), inspired from the context of drag story hour.

Meet Julian's inner Drag Queen: *Sayuri THE Fab*

We're born naked, everything else is drag. [Drag's] a social statement and a big f-you to male-dominated culture' (RuPaul in Aitkenhead 2018).

Yes, mama Ru, I totally agree with your definition of 'drag' and like to add that it is not only a 'f-you to male dominated culture', but also a f-you to a neoliberal system that is fuelled by White supremacy that favours social and gender conformity and discriminates against vulnerable groups such as LGBTQIA+ students and teachers. My drag, Sayuri THE Fab, is a bold, quick-witted (OK, sometimes bitchy), bubbly, funny and deep down a caring and loving queen. Besides her normal academic life, she uses her drag as a colourful and creative form to express her fun loving persona and gorgeousness without fear, savouring the moment of kicking some Eurocentric and heteronormative ass. Her F-A-B-U-L-O-U-S persona emboldens her advocacy and allyship to approach hard conversations around any forms of injustice and discrimination against gender diversity, race, and sexuality.

Meet Kim's inner Drag Monarch: *Hellen Bak*

Revealing my drag persona and pulling faer out of myself was a wild ride.³ For someone who is already so colourful, so eclectic, and does not fit the traditional society norms, where was there to go? Also, had I not been performing gender for over 30 years before I realised my true self? How could I separate the individual identities and ensure I was doing them all justice? The digital age and photo effects and filters on social media allowed the exploration of my drag monarch self, resulting in the welcoming of Hellen Bak! A self distinct from selves that have come before. Hellen is an ethereal queer fairy who broke out from a trained 1950s housewife pixie dream. Fae is sexy and filthy, whilst also being the epitome of a manic unicorn's most feminine pastel dream. Fae brings joy and rainbows to the world, whilst balancing the lightness and darkness that exists within each person. One day Hellen may have a moustache and man bun, the next fae has a pussycat wig and fabulous glasses. Within Hellen is a non-binary parent who, for the sake of their children, wants to dismantle the patriarchy and gender binaries reinforced throughout society. Hellen oscillates between the masculine and feminine in a way that highlights the variability of all people. Fae is born from the hope that one day all people will feel free to be themselves and dress, act, behave, and do the things that bring them joy regardless of the stereotype attached to them. Fae has travelled to hell and back to unlearn bigoted views and beliefs and learn true acceptance of themselves. It took fae over 30 years to achieve this feat and thus, Hellen truly believes that all people have this journey in them and are ready to be awoken!

Meet Bri's inner Drag King: *Jett Setter*

Who am I? I guess you'd like to know. But I won't tell you much. I make my own plans, go my own way; make my life up as I go along. I won't stick around for long in any one place so, if I'm in town, don't expect me to answer your call. You might find me at the bar, a half-drunk G'n'T in my hand. Or at the beach, lounging and working on my tan.

But usually, I don't have time for chit chat; I have another place to be. Jett Setter is free of connections, and he does exactly what he wants. He accepts others on face value and expects the same in return. Jett Setter explores his freedom by indulging in beautifying activities, lounging, and travelling at will.

Meet Wendy's inner drag: Marie-Philippe

My inner persona Marie-Philippe is often perceived as non-binary, sometimes as feminine and occasionally as masculine. Through their core sense of self, Marie-Philippe demonstrates confidence to establish safe spaces for being, acting and moving. Marie-Philippe wears purple eye shadow and dons a short, layered bob, dipped in pink-brunette balayage. On most days, no matter the weather, they pull on a grey bowler's hat, a dark double-breasted, suit, and black lace-up combat boots. Sometimes, underneath the suit jacket, Marie-Philippe wears lacy white blouses with long frilly sleeves. Often, Marie-Philippe is addressed as them and prefers to be called, Marie-Philippe. Sometimes, Marie Philippe uses the pronoun she, and prefers to be called Marie. Occasionally, Marie Philippe opts for Philippe and the pronoun he.

Marie-Philippe regularly speaks English, but other times, they speak French, and sometimes, Franglais or a combination of other languages. Wherever they find themselves, Marie-Phillippe attempts to observe people attentively, and 'read the room', before speaking. In a multiplicity of situations, they feel comfortable: from dancing at trendy ballrooms in New York, trekking in Nepal, to delivering meals at homeless shelters in Vancouver, visiting remote Aboriginal communities in Western Australia, attending haut couture pride parades in Paris and teaching at corporate events in Sydney. Marie-Philippe advocates for LGBTQ human rights and is not afraid to call out homophobia, transphobia, biphobia, dragphobia, racism and sexism. When the going gets tough, and uncomfortableness overtakes people's emotions, Marie-Philippe confronts their own biases and continues to seek social justice.

Our Drag Reactions to DQS

Sayuri THE Fab: So here comes my drag sister, Cougar Morrison, who was reading a children's book to kids during City of Perth's DQS in March 2023. Regrettably, a 'giving back to the community' event was being politicised and egged by hetero-/cishnormative protestors outside the City of Perth Library, shouting 'Say no to Drag Queen Storytime' and accusing participating parents of 'child abuse'. Cougar Morrison's experience epitomises what other drag queens, allies, and even parents who support this form of creative education must endure across the nation and globe. As sister Cougar rightly put forth, '...people think we do something very different to what we do here. I'm just going to read some books to you' (Emery 2023). This no-hidden-agenda, well-intentioned volunteer service provided by drag queens was also supported by Nat Latter, head for Boorloo/Perth DQS, who states/believes/argues that DQS promotes 'literacy and a love of storytelling by engaging with kids' love of pageantry, dress-ups and self-expression' (Emery, 2023). Who can tell me what is wrong with using performing arts to bring love, joy, colour, and animation to children's literacy development, and increase their motivation to read? Is it wrong to some people because the storyteller is a drag queen who dresses and acts differently

from the so-called 'normal' people? I need to summon my other three drag siblings to help me debunk this myth.

Hellen Back: DQS would have meant to me so much as a young child. Using the immortal question that Ru asks of all of her finale queens: 'Here's a photo of 3-year-old Kim, if you could time travel, what would Hellen Bak have to say to little Kim. My message would be:

Love yourself, love what you are and who you are. Do not change that for anyone! Forget what everyone expects (and demands!). Do not allow yourself to be squashed down and to limit yourself by the definition of femininity forced upon you by books, movie, TV, school, parents...life. Push all the shame of being different to the side and be proud of your uniqueness. Be joyous, and happy, and your amazing self. Authentic you is going to inspire people including your children to be authentically themselves. So much so, that one of your children is going to throw away the idea of having a superpower because they love themselves the way that they are! That kind of self-assurance would have been so important for three-year-old you, and all throughout your life. In all those hard times where you have dealt with the fear of people finding out the real you. The queer, neurodivergent, non-binary FINERY!!

Be the example of how you can be yourself, in your own way, not hurting others (despite constantly being hurt by others) and show how fantastic and truly bright that can be. People are people, fabulous is fabulous, and drag queens are pure innocence, joy, and animated fun.

Jett Setter: I feel privileged to know my queer compatriots Julian/Sayuri and Kim/Hellen who do their own thing. I'm a live and let live kind of guy, but to read your thoughts and reflections is to better understand true queer lived experience, including the pain and exhaustion of dealing with day-to-day violence. I'm learning that to 'queer' something is not to sexualise it. Fear of drag queens and of DQS itself is rooted in irrational ideas of 'sexual emergency' and the notion that non-conforming gender identities are somehow 'deceptive' (Ellis 2022). If we want to make early childhood education more inclusive and accessible to all families and children, DQS is one powerful tool we can draw on. Queering the reading of books to children is about disrupting normalcy, in a safe and inclusive environment. What message does it send to children? That there are endless ways to think, act and be; that all bodies, shapes, colours and expressions are legitimate. The energy of DQS events is fun, expressive, creative, and perfect for kids. We as a community, must not let our unfounded fears crush this beautiful thing!

Marie-Phillippe: I agree with Jett Setter, Sayuri and Hellen. The banning of drag story times can impact negatively not only on the performer but also on the children and families who wish to engage with this genre of storytelling. As an experienced educator, I am cognisant that reading aloud to children promotes language and literacy development, whether through family, community, or classroom practices. Valuing literacy programs organised in safe public spaces, such as libraries, allows children to be scaffolded in learning to read and reading to learn. As children learn to read, their engagement with read aloud sessions can strengthen reading fluency, build vocabulary and solidify graphophonic knowledge. But reading aloud can also support

the creation of collaborative learning spaces, which as Freire noted, can encourage learners to shift their gaze from the word to the world (1976). Discovering more about their world through stories allows children to develop curiosity and empathy. When reading out loud sessions are intertwined with critical discussions, learners can be scaffolded to better understand humanity through diverse landscapes, points of view and characters.

Our Collective Reflections

Kim: When I first started writing this piece it was easy to describe the litany of recent abuses done to the trans and gender-diverse population, and to me, Kim. The pain is palpable and there is a shared sense of loss throughout the global queer community, and raising awareness is valuable. When I came to reflect from Hellen's perspective, however, there was joy, togetherness, and hope. So rather than listing atrocities, I want to approach this in true drag fashion and embrace the FUN. For what is drag and DQS if not a celebration of individuality, self, labels, and life!

DQS opens the door to promoting the LGBTQIA+ rainbow. It allows openness in discussions and learnings beyond the binary. It lets people who have been oppressed and discriminated against to feel seen and heard. It also allows them to enjoy progressive non-heteronormative books being read, whilst reinforcing uniqueness and individuality. The glorious conversation sparked by DQS allows for subtle (or not!) shifts in gender roles and allowing people to stop being limited by perceived masculinity and femininity. In turn, the acceptance and celebration of trans and gender-diverse people is promoted.

Julian: As a queer academic, I am all for creativity and free form of expression in arts and education. DQS is the epitome of bringing colourful art form, literacy, and above all, playfulness to children, allowing them to be part of those storybooks animated by our fabulous Queens to bring characters to life! Being a language educator, I also like to share that younger kids learn and retain the reading text better when they can also be fully immersed in a literacy circle by performing (using gestures to make meaning) along with the drag queen storyteller, whilst listening to the narration that comprises the storyline, vocabulary, queer protagonist, climax, and resolution. There is also more to those DQS books than meets the eye—it is not just drag queens wearing exaggerative makeup and costumes to entertain kids; rather, the combined performing art and literacy can educate our next generation what it means to respect, acknowledge, and celebrate gender diversity and inclusion in all aspects of our lives. Though long overdue, it is about time to call for promotion of non-heteronormative books and materials that are gender diverse and inclusive in education.

Bri: It took this exercise for me to really realise how gender is performative. Like I understood it intellectually, right? But to recognise it and enact it? While I used a social media filter to gently ease myself into the exercise, and while my drag persona isn't, at this stage, embodied, he is nonetheless performed here, in this publication. In this way, technology serves to support my initial efforts to 'put my toe in the water'. So, when we're talking about educating allies and we talk about how gender is performative well, try this, you know? When you do it, all these things are going off in your brain all the time; like 'ding, ding'! All these things that I do in the day to day

that are performative elements of my gender that are just, you know, me; because it's easy for me to get to do that, right? I don't even have to think about it because of my inherent privilege in being cisgender. So, I feel very lucky doing this exercise and discovering Jett, because I learned so much about my secret yearnings and how I can, if I choose, enact this performance of gender differently.

Wendy: Writing this piece was a daunting but rewarding process, characterised by intensity and vulnerability. Early in the drafting process, when I pushed the leave button on our group TEAMS meetings, my confidence would evaporate. My train of thoughts would straggle, pushing, and pulling, like gum boots across rain puddles. For comfort, I would turn to my kettle and afternoon cups of tea. My thoughts would stumble through thick cognitive bog, permeated by my negative interior monologue 'The researcher's inner drag. . . 'Sounds glamorous . . . glittery . . . creative. . . 'But is it frivolous?' My researcher's identity fractured into minuscule pieces. 'What would people think? What would they say?' I imagined a splashy headline in the daily news: 'White, middle-aged, cisgender, straight female academic appropriates drag character. . .' Images of rainbow clouds, ruby stilettos, and pink boa feathers spun in my head. I quizzed myself, 'How can I spill the tea? 'Finding my inner drag, seems. . . so ephemeral, so. . . scary'.

Fortunately, I have been privileged to work with this supportive team of practitioner researchers who accepted me, with all my foibles and insecurities. When I drafted long distractions and roundabouts, these same colleagues encouraged me to continue. When I delved into sensitive material about my childhood, the team stood by me shoulder to shoulder. Over time, I learned to ask for help and to listen intently. I started to draft online, in front of the group, without fear of criticism. I learned to trust in the solidarity of collegial friendship. The application Bitmoji also served as a tool to scaffold a liminal space where I could playfully explore the beginnings of an alternative identity. Through concerted, patient efforts, the team has been able to achieve outcomes, which have significantly strengthened my empowerment as a researcher, ally, and activist educator.

As We Sashay Away

In the future, drawing on our theatrical 'queens', 'kings' and non-binary personae, we as drag performers in full makeup and fabulous costumes, may engage children and families to animate queer characters and events in storytelling. Behind the glamour is the hope to nurture children's love for reading, develop literacy skills, build understanding of inclusion, and above all, foster appreciation for diversity. Unfortunately, vehement opposition towards the DQS is symptomatic of ongoing discrimination against rainbow communities, including anti-transgender legislation, book bans and erasure from formal and informal school curricula.

In this creative essay, we enacted queering narratives to channel our inner drags to challenge, disrupt, and call out homo/trans/dragphobia vis-a-vis DQS. As professionals and academics in fields that privilege traditional qualitative research methods, we initially found this queering approach, particularly in a public space, pushing us outside of our comfort zones as can be seen in our most honest narratives that unearth our fear and vulnerability. However, throughout our authentic, critical queering inquiries, we have also gained newfound knowledge and understanding of how to employ queer narratives as a legitimate approach to explore LGBTQA+

issues as practitioner researchers. We were also able to transform our initial fear into queer power that helped us really investigate our true selves and reclaimed our intersectionality. Hence, this queering practice has impacted us profoundly, empowering us to take risks by bringing innovation, creativity, and playfulness to normative academic undertakings. As our narratives unfold, we aim to further unleash queerness in our pedagogy, advocacy, allyship training, and above all, our research dissemination in creative forms, such as in this collective piece. Future transdisciplinary collaborations across larger groups of educators, researchers and community stakeholders will provide new arenas for us to showcase the implications of these drag story processes for research, teaching, and even ways of thinking.

Notes

¹ Across the US, protesters at DQS events include members of White nationalist and supremacist groups such as the Proud Boys (see Laviertes 2023; Livingston 2023; Martiny and Lawrence 2023).

² Anti-DQS protestors called DQS a form of ‘child abuse’ (Emery 2023) and at a protest the following month at a different library justified their actions in the name of child protection (Ho 2023).

³ Fae/Faer/Faers is a set of neopronouns someone (e.g., non-binary people) may use to refer to themselves as it aligns with how they feel about their identity. For more information on neopronouns see: <https://www.hrc.org/resources/understanding-neopronouns>. To learn how to use different pronouns including neopronouns: <https://www.minus18.org.au/pronouns>.

Works Cited

- Aitkenhead D 2018 'RuPaul: 'Drag is a big f-you to male-dominated culture.' *The Guardian* (3 March) <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/2018/mar/03/rupaul-drag-race-big-f-you-to-male-dominated-culture> (accessed 3 October 2023)
- Anzaldua G 1987 *Borderlands/La Frontera: the new mestiza* San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books.
- Bradway T 2021 'Queer Narrative Theory and the Relationality of Form,' *PMLA*, Vol. 136(5): 711–727.
- Cumming-Potvin W 2023 *LGBTQI+ Allies in Education, Advocacy, Activism, and Participatory Collaborative Research* New York: Routledge
- Duberman M 2018 *Has the Gay Movement Failed?* Oakland, California: University of California Press.
- Earles J 2017 'Reading Gender : A feminist, queer approach to children's literature and children's discursive agency,' *Gender and Education*, Vol. 29(3): 369–388.
- Ellis JR 2023 *Representation, Resistance and the Digiqueer: Fighting for Recognition in Technocratic Times*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Ellis JR 2022 'A Fairy Tale Gone Wrong: Social media, recursive hate and the politicisation of drag queen storytime.' *The Journal of Criminal Law*, Vol. 86(2): 94–108.
- Emery K 2023 'Bigotry Drags On as Protestors Accuse Parents of Child Abuse at Perth Library.' *The West Australian* (21 May) <https://thewest.com.au/opinion/kate-emery-bigotry-drags-on-as-protestors-accuse-parents-of-child-abuse-at-perth-library-c10679772> (accessed 21 May 2023).
- Freire, P (1976) *Education: The practice of freedom*, London: Writers and Readers.
- Hackford-Peer, K 2019 "'That wasn't very free thinker': Queer critical pedagogy in the early grades,' *Critical Studies of Education*, Vol. 11: 75–92.
- Hames-Garcia, M and EJ Martinez, E 2011 'Introduction' in M Hames-Garcia and EJ Martinez (eds) *Gay Latino Studies: a critical reader*, pp 1–18 Durham: Duke University Press.
- Ho C 2023 'Drag queen storytelling event at Maylands library attracts protesters and counter-protesters.' ABC News (17 June) <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-06-17/protesters-rally-at-drag-queen-storytelling-event-maylands/102490866> (accessed 2 May 2024).
- Horowitz, K 2020 *Drag, Interperformance, and the Trouble with Queerness*, New York: Routledge
- Jonze, T 2022 "'I'm just trying to make the world a little brighter': How culture wars hijacked drag queen story hour.' *The Guardian* (11 August) <https://www.theguardian.com/culture/2022/aug/11/im-just-trying-to-make-the-world-a-little-brighter-how-the-culture-wars-hijacked-drag-queen-story-hour> (accessed 15 August 2023).
- Keenan, H and Lil Miss Hot Mess 2020 'Drag pedagogy: The playful practice of queer imagination in early childhood.' *Curriculum Inquiry*, Vol. (50)5: 440–461.
- Lavietes, M 2023 'Protesters Are Bloodied and Arrested at NYC Drag Story Hour.' NBC Out News (21 March) <https://www.nbcnews.com/nbc-out/out-news/protesters-bloodied-arrested-nyc-drag-story-hour-rcna75724> (accessed 15 August 2023).
- Martiny C and S Lawrence 2023 *A Year of Hate: Understanding Threats and Harassment Targeting Drag Shows and the LGBTQ+ Community* <https://www.isdglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Anti-drag-Mobilization-Efforts-Targeting-LGBTQ-People-in-the-US.pdf>

McKenzie, B, J Chen and L Veliz 2024 'Problematizing Intersectionality, Allyship and Queer Pedagogy in TESOL Down Under: A trioethnographic approach' in E Trinh, J Coda and K M Reynolds (eds) pp 3–19 *Teaching Pride Forward: Global LGBTQ+ allyship in ELT*, Alexandria: TESOL Press.

Our Watch 2021 *Change the Story: A shared framework for the primary prevention of violence against women in Australia* (second edition) <https://media-cdn.ourwatch.org.au/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2021/11/18101814/Change-the-story-Our-Watch-AA.pdf> (accessed 3 October 2023).

Sawyer, RD 2022 'Queer Narrative Theory and Currere: Thoughts toward queering Currere as a method of queer (curricular) self-study.' *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*, Vol. 37(1): 23–38.

Whitlock, RU 2010 'Getting Queer: Teacher education, gender studies, and the cross-disciplinary quest for queer pedagogies,' *Issues in Teacher Education*, Vol. 19(2): 81–104.

Zoledziowski, A and M Sheldon 2023 'These Drag Performers Say Protests, Threats Won't Stop Them Reading to Kids at Storytime Events.' CBC (16 September) <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/drag-storytime-events-1.6967566> (accessed 3 October 2023).

Acknowledgements

We want to acknowledge students like Nex Benedict (Rest in Power) and others who we have lost to unsafe and unwelcome school environments, and we offer our condolences to their friends and family members. We hope that we all can make ripples that prevent such loss in the future, and we can see all LGBTQIA+ young people grow into adults and live their authentic selves.

About the authors

Julian Chen (they/them) is an Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics/TESOL and Course Coordinator of Asian Languages at Curtin University, Western Australia. Julian's research synergises technology-mediated task-based language teaching, inclusive education, critical pedagogy, and participatory action research. They are currently working on several queering curriculum projects to build gender diversity, equity, inclusion in education.

Wendy Cumming-Potvin (she/her) is an Associate Professor and Director of Research in the School of Education at Murdoch University in Western Australia. For over two decades, her research and teaching have highlighted diversity, equity and inclusion. Her latest book, *LGBTQI+ Allies in Education, Advocacy, Activism, and Participatory Collaborative Research*, was published last year by Routledge.

Kim Andreassen (they/them) is a highly passionate and enthusiastic sexologist with a focus on diversity and inclusion. Kim has a mix of educational qualifications in data, sexology, education, disability and is a current PhD candidate at Curtin University. Kim desires to advance the field of sexology, particularly within the intersection of gender diversity, sexual diversity and intersex variations, disability, and other marginalised populations. They are currently working on several queering curriculum projects and hope to enact positive social change through education, support, policy, and best practice.

Bri McKenzie (she/her) is a professional learning designer and LGBTQIA+ inclusive education consultant living and working on Noongar boojar in Boorloo/ Perth (Western Australia). Bri has a passion for inclusive education at all levels and is currently working on several research and writing projects promoting queering pedagogies.



AXON: Creative Explorations

2024 vol 14.1 *Translate | Transform | Transdiscipline*

axonjournal.com.au

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

DOI: 10.54375/001/s4wkyttofK
Keywords: **Essay–dialogue**, Ecofeminism,
Antarctica, Counter-histories, Collaborative
writing, Narrative, Speculative fiction,
Global warming

WRITING ON ICE

An ecofeminist conversation on Ursula K. Le Guin's 'Sur' and the fate of Antarctica

Michelle Hamadache

Jane Messer

Macquarie University, ORCID: 0000-0002-4546-8710

University of Canberra, ORCID: 0000-0001-7482-5767

WRITING ON ICE: AN ECOFEMINIST CONVERSATION ON URSULA K. LE GUIN'S 'SUR' AND THE FATE OF ANTARCTICA

Michelle Hamadache & Jane Messer

Introduction

The Antarctic of Ursula K. Le Guin's 'Sur', a speculative short story that imagines the continent as a vast uncharted wilderness of ice largely untouched by the human, no longer exists. At the time the story was published in 1982, only a few dozen to a few hundred people were visiting Antarctica annually (SAT 2023). They followed upon the explorations of Ernest Shackleton, Robert F. Scott, and Roald Amundsen earlier in the century, and the work of scientists and governmental agencies which led to the original twelve-nation Antarctic Treaty of 1959.¹ Today, well over 70,000 people visit Antarctica each year (SAT, 2023).

But for a very long time, the Antarctic was unique amongst the world's continents for its 'complete absence of women' (Leane 2009:509) and, until the late twentieth century, it was almost exclusively through literature that women experienced the Antarctic. This gendered history makes 'Sur' doubly speculative. Firstly, it's an invented feminist genealogy integrated with the real history of exploration of the South Pole: it is not Admunsen, but an intrepid group of nine South American women who are the first to arrive at 90 degrees South. Secondly, despite a life-long fascination with the continent, Le Guin (1929–2018) did not visit Antarctica.

Women too often just disappear from history. Too often they are erased, excised, or just left out. What Le Guin does so skilfully is to have 'Sur' perform two movements, one feminist, one ecological, that together place the women on that continent, and map a counter history of endurance and invention through the women explorers. In her essay 'The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction', Le Guin argues against the established privilege of the hero's story, or the killer's story, with its origins in hunting and warfare (Le Guin 1997: 156). From anthropologist Elizabeth Fisher's thesis that the first tool of human evolution was not the hunter's spear but the humble container (1979) and Virginia Woolf's definition of the 'hero as bottle' (Woolf cited in Le Guin 1997: 154), Le Guin develops a theory of 'co-implication' of 'stories and technologies' (Haraway 2014), proposing that the story is the ancient woven bag and the 'bottle as hero' (Le Guin 1997: 154). For Le Guin, the bottle and the story are both containers, 'a thing that holds something else' (154) In the schema of 'Sur' the story is not a hero's journey, but a container for the everyday acts of curiosity, community, and nurturing.

'Sur' is a story about the work and imaginations of women, historically trivialised within patriarchal cultures (Evans, Hemmings and Henry et al. 2014). As an ecofeminist text, it 'draws attention to differences that have been deemed 'not to matter', yet have reified and oppressed women historically (Colebrook 2017: 9). Le Guin's 'Sur' is self-reflexive on this point; unlike their male counterparts in real life, the women in her story did not raise a flag on a pole when they reached the far South Pole, write an impactful memoir, or publish their scientific findings. Their story is the vessel, not the spear, and they choose not to disrupt. 'Sur' asks whether valuing the ephemeral over the enduring, good housekeeping over waste, and community over personal achievement, might be an ethics with which to confront Earth's environmental degradation. The women choose not to leave a trace.

As two women with a love of Le Guin and a passion for the short story, we asked, could we write about 'Sur' in a way that was faithful to the feminist, collaborative spirit of the story? Tired of the solitary page, of facing the questions of where to next, we decided to explore the enterprise of writing together. We asked, why do we so often write alone? *Why* write alone? Why write alone when you can write with a friend, a colleague, a conspirator, who laughs and frets with you, or pushes back and willingly says they do not agree and asks, 'have you thought of this X or Y or Z instead?'. This essay–dialogue is our other way. Its structure honours the feminism of the great Ursula K. Le Guin and her story 'Sur'. It is a work that arose out of our Zoom dialogues where we explored just a few of Le Guin's many short stories, essays, novels, blogs, and interviews without the aim of critical conquest. After talking about 'Sur' and reading it again and again, we wanted to pay tribute to the work and the writer whose radical imaginings sustained us during the pandemic lockdown.

'Sur' first appeared in Le Guin's short story collection *The Compass Rose* and *The New Yorker*, and was republished in 2023 by the feminist publisher Silver Press in *Space Crone*, an anthology of Le Guin's fiction and essays. Like much of Le Guin's work, 'Sur' is speculative fiction, though the speculative element is not another planet or world, but a reimagined past. It is inventive, it is environmentally prescient, and it presents a critique of patriarchy that is as relevant today as it was in 1982 when first published.

For those who haven't yet read 'Sur' or who read it so long ago that their memory of it has submerged itself like Hemingway's iceberg, the story is framed as a true report written after the expedition has concluded. Subtitled 'A Summary Report of the Yelcho Expedition to the Antarctic, 1909–10', it includes a final note written in 1929. The narrator explains that the idea for the expedition came about in 1908 after she'd loaned her friend, Juana, Robert Falcon Scott's record of his first expedition to Antarctica, *The Voyage of the Discovery*. Juana reads Scott's book and says to her one morning when they're leaving Mass, 'Well, if Captain Scott can do it, why can't we?' (Le Guin 2023: 9). From that audacious impulse, the planning for the expedition begins. In August 1909, nine women from Peru, Argentina, and Chile gather in Punta Arenas in Chile, and sail west to McMurdo Sound, setting up their first camp on the Ross Ice Shelf in September of that year.

Reading the story, we occupied two literary spaces: the space of the text's snow-bound, ice-sheeted Antarctic, and our virtual collaboration via Zoom, initially during the lockdowns of 2020. The weather in the story was unrelentingly cold, while we conversed through a range of seasons, from Sydney houses in the northern beaches and the inner west. Each of our conversations opened with one or other of us sharing a new discovery about the Antarctic's geology, the rapid, calamitous melts taking place, and facts of the expeditions of Amundsen, Scott, and Shackleton. We mapped the concurrences and divergences between the short story and the lived history. We soon found ourselves referring to Le Guin familiarly as 'Ursula'. Drawing her into our circle, as a fellow feminist, writer, and eco-critic was reassuring and inspiring.

Le Guin builds 'Sur' with geographical and historical precision. Yet for all its historical precision, reading 'Sur' presented us with a heightened, conjectural experience: firstly, because it is about an expedition of women to the Antarctic that did not happen, and secondly, because it is not possible to read it without recognising that the certainty of the ice has gone (Carrington 2023), and that climate change is being writ upon the Antarctic faster than anywhere else on Earth. The Antarctic that was true to the story already only exists now in narratives, explorer's journals, science reportage, pre-1980s fiction, and documentary and research film, such as the

thousand rolls of 35mm and 8mm film recorded from sea planes in the 1960s and 1970s for an international Antarctic geoscience survey (Than 2017).

As we read and reread the story, then turned to research the specific places described in the story such as McMurdo's Ice Shelf, we shared our shock that every single one of the landmarks in Le Guin's short story has irrevocably changed, in just forty years.



Michelle Hamdache (MH): I always think the power of a story exists in its afterlife. The image from 'Sur' that I can never forget no matter how much time lapses between readings, is the image of the base camp dwelling the women build beneath the ice. In my mind's eye, I see their dwelling as though looking into an underworld through a window of ice, or a skylight, an ice-light I guess. It is haunting to imagine the women building a sort of temporary utopia under the ice. A shelter that is far more than an explorer's hut, not merely instrumental for survival but also nurturing a place of creation, of sculptures and libraries, what the women call their 'prairie-dog village'.

Jane Messer (JM): They're exhilarated to have left repression behind, and to be building this new kind of village. Their families don't know that they are at the Antarctic. Some believe they're in Paris and others that they're at a retreat in a Bolivian convent (9). For six months, the women leave behind their usual lives of marriage and families, in which they have had to hide their desires. Here in the Antarctic, they give themselves wholeheartedly to curiosity and exploration, making their way across the glaciers, sastrugi and the altiplanos with unending noons, towards the South Pole. Towering over everything in this story, is Sur, Antarctica, and Le Guin's exquisite evocations of the place. The narrator observes for instance, 'the strange silent flight of the rainbow-fringed cloud wisps' (19). After a blizzard had pursued them for a week, the narrator says simply that she 'cannot describe it. I wished we had not gone to the Pole. I think I wish it even now' (22). But she does describe it, brilliantly: 'It is strange now to remember how thin our voices sounded in that great silence. It was overcast, white weather, without shadows and without visible horizon . . . We had come to a white place on the map, that void, and there we flew and sang like sparrows' (19).

MH: It's such vivid writing isn't it, emblematic of Le Guin's ability to build whole worlds from words. Yet part of the impact of her Antarctic image is the way it resonates with a particular way of being in the world. A way of being that Le Guin sets up as decidedly feminine, feminist, one that doesn't seek to leave its mark upon the surface, but rather works hard at immanence; at dwelling within the bosom of the natural world. The hut beneath the ice, a *cryo-oikos*/ice--home, also becomes a metaphor for the hidden, behind-the-scenes work of domesticity, of home building and provisioning; the invisible labour is continuous, unacknowledged, but ever present. Again, this is so much a part of Le Guin's oeuvre: that desire to make the stuff of the everyday the stuff of fiction, using the speculative genre to defamiliarise the domestic and the ordinary. I also wonder if, when 'Sur' speculates an enduring 'living ice', one that will 'last as long as stone' (17), this is a moment to pause upon the strange, the uncanny, pairing of 'living' and 'stone' to describe the quality of ice. Neither living things nor stone endure: the shoreline of every beach is testimony to the power of erosion. Le Guin's style is distinctive for its unerring precision with language, so when she creates paradoxical couplings, it's the reader's job to ask why.

JM: Those paradoxical couplings remind me of James Wood, where he says in *How Fiction Works* that 'even complex prose is quite simple because of that mathematical finality by which

a perfect sentence cannot admit of an infinite number of variations' (Wood 2008: 138). Though Le Guin never visited Antarctica she writes of it with such grace and verisimilitude. I particularly love this sentence for its balance, the way that the 'faded blue' is echoed again in the 'towering pale': 'The steam from our own small funnel faded blue on the twilit water as we crept along under the towering pale wall of ice' (15). Because she evokes the landscape and its deep and beautiful cold so very well, I experience a nostalgia for an icesheet that I have never known, other than through the narratives and documentary.

When Le Guin was writing 'Sur' sometime in 1981 and 1982, climate change was only beginning to enter our collective consciousnesses, and it was still principally a concern amongst scientists. Three years later the astrophysicists Farman, Gardiner and Shanklin (1985) published their discovery of the hole in the atmospheric ozone layer over the Antarctic. Six years later the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established by the United Nations to assess what was known about climate change. Indeed, 'Sur' is not the first story in which Le Guin critiques the damage wrought upon the environment by capitalism, and what she describes as 'uncontrolled economic (and population) growth' (2011). Her 1975 novella *The New Atlantis* had already imagined the city of New York flooded by rising sea levels.

MH: Yet when she was asked about her prescience about climate change in an interview for *The Boston Globe*, she expressed angry dismay, saying she was haunted by that suggestion because all she was doing was 'listening to the scientists' who were warning, even then, of the peril of human impact (Freeman 2014). But I have to confess, Jane, that as much as I've come to love 'Sur', and even though I've held the images of those vast areas of snow and ice in my mind for all these many months of conversation about the story, I'd never of my own volition have read the story. I don't really like speculative fiction and I detest stories and films set in the snow, so 'Sur' having such a powerful afterlife is entirely thanks to you making me read it.

JM: Michelle, it's just a matter of dressing warmly for the reading excursion. And yes, the Antarctic truly occupies a powerful space in our imaginations, doesn't it? It finds its way into us through many routes. While for you there's the horror of the cold and white ice, for me, I've always longed to go there, from when I was a child sitting beneath one of Scott's sleds which, remarkably, hung on the wall of my Sydney primary school hall. What I think is happening in 'Sur' is that Le Guin is doing something that is now very modern, very much a response to our understanding of the Anthropocene, which is informed by feminism's intersectional critiques of domination, colonisation, frontierism, and power.

MH: There's such a deep ethic of respect in the story for the wildness of the place and of our responsibility towards others, animal and human. The women actively disdain the need to write themselves upon Antarctica, to claim it. When Juana, Dolores, and the narrator at last reach the South Pole on 22 December 1909, two years before Amundsen and Scott, they discuss leaving some kind of 'mark or monument, a snow cairn, a tent pole and flag.' But they quickly decide that they won't leave any trace of themselves, of their achievement. The narrator says, 'Anything we could do, anything we were, was insignificant in that awful place' (22). Her use of 'awful' also echoes the words Scott uttered upon his reaching of the South Pole: 'Great God! This is an awful place'. (2020 [1913]), an 'awful' that is both awe-inspiring and dreadful. Le Guin is so conscious of the link between naming and power—she has the women rename Shackleton's 'Beardmore Glacier', the 'Florence Nightingale' in honour of the English woman's achievement. She pokes fun, honouring the Venezuelan leader Simón Bolívar, who liberated much of South American from the Spanish by naming a long peak 'Bolívar's Big Nose'. Unlike the published

maps of the famous expeditioners, the women's maps are afterwards stored away in 'various suburban South American attics' (21). They don't want to claim territory for any sovereign, and they don't want to master the Antarctic through naming places and landmarks after themselves for posterity. They're there to satisfy their deep curiosity about the frozen continent: 'to go, to see, no more, no less' (8). Even Le Guin's decision to make the women South American, a continent so profoundly riven with Spanish and Portuguese colonisations and the aftermath of the slave trade is a revisioning, a re-writing of Empires.

JM: And this revisioning and imagining of empires is a foundation of Le Guin's creativity, isn't it? She was a respected translator of Spanish literature, of the poets Diana Bellessi and Nobel Prize laureate Gabriela Mistral, and the sci-fi writer Angelica Gorodischer. Le Guin was very well prepared to imagine these South American women departing from Chile, sailing with their compatriot Captain Pardo, and provisioning themselves with indigenous foods. They bring pemmican from Native Indians of North America, pisco, and dried fruits to prevent scurvy, and 'potatoes, frozen and dried according to an ancient Andean Indian method'. The dried foods are so light-weight they're 'perfect sledding rations' (18). All this might all seem like a post-colonial feminist utopia, but the story frames their actions as a pragmatic ethics of domesticity and care for others. The women organise themselves cooperatively. They leave no waste behind, imposing themselves as lightly as possible upon the wild environment. In these ways, the narrative avows an ecocritical feminism, which prioritises 'making-do' over the 'techno-science solutions' and heroic feats (Gaard 2015: 24) that characterise the masculinist and capitalist logics which Le Guin was so critical of. By way of example, the narrator offers the pithy observation that 'the backside of heroism is often rather sad; women and servants know that' (15).

MH: While Shackleton prioritised British glory, the women explorers prioritise the collective endeavour, and collectivity is an idea which very much shaped our writing of this piece. How often did you step in here when I was slammed with work, or when one of my children were in trouble or unwell? What it was like to go in and find you'd been working away at a knotty bit in my absence? A relief.

JM: Willingly done! Or when I'd use one of your sentences to finish one of mine? Or one of your sentences spurred me to think harder? Which brings us again back to 'Sur'. The expeditioners demonstrate a consistent humility to care for each other, which ultimately makes their expedition successful, without deaths or serious injury, and the incredible goal of reaching the South Pole, achieved. The women honour cooperation, choice, and diversity. The narrator writes that the whole ethos of conquest and 'achievement is smaller than men think. What is large is the sky, the earth, the sea, the soul' (15). For the women, it's the genealogical history to come that matters, the grandchildren who might (or might not) come to know of what their brave, 'crazy' grandmothers did (26). The women's time in the Antarctic is a fleeting chapter of their lives, marked by adaptation and stoicism rather than idealism. The story insists upon the ordinariness of the rest of the explorers' lives. It insists upon hiding their adventure, of not making public utterances or claims about it. The kind of utopia that Le Guin proposes is one that, once reached, ceases to exist.

MH: In that essay you're referring to on the impossibility of utopias, 'A Non-Euclidean View of California as a Cold Place to Be' (1997), Le Guin talks about the way societies that prioritise the future and 'reconstruct the world, to rebuild or rationalize it . . . run the risk of losing or destroying what in fact is' (Le Guin 1997: 81). Famously, she asks, what would a Yin utopia

be like? The answer: 'It would be dark, wet, obscure, weak, yielding, passive, participatory, circular, cyclical, peaceful, nurturant, retreating, contracting, and cold' (89).

JM: Yes, and why Donna Haraway was influenced by Le Guin in generating her own geo-feminisms and speculative fabulations (Haraway 2014; 2016: 230). Collaboration is a key element of the speculative fabulations of both writers. Le Guin is more impressed by communal efforts than she is the lone genius or hero narrative. These women are on the very opposite of the hero's journey. It's not a trek to bring them fame and glory, nor to immortalise the women as heroic; it's a secret history.

MH: Which is so unlike Scott's ill-fated 1912 expedition. Instead of seeking glory and not recognising their physical limits, three of the women turn back to main camp from the trek to the South Pole. As a result, no one dies. The egalitarian ethos of the group—no individual woman's role is less or more important than the next—is central to the expedition's success, and a further commentary on the tensions that beset Scott's expedition. Only the narrator, Juana, and Dolores (how aptly named!) attempt the South Pole; those three are clearly pushed to their limits. On their arduous return to camp from the South Pole, they almost 'give up', and even lie down to die (no false bravado here) due to sun blindness and frostbite.

Perhaps it's the desolation of a death, so far removed from everything known and loved, that makes me steer clear of snow and space narratives alike. The white terrains of the moon and the Antarctic haunt writers, don't you think? The terrifying image of the blank white page, the marvellous potentiality of the story yet to be written. The Pampas as that terrain of fantastic liminality as well as the uncharted territory of the blank page. And that's another image I can't forget in 'Sur': the invisible and transparent cattle the women imagine (24); cattle 'pastured on the spindrift snow' and herded by their 'gauchos the restless, merciless winds' (21). That's so very surreal, with its Borgesian echoes.

JM: Yes, Le Guin said in a conversation about the writing of 'Sur' that she was thinking very much of Borges (Mandelbaum 2005: 205). Antarctica is truly like a Borgesian pampas, its human silence, a wilderness almost as unfathomable as the universe, enduring long after memory has gone. The women stand, metaphorically, with their backs to their lives at home, looking with open faces towards the vast plains and mountains of ice before them.

MH: 'Sur' made me think of another of Borges's short stories, 'A Weary Man's Utopia' (Borges 1998). In that story, the narrator crosses the pampas to arrive at a tiny hut where one's material belongings are incinerated before death, so that in this world you don't leave a trace, a presence. In that Borgesian speculative world, the 'no place' of utopia, they have done away with 'commemorations or anniversaries or portraits of dead men' (Borges 1998: 70). That seems to resonate with the women's agenda to explore Antarctica solely for the purpose of seeing, being-there, having been there. Of course, that desire not to leave a record in history is also essential for the conceit of the story to work. For it to function as a 'true' story, as an alternative and secret history, again so much of a nod to Borges's fantastic style, there must be a reasonable explanation for why the women chose to keep their accomplishment secret.

JM: The months that they lived on the altiplano are secreted away in the narrator's report. Their bodies are changed by the experience. Some of them stop menstruating, and one gives birth, they suffer injuries. These changes need to be hidden. Managing the patriarchal society, their return requires a strategy. They hide the marks or explain them away. The narrator tells her curious children that a dog bit her frostbitten toes. Their families would have been shocked

and angered to learn they had not been exploring the Belle Époque Paris salons and shopping in the galleries but making their way to the South Pole.

MH: It is testimony to Le Guin's power as a storyteller that she manages to create such a cohesive story-world out of that mixture of real and imaginary; the real social mores, and the critique of those social mores. I love that when the women come across Scott's 'Discovery' hut, they are appalled by how dirty Scott and Shackleton's teams left it.

JM: That's such a wry scene isn't it. They look about at the mess, biscuits on the floor, empty meat tins. But they don't then tidy up after the men. They don't put the lid back on the abandoned tea caddy or sweep-up the frozen dog-turds. The narrator remarks that, 'housekeeping, the art of the infinite, is no game for amateurs' (13–14). It's a radical idea of housework as ecological awareness. To not leave traces of human effort and habitation in the Antarctic wilderness, you need to tidy up after yourself. Housework in this wilderness is a harbinger of the recycling and reusing strategies that we're now trying to retro-fit to our modern lifestyles, in our homes and workplaces. And yet, while they themselves leave no trace, they won't clean up after the men. And herein lies another irony. The rules of 'Sur' are that the women's stories are inserted within and between the 'real' history of Antarctica's exploration, without removing any of the working parts of the non-fictional history. And so, the story requires the messy evidence of the Shackleton and Scott expeditions to remain, undisturbed by the fiction. Le Guin really is a trickster, blowing a raspberry at history (Le Guin 1997: 91).

MH: Exactly, and so the comment about housekeeping is another decisive moment in 'Sur's eco-feminist critique of the patriarchy, as a remembering and existential stance *towards*, and determinedly not *against*, insignificance. Not in the sense of submission to a male order, but in the wider sense of *ephemerality* as an essential component of the individual in order that the species might thrive within an ecosystem, and ecosystems might themselves thrive.

Le Guin insisted that she hadn't been prescient in her awareness of climate change. Yet the story is infused with prescience. When the women come across a set of raised footprints that the unique conditions of the Antarctic have preserved, those indentations in the ice resonate with the metaphor of our carbon footprints. If only it were possible to erase these prints entirely. I keep coming back to the words of the narrator when the party of three reach the 90 degrees, that they see no reason to mark the site, because the human is insignificant. The ice is frozen so hard they've left no footprints or sled marks showing the path of their arrival.

JM: And now, today, that hard ice is softening and dying. It's so important that as writers and artists we describe what we see and know of the natural world and how we are experiencing it. To know it now, to witness it in the present, to tell its stories, in so far as we can know them in our human way.

During one of my re-readings of the story, I was struck by Le Guin's description of 'luminous circles and crosses surrounding the suns. . . three or four suns in the sky, up there' (22). I'd not noticed the multiple suns, then when I did, they struck me as a sci fi element. But they're a real phenomenon: 'sun dogs' are one of the many extraordinary effects that arise from light passing through air-borne ice crystals. Will these suns—that is our human eye's perception of the presence of them in the refractions of the crystals—survive the Antarctic atmosphere's warming? The research suggests that very likely, no. Reports on global warming, and updates from high-resolution computer models of the Amundsen Sea show that the acceleration of

melting ice-shelves is three times faster this century than last. The collapse of the west Antarctic ice sheet is 'inevitable' (Carrington 2023).



It's now abundantly clear that the formative ideas of the story are wrong: that the Antarctic will remain largely outside the reach of all but a few extraordinary explorers; that it is a region that will continue to occupy the imaginative terrain of future generations as a 'last frontier'; that it is a place that, in Le Guin's words, makes the human seem 'insignificant' (22); and that it will physically endure. Our collaboration has been often joyful, but we finish this essay feeling grief for the Antarctic. Sur's tragic paradox is that it tells a secret story of an ideal human exploration that left no trace upon the earth, no afterlives. It is a story that with hindsight, pulsates with prescience for the disappearing ice.

Research statement

Ursula K. Le Guin's significant literary oeuvre draws upon history, ecology, science, and anthropology. Her science fiction and fantasy novels such as *A Wizard of Earthsea*, *The Left Hand of Darkness*, and *The Word for World is Forest*, are renowned for genre-defining innovation and originality. In her short story 'Sur', Le Guin, with customary adeptness, dissolves the boundaries between speculative, historical, and literary fiction, producing a work of ecofeminist climate fiction. She considers the kinds of masculinities that have produced the Anthropocene and the kinds of feminist revisioning that point to less destructive ways of being in the world, producing a 'counter history of minimal impact on the planet' (Colebrook 2017: 17).

Our aim with this essay has been to collaboratively produce writing embedded in friendship and conversation, rather than the solitude and individualism of the writing we were more practiced at. The lockdowns had amplified our isolation as writers, and we realised we could alleviate our writerly loneliness through this writing experiment; to compose through a collaborative process a speculative, exploratory dialogue on the topic of 'Sur'. Our choice of this short story as the central artefact for this essay's dialogue originated in a lecture series we had prepared as teachers in a Masters in Creative Writing course. 'Sur' was a timely and pertinent selection for students as it was by a feminist speculative fiction writer. Many of our students were familiar with her science-fiction and fantasy novels but not her short stories. 'Sur' also had significant ecological topicality through its setting in Antarctica. We read it as a significant work of climate and feminist fiction.

Through exchanging and critiquing each other's creative and scholarly works-in-progress for years we were also well used to each other's aesthetic and theoretical tendencies and preferences, styles of writing, and critique and review. We were well 'attached to each other by skeins of influence and patterns of friendship, critique and review' (Webb and Melrose 2015: 189). It was interesting to us to see that our mode of production of the essay actively upheld the collaborative practices of the characters in Le Guin's ecofeminist narrative, practices which had drawn us to the story and the story of Antarctica. We also noted that Le Guin had been part of the Side Porch Poetry group for many decades, sharing words in progress with others.

Sometimes we'd write collaboratively in real time, typing, and editing as we talked during Zoom meetings. Other times, we would discuss an idea and then write independently offline. We were keenly aware that before the modern 'myth of isolation' for writers, the 'community of

writers' and writers 'connected to others in their social world' had been the norm (Webb and Melrose 2015: 182–188).

We brought together individual influences and fascinations: Jorge Louis Borges; the great explorations of Shackleton, Scott, and Amundsen; contemporary feminism and ecological writing, including the 'speculative fabulations' and *simpoiesis*/'making with' proposed by Donna Haraway (2016), herself influenced by Ursula K. Le Guin. In sum, we brought together many disparate threads, all of them bound by Antarctica's very bleak future.

Note

¹ The 1959 Antarctic Treaty establishes the continent as a peaceful and scientific space, banning military activities and nuclear testing while encouraging international scientific collaboration and environmental protection. It allows free access for inspection by treaty nations and does not acknowledge territorial claims. Initially signed by 12 countries, there are now 57 signatories. See https://documents.ats.aq/ats/treaty_original.pdf. The Madrid Protocol, signed in 1991, bans commercial mineral mining on the continent. See https://documents.ats.aq/recatt/Att006_e.pdf.

Works Cited

Borges, JL 1994 [1956] *Ficciones* translated by A Kerrigan and A Bonner, New York: Perseus Books.

Borges, JL 1998 [1975] 'A Weary Man's Utopia' pp 65–72 in *The Book of Sand and Shakespeare's Memory* translated by Andrew Hurley, London: Penguin.

Farman, J, B Gardiner and J Shanklin 1985 'Large Losses of Total Ozone in Antarctica Reveal Seasonal ClOx/NOx interaction.' *Nature* (1 May) <https://www.nature.com/articles/315207a0> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Carrington, D 2023 'Rapid Ice Melt in West Antarctica Now Inevitable, Research Shows.' *The Guardian* (24 October) <https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2023/oct/23/rapid-ice-melt-in-west-antarctica-now-inevitable-research-shows> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Colebrook, C 2017 'We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The anthropocene counterfactual' in R Grusin (ed) *Anthropocene Feminism*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp 1–20 <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.5749/j.ctt1m3p3bx> (accessed 17 March 2024).

Evans, M, C Hemmings, M Henry, H Johnstone, S Madhok, A Plomien and S Wearing 2014 *The SAGE Handbook of Feminist Theory*, London: SAGE Publications <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781473909502> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Farman, J, B Gardiner and J Shanklin 1985 'Large Losses of Total Ozone in Antarctica Reveal Seasonal ClOx/NOx Interaction', *Nature* May (315): 207–210. <https://doi.org/10.1038/315207a0> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Fisher, E 1979 *Woman's Creation: Sexual evolution and the shaping of society*, New York: Anchor Press.

Freeman, J 2014 'Ursula le Guin: she got there first.' *The Boston Globe* (28 November) <https://www.bostonglobe.com/arts/books/2014/11/22/ursula-guin-she-got-there-first/aQURr2fiFuKjxf1Fv6zW3O/story.html> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Gaard, G 2015 'Ecofeminism and Climate Change', *Women's Studies International Forum*, March–April (49): 20–33.

Haraway, D, 2014 'Ursula K. Le Guin: Panel Discussion with Donna Haraway and James Clifford,' Aarhus University, *AURA: Aarhus University Research on the Anthropocene* <https://anthropocene.au.dk/conferences/arts-of-living-on-a-damaged-planet-may-2014> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Haraway, D 2016 *Staying with the trouble: making kin in the chthulucene*, Durham: Duke University Press.

Le Guin, UK 2023 'Sur' in S Mayer and S Shin (eds) pp 7–26 *Space Crone*, London: Silverpress.

Le Guin, UK 2019 [1986] *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, London: Ignota Books.

Le Guin, UK 2011 'Clinging Desperately to Metaphor' <https://www.ursulaklequin.com/blog/33-clinging-desperately-to-a-metaphor> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Le Guin, UK 1997 *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places*, New York: Grove Press <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/mqu/detail.action?docID=5503772> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Le Guin, UK, J Tiptree Jr and G Wolfe 1997 *The New Atlantis and Other Novellas of Science Fiction*, New York: Hawthorn Books.

Leane, E 2009 'Placing Women in the Antarctic Literary Landscape,' *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, Vol. 34(3): 509–513.

Kerr, T 2017 'Vintage Film Provides Stanford Scientists New Insights About Antarctica.' Stanford News (15 Dec) <https://news.stanford.edu/2017/12/15/vintage-film-offers-new-insights-antarctica> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Mandelbaum, P (ed) 2005 *12 Short Stories and Their Making: an anthology with interviews*, New York: Persea Books.

Secretariat of the Antarctic Treaty (SAT) 2023 Tourism and Non-Governmental Activities <https://www.ats.aq/e/tourism.html> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Scott, RF 2020 [1913] 'Scott's Last Expedition'. Scott Polar Research Institute <https://www.spri.cam.ac.uk/museum/diaries/scottslastexpedition/page/7> (accessed 22 June 2024).

Wood, J 2008 *How Fiction Works*, London: Jonathan Cape.

About the authors

Dr Michelle Hamadache is a Sydney-based writer and the Course Director of the Master of Creative Writing program at Macquarie. She has published short stories, essays and poetry in *Parallax*, *Southerly*, *Island*, *Mascara Literary Review* and *Cordite*, *Wasafiri Journal of International Writing* and *Antipodes*. She is a former editor of *Southerly Journal* and *Mascara Literary Review*. Her research work focusses on fantastic literature and colonial and postcolonial representations of Algeria in English. She is currently working on a collection of erotic ghost stories set in Algeria and Italy, entitled *Fearsome Things*.

Dr Jane Messer is a writer and Visiting Fellow at the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research, University of Canberra. Her published and broadcast works include fiction, memoir, radio drama. Her books include the novels *Hopscotch*, *Provenance*, and *Night By Night*, and the anthologies *Bedlam: Anthology of sleepless nights*, and *Certifiable Truths: Stories of love and madness*. Her scholarly research has focused on work and mothering, and has been published in *Studies in the Maternal*, *Australian Humanities Review*, *Women's Studies International Forum*, *Cultural Studies Review*, *New Writing*, and *TEXT*. She was the Course Director of the postgraduate creative writing program at Macquarie University for over fifteen years until 2021. She now works with writers as a manuscript mentor.

TRANSLATION AS AN ACT OF LOVE

Ethical Considerations in the Translation, Continuation and Transformation of Witness Poetry

C. M. Stone

University of Applied Arts Vienna, ORCID: 0000-0001-9031-7527

Abstract

This paper will critically consider the ethical responsibilities and positionality of the translator of Witness Poetry (poetry written in response to mass social trauma), primarily through engagement with the work of Dale Tracy in *With the Witness: Poetry, Compassion and Claimed Experience* (2017), and Gayatri Spivak's 'The Politics of Translation' (2000), and through interdisciplinary considerations of trauma theory, testimony, and poetics. Translation engenders fluctuating movement into, and out of, the text; it requires thorough exploration 'inside', considering the micro levels of language, and a frequent moving 'out of', in order to remain aware of one's own position and linguistic context (Slavitt 2010: 509). The 'frustrations' of translation, that a shift across languages will always create changes in weight or meaning, reminds the translator of their limited position: limited, in terms of distance from the original event via systems of language. Translation affords intense, prolonged attention to the original poem, and imbedded reminders of distance and refracted positionality. Crucially to Witness Poetry, translation provides opportunity for participation in the continuation of testimony, in the act of remembering (Slavitt 2010; Deanne-Cox 2013). I argue that the position, responsibilities, and possibilities of the translator to Witness Poetry can be (re)imagined through the transdisciplinary, trans-epistemic lenses of compassion, trauma theory, ethical readership and response.

TRANSLATION AS AN ACT OF LOVE: ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE TRANSLATION, CONTINUATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF WITNESS POETRY

Caitlyn M. Stone

Translators, and especially translators of poetic testimony to trauma, have long been aware of the peculiar and weighty power which translation holds. Translation can, at worst, ‘collapse the testimony’ (Deanne–Cox 2013: 321) of a writer, misconstrue or wholly misrepresent a text, or at best, ‘enrich its native tongue as it had changed the linguistic world of its original’ (Forché 1993: 33), and preserve the ‘contours of the survivor’s memory’ (Deanne–Cox 2013: 321). An important presupposition in this essay and most translation studies is that a translation can never exactly replicate an original text. Across languages ‘exact linguistic definitions are by definition non-existent’ (Raffel 2021: 11). There are no perfectly matched sonic, phonemic, semiotic, historical, syntactic units of meaning across languages; even words which may be shared across languages carry with them a corpus of difference in their historical relationality and connotation (2021: 12). It is a commonly held understanding, too, that ‘every translation involves inevitable loss’ (Levi 2003); that units and nuances of meaning that exist uniquely in one language can and will only remain in that language. But translation is hardly ever only loss, or a stripping away. A translator’s best efforts to recreate the full meaning and effect of text, phrase, or word, requires the creative use of her target language to compensate for this loss, which inevitably enriches the re-creation of the original text (Slavitt 2010: 508). Sharon Deane–Cox considers the translator a ‘hermeneutic listener to and receiver of the survivor’s lived experience’ who is crucial in ‘its reconstruction and retranslation’ (2013: 311). She warns that the translator will inevitably ‘feed [their] own beliefs, knowledge, attitudes and so on into [their] processing of the texts’ (2013: 312). However, I see this warning not so much as a shortcoming, but as an opportunity to reframe the translated poem as a refracted poetic event, which has undergone a radical shift in language to exist as a new occurrence.

The act of translation, in other words, is never a neutral act. Translations will always contain traces of the translator. A translator cannot be invisible between the source text and the target text; there is no perfect, exact translation behind which a translator can hide. In the tensions, awkwardnesses, clumsiness the translator’s decision-making and positionality are revealed. The translator’s authorial traces are again made visible when creative and enriched poetic moments flow into excess. There is thus monumental risk in the space of translation, in the prioritisation and interpretation of meanings upon potential meanings, ‘where each language must yield points to the more forceful configurations of the other’ as ‘two languages contend for dominance’ (Raffel 2021: 37). Which meaning is the ‘right’ one? Which is the ‘truest’? And what potential meanings must be sacrificed in the prioritisation of the other? It is not only the two languages which contend for dominance, but near infinite possibilities of meaning existing in the ‘always possible menace of a space outside language’ (Spivak 1993: 181), the endless possible semantic reconstructions of the ‘unthought known’ (Prendergast 2022: 109) through which the translator must orient herself to reach textual decisions.

Gayatri Spivak, writing in her essay ‘The Politics of Translation’, claims it is the obligation of the translator to ‘facilitate this love between the original and its shadow’ (2000: 181). ‘This love’ is love which ‘permits fraying’, in order to get ‘perilously close’ to the dissemination of

logic, which takes the risk of rhetoricity pushing past boundaries of ‘self and other’ (2000: 181). The act of love involves breakages, tearing to pull, reform, and ‘fray’ the logic of the source text to become a new, collaborative and ongoing process of language and love in the target text. For Spivak, translation is ‘primarily an act of love; but as love, it is also a risk, a transgression’ (Bhattacharjee 2023: 79). The view of translation, as one of perilous and almost ‘tragic’ love—tragic because of the ‘double-bind’ of the nature of translation, being at once impossible but necessary for the continuation of testimony (74)—will be considered in dialogue with the theories of compassionate readership posited by Dale Tracy in *With the Witness: Poetry, Compassion and Claimed Experience* (2017), to reach a possibility of ethical positionality and translatory engagement with poetic testimony to trauma. I will be using the word ‘compassion’ interchangeably with ‘love’, as Spivak’s framing of love aligns with the compassionate engagement outlined by Tracy.

According to Tracy, compassion demands ‘a process of waiting through the intimacy of allowing oneself to be—and to be attentive to being—in relationship’ (2017: 19). This frames compassion not only as a static feeling, or combination of feelings, but as a process, a process which takes time; thus Tracy broadens the notion of compassion to include a focus on temporality. The focus on compassion as a ‘relationship’, and repeated emphasis on the need to recognise distance in response, ‘feeling one’s own suffering in response to another’s suffering’ (2017: 7), expands compassion to privilege both temporal and relational spatiality, and in this way, can be understood as a ‘perceptually driven conceptualisation’ (Zelinsky–Wibbelt 1993: 354). These two key aspects of compassion, the temporal possibilities and demands, and the spatial conceptualisations and positionalities it facilitates, provide not only a possible methodological framework for translator as a ‘secondary witness’ (Deane-Cox 2013: 310) to poetic testimony, but also more broadly a way of imagining the act of translation, especially translation which must act across transdisciplinary bounds of poetics, testimony, psychoanalytical theories of trauma, and the ethics of witnessing. In a space such as Witness Poetry, defined by Dale Tracy as ‘poetry responding to social suffering and atrocity’ (Tracy 2017: 1), the ethics of translating are especially important in the preservation of poetic testimony, and especially complicated by the unresolved and contested field of trauma theory. The translator must consider the realities of her position, being an ‘enabler of testimony’ (1991: 58) as the testimony stretches and breaks into new languages – and the impossibility of her position, wishing to have no position, to be invisible, so as not to enact an interference with the text and its meaning. The ‘untranslatability’ (Apter 2013: 4), the ‘impossibility of translation’ (Alexander 2007: 173) is possibly the truest metonym for relationship with the alterity of the traumatised other. This relationship does not confine the other to complete solitude; rather, it should respect, acknowledge the distance created by extremity and traumatic rupture (Forché 1993: 30), but still always risk and aim for ‘critical intimacy’ with the (un)reachable other (Spivak 2000: 183).

Just as ‘objective’ historians might choose to ‘disguise their role as subjects of knowledge or understanding and agents of narrative interpretation’ (Trezise 2013: 17), translators may deny or mitigate their own visibility as sites of knowledge production and the necessary interpretative imprints they leave in each word choice. Compassionate translation resists this denial and celebrates instead that dialogue and relationality which translation affords. I propose translation be used as a creative methodology for compassionate engagement with Witness Poetry as it not only provides a flexible and ethical framework for engagement with poetic testimony, but also approaches an answer to the question of a translator’s obligations to this poetry.

In attempting this compassionate mode of engagement through translation of the poem, 'Kommt einer von ferne/*If one comes from afar*' by the Jewish Witness Poet Nelly Sachs (2004 [1959]: 23), I found the opening stanza to contain and explicate the precise difficulties across language which I was encountering. After being forced to flee her home of Germany to Sweden with her mother, narrowly escaping a scheduled deportation to a concentration camp, Sachs (1891–1970) went on to write prolifically throughout her life (Wilson 1991). This poem was first published in 1959. I found that the opening stanza of this poem could perhaps address the untranslatability of poems such as itself, as well as reminding me of my own distance, of my position as a stranger, coming from afar towards the text:

Kommt einer	<i>If one comes</i>
von ferne	<i>from afar</i>
mit einer Sprache	<i>with a language</i>
die vielleicht die Laute	<i>which perhaps the lute</i>
verschließt	<i>encloses</i>
mit dem Wiehern der Stute	<i>with the neighing of the mare</i>
oder	<i>or</i>
dem Piepen	<i>the piping</i>
junger Schwarzamseln	<i>of the young blackbirds</i>
oder	<i>or</i>
auch wie eine knirschende Säge	<i>the grinding of the saw, too</i>
die alle Nähe zerschneidet—	<i>which cuts all nearness into pieces—</i>

There is a prioritisation of uncertainty here. The entire *poem* is conditional; '[*If one comes*]' places the poem into the realm of the hypothetical. It is grammatically ambiguous as to whether the descriptions to follow are conditional upon the fact of the stranger coming from afar, or upon the language which they are to bring. The word 'oder/*or*' is enjambed both times it appears, placing any conditions of what may be enclosed within this stranger's language into question, as well as turning any direction of description back to the uncertain, or the possible(s). It is an apt point of beginning for imagining the task and role of the translator. How many '*ors*' each word presents for the translator, how many possible meanings and connotations might be enclosed in the words I choose, in this new language from afar? Even in the title and opening line I ran into difficulty; the poem is in the 'Konjunktiv II', the subjunctive mood, a special German tense used to express hypotheticals that does away with the need for the word '*wenn/if*'. So the very first word of the title and poem in my translation, '*if*', is a compromise, an additional syllable, a simplification of the German grammar and a complication of the phrase.

The importance of the word '*afar*' reminds me too of my position, geographically, historically, linguistically, in relation to this text, and to the Witness Poet herself. It is a reminder of distance and it is also a warning; this language has the potential to enclose music, of the lute or the blackbirds, *or* the '*the grinding of the saw, too | which cuts all nearness into pieces—*'. Sachs describes precisely here my own anxieties in engaging with such a poem. The fear of butchering the language through my own clumsiness; in search of intimacy and closeness, through insensitivity to meaning or nuance, succeeding only in cutting '*all nearness into pieces*'. The em dash cutting through the rest of the line and into the next stanza slices to the next conditional, beginning again with '*[if one comes | from afar [...]]*'. It suggests that these conditionals, these fears and possibilities cannot be ignored, but are a part of my '*coming from afar*' to approach a poem, and engagement means to slice on to the next conditional, to find where else these points

of difference and distance may be, and carry on with close attention. It is also the '*grinding of the saw*' which *needs* to be carried over in translation. The nature of Witness Poetry, and the nature of poetics, testimony, and trauma means there are 'trace[s] of an event' (Forché 1993: 41), of extremity that fragment and break the conventions of 'normal' language (Forché 1993). The violent 'cutting' of language is central to the telling of testimony to trauma.

Perhaps it is helpful then to read this language which Sachs describes as both the language of the Witness Poet—whose encounter with the traumatic splinters their language and demands splintered language in return, and whose poetic writing is infused with ambiguities and multiplicities of meaning—and as the language of the translator—the witness to the Witness, whose actions and use of language risk fraying logic, 'cutting all nearness into pieces'. All hanging on the 'ifs' of her engagement, the translator 'leaps into the unstructured spaces between two established languages and realms of meaning' (Spivak 2000: 180), a realm complicated further by the (contested) nature of trauma and testimony within Witness Poetry.

Witness Poetry and the Slippery Realm of Trauma Theory

Due to the emergent nature of Witness Poetry as a genre distinct from the broader category of War Poetry, critical discussions of its impact and readership are only in the early stages of development. The term 'Poetry of Witness' was coined by Forché in *Against Forgetting: Twentieth Century Poetry of Witness* (1993) and is used to refer to poetry written by witnesses to mass trauma that includes, but is not specific to, war and conflict. Importantly, Witness Poetry is considered to be an act of poetic testimony (Forché 1993; Felman and Laub 1991). I, in the same vein as Dale Tracy, adopt the term 'Witness Poetry' to refer to a broader category of poetic testimony to trauma, that does not strictly delineate the 'categories of witnessing' nor the 'categories of trauma'; I am reluctant to decide 'who is close enough to extremity to be an authentic witness' (Tracy 2017: 24).

There is extensive research into the nature of testimony and the role of the listener, especially within the psychoanalytic field, led by Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Susannah Radstone, after seminal early thinkers, especially Freud. There is considerable scholarship on the translation of testimonial poetry, and the ethics of engagement and transmission therein, emerging especially in the realm of Holocaust studies (Deanne–Cox 2013; Slavitt 2010). A key piece of scholarship investigating the role of the listener/reader in the context of Witness Poetry is Dale Tracy's *With the Witnesses: Poetry, Compassion, and Claimed Experience* (2017). Tracy solidly defends her proposition for a mode of 'compassionate engagement' (2017: 29) with Witness Poetry. What remains underexplored within this work and the field, however, are the implications for translators as creative practitioners and 'refracted witnesses'.

As it is not possible to encompass the breadth of discourse current to trauma studies within the scope of this article, I will focus on key texts relevant to understanding the position of the refracted witness cum translator. The co-authored *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History* is a monumental, interdisciplinary exploration of testimony and trauma in which the authors Felman and Laub (1991) stress repeatedly the role of the 'listener', in a clinical, pedagogical or literary setting, as being one which 'enables the unfolding of testimony' (xvi). The 'speech act' of testimony liberates the Witness from the solitude of trauma; by addressing another, the Witness invites the listener to *discover* with her (35–38). What of the trauma is known or can be known, however, is disputed within critical circles. Felman and Laub argue that the nature of trauma renders it unknowable; the trauma undergoes 'radical

displacement' (12) into the unconscious, where it remains until it is accessed via testimony. It is only through the act of testimony, their argument continues, that the unconscious trauma can be accessed and liberated, known. This is the same argument made by Cathy Caruth in her *Unclaimed Experience; Trauma, Narrative and History* (1996), though Caruth goes further still in claiming that the Witness has 'an absolute inability to know' (Caruth 1996: 8) their own trauma, while acting out, solely at the duress of their unconscious, the belated effects of trauma, until happening upon the 'accident of testimony' (1996: 92). Caruth's approach to trauma theory, aligned with that of Felman and Laub, has made a significant impact upon the field, while also receiving substantial critique. Their idea that before testimonial 'release', trauma is fully confined to the unconscious, is criticised as being 'epistemically unfounded' (Trezise 2013: 46). Dangerously, the implications of this theory disempower the Witness, while elevating the position of the listener (Tracy 2017: 34).

The level of critique demonstrates the highly contested, developing nature of trauma studies, as well as the consequences such theoretical frameworks can carry into the realm of ethics. Thomas Trezise, in his *Witnessing Witnessing: on the Reception of Holocaust Survivor Testimony* (2013), thoroughly engages with and contests this demarcation of trauma to the unconscious. Trezise resists the 'making of an absolute', in this treatment of trauma, which perpetuates the 'profound psychosocial incapacitation of its victims' (2013: 7). He argues instead that trauma necessitates testimony not due to the nature of the subconscious, and its subjugation to trauma, but due to the nature of trauma 'disabl[ing] the very means of its own representation' (2013: 40), and thus requiring the normal bounds of story-telling, and internal narrative-making, to be dismantled. This shift reframes trauma from being 'unknowable', hidden from the Witness within the subconscious, to being instead 'incommunicable' (Trezise 2013: 43) within conventional frames of language, but present, albeit unarticulated, within both consciousness and the subconscious. This reaffirms the unique space of poetic testimonial writing as one which intentionally breaks conventions of language to access known and unknown trauma.

In 'Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics', Susannah Radstone delineates the two main streams of trauma theory as mimetic and anti-mimetic, both of which, she flags, favour 'absolutes' over nuance (Radstone 2007: 24). Radstone accounts for the ongoing dissonance among major theorists, and problems within each theory, demonstrating the unstable and unresolved nature of trauma theory, and the lack of clear or definitive guidelines for engaging with trauma and testimony. She arrives at the conclusion that the nature of trauma, as an extreme which exists outside the realm of 'normal' cognitive and emotional experience, when coupled with the fluidity of subjective experience, resists absolute classification. It demands instead an awareness of 'shifting signification of memory and meaning-making' (Radstone 2007: 25), as well as an acceptance that both the nature of the event *and* the nature of the unconscious can simultaneously, or in fluctuation, inform the experience of the Witness.

What is especially significant, for my purposes in investigating the position of the translator, is the repeated return to and focus on testimony. Testimony disrupts the ongoing process of fragmentation within the subject's internal world; it is an attempt to communicate the incommunicable, and by doing so, reassert autonomy and the 'sovereignty of the Self' (Amir 2015: 22). The 'middle ground' between testifier and the listener is a dialogical, shifting space, open to the accessing of 'belated remembering' (Radstone 2007: 20), and the exploration of the 'gaps and absences' (2007: 20) within traumatic memory. This refracted space can also be understood as a 'potential space', to use Donald Winnicott's term, which speaks to the 'dialectic

relationship between internal and external' (Amir 2015: 11). This partly accounts for the appeal of the poetic form as a vehicle for testimony: the poetic form is likewise one of potential space, which treats narrative, linearity and temporality with flexibility, encouraging exploration of the space, rather than a linear 'working through' between narrative absolutes. Through articulation and testimony, Witnesses can begin to reinstate order upon the fragmented memories; it is the first step in repairing the 'contact barrier', the mitigator of the conscious and subconscious (Amir 2012: 886). Ascribing language to traumatic memory, however fragmented or unconventional the language must be, resists the 'incommunicable' (Trezise 2013: 43) burden of trauma, and the 'mnemonic degradation' (Levi 1989: 32) of this internal muteness.

Forché's *Against Forgetting* marked a critical consideration of the infusion of testimony with the poetic space. While this concern was addressed by Felman and Laub, their problematic rendering of the 'poem as accident', instead of a conscious and deliberate act, removes authorial autonomy from the Witness (Tracy 2017: 78). Forché's anthology privileges the position of the original Witness, creating a platform for poetry written after witnessing 'mass social trauma' (Forché 1993: 37). A great strength of Forché's critical writing is her respect for ambiguity and acceptance of the unresolvable, with her main concern being the nature of the 'impress of extremity upon the poetic imagination' (1993: 30), and the varying attempts of Witness Poets to give words to the 'unspeakable' (1993: 41). As Forché says '[e]xtremity, as we have seen, demands new forms or alters older modes of poetic thought... [i]t also breaks forms and creates forms from these breaks' (1993: 42). According to Forché, writing after extremity imbues the testimony with traces of the event, and creates a new event by doing so (1993: 33). Forché positions the reader of Poetry of Witness as one 'entering into' (1993: 32) a poetic, traumatic event, as the poet attempts to 'mark us as they have been marked' (1993: 37). The type of 'trauma' felt by a listener, or reader, belongs to a 'different order of being' (1993: 36) to the 'original trauma'; it has passed through the psyche of the subject, poetic language, and the mind of the reader. It is fundamentally different in nature, because it is entered into *voluntarily* by the reader. I go further than classifying it as a different type of trauma; I argue that the voluntary and 'safe' position of a reader generally declassifies it as trauma. A key feature of trauma is the shock and accident of extremity, which disrupts the normal functioning of the psyche (Tracy 2017: 57-59; Freud 1953: 18-34; Amir 2015: 9-12). The reader, therefore, does not necessarily experience trauma as a refracted witness to another's trauma. They experience 'refracted extremity', whereby the extreme nature of the trauma is communicated through layers of refraction and distance, but it would be insensitive and inaccurate to label the emotive response to a Witness Poem as being a traumatic response. Instead of this 'contagious notion of trauma' (Tracy 2017: 14), which Forché, Laub and Caruth posit, I understand the poetic testimony as creating a 'potential space' between speaker and listener, wherein refracted affect and emotive response deserves attention, but does not allow the reader to claim, inhabit, or own the trauma of the Witness. This distinction is laid out clearly by Tracy as a mode of ethical readership and forms the basis for the positioning of the translator, and the act of translation as embodiment of 'loving' relationship.

By extending the role of reader to the role of translator as creative responder, I argue, the refracted witness, that is, the witness to the other's suffering and witnessing of trauma, at once confronts their distance from the event, connection to the poem, and emotive response. This creates a space for deep exploration of the nuances and effect of the original poem, demands extended time and attention be paid thereto, and ultimately results in a more thorough, personal and deliberate engagement with the poetic work. The translations are in many ways 'response

poems', 'calling back' to the original Witness poem in its own form and on its own terms. Simultaneously, they are a 'calling inward', to search and examine the emotional response of the refracted witness, and a 'calling out' to new readers, an imploration to consider their own position and relationship to Witness Poetry. It invites questioning, affords attention, and holds a mirror to the responsibilities of reading, as well as the possibilities and troubles of creative engagement.

Dress Him Warmly: Translation as Relationship, as Love

Compassion is a space of extraordinary potential; it opens a space of undefined, indexical emotional response, literally, *movement*, which privileges the inhabitation of a relationship at once conscious of distance and conducive to intimacy (OED). A key aspect of Tracy's theory of compassionate engagement, which has shaped my methodology, is inhabiting relationship; feeling *with* rather than *as* another (Tracy 2017: 6). When a reader recognises the distance between the Witness Poet and themselves, they are resisting identification (empathy), and instead favouring compassion (2017: 6). They are inhabiting their relationship with the poem and author, by recognising their emotional response as their own, feeling in response to the Witness. This 'encounter with another' (2017: 4), instead of substitution *for* another, allows the reader to become a witness to the event of poetic testimony. Testimony produces knowledge 'by the act of telling' (Trezise 2013: 17): new knowledge emerges, solidifies, is constructed into poetic form. The poetic form, in its resistance to linear narration and accommodation of space and fragmentation, allows for the omissions, ambiguities and silences to be maintained, as a part of this 'genuine advent' (ibid) of knowledge. There is a prioritisation of uncertainty, of the 'or's which enjamb themselves between any neat sense of narrative cogency, to instead allow for a cohabitation of various meanings, impressions and expressions which can then extend into extremity itself. The original event, and trauma, is not replicated or transmitted in its original form; it is transmutable, not contagious. Trans-epistemically, the Witness reforms the trauma into a poetic act, paradoxically hedged by the inherent limits of language to capture experiential knowledge, and freed from the 'menace of a space outside language' (Spivak 2000: 181) of the traumatised unconscious; another double-bind. Language in testimony, to some extent, allows a witness to direct and control memory, experience, impressions. As Tracy rightly stresses, how much more control and order must be exhibited through poetic language, which demands specificity and attention to an even greater degree than spoken testimony?

In continuing with my translation of 'Kommt einer von ferne / *If one comes from afar*', I found these themes to be present in both the practice of translating, and the poem itself. In the second stanza, there is a shift in focus from the language of the stranger to his movements. The familiar 'or' reappears, describing two possibilities of zoomorphic movement for the approaching figure, that of the dog or the rat. Despite the animalistic movement of this stranger, the reader is directed to 'kleide ihn warm / *dress him warmly*', and, more than that, if the soles of his feet burn the carpet, he must not be scolded, as he may have fire on his feet, 'vielleicht ritt er | auf einem Meteor' '*perhaps he rode | atop a meteor*'. The stranger might come into the home of the reader, burn the carpet, move like a dog or a rat, and will be treated with hospitality, 'dressed warmly'. There is doubly a reminder of accepting with grace the 'burning', fraying, of language which I fumble in translation, and accepting that the movement of feeling and compassion may be clumsy and feel foreign to the text and the traces of extremity therein. There is a reminder, too, that the witness to trauma brings with them an experience so other-worldly that they arrive to the reader, and to language, with soles burning, and with strange

and foreign movements. Throughout it, still, is the 'vielleicht / perhaps', this subjunctive mood, conducive to the space of hypotheticals and potential, and giving an opening to a gentle, loving encounter with the other.

In the search for an ethical method of engagement with poetic testimony to trauma, a reader will likely come across frameworks for empathetic engagement. Influential writers in the interdisciplinary space of trauma theory, ethics of listening and the reception of testimony, and Poetry of Witness, have, at best, proposed empathetic modes of engagement with reservations for positionality (LaCapra 1999), and, at worst, empathy which can 'co-own' trauma (Laub 1991: 57). As Tracy argues, however, empathy demands identification; whether this is partial, 'virtual' (LaCapra 1999: 2000), or not, it implies and forwards 'contagious notion of trauma' (Tracy 2017: 7) which has had trauma theory in a chokehold since Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative and History* burst onto the relatively fresh field of trauma studies in 1996. I argue that empathy as an approach to translation forecloses the space of potentiality, the relationality which is opened by compassion. Identification with the testifier in poetic witnessing, purports to ignore or disseminate the distance between reader/author, translator/text, in order to 'feel as' the other and give into the 'temptation of closure' (Friedlander 2022: 210) between two separate positions. This imagined closure between the impossibility of experience, the impossibility of truly understanding the extremity endured by a witness to trauma, and the well-intentioned reader/translator eradicates the kinetic space of ambiguity, loss, and aporetic time which is inherent to the 'encounter with another' (Tracy 2017: 4). It ends and claims to make redundant the 'gesture of unending openness to the other' (Bhattacharjee 2023: 75), the endless 'reaching out' (Spivak 2000), despite, and perhaps because of, the impossibility of the task. The liminality, the unreachability, between the translator and the witness protects the authenticity of the nature of the experienced trauma, it prohibits the reduction, the whittling-down of trauma to fit within the limited frames of comprehension of the outsider-translator coming from afar. The compassionate translator does not claim to understand the knowledge created in the poetic testimony, or to be, in Laub's words, a 'co-owner to trauma' (Felman and Laub 1991: 57), rather the compassionate translator 'inhabits relationship' (Tracy 2017: 4), is attentive to the responsive nature of their emotion, attempts to be always self-reflexive in order to be fully attentive to the spatial, temporal distance from which they are positioned. Through thorough self-reflection, a compassionate reader becomes a witness to the new poetic event, the refracted trauma which exists as 'trace' (Forché 1993: 7) within it, *and* a witness to their own response (Tracy 2017: 83). As Tracy argues, 'feeling one's own suffering in response to another's suffering' (87) stipulates self-awareness, and, in the context of writing and translation practice, an oscillation between 'inside/outside' (Gibson 2010: 4), between experiential knowledge/reflection.

Translation can be an act of self-reflexivity and embodiment of relationship. It is a rare and important privilege in the reception of poetic testimony. In 'Translating Poetry', David Slavitt writes, 'the best, the most scrupulous, way of reading poetry is to translate it, coming to terms, as it were, with the words on the page (Slavitt 2010: 510). The process of translation allows the reader to fully encounter each word, its connotations, its placement, its weight and role within the context of the poem. The 'frustrations' of translation, that a shift across languages will always create changes in weight or meaning, remind the translator of their limited position: limited in terms of distance from the original event via systems of language and in the consistent and fundamental disjunct across these linguistic systems. Translation affords intense, prolonged attention to the original poem, and imbedded reminders of distance

and refracted positionality. As Spivak says, '[t]ranslation is the most intimate act of reading. I surrender to the text when I translate' (2000: 183). Spivak, with her use of the word 'surrender', implies vulnerability. There is humility in this intimacy. Translation, in this sense, goes beyond understanding and deciphering to find the 'true' meaning (Raffel 2021: 38) of a text, especially a text which is imbued with a meaning that is inaccessible to the outsider. Translation, as an act of surrender, as love, asks the translator to acknowledge the distance, both horizontally (in difference between language) and vertically (in difference between prioritisation of position). The translator acknowledges the impossibility of her poetic task, the horizontal separation between structures of language, in between which she positions herself, and the impossibility of her ethical task, to 'carry over' the immense weight, urgency, ambiguities and peculiarities in the (vertically) unreachable poetic testimony. The inevitable 'fraying' (Spivak 2000: 181) of language which the translator will enact, the risk of violence in involving oneself too little or too much, where an 'act of love is unfortunately much more an act of betrayal' (Raffel 2021: 110), could be enough to discourage any translation at all, not least for poetry (already an extremely challenging mode of writing to translate) that presents testimony to trauma (providing another layer of inaccessibility). But it is the decision to *still* translate, to *still* 'reach out' when distance is known to be uncrossable, to face what Tuhin Bhattacharjee names the 'aporetic dimensions of translation' and embrace the tragic 'limitations of human knowledge' and language (Bhattacharjee 2023: 73) that transform the act of translation from a linguistic exercise to one of profound ethical, compassionate, intimate meaning. To acknowledge that language could contain the 'grinding of the saw', which might 'cut all nearness into pieces' (Sachs 2004: 23), but to proceed gently, attentively still; this would be impossible without the acknowledgement of ambiguity and distance in the space of relationship with Witness Poetry, without the inhabitation of spatially and temporally conscious positionality.

In the context of translation, Spivak writes of language as being a 'vital clue to where the self loses its boundaries' (2000: 180), however, I see this attention to language as being a clue to where the self is bounded. This call for compassion in translation asks the translator to find every sticking point of separation, dissonance, between herself and the lyrical 'I', and brings her to the complete conscious occupation of her positionality in relationship. This is where relationship can begin, not in the losing of boundaries in the pursuit of identification, where 'identification leads the listener to usurp the place of witness' (Trezise 2013: 29), but in the inhabitation and opening of the potential space of relationship *between*, where the 'absences, ambiguities, confusions' (2013: 17) inherent to testimony and trauma can be allowed to continue. The opening of this potential space of relationality is made possible through the self-reflexivity, attention, and temporal and spatial elongation championed by compassion. Translation as an act of love valorises relationship, denegates identification, and provides one methodological approach when stepping into the realm of Witness Poetry. Through this act of intimacy, the translator 'comes to the closest place of the self', in the search for 'the trace of the other' (Spivak 2000: 180).

Conclusion: The Importance of (Un)reachability

In my translation of the final stanza of 'Kommt einer von ferne', I wanted to keep the sentence structure as similar to the original as I could, to retain the temporal discovery and ordering of key words, but this makes for awkwardness in the English syntax. I wanted also to keep the double and ambiguous meaning of 'im Arm', where 'Arm' means both arms, and poor. This

makes for an addition of a bracketed 'poor'. I wanted too, to keep the gendered 'die / she', so translated 'Heimat' to 'motherland' instead of 'homeland':

Ein Fremder hat immer
seine Heimat im Arm
wie eine Waise
für die er vielleicht nichts
als ein Grab sucht.

*A stranger has always
his motherland in his (poor) arms
like an orphan
who for her searches perhaps for
nothing more than a grave.*

These concessions, breakages, frayings, cuttings and additions I see not as a failure, but as a result of my positionality and fruit of my compassionate engagement with the poem. I know that the level of attention and tracing of potential meanings necessary to creating this amateur translation is to a level that only deliberate and reflective risk-taking can grant. My translation is only one of near-infinite possible renderings; it does not finalise or close my engagement, because its imperfect nature means I will always need to return and rework upon re-engagement. The potential space remains open, the place of feeling and responding is still alive, the poetic testimony breathes. The endless reaching out towards the other goes on, always falling short and overcompensating in some way, but, because of this, allowed to, implored to, continue.

There is much more to continue exploring in the practical elements and examples of this role and the steps of translation in practice, steps which this article only began to address. A starting point, however, is the perceptual conceptualisation of the *position* of this translator. 'Abstract situations...which may not be perceived sensorially', such as where a translator to poetic testimony should situate herself, 'are conceived in terms of concrete, sensorially perceivable scenes' (Zelinsky–Wibbelt 1993: 354). A helpful metonym for the compassionate translator is perhaps the conceptualisation of prepositions, which are 'relational expressions' (Zelinsky–Wibbelt 1993: 365) relying on 'simplified geometric and topological properties' to gain meaning (Zelinsky–Wibbelt 1993: 354). Just as a preposition is imagined and used through 'spatial disposition' (Zelinsky–Wibbelt 1993: 374), so too is the role, engagement and responsibilities of a translator. By resisting identification, by resisting the empathetic 'as', and consciously inhabiting the compassionate 'with' that is 'alongside', 'in response to', (Tracy 2017: 3), the spatiality exists as an opening to relationship, without foreclosing the unresolvable, ungraspable traces of extremity which live on in poetic testimony. And it is as this preposition, as this 'with' which is apart from, but striving to be intimate with, poetic testimony, that the translator can imagine herself in the search for ethical, loving engagement with poetry of the most urgent kind.

Works Cited

- Alexander, Z 2007 'Primo Levi and Translation' in RSC Gordon, pp 155–169 *Cambridge Companion to Primo Levi*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Amir, D 2012 'The Inner Witness,' *International Journal of Psychoanalysis* Vol. 93(4): 879–96 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1745-8315.2012.00618.x> (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Amir D 2012 *On the Lyricism of the Mind: psychoanalysis and literature*, New York: Routledge.
- Apter, E 2013 *Against World Literature: on the politics of untranslatability*, London and New York: Verso <https://doi.org/10.1080/08037060903352981> (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Bhattacharjee, T 2023 'The Tragic in Translation: Spivakian Planetarity and a New Ethics of Reading.' *Journal of Comparative Literature & Aesthetics*, Vol. 46 (2): 74–79.
- Caruth, C 1996 *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press.
- Deane-Cox, S 2013 'The Translator as Secondary Witness: Mediating Memory in Antelme's *L'espèce Humaine*,' *Translation Studies*, Vol. 6 (3): 309–23 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14781700.2013.795267> (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Felman, S and D Laub 1991 *Testimony: crises of witnessing in literature, psychoanalysis, and history*, London: Routledge.
- Forché, C 1993 *Against Forgetting: twentieth-century poetry of witness*, London: W.W. Norton.
- Freud, S, J Strachey, A Freud and CL Rothgeb 1953 *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psychoanalysis.
- Ganguly, A 2019 'Border Ethics: Translation and Planetarity in Spivak.' *Intermedialités / Intermediality*, Autumn (34) <https://doi.org/10.7202/1070871ar> (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Gibson, R 2010 'The Known World,' *TEXT*, Vol. 14 (Special 8) <https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.31508> (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Levi, P 2003 'On Translating and Being Translated.' *Los Angeles Times* (30 March) www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-2003-mar-30-bk-levi30-story.html (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Levi, P 1989 *The Drowned and the Saved*. London: Abacus.
- Prendergast, J 2021 'Ideasthetic Imagining-Patterns and Deviations in Affective Immersion.' *New Writing* Vol. 18 (1): 47–65 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2019.1709508> (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Prendergast, J 2022. 'Stimulus in Creative Writing - Wrangling the Experiential Unresolved.' *New Writing* (Clevedon, England) 19 (1): 105–16 <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2021.1925304> (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) 'Compassion n.' https://www.oed.com/dictionary/compassion_n (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Raffel, B. 2021. *The Art of Translating Poetry*. Penn State University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780271072807> (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Radstone, S. 2007. 'Trauma Theory: Contexts, Politics, Ethics.' *Paragraph* Vol. 30 (1): 9–29.
- Sachs, N 2004 [1959] 'Kommt einer von Ferne' in E. Boland (ed) *After Every War: Twentieth-Century Women Poets* p 23, Princeton: Princeton University Press.

- Slavitt, DR 2010 'Translating Poetry.' *The Hopkins Review*, Vol. 3(4): 505–22 <https://doi.org/10.1353/thr.2010.0005> (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Spivak, G 'The Politics of Translation.' in *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti. London. New York: Routledge.
- Tracy, D 2017 *With the Witnesses: poetry, compassion, and claimed experience*, Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press.
- Treize, T 2013 *Witnessing Witnessing: on the reception of Holocaust survivor testimony*, New York: Fordham University Press <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780823264056> (accessed 13 June 2024).
- Wilson, K M 1991 *An Encyclopaedia of Continental Women Writers*, London: Garland Publishing.
- Winnicott, DW 1971 *Playing and Reality*, London: Tavistock Publications.
- Zelinsky-Wibbelt, C 1993 *The Semantics of Prepositions: from mental processing to natural language processing*, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter <http://www.degruyter.com/doi/book/10.1515/9783110872576> (accessed 13 June 2024).
-

About the author

C. M. Stone's academic and personal interests lie mainly within the poetic, the ethical, and the translatory. She is completing a Masters in Applied Human Rights at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, where she plans to continue her current critical and creative research into the role of the poet and listener to and translator of testimony, and the ethical nuances and demands of responding, within the creative realm, to human rights crises.



AXON: Creative Explorations

2024 vol 14.1 *Translate | Transform | Transdiscipline*

axonjournal.com.au

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

DOI: 10.54375/001/0oqiyz2c83
Keywords: Photoessay, Collective research,
Transnational, Interspecies, Japan, Site-
responsive, Performance, Documentary,
Biodiversity, Ecological planning

FUJIFILMS: EVERY PICTURE MATTERS

Notes on our collective's encounters among rice fields and tree frogs

Mapped to the Closest Address Collective

Contextual Statement

From 2019 to 2022, Mapped to the Closest Address (MaCA) was a transnational interspecies dance collective composed of Maharu Maeno, Catalina Fernandez, Alex Viteri Arturo, and Shuntaro Yoshida (Japan/Colombia & Ecuador). Jun Yamaguchi joined the collective for the 2022 Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial, an event that is part of Japan's ecological planning to revitalise Niigata Prefecture's satoyama regions. In this creative essay, we invite readers to explore the sonic world of our site-responsive performance, *Turn Off the House Lights*, which was presented within our installation, *We Like to See Clumsy Seeming Mountains*, at the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial. Analogue photographs from the series *Fuji Films: Every Picture Matters* offer a glimpse into our archival practices, along with digital images of the performance and installation. Through collective choreographic practices, we entered into contact with other-than-human persons, using various devices to record our encounters and craft multimedia installations to share our archive. Our project aimed to highlight the entangled relationship between humans and non-humans and to shift anthropocentric perspectives. For over four years, we've met and gathered stories from fellow community gardeners, arborists, farmers, winery workers, friends, and family. This piece honours them.

FUJIFILMS: EVERY PICTURE MATTERS (Notes on our collective's encounters among rice fields and tree frogs)

Mapped to the Closest Address Collective

For music throughout the piece, one good possibility is our installation's soundscape, mixed by Catalina Fernandez and used as a base for our transmission iteration at Tokamachi's Community Hub: <https://on.soundcloud.com/6o5zr>.

Turn Off the House Lights

Welcome to Mapped to the Closest Address's transmission. We are broadcasting live from Tokamachi City, Niigata Prefecture, Japan. This is Alex and Maharu speaking. We'll be your host for the next half hour. Our voices are being recorded so that in the future others can listen to our stories. Today, the 20th of August 2022, it's still summer in Japan. It's 23 degrees outside, but it has been raining for the past four days. Although a thick layer of mist is coming down from the mountains, clouding the cedar trees in front of us, if you look carefully, you might see the small frogs wandering among the rice fields.

Our guests have taken their seats. The show is about to start.



1

Mountains surround Tokamachi, and rice fields cover the valleys. From the upstairs bath house window, guests saw the rice field dancing with the wind and as the steam rose from the pools, they gazed at the peaks. The three nearby mountains—Akiba, Gongen, and Takaba—returned the look. It's a similar view to the one we're looking at now.

The bathhouse closed many years ago and is now gathering dust.

The rice field remains.



2

Minomata-san, a tree doctor and good friend, once told us that trees are like humans in a sauna. Daily, leaves release large amounts of water. Trees dance, unnoticed by our human centred gaze.

Listen.

A bunch of trees have grown in the abandoned bathhouse.

They are sweating, contemplating through the window the rice field, Mount Fuji's portrait above their crowns.



3

We've accompanied Mount Fuji's painting with a view of Mount Cotopaxi, a childhood memory from the Andes Mountain Chain.

When visiting Cotopaxi, the night before hiking to its mouth, local guides will invite their apprentices to drink warm canelazos. The schnapps will warm up their hearts and prepare them for the encounter. Canelazo is a warm drink made from brown sugar, cinnamon, cloves, orange



4

juice and, in our version, aguardiente, also known as 'fire water'. There's no aguardiente in Japan, but Niigata prefecture is full of rice fields and clean clear water. So, for today's immersion, we thought we could offer cold sake. Sadly, Tsumari's regulations prohibit us from serving drinks to our guests. We can, though, share the vibration of our voices. As we speak, Shuntaro is placing small speakers in our guests' hands.

A while ago, visitors left their shoes on the edges of the indoor cricket ground and entered the space, feeling the cricket ground's fake grass under their feet. Our archive will remain the whole summer until early November but we left the goals open, hoping Tokamachi's seniors would still come in to play.

Ichi Ni San.

[4]

Did we say they are now sitting on one-hundred-year-old wooden benches? Around the field, stones gathered from the Shinano River witness our performance with them.

Did we mention our performance is also inspired by three mountains and a rice field?

Once upon a time, a woman used to sell Kimonos in Tokamachi. She did so for over forty years. Now, she has retired and dedicates her time to growing the rice field in front of us. Her family has been dedicated to growing, harvesting, and transforming rice fields for over nine generations. She's with us tonight. Sometime ago, she explained, 'In Tokamachi, where we are now, the soil is rich. Heavy snow falls in winter. When it melts, cold water feeds the fields. Summers are hot and humid. The contrast between seasons is ideal for the soil. Rice farmers in Niigata know this, that is why we produce Japan's best sake.

Isn't this beautiful weather?'



5

If today was the 9th or 10th of September, we would go to Niigata Katakai Festival to celebrate with locals the start of the harvest and render tribute to those that have passed to the other side.

When time comes, we will.

[5]

For over two years, we've met and gathered stories from fellow community gardeners, arborists, farmers, winery workers, friends, and family.

Today, we shared their stories.

Fujifilms: Every Portrait Matters

A white stain drips from the top of the photo. Under the stain, we could see Maharu holding a camera, mirroring Catalina on the other side of the lens (6). Jun is seated next to Maharu; he looks at her with smiley eyes, amused. His chest slightly bent towards the other side as if trying to escape the frame. In the photograph, we are sitting at Atmos Café, which is on the same block as the Daishin Camera Co. shop, where we bought two Fujifilm ClearShot 30 film cameras and six Fujicolour C200 35mm film rolls. This is the first photo of our collective's Fujifilms Series. Although we are not all visible in the shot, we think this picture is a perfect family portrait of our collective, capturing a particular moment of our time in Japan. We developed our 35mm film at Catalina's Berlin apartment with a home kit.

We took one Fujifilm ClearShot camera to document our travels through Japan and left the other at the Risetsu Shinsetsu Centre, the site of our installation. We considered using two cameras to document the bifurcation of our artistic journey. With one camera, we wanted visitors to add to our archive by capturing the passage of time within the installation. With the other one, we would simultaneously capture our ongoing exploration of different creative spaces and landscapes during our one-month trip throughout the island.

Niigata prefecture is known for its sake production; rice grows strong thanks to the intense change of seasons. Risetsu's interior cricket ground opens on one side to one of such rice fields. Our installation aimed to highlight its presence and wished visitors to document its growth with the analogue camera. We dreamed of having some field rice workers in the photo, so we placed the camera on a tripod and broadly framed the space's large opening to the rice field. Next to the camera, we added a small sign with our wish and a list of dates to be filled in by our guests: a picture per day plus the photographer's name.

We wrote the note in Japanese and kept the instructions fairly general, curious about visitor's tendencies. (7). Shuntaro has since provided a rough translation: 'We would like daily pictures. If today's photo has not already been taken, please press the shutter button. Add your name to the notebook. ↓↓↓↓↓↓ 2022.11.12 (Sat) (Please open the lens cover!) Limited to 1 person per day! [If the date is already filled in. Please do not take my picture].'

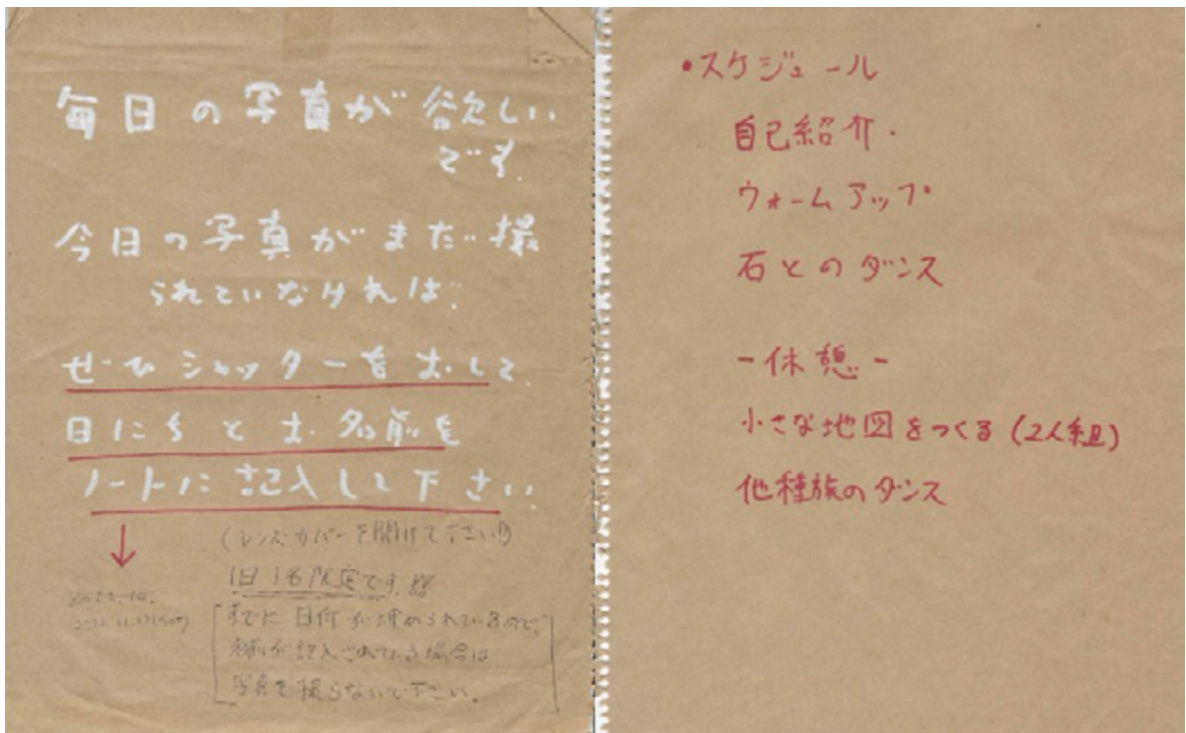
Since our first remote residency, we have been interested in slowing down time and testing outdated aesthetics. The Fujifilm ClearShot cameras met our budget and were easy to set up and use. The camera has a considerable depth of field, so it was likely to capture the inside of the cricket ground and the surrounding rice field.

The series unexpectedly transformed into a compilation of family portraits. Even though we did not explicitly encourage visitors to take photos of each other, many captured their friends and family posing directly in front of the camera with the field rice in the background.

The images remind us of photos one could find in forgotten family albums at a flea market or in the archives of a theme park. Indeed, most visitors to our installation were local tourists wandering through the region to see the Triennial highlights. Their photos portray this assumed role and echo the highly mediated gaze of our society. Still, the series also captures the transformation of the rice field in the background and subtle moments of encounter between them and the outside landscape. We included both posed portraits and candid shots of people encountering the rice fields, in hope that they will give you an idea of the region and its visitors (8–11). Some decided to leave us drawings (12).



6



7

The Collective: *Mapped to the Closest Address*

We hold that what is currently being destroyed is also other-than-human persons because what extractivist and environmentalist practices enact as nature may be, also, other than such. This is one of the things we (the editors) have learned from a mountain in the Andes of Peru that is also a being and from forest animals in Paraguay that are also spirit masters of their world. (Cadena and Blaser 2018)

MaCA's work was rooted in collaboration with living beings and organic matters, most often mountains, cats, plants, and bodies of water. We engaged with art practices that offered a sensuous encounter with scientific knowledge and non-scientific data from various ecologies. We collaborated with choreographers, visual artists, scientists, and scholars at the intersection of improvisational dance and ecocritical thinking. We were part of the happily forever-growing group of artists engaged in understanding the agency of the non-human.¹ Against modernity's apocalyptic narratives, we insisted on unlearning, returning, listening, and experiencing multiple mutations (Miñoso 2022).

As we navigated through the pandemic, our collective took care of two vegetable gardens. Maharu and Shuntaro travelled between gardens in Hyogo and Tokyo, Japan, and Catalina and Alex nurtured a Schrebergarten in Frankfurt Oder, Germany. We named the latter Arenero Yumita, a tribute to Gloria Anzaldúa and Fernández's mother Luz Marina Giraldo 'Yumita';² a wishful naming for our queer family sanctuary in which we wish to encounter and learn from other-than-human beings. Our practices combined readings on non-human personhood with gardening.³ Since we could not travel and meet in person, we worked remotely, inventing a digital residency to exchange the sensory experiences of our respective locations. Gestures learned by preparing the earth and mixing the compost pile leaked into our choreographies. Throughout our creative process, we experimented with various documentation formats including low-tech tools such as analogue cameras and fax machines, and accumulated several images, videos, and sounds of urban ecologies.

We wanted to slow down, stretch time, and impose an outer space rhythm to our exchanges. We recorded the depths of a dying lake, the Helenesee in Frankfurt Oder. We turned to Violeta's daily walk footage as she, a one-year-old cat, roamed the German community garden with a miniature spy camera attached to her chest. This footage became portals that allowed us to escape, although briefly, from our human perspective. Indeed, we sought to dislocate our anthropocentric standpoint and explore from other points of view the many worlds within gardens, forests, and lakes. These experiments led to *Open Forest Launch*, a digital archive that follows a rhizome's structure, something like the body of an octopus with many legs and pods. We also edited a 40 minute video uploaded to an online platform and visible on a Plasma TV within our installation at Echigo's Art Triennale.⁴

The Installation: *We like to Watch Clumsy Seeming Mountains*

Following an invitation from the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennial,⁵ we designed and built an exhibition using archived materials from our previous works. The Risetsu Centre in Tokamachi City housed *We Like to Watch Clumsy Seeming Mountains* from August to November 2022. Our multimedia installation imagined a futuristic bathhouse within the interior cricket ground on the building's first floor. We incorporated red filters in the overhead lamps and windows and played a science-fiction soundtrack through its speakers. We weaved and suspended 3-dimensional



8



9



10



11



12



13



14



15

portraits of the three nearby mountains, Akiba, Gongen, and Takaba, by boiling, fermenting, and river-washing local kudzu vines.⁶ Visitors could explore the installation barefoot, encounter the trembling mountains, and view our video and photo archives on two plasma TVs. We also created a scaled-down version of El Arenero Yumita and covered its walls with photos and messages from our gardens (12). Additionally, we installed a Fujifilm ClearShot 30 camera and provided multiple drawing surfaces for visitors to leave messages and contribute to growing our archive.

The Performance: Turn Off the House Lights

Inspired by audio descriptions of performance events, we created an audio transmission event interwoven with remote landscapes. We wanted to immerse our guests in the sensuous realms of actual, imagined, and imaginations-of-real landscapes.

For the first iteration of *Turn Off the House Lights*, we hosted an in-person audience at *Cordillera Raum für Körper und Utopien* dance studio in Berlin (13). We treated our guests to *canelazos* and provided them with wireless headphones. Using storytelling, we led them from inside the studio to explore the outdoor garden as if they were wandering through an imagined forest. We also broadcasted the audio to an online audience, who we hoped were listening to us while sitting beside a window and perhaps even ventured outside. Shuntaro Yoshida activated the space with gestures inspired by our research on more-than-human personhood, while Catalina Fernandez composed live soundscapes using synthesizer sounds and our garden field recordings. The transmission concluded around a bonfire, where we watched the sunset.⁷

Previously, we studied the works of Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), a New York landscape painter. Church's portrait of Mount Cotopaxi fed our longing for the Andes and accompanied us throughout the creative process. In *Turn Off the House Lights*, we narrated Church's travels to the Andes and challenged his choice of adding palm trees to increase the value of his paintings (Kusserow, 2018: 121). We intertwined his parkour with our childhood memories of Cotopaxi, discussed Mount Fuji's cultural significance as Japan's national icon and reflected on the life of a tree.

This first iteration of *Turn Off the House Lights* became a methodology and structure for an itinerant site-responsive performance. For each iteration, we maintained the setting: an audio transmission event facing a landscape that invited its guests to enter the frame and sense their bodies as being part of the ecosystem. We updated the content with local stories for each new site that hosted the event.

The Echigo-Tsumari triennial version of *Turn Off the House Lights* merged accounts of our visits to the local mountains, with gestures developed while handling kudzu and stories told by local rice farmers.⁸ We wanted visitors to have an immersive experience that echoed the viewing of Mount Fuji while submerged in a hot spring, a hint to the historical use of our performance site. Once again, while Maharu and Alex told stories, Catalina composed a soundscape live. While Jun sewed kudzu dried vines, Shuntaro moved following non-human choreographies. He became a spider in a bathhouse, a frog in a rice field, the palm tree in Church's paintings, a cherry tree beside the river in Kotō-ku, a kudzu vine, and one stalk among the many in the rice fields. In Shuntaro's words, 'I tried to draw every movement from the environment, moved in response to the wind, the clouds, the weaving of the rice fields, followed mountain ridges, and channelled distant rainfalls'.

Upon our return to Berlin, we organised an open sharing with memories, movement vocabulary, and materials from our recent trip to Japan. The piece emerged as a variation from the previous performances. Although we kept exploring storytelling interspersed with gestures from our first performance, we experimented with a new structure by starting our performance outside, in the studio's garden, and changed its name to *Remembering Rice Fields and Wild Frogs*. In this listening session, we invited the audience to cruise Niigata's faraway landscapes as the sun set and plants went to their long winter sleep. Once again, we served hot *canelazos*, and through an audio description streamed on wireless headphones, we guided guests for an outside walk in a solar punk rice field (14).

Work Details

- 1 Shuntaro runs from the horizon of rice fields towards our stage's proscenium. He will close the red crystal door to immerse our audience in a sci-fi bathhouse. A Fujifilm ClearShot camera is in the foreground. It will stay in the space all summer. *Turn Off the House Lights*, 20 August 2022. Top image: Scanned 35mm colour film photograph by Catalina Fernandez. Lower image: Video still (MaCA 2023).
- 2 An anonymous painting of Mount Fuji and our double reproduction of Frederic Church's portrait of Mount Cotopaxi. In the background, the rice field. Scenario for *Turn Off the House Lights* and detail of the installation *We Like to Watch Clumsy Seeming Mountains*, August 2022. Scanned 35mm colour film photograph by Alex Viteri (MaCA 2023).
- 3 Shuntaro Yoshida looks at a piece of moss. He enters the building and places it and a small speaker in a guests' hands. *Turn Off the House Lights*, August 2022. Top image: Video still edited by Catalina Fernandez. Lower image: Scanned 35mm colour film photograph by Nakamura Osamu (MaCA 2023).
- 4 Shuntaro Yoshida moves through the red crystal door as a spider. *Turn Off the House Lights*, August 2022. Video still edited by Catalina Fernandez (MaCA 2023).
- 5 Yumiko Yoshida before one of our last performances. On November 15, Yumiko will text her son, 'The stage is the entire earth and a multilayered circle, large and small. Their intention is to choreograph collaboratively and bring together the multitude of beings that play overlapping roles in reimagining the earth's ecosystem . . . living beings, human beings, and even matter'. *We Like to Watch Clumsy-Seeming Mountains (誤山を眺める)* 11 September 2022. Scanned 35mm colour film photograph by Catalina Fernandez (MaCA 2023).
- 6 Jun Yamaguchi and Maharu Maeno at Atmos Café, Muikamachi (Six City), Niigata Prefecture. Scanned 35mm colour film photograph by Catalina Fernandez (MaCA 2023).
- 7 Welcome note with instructions for using the camera and schedule for our dance workshop with stones. *We like to watch Clumsy Seeming mountains (誤山を眺める)* (MaCA 2023).
- 8 *Fujifilms: Every picture matters* 11 September 2022. Photograph probably by Hisako Takei. However, Hiromi Hane, ナイトウ ミノル (Naitou Minoru), イノマタ ヒロコ (Inomata Hiroko), Suzu hiro, 行田久里子 (Ikuta Kuriko) or Masakazu Kobayashi are also potential authors. We added further instructions to our welcoming note to avoid future confusion. Scanned 35mm colour film (MaCA 2023).
- 9 *Fujifilms: Every picture matters* 18 September 2022. Photograph: Sakai Seita (サカイ セイタ). Scanned 35mm colour film (MaCA 2023).
- 10 *Fujifilms: Every picture matters* 11 September 2022. MaCA's members Maharu Maeno, Shuntaro Yoshida, Alex Viteri Arturo, and Catalina Fernandez. Shuntaro's parents Yumiko and Hiroshi Yoshida join them in the photo. The sign in Japanese above their heads, framing the rice field, translates to 'This is not Art, It is Nature (コレハアートデハナク、シゼンデス)', a quote from a Tokyo bartender when asked about a mineral rock displayed on his counter. Scanned 35mm colour film photography by Jun Yamaguchi (MaCA 2023).
- 11 *Fujifilms: Every picture matters* 18 September 2022. Portrait. Fuji Films, September 11th, 2022. Photograph: Kota Senshu (こーた 専修). Scanned 35mm colour film. (MaCA 2023)

12 A visitor's drawing on A3 cardboard notebook. On the back of this page is the following message, 'Tanino Niko 2022/8/28 Sunday. 12 years old, 6th grade. Likes games. From 神奈川県 Born in Nara. 'I'm Ninja' /. 2022.9.3 Momoko 7 years old and in 3rd grade. :) Apple <3'. From *We Like to Watch Clumsy-Seeming Mountains* (誤山を眺める) 2022. Translation by Jun Yamaguchi. A3 Cardboard notebook. (MaCA 2023).

13–15 Images of our installation, *We Like to Watch Clumsy Seeming Mountains*, August 2022. Photograph by Nakamura Osamu (ETAT).

Notes

¹ In the book *Ethics of Art Ecological Turns in the Performing Arts*, Guy Cools and Pascal Gielen describe the paradigm shift derived from environmental, political, and economic struggles that drew European artists to ecology (2014: 10). In *Abya Yala* (one of the names for what we now know as Latin America), ecologist artists oppose extraction practices and align with forms of governance outside the colonial state framework (Merlinsky and Serafini 2017: 20). Our collective embraced both turns.

² At the Lesbian Plenary 'Session Combating Heterosexism in the 80's', at the National Women's Studies Association's 1988 Conference, philosopher Gloria Anzaldúa describes four roles, or ways of being and interacting in the world. One of them is acting as a sandbar, 'To me the sandbar feels like a more 'natural' bridge (though nature too, some argue, is a cultural construction) . . . Being a sandbar means getting a breather from being a perpetual bridge without having to withdraw completely' (Anzaldúa 2019).

³ *The Extractive Zone* by Macarena Gomez Barris (2017), *Ecologies of practice across Andean worlds* by Marisol de La Cadena (2015), *What Animals Teach Us About Politics?* by Brian Massumi (2014), and *How Forrest Think* by Eduardo Kohn (2013) greatly influenced our artistic engagements, challenging and transforming our thoughts, and practices. These publications applied ecological concepts to the social sphere and related to significant political and economic challenges, which prompted reflections on our production and distribution mechanisms.

⁴ See our virtual world at <http://mappedtotheclosetaddress.neocities.org>. Our video diaries are available at <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/493305542>.

⁵ The triennial is part of Japan's ecological planning to revitalize Niigata satoyama regions. However, since the 1950s, these areas have been and were 'exploited' by forestry and mining industries and This led to a movement advocating for nature's safeguarding. The momentum swelled in the 1990s with heightened global environmental awareness. Japan's Ministry of the Environment incorporated satoyama protection into its ecological planning during the same period

⁶ While people during the ancient Jōmon periods of Japan utilized kudzu (c. 14000–300 BC) for fibres, and cloth, few such techniques remain (Wimberley and Rocky 2022). Jun Yamaguchi recuperated some of these techniques for our installation's kudzu sculptures.

⁷ Cory Tamler, a performance critic and friend, attended our Berlin show and reviewed it in the online dance journal *Tanztage* <https://tanzschreiber.de/en/longing-for-mountains-interspecies-performance-experiments/>. This piece also features some of Violeta's footage.

⁸ *Turn off the House Lights* was shown on 4 March and 21 May 2022 at Cordillera Raum für Körper und Utopien <https://diekg.org/projektraum/>. In Japan it was performed again in a new version from 18 August to 11 September as part of the Echigo-Tsumari Art Triennale. The complete program and images of the installation and performances are available at <https://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/art/artwork/we-like-to-watch-Clumsy-Seeming-mountains/>.

Works Cited

- Anzaldúa, G 2019 *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Barris, MG 2017 *Extractive Zone*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cadena M and M Blaser (eds) 2018 *A World of Many Worlds*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Cadena M 2015 *Earth Beings: Ecologies of practice across Andean worlds*, Durham: Duke University Press
- Cools G and P Gielen P 2014 *Ethics of Art: Ecological turns in the performing arts*, Amsterdam: Valiz & Antennae Series.
- Echigo-Tsumari Art Field Triennial (ETAT) 2023 'Mapped to the Closest Address: Dance and other participatory workshops' https://www.echigo-tsumari.jp/en/event/20220730_0911/ (accessed 16 November 2023).
- Kohn, E 2013 *How Forests Think*, Oakland: University of California Press.
- Kusserow, K 2018 'The Trouble with Empire', in K Kusserow and A Braddock (eds.) pp 103–139 *Nature's nation: American art and environment*, New Jersey: Princeton University Art Museum
- Mapped to the Closest Address (MaCA) 2023 *Fujifilms: 35mm colour film*, Arenero Yumita Collection: [Personal archive of C Fernandez and A Viteri].
- Mapped to the Closest Address (MaCA) 2020 'Open Forest Launch Video Diaries' <https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/493305542>.
- Massumi, B 2014 *What Animals Teach Us About Politics?*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Merlinsky, G and P Serafini 2020 *Arte y Ecología Política*, Buenos Aires: Clacso <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1gn3t37> (Accessed 7 July 2024)
- Miñoso, Y 2022 'The Future Already Was: A critique of the idea of progress in sex-gendered and queer identitarian liberation narratives in Abya Yala' in S Tate and EG Rodríguez (eds) pp 209–225 *The Palgrave Handbook of Critical Race and Gender*, Cham: Springer International Publishing, 209–225.
- Okada, W 2017 'Origin of and Change in the Concept of Satoyama in History of Forest Policy,' *Journal of Forest Economics*, Vol. 63(1): 58–68.
- Tamler, C 2022 'Longing for Mountains: Interspecies Performance Experiments,' *Review of Tanzschreiber* <https://tanzschreiber.de/en/longing-for-mountains-interspecies-performance-experiments/#more-10628> (accessed 20 August 2023).
- Wimberley, VS and BP Rocky 2022 'Investigation of the Extraction Processes and Performance Properties of Kudzu Fibers,' *Journal of Natural Fibers*, Vol 19(4): 1449–1460 <https://doi.org/10.1080/15440478.2020.1776664> (Accessed 7 July 2024)

About the Authors

Between 2019 and 2022, Mapped to the Closest Address (MaCA) comprised four human animals; Maharu Maeno (Japan), Catalina Fernandez (Colombia), Alex Viteri Arturo (Ecuador), and Shuntaro Yoshida (Japan), and a cat, Violeta. Jun Yamaguchi (Japan) joined the collective for this project.

Maharu Maeno is a Japanese artist and performer based in Berlin. She has a Bachelor's degree from Tokyo University of the Arts and has exhibited her work, 'Red Hook Horror Lemonade' at studio DE-CONSTRUKT, 'The Museum of Make-up Art (2019)' at FIGMENT New York, 'Migration of Red Pepper (2018)' at Open Source Gallery, 'Kasumi-ka Kumoka (2020)' at Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, Tokyo).

Alex Viteri Arturo is a South American performer and scholar based in Berlin, working at the threshold of the visual arts and performance. Viteri grew up in the Andes, alongside the mountains Ruco Pichincha and Cotopaxi. Inspired by feminist decolonial activists and scholars, her research cares for Andean modes of knowledge. Alex maintains an ongoing collaboration with choreographer Juliana Piquero and light/sound designer Catalina Fernandez. Their work, *Fan de Ellas*, premiered at Sophiensaele, Berlin in Nov 2019. Last year, Alex performed with marionette storm and Daniel Lühmann in *Apparitions at the reef* through the frame of 'Master Exerce' at the Centre Choreographique National Montpellier and at La Place de la Danse Toulouse in France.

Catalina Fernandez is a light and sound designer for theater, dance, and the visual arts. She likes to compose subliminal spaces and engulfing in-site installations. She works as technical director in several productions and assists choreographers, filmmakers, and multidisciplinary artists. Catalina is an ongoing collaborator of the choreographer Juliana Piquero, the musician Hans Unstern and the artist's collective Fehras Publishing Practices. With Noam Gorbat, Catalina founded Can Doc, a collective that offers audio-visual documentation for visual artists, choreographers, projects, and institutions. Fernandez studied film photography at Corporación Universitaria Unitec, Bogota, and Lighting Design in Instituto Universitario Nacional del Arte (IUNA), Buenos Aires. She has been awarded by Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Europa with the 2022 DisTanz Recherchestipendium

Shuntaro Yoshida is a dancer, choreographer, performance maker and researcher. He is currently an Associate researcher at Berlin Centre for Advanced Studies in Arts and Sciences (BAS). He obtained a Ph.D. from Tokyo University of the Arts in September 2020. He has an M.A. in dance from Tokyo University of the Arts and the University of Paris 8, and a B.A. in Human Sciences from Waseda University. He was a JSPS Post-doctoral Research Fellow at Faculty of Sport Sciences at Waseda University from 2021 to 2024 and a Visiting Scholar at the Department of East Asian Studies at NYU from 2018 to 2019. He is the author of *Post-choreography: Jérôme Bel's Choreography and Movement in Malfunction* (Routledge 2024).

Jun Yamaguchi is a researcher, designer, architect, and artist. He is a part-time lecturer at Musashino Art University and Tokyo City University. He obtained a Ph.D. from Kyoto University. He has an M.A. and B.A. in engineering from Kyoto University. He is a coauthor of *Okane No Tame Ni Hataraku Hitsuyo Ga Nakunattara, Nani Wo Shimasu Ka?* (Kobunsha 2018)



AXON: Creative Explorations

2024 vol 14.1 *Translate* | *Transform* | *Transdiscipline*

axonjournal.com.au

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

DOI: 10.54375/001/25eyibw4i7

Keywords: Visual essay, Place-based art,
Art event, Site-specific performance, Video
art, Anticolonial practice

IT HASN'T FINISHED

A collaboration with Ron Stone Park across a year-long divide

Cassandra Tytler

Edith Cowan University, ORCID: 0000-0003-0357-7123

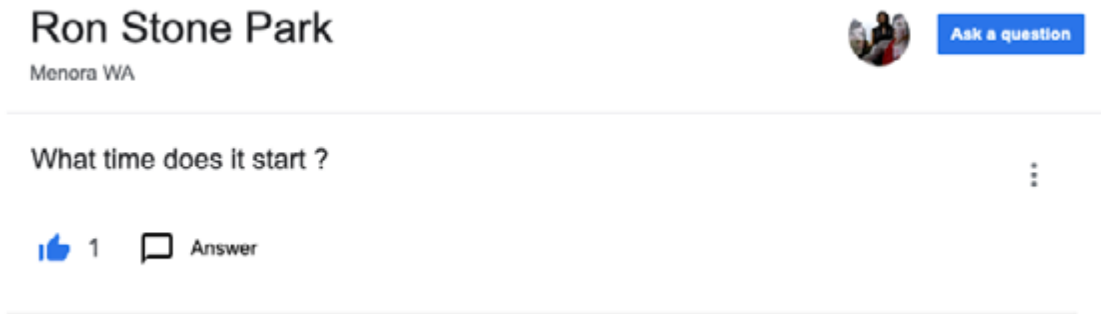
Contextualising Statement

This visual essay contemplates time, both as a conceptual framework and as it relates to the ongoing existence and evolution of a place-based artwork, *One Peppercorn (if demanded)*. By weaving together personal reflections, poetic musings, and excerpts from the art event itself, the text invites readers to engage with Ron Stone Park, where the original art event took place, as both a physical space and a conceptual locus of inquiry. It questions how a site-specific work can continue after the art event has finished and becomes re-enacted in text and photographic form. It aims to enact an interconnectedness of past, present, and future, delving into the complexities of representation, particularly concerning the translation of an art event that was originally framed as finished, but that is given new life within this renewed context. It reflects on the ongoing process of translating and extending an art event through various mediums, including writing and imagery. This essay highlights the multidimensional nature of the art event, its engagement with place, and its ongoing resonance beyond the physical boundaries of the park.

I write this text while living in Whadjuk Noongar Boodjar, colonially known as Perth, Western Australia. I am originally from Naarm, or Melbourne, where I lived on the traditional Country of the Wurundjeri People of the Kulin nations. The land I am on, and sovereignty to it, has never been ceded. I am a performance-informed video artist, whose recent practice has moved towards place-based and participatory outcomes. Working in this way as an uninvited settler, I am cognisant of moving slowly, with care and respect on what will always be Aboriginal land. This work would not have been possible without the collaboration and generosity of Trevor Ryan, who is the cultural advisor for the Centre for People, Place and Planet at Edith Cowan University, where I am a member. Working together at the CPPP enabled a conversation that took the form of a walking interview in Ron Stone Park. As we walked around and through the multiple elements of the place, I recorded Trevor's voice. Our responses together formed the basis of the soundscape of *One Peppercorn*.

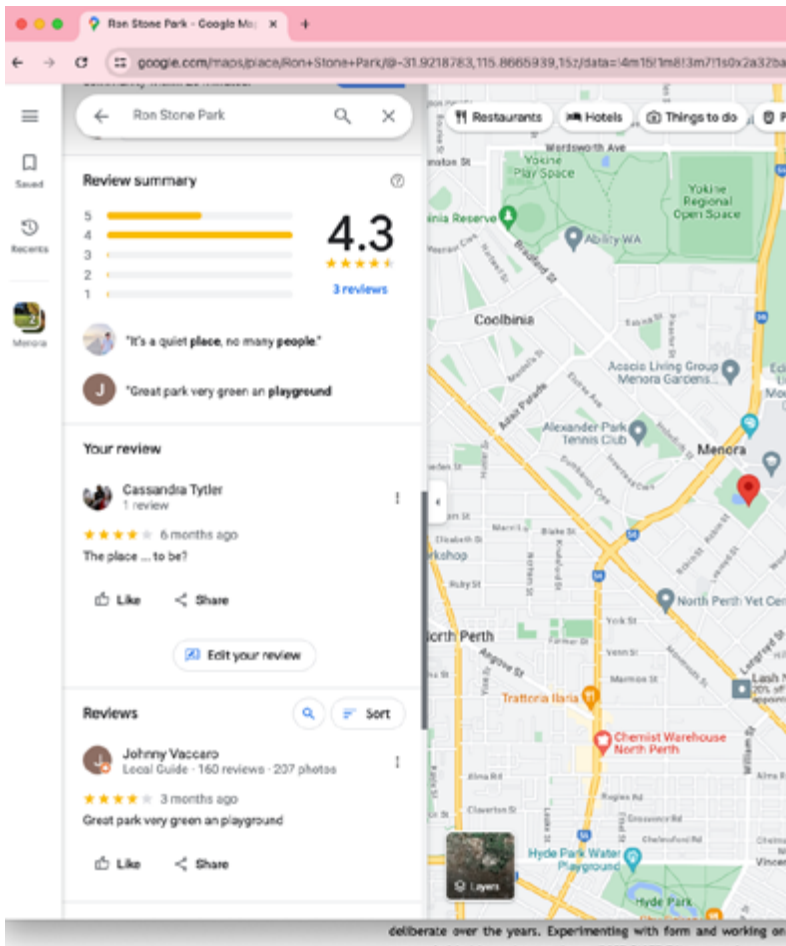
IT HASN'T FINISHED: A COLLABORATION WITH RON STONE PARK ACROSS A YEAR-LONG DIVIDE

Cassandra Tytler



1 This image was not in the original artwork but was written while making it.

Ron Stone Park, a small local park in Menora, Boorloo (Perth), is as Google reviewers point out both ‘quiet’ and ‘green’. It has a small playground, and it is quiet. One would most likely stroll through it on the way to somewhere else. It is unobtrusive within the suburban landscape.



2 Still from one of the videos found when we walked to ‘tree cluster 1’.

One Peppercorn (if demanded), was activated within this place and made with the intention of enriching understanding of this small, unassuming park. Its aim was to listen and to experience what the park was telling us. As the lead artist on this intervention, I hoped that by taking part in the activation of this place, participants may recognise it and themselves as interwoven into a larger ecosystem; a system that is knotted with uneven, messy, and often non-innocent histories, stories, politics and cultures alongside environmental ecologies, flora, and fauna.

To paint a picture of One Peppercorn as an art event

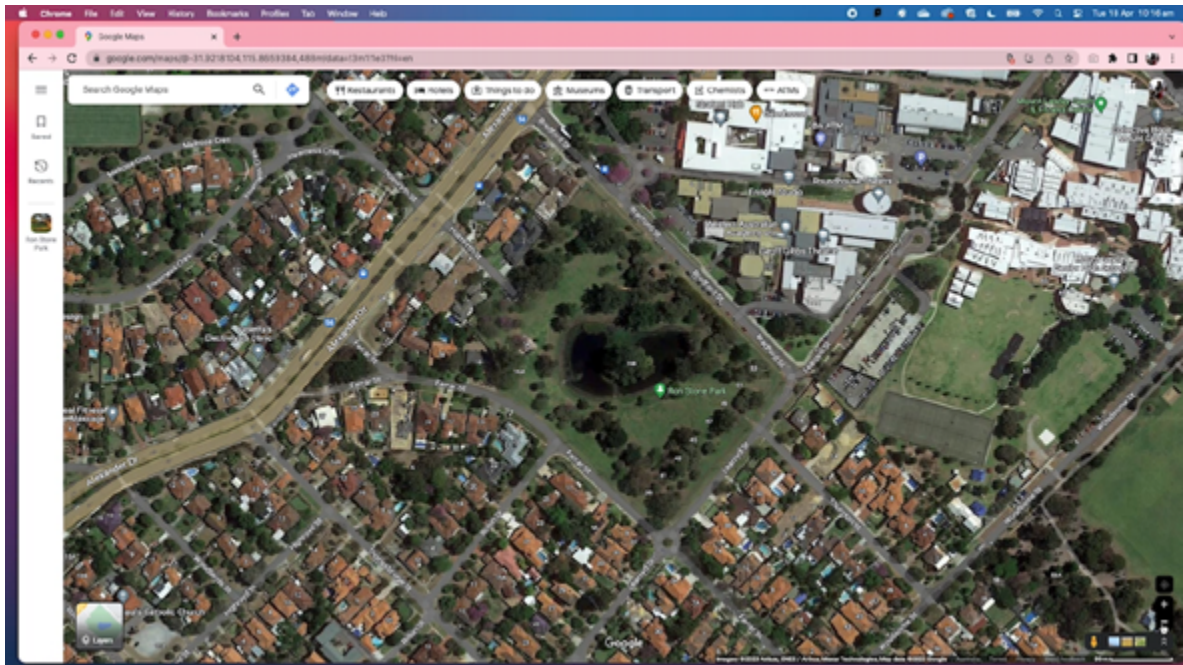
Thirty-four people participate. They are each given a set of headphones that are synchronised to one another. I explain to them that we will begin at a given point and that they should follow me as I guide them through the park. They can keep their own pace but there might be moments when they are asked to take their headphones off or to interact with an element of their surrounds. I advise them of the video elements that they will encounter at certain points as they walk. As they walk and follow me, they listen to a soundscape that I have recorded and mixed. In it, they hear sound effects; recordings of Ron Stone Park; musical cues; my voice musing about the different natural and cultural elements of the park; and Noongar Yamatji performer Trevor Ryan's voice ... speaking about different elements of the park from a First Nations perspective. Trevor comments upon, amongst other things, the flora and how it was used by Indigenous Australians; their connection to Country; and the multiple layers of connection and meaning within an Indigenous Australian perspective of land, sea, waters, and sky. Trevor and my own voice weave back and forth between one another within the soundscape.

Now looking back, typing this text that includes images that were a part of the site-based art event, as well as those that were extensions of it but not 'on site', I wonder, 'Ron Stone Park – What time does it start?'. This was the question I asked Google in April 2023 when I was making the audio–visual elements for this site-specific performance work and mapping out the physical path that I would lead participants along. Is this essay a translation of an art event or an extension of it? When did the artwork begin and has it ended? Ron Stone Park exists as a physical space, as a park, and in online maps. Footprints have made marks on the land, and digital footprints have made associative and social impressions, awarding it 4.3 out of 5 in Google Reviews. These footprints make their mark through assessment of 'worth', and if worth is determined, may later make their imprint in more physical indentations on the land by the Google Reviews reader.

Writing with this artwork in my present, which is your past, I am struck by the never–ending process of translation of a work in place. My concern here, as I type, is not to translate the single art event that transpired in April 2023. What engages me in writing this text is to grapple with the continuation of connection across the divide of the physical activation through writing and images. Now, in my typing 'present', its traces exist almost a year since. Through writing this text, *One Peppercorn (if demanded)* is framed as creative practice–led research and it endures in a different guise. *You are not in the park, you are not following my body guiding you, you cannot hear the soundscape, and maybe you are sitting as you read.* This is a translation and transformation after the fact, yet this is still a work grappling with this colonised place, Ron Stone Park.

This was an event that lasted almost thirty minutes, with further discussion at its 'conclusion'. The recording of the soundscape was later attached to documentation stills and bursts of video showing the 'hows' of this moment in time. I wrote about it and presented it at a conference, at

an artist as researcher talk, and it was also in the 'members spotlight' in its online video form for Eco Art Space (ecoartspace.org). Thinking of this writing now, as a continuation, rather than an interpretation, leads me further in thinking about place and its multiple contested meanings.



3 Still from one of the videos found when we walked to 'tree cluster 1'

The non-innocent histories that were wrestled with during the art event are still present in this written text, where I shirk from offering the development of critical consciousness alone as a settler move to innocence (See Tuck and Wang 2012). Here, I would like to point to my choice of images so far, specifically **Image 2** and **3**. Maps delineate, mark, and take possession. From an Australian perspective, the history of colonisation, segregation, and separation, are tied to a controlling of and extraction from the land. The map is one visual signifier of this regulating device. Similarly, an online review deciding the worth of a park: 'Great', and 'a playground'; presents a simplified understanding of this place. *Why did I only give it 4 stars? What translation of value was I adhering to, and who was I to rate this space on a scale of 5?* I look back at my writing a year ago and question this ideological conversion through an assumption of a park. Ron Stone Park, *'the place . . . to be?'* My question at the time was a playful one. The infinitive of the verb purposely defying a clear subject – and even now, the Hamlet referential echo *or not to be* sticks in my head. What IS Ron Stone Park? Can we understand it in multiple states through a text that writes about it as a finished event? I will continue, but first go backwards to explain the choice of map images during the event.

Image 3 was placed among a cluster of trees that participants would come across as I led them to different sections of the park. Image 3 was a part of 'Cluster 1': six video screens placed in a line formation that the participants slowly weaved their bodies through in a zig-zag. On different screens were screen-recordings of someone searching through street maps (**Image 2**); bird's eye view maps (**Image 3**); the Google camera view that rests on the strange shapes that are accidentally formed in their 360-degree attempts of representation (**Image 4**); there were Youtube videos that people had uploaded of the park; Google reviews of the park (**Image 2**); and artworks that people had painted of the park and put online. You, the reader, cannot stand

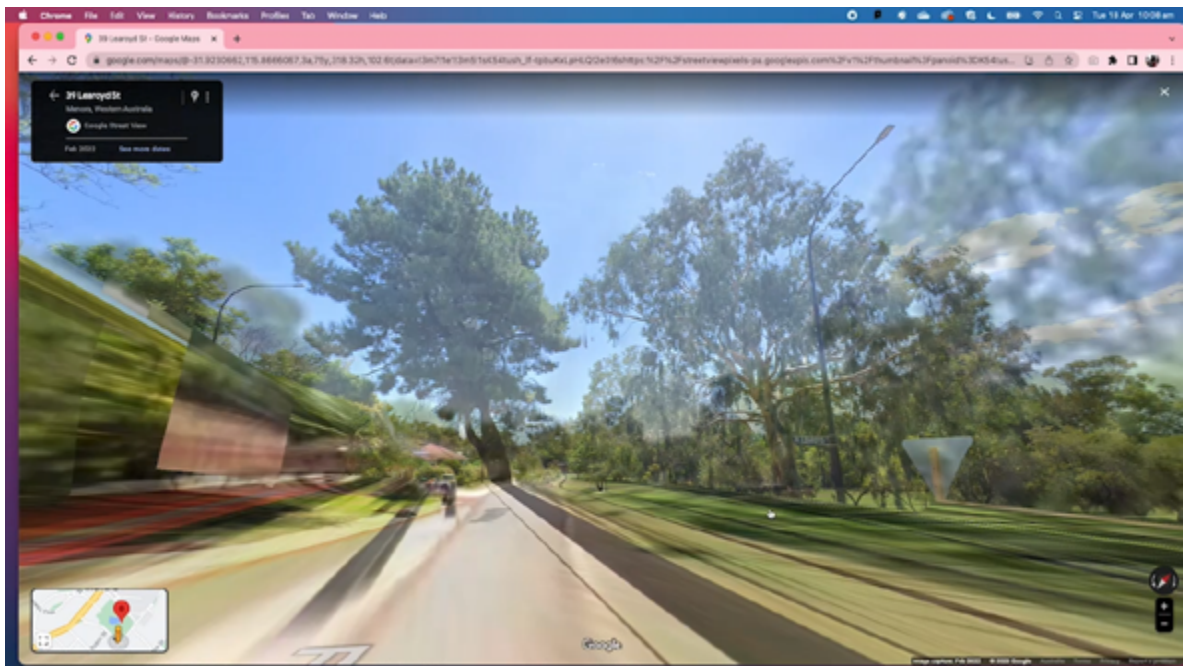
over the video Google maps that were placed on the ground, experiencing the perspectival shift as a reminder of the performatively controlling and dividing power of the map, with nature and culture entwined on the ground at your feet. I also choose not to re-enact this moment here through documentation, with a foot seen at the same level as the screen on the ground. Instead, you see a mundane image of something you could type into Google yourself.

(My voice in the soundscape):

I ask myself, why a park? How natural is a park? Manicured, cultural, and mannered. A place of leisure to tame the uncouth youth. Are parks an interruption to the city, or an elevation of it? The moral pageantry of the park makes the empire apparent through these didactic spaces of landscaped beauty. Nature as human construction. Good for us and our human souls!

(My written voice in your head):

You ask me, why a computer image? A digital accentuation of a natural space, its ugly greenery so . . . ordinary. Nature, the environment, the 'true realness' is a thing of beauty that a representation cannot reclaim! Instead, this image, an exemplification of conquest, provided by a multinational corporation, works to do what the text alone cannot – render a small (commonplace) park a part of a much larger system. Like Ron Stone Park, this is 'nature as human construction'. Our bodies, our cultures, our histories, and our socialisations are connected to it.



4 Still from one of the videos found when we walked to 'tree cluster 1'.

(My written voice in your head but imagine AI speech reading it. Vowel sounds clip and are shortened. Even with 'Australian' accent mode on, it's not quite there):

Look, and look again at 4. Observe the interplay of pixels, a distorted tableau of temporal displacement. The Google camera, in its pursuit of documentation, has captured not just a scene but a rupture in the fabric of time. In the static frame, we are deprived of the temporal context that was the original video, so that here we perceive a fragmented collage of distortions and anomalies. Is that a person traversing the road, or a spectral apparition haunting the digital ether? Are the trees suspended in motion, or are they frozen in a timeless tableau? Here, in this glitched dreamscape, the boundaries between the natural and the constructed, the tangible

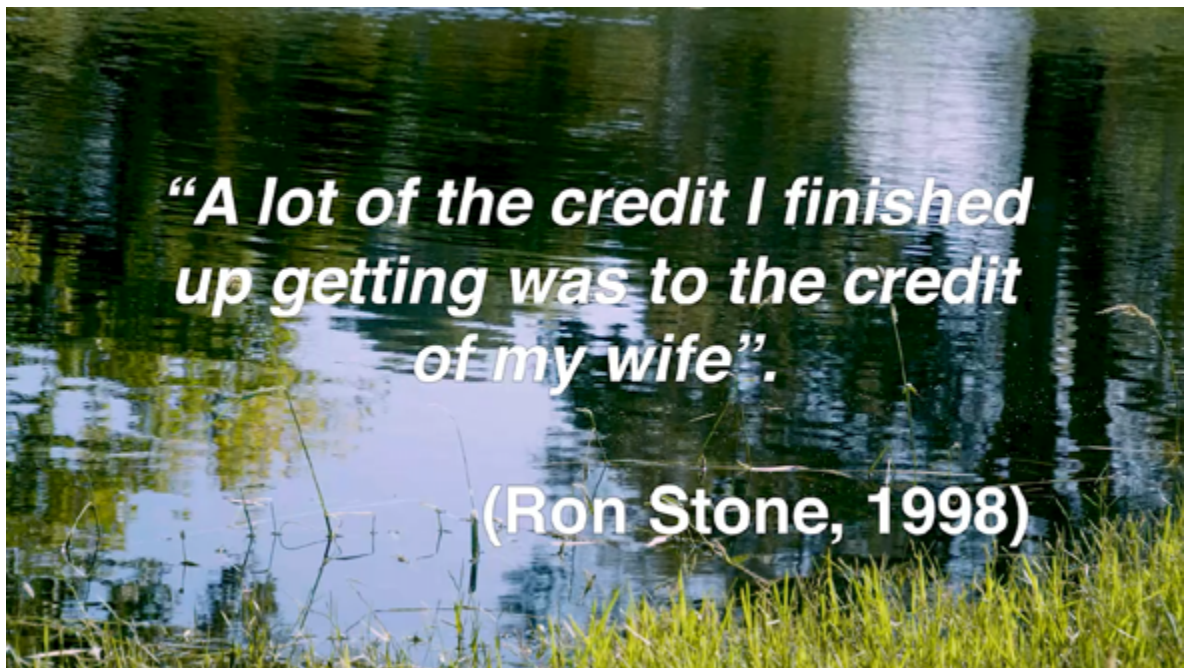
and the ephemeral, dissolve into a kaleidoscopic blur. What time is it, indeed? Is it the present moment, frozen in pixelated perpetuity, or a glimpse into the ever-shifting tapestry of the past-future of the place that is Ron Stone Park?

Ron Stone Park is a part of this technological ecosystem. Representationalism is warped. It is the in-between-ness of movement, street, park, environment, Internet, and computer screen that renders this previously unseeable image from the original video in the art event present. This is a transformation of the original video image that positions Ron Stone Park within multiple natural and cultural ecologies. Time is overlapped, so that the past is here but also into the future.

Returning to the past of the art event

(Trevor's voice in the soundscape):

What happened in this place many thousands of years ago, or even hundreds of years ago it's only been 230 years when colonisers first came to Australia. For us in WA it was 1826 when they first came to Perth, they'd already been to Tasmania, to Sydney. So, by the time they came to Western Australia they knew exactly what to do and they just about did wipe us out, coming from the other states, all the other countries. So, we're proud we're still here.



5 Still from one of the videos found when we walked to 'tree cluster 3'.

(My voice in the soundscape, with the sound of a ticking clock):

Ron Stone, who is the namesake of this park, repaired watches. He kept time, organised time. In 1981, while receiving an Australia medal at the Queen's birthday honours, the Queen said to him: 'You are a busy person. I've seen you so many times today.' Geological time ... Anthropocene time. Ron Stone rides in time. Time is infinite because of its connection across everything. As we walk, look and listen, secrets are revealed to us.

Ron Stone said that his mind used to go everywhere, and he couldn't remember things. ... Ron Stone was in and out of time. Forgetfulness can be convenient. The future ... the future! Yet, we

are always in the past. ... Do we reckon with our past? Standing here in the past, what can we learn? (see Image 5)

(Trevor's voice in the soundscape):

It's like I'm still here. Presently still here . . . through my vibrations on Country.



6 Still from one of the videos found when we walked to 'tree cluster 2'.

Do you see yourself in the mirror?



7 Still from one of the videos found when we walked to 'tree cluster 2'.

Or here, or below?



8 Still from one of the videos found when we walked to 'tree cluster 2'.

The stories we tell, the stages upon which they unfold, and the manner in which they are narrated are intricately interwoven within the fabric of our material and discursive realities. I wasn't being funny when I asked if you could see yourself. Do you now?

The act of translation remains in perpetual flux, contingent upon the recipient, the socio-political context, and the temporal dimension. This is not a reproduction of an art event, nor documentation of it in place. In the act of recounting *One Peppercorn (if demanded)* and presenting stills from the videos, it is in an adapted direction.

Ron Stone Park: What time does it start?

It hasn't finished!

Works Cited

Tuck, E and KW Yang 2012 'Decolonization is not a metaphor,' *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* Vol. 1(1): 1-40.

About the author

Cassandra Tytler is an artist and researcher with a particular focus on performance practices. She works across single channel video, performance, site, and installation. Her research interests lie in the performance of video and its encounter within place, to create a relational and aware politics of resistance to normalising narratives of exclusion. She completed her practice-led PhD within the Faculty of Art (Theatre Performance) at Monash University in 2021. She has exhibited, screened, and performed work nationally and internationally. She is currently a Forrest Creative Fellow, based in Boorloo (Perth), situated with the Centre for People, Place, and Planet and working across the School of Education and the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University.



AXON: Creative Explorations

2024 vol 14.1 *Translate | Transform | Transdiscipline*

axonjournal.com.au

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

DOI: 10.54375/001/4fus9hb76l
Keywords: Essay, Art, Science,
Interdisciplinary, Transdisciplinary,
Research, Ecology, Knowledge,
Collaboration, Place, Lab, Studio

LAB/STUDIO/SPACE/PLACE UNDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH CONTINUED

Artists as Connective Knowledge Producers and Reconciling the 'Where' of Undisciplinary Research

Andrew Freiband

Artists' Literacies Institute, ORCID: 0009-0005-4390-4223

Abstract

Building on previous work developing a methodology for art/science collaborations deemed 'undisciplinary research', this paper considers the role of a place – and the names we give to spaces – in how the knowledge produced there is shaped. Through a series of events and dialogues among knowledge practitioners from multiple disciplines, I explore the differences in how people work when located in a lab versus when they are placed in a studio. I consider how interdisciplinary research is constrained by Western disciplinary conventions, including the language employed, and the acculturation of labs, studios, schools, and offices. This paper is concerned with the nature of this *place and space* for research and includes a consideration of a precedent initiative, the Indonesian collective ruangrupa; an analysis of a discussion I facilitated with participants at The Soil Factory, an interdisciplinary arts/science community/research space, about how the place within which they work forms the knowledge they produce there; as well as a view of current undisciplinary research as it is conducted at The Soil Factory.

LAB/STUDIO/SPACE/PLACE UNDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH CONTINUED: ARTISTS AS CONNECTIVE KNOWLEDGE PRODUCERS AND RECONCILING THE 'WHERE' OF UNDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH

Andrew Freiband

Introduction

A core concept for this paper is 'undisciplinary research', a methodology that was developed when I collaborated with artists, scientists, academics, and scholars from Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences to develop a proposed arts/science interdisciplinary research centre.¹ My role as an artist-consultant was to structure and facilitate discussions that would lead to strategies for the centre's design. During this process, we discovered that the types of knowledge exchange and development desired by the prospective inhabitants of this centre were not necessarily *interdisciplinary* at all, but something else. What resulted became not interdisciplinary, but un-; and not a centre at all, but in fact an off-campus, unaffiliated satellite venue on the outskirts of Ithaca which came to be called The Soil Factory, after the prior function of the warehouse in which it was housed.²



1 The Soil Factory, exterior, during setup for a gathering. Note the green waste-separating toilet, designed by John Fuchs, which is central to some of the Soil Factory's research on circular bionutrient economies.

Previous explorations of unconventional inquiry or inter/multidisciplinary study in the sciences have been termed 'undisciplinary', notably by Robinson (2008) and subsequently by Haider, Hentati-Sundberg, Giusti, and Goodness et al. (2018) who identify three key competencies they deem necessary for 'undisciplinary' research:³

(1) the need for a deep *grounding in methodology*; (2) the importance of being aware of and able to navigate ontological and epistemological differences (*epistemological*

agility’); (3) the ability to strategically *navigate existing institutional spaces and structures*.

Proposing that *epistemological agility* falls short of the ‘interdisciplinary scope’ (Huutoniemi, Klein, Bruun, and Hukkinen 2010), I approximate something like Mignolo’s epistemic disobedience (Mignolo 2009) in this paper as it focuses more closely on Haider, Hentati-Sundberg, Giusti, and Goodness et al.’s (2018) third competency of undisciplinarity: the navigation of existing institutional spaces and structures including the need for developing new ones, as well as adapting old ones. Can we combine, re-combine, reimagine, or altogether reinvent labs, studios, farms, and schools? What happens to research when we *begin* by rethinking the space in which it occurs? This paper, then, is an exploration of the *literal* space of ambiguity that artistic knowledge may make possible for collectives of scholars pursuing undisciplinary research.

Epistemic Disobedience in Action: ruangrupa and the role of place in contemporary artistic thought

Rancière (2006: 5), following Plato, observes about knowledge that it ‘requires stories because it is in fact always double’. By this he means that knowledge also implies ignorance, and to understand one or the other, stories connecting them must form. Considering the importance of stories in shaping disciplinary thought, it is appropriate that Mignolo (2009) begins his essay on epistemological disobedience with ‘*Once upon a time*’ and immediately challenges extant assumptions of a detached and neutral knowing subject in academic disciplines and highlights the necessity of decolonialising knowledge and embracing diverse perspectives, pointing to:

the geo-political configuration of the world in which people are racially ranked and regions are racially configured... As we know: the first world has knowledge, the third world has culture; Native Americans have wisdom, Anglo Americans have science... Geo-politics of knowledge goes hand in hand with geo-politics of knowing (Mignolo 2009: 160).

Mignolo emphasises the ‘enunciation’ at the heart of knowledge production, ‘if we aim at changing the terms and not only the content of the conversation’ (Mignolo 2009: 162). Citing Frantz Fanon, ‘to speak a language is to carry the weight of a civilization’, he argues that ‘you can do sociology in Spanish, Portuguese, Arabic, Mandarin, etc. But doing it in those languages will put you at a disadvantage in relation to mainstream disciplinary debates. It will be a sort of “local sociology”’ (Mignolo 2009: 166). Economic and cultural constraints are also passed down to artists and other producers of ‘subjective’ knowledge, and Mignolo’s disobedience offers a framework for breaking away from colonial and geopolitical constraints that are imposed on institutionally produced knowledge.

It is in such a spirit that we pursue undisciplinary research not as another variation of mixed knowledges within that Western hegemony, but as a necessary transgression of the structures and strictures of knowledge creation as it exists in Western academia.

Disciplinary positioning variously as artists or scientists is pertinent in so far as it defines the structures within which we find ourselves already, but also the possibilities inherent in those positions—what Jacques Rancière calls our ‘ignorances’, inextricably paired with our ‘knowledges’ (2006: 4). Haider, Hentati-Sundberg, Giusti, and Goodness et al. observe that PhD students ‘like us are no longer ecologists, economists, or sociologists working together in an interdisciplinary team, but rather that we are interdisciplinary individuals engaging with

disciplines, or even that from our interdisciplinary training we engage with others with a similar interdisciplinary background, collaborating in an effort to create inter- and transdisciplinary science, and essentially practicing what we refer to here as “undisciplinary science” (Haider, Hentati-Sundberg, Giusti, and Goodness et al. 2018). Compare this to Pablo Helguera, writing of socially engaged artists (such as myself): ‘The artist as social practitioner must also make peace with the common accusation that he or she is not an artist but an “amateur” anthropologist, sociologist, etc. Socially engaged art functions by attaching itself to subjects and problems that normally belong to other disciplines, moving them temporarily into a space of ambiguity’ (Helguera 2011).

ruangrupa became internationally known when they were selected as curators of Documenta fifteen, staged in 2022 in Kassel, Germany.⁴ Their curatorial framework was named for *lumbung*, a term in Indonesian which originally denotes a communal rice barn, but which was expanded upon in ruangrupa’s curation to describe a broader ethos of cultural communalism and collectivism (Totona, Abdul and Abidin 2022). As such, instead of a conventional art fair or exposition, Documenta fifteen became a gathering of collectives by collectives; a wildly social cultural event that did not stay comfortably within the bounds of capital-A ‘Art’, but was a vibrant, lively festival of relationality, making, speaking, eating, thinking, and learning. The galleries and museums of Kassel were as likely to be occupied by educators, chefs, farmers, social scientists, activists, or scholars as they might be by artists. As curators, ruangrupa sought to ‘avoid the commissioning logics of artworks’, stating that ‘what we are trying to cultivate instead is relationships. We appreciate wasting time’ (Rakun 2023). ruangrupa’s curation was profoundly undisciplinary in the way it drew together a wide range of artists and invited them to practice their discipline in a free, mixed, open environment comprised of repurposed architectures, where outcomes were not measured by objects but by relationships, encouraged by the ethos of *lumbung*; a horizontal principle of sharing and communal care.

My interest is in ruangrupa’s own long research on the role of space/place in cultivating such undisciplinary engagements. The word ruangrupa itself offers a clue: in Indonesian it means ‘art space’ or ‘spatial form’, and the collective, like the Soil Factory, seems to have evolved with a *who-* and *where-*first concern. Their English language website attempts to encompass the multiplicity of the place that is ruangrupa: ‘ruangrupa is more like a clubhouse: always open, always peopled—a studio, a library, a research lab, and a party venue, all in one’ (ruangrupa 2023).

In October 2023, ruangrupa member Farid Rakun gave a keynote at the Vera List Center for Art and Politics in New York entitled ‘On Space: or putting the ruang in ruangrupa’. Rakun is a trained architect and the collective was founded by artists who felt they needed space to gather and connect. Now comprising dozens of members who come from numerous professions, the group did not in fact consider themselves a collective until recently, when they realised that in the art world, the term is ‘a good shortcut, calling ourselves a collective so that certain questions can be answered directly’ (Rakun 2023).

According to Rakun the Indonesian language is not gendered, and as a result ‘we don’t have his/her stories, their stories, we have different logics in our language’ (Rakun 2023). One of those logics is that of *rupa* itself, which Rakun characterizes as the closest approximation to the Western term ‘art’, but which carries crucially important additional connotations. When talking about what in the contemporary West might be called ‘fine art’, in Indonesia the term *seni rupa* is used. This points to ‘material’ or ‘visual art’, but according to Rakun ‘because of

our understanding of *seni*, then it needs – not functions maybe – but it needs to *play a role ...* in people's lives, in our own lives. It's not autonomous. It's not something to ponder. It's not solitary, it's not alienated. . . It's not separated from life' (Rakun 2023).

This absence of autonomy in art is a significant departure from Western ideas about art as a discipline. Gregory Sholette, to cite just one example, argues that artistic autonomy is essential for artists to be able to operate effectively in a complex ecosystem of institutions and social structures (2002). In this, he is building on a concept of artistic autonomy developed by Kant and Adorno, and carried forward to the present day (Cazeaux 2017: 7). It is a valuable comparative example to see how a non-Western cultural and linguistic foundation for understanding space/place can also generate a different set of entangled values within art, and that these entangled values may be crucial for us to (re)discover as we seek to expand our knowledge and mediate our relationships anew. Rakun reinforces this difference in context, saying 'in Indonesia, disciplines are not that rigid'. And while he 'quit' architecture professionally more than 10 years ago, 'what I see myself doing is still architecture because of space' (Rakun 2023).

Lab Studio Farm School: On the 'where' of undisciplinarity

In the fall of 2022, I facilitated an 'assembly' at The Soil Factory as part of weekend-long event series coinciding with my stay as artist in residence there. After the previous work establishing the primacy of *relationships* in the undisciplinarity methodology (see Freiband, Dickin, Glass and Gore et al. 2022), I, along with Soil Factory principals Johannes Lehmann and Rebecca Nelson, wanted to examine the question of *where*; what is the nature of the space or place that we desire to conduct interdisciplinary, disciplinary, or undisciplinarity research? What is the difference in the data when it is gathered in a lab versus a studio? And how do these framings of place affect the way we conduct research and generate knowledge?

I began with the idea for a discussion on 'The Lab vs The Studio', since these designations best defined the conventional sites of scientific and artistic work, respectively. As I collaborated with biologists and agricultural scientists who were embedded within an institution of higher education, we broadened the scope of the discussion, leading to its title 'Lab/Studio Farm/School Space/Place'.

The assembly involved scholars and practitioners from numerous fields – science, art, anthropology, humanities – as well as their family members, friends, community participants, and 'happenstance' guests. The assembly was an informal but structured group discussion in which I posed the initial questions and let the participants carry the conversation forward. Children played amongst us and nearby people were setting tents for an early autumn campout. The discussion was recorded and transcribed, and this represents an analysis of the conversation, taken within the context of my ongoing research into art/science collaborations.

What we name our workplace influences how we work there. It also affects our perception of what comes out of it: discoveries from a lab are treated differently from discoveries made in a studio. These perceptions derive not only from the discoverer, but from wider social convention. Not only does 'architecture affect behavior' (an observation contributed by an architect), but place affects preconceived notions of what is expected and allowable there. It was restlessness with the rules of the lab that had driven scientists like Johannes Lehmann to establish the Soil Factory in the first place:



2

[In a lab] we try to design the perfect experiment and then we conduct the perfect experiment and then we clean up and and it's all in little bottles somewhere in the box and it's put away and it lives on as data.⁵

Contrast this to a participating artists' description of some of the key behaviors of work in a studio:

Sometimes studio time is lying on my bed and looking through images and silly little ideas in my head. And sometimes studio time is a rehearsal space and sometimes it's a variety of things... it's a place to sift through materials and see where the threads are and see what is actually happening. . . studio space is giving yourself permission to – pardon my French – to fuck around for a day or a month or a year and just see what comes to you.

A lab or a studio does not have to describe a *place*, but in fact describes a 'set of protocols'. Some of these protocols have architectural or structural prerequisites, such as the equipment required in some labs, but often the protocols are presumptions rooted in convention. Realizing this, the participants began to use the words as verbs: *labbing* = *to lab*, *studioing* = *to studio*.

Analysing the discussion among these many practitioners with their varying experiences in both labs and studios, I have separated out some of the named characteristics of both labbing and studioing.

We proposed that the protocols of labbing or studioing constituted an 'invitation' or 'attraction' for practitioners at various stages of their work. Within academia or the trajectory of a professional artist, that attraction to one set of protocols often transpires unconsciously, or as the result of convention, e.g. art students, learning in studios from art educators who themselves work in studios, are acculturated to *studioing*; and science students, learning in labs run by their scientist mentors, take on the assumption that labs are where science happens. Institutions, in our evaluation, reinforce these tracks and insist they are permanent choices. From a professor of design:

LABBING	STUDIOING
'sacrosanct' testing clean up after yourself	alone fuck around studio 'visit' rearranging pieces
equipment repeatable convention: papers	detritus/ artifacts materials product-making
outcomes: data, knowledge, papers	outcomes: objects, products, iterations
time limited	financial constraints
	time unlimited
	therapy
separation naming	synthesis confusing

3

Academia puts us in our little spaces. I actually think that us being segregated towards little spaces is how they deal with us.

The point here is that it requires a conscious act of *undisciplinarity impetuosity* to reconceive our practice as happening in an *other* kind of place, according to a different set of protocols. Artists and scientists tend not to even be familiar with what those conventions and protocols are, but when professional restlessness hits, we certainly have some preconceptions that attract us to experimenting with undisciplinarity. Artists in our assembly said they are attracted to the apparent 'rigour', 'professional validation', and 'financial stability' of the lab, while scientists in the discussion were attracted to the studio's 'freedom', 'creativity', material tactility, and sense of collaboration and collectivity.

Returning to this concern about the role of institutions and our previous paper's underlining of the double-entendre of the term *discipline* (Freiband, Dickin, Glass and Gore et al. 2022), and why the framework of labs and studios is so deeply ingrained there, one of our participants shared:

when we mention lab and studio that these are like cells, arguably they're like storage facilities that keep us out of the world.

That is, while labs and studios may allow us to achieve certain disciplinarily specific goals, they are also ideal vessels for ensuring disciplinarity itself within the institution. For example, research conducted within studios is perceived quite differently (less rigorously, perhaps) than research conducted within labs; and the products of labs will be less likely to attract the kind of aesthetic, cultural, or interpretive attention as those made in studios. Bruno Latour observes scientific practice from within the lab through the eyes of an anthropologist, and spots one of the mechanisms by which these perceptions are formed, describing how, to an observer, 'a tribe of readers and writers' in laboratories 'appear to have developed considerable skills in setting up devices which can pin down elusive figures, traces, or inscriptions in their craftwork, and in the art of persuasion', and that it is this 'skill' that 'enables them to convince others that what they do is important, that what they say is true, and that their proposals are worth funding' (Latour and Woolgar 1979: 69–70).

The idea that labs and studios are not 'of the world' is also one that appeared consistently through our discussions, and lends itself to consideration of what other sort of spaces/places or protocols might house different kinds of knowledge production. In our assembly, the 'real

world' was identified as existing in places such as 'the field' or 'on site'. Disciplines such as architecture and anthropology, among others, used this terminology and viewed these as key locations of knowledge production.

Additionally, designers in our assembly felt that the 'design studio' merited a separate treatment from the studio that might come to mind when talking about artistic practice. Design studios differed from artists' studios in a few key ways; design studios tended to be 'communal' and 'collective' where artists' studios usually implied solitary work, if not outright isolation. And finally, numerous participants observed a widely prevalent mode of production that we deemed 'screen/office'. Certain lab/studio protocols can be enacted in the screen/office space, but they face erosion in their integrity by the screen/office's own protocols of emailing, administration, and distraction.

It was also noted how much diversity there can be in both labs and studios. As these concepts are largely protocols, artists acknowledge studioing anywhere from their bedroom to their car to a tiny, rented office or an industrial loft. Scientists, similarly, work in labs that range widely in size, resources, and reputation. This underlines the previous emphasis on *who* we are conducting research with, as opposed to *what* that research is. A lab or a studio (or a school or a farm) may manifest without any architectural element at all if a cohort of *mutually attracted* and curious researchers finds themselves sharing space and time.

The Lab/Studio/Farm/School assembly prompted aspirations among participants to conduct collaborative making/learning sessions simply to leverage the knowledge-producing possibilities of our new lens. Scientists expressed enthusiasm for participating in collaborative art making sessions as a catalyst for the development of scientific questions; and artists (and designers) offered themselves up as connective knowledge producers – facilitators and participants – in labwork and scientific inquiry.

The Soil Factory: Undisciplinary research in practice

Through the course of the conversations that comprised my research-artist consultancy at what would become The Soil Factory, outlined in my introduction, I heard participating scientists say that they wanted free-ranging engagements with people from lots of different fields; they wanted to have new questions proposed to them from new perspectives; they wanted their work to be done not within the confines of a lab, but in a place where messes could be made and learned from, and where one practitioner's failure might hold value, beauty, or utility to someone else. They wanted music, art, food, and conversation all around, as well as a place to teach, to read, to learn, and to experiment. The soil scientists, plant pathologists, and biologist wanted open spaces, outdoor gardens, and land. It sounded to me like an artist's collective.

Artists gather to talk, look at work, play music together, and socialise regularly as a key means of developing their practices. This relationality has been explored in formal terms within art, most notably in the works of those artists affiliated with relational aesthetics, including Rirkrit Tiravanija and Urs Fischer, among many (Bourriaud, Pleasance and Woods 2002). I learnt that this was not necessarily common in other disciplines where annual conferences or other formal convenings were too infrequent and ordered. Relational aesthetics was an artworld formalisation of a basic aspect of countless artists' lifestyles. We often live and eat collectively because it is cheaper, and the best way to occupy unfinished or multipurpose spaces like lofts and warehouses, where one can both live and make art. Artists draw from one another socially,

emotionally, and physically, perhaps in part because artistic material technique often requires close-up mutual learning. A sociology of artists could pursue this question further, but this is not that study.

For the participants in the Soil Factory planning, the major takeaway was that the research methodology they desired did not begin with the question ‘*What* are we working on?’ but rather the question ‘*Who* will I work with?’ In this way, the process does not begin from within a discipline such as a scientific hypothesis or a guiding thematic question – the starting point was *undisciplinary* (or epistemically disobedient) in that it initially disregarded disciplinarity and emphasised ‘the knower rather than the known’ (Mignolo, 2009).

The participants in our assembly at the Soil Factory used the term ‘place of inquiry’ to encompass all the sites and protocols: labs, studios, fields, sites, offices, schools. For us, curiosity and questioning is primary to activating any-place – from a laptop in a coffee shop to a loft studio or an advanced biology lab – into a location for knowledge production. While scientists, conditioned by the lab, generate data by category and analysis, artists are conditioned by the studio to be relational, ecological, comparative, and in-commoning.

Towards a circular economy of the body and planet

Johannes Lehmann and Rebecca Nelson are both founding participants of the Soil Factory, and scientists studying soil and plant pathology, respectively. Their work has led them into deep inquiry into the bionutrient economy, tracing the path of key fertilising nutrients from soil to crop to market/table to body to waste system. This pathway is largely one-way for the nitrogen, phosphorus, and potassium (NPK) molecules in question, because our food and waste systems are desperately overleveraged toward extraction of nutrients, trucking, dumping, and ultimately pouring them, via our bodies and sewage systems, into oceans and waterways. A nitrogen molecule extracted in one place may be trucked hundreds of miles away, added to the soil in a new place, drawn into a crop which is picked and trucked another several hundred or thousand miles away, bought and consumed in a city somewhere, and then passed through the digestive tract of a consumer who knows no alternative to depositing it into a toilet and flushing it thoughtlessly into a sewage system ultimately aimed out to sea. Their research is oriented to realising a *circular* bionutrient economy: recapturing the nutrients we ingest to sustainably return them to the soil where they can contribute to the growth of more food. The climatic and public health implications of such a circular system are extraordinary, and the science is approaching real viability.

A key obstacle to large scale systems change – along with the carbon capture, resource preservation, waterway remediation, and food growth sustainability that would come with it – is a set of cultural legacies around human waste and the physical infrastructure that mirrors them. Put crudely, Johannes, Rebecca, and their students have begun to figure out how to make shit and piss *useful* to a world in ecological emergency; they do not operate in the fields of knowledge which might permit these uses to ever be realised. Taboos and a toilet culture that reinforces them drive the system, no matter what science might offer as an alternative. The fields in which new knowledge is needed are relational, cultural, municipal, political, architectural, anthropological, and combinations thereof.

In October 2021, I staged a weekend series of events, inviting consideration of the Circular Bionutrient Economy at the Soil Factory, with artist Ella Ziegler, a Berlin-based artist who Lehmann



4

became acquainted with and invited to Ithaca as a connective knowledge producer to help develop the circular bionutrient economy research. The Soil Factory community – scholars, citizens, families, friends, students, colleagues – was invited to a long weekend’s worth of events to attend and present talks on bionutrients, food, culture and taboos, sewage systems, and more. Waste separating toilets and solid waste pyrolysis demonstrations were offered, and the scientific mechanisms of a prospective bionutrient circular economy were shared. We tasted wine and food as a demonstration of the sensory manifestation of soil composition and nutrient balance. After all this knowledge sharing and continuous play, dialogue, and discussion, we ran arts-based

workshops together to develop potential interventions in the taboos, imagining how cultural producers can contribute to the forward movement of the Circular Bionutrient Economy. Finally, discussions were held with municipal waste stakeholders in Ithaca, so that actionable steps could be taken for how to move this difficult problem out of the abstract sphere of academic scholarship and into the ‘real world’.

Stories, poems, and songs were written about urine and faeces, and participants recognised the deeply internalised obstacles to realizing this elegant cyclical system. All this work was later aggregated into a series of chapbook-style publications assembled by Ziegler and distributed through The Soil Factory as an example of informal, undisciplined scholarly publishing. This work is alternately silly, serious, joyful, playful, and an urgent response to an epochal emergency in our species’ survival



5

on Earth. It is the ambiguous space of artistic knowing. I contend that this multiplicity and complexity is a characteristic of undisciplined knowledge creation: in foregrounding relationships and sharing of disciplinary expertise without hierarchies of ‘rigour’ or rightness, the knowledge that emerges can be messy, useful, surprising. It raises still more questions and begs follow-through along a dozen different threads. It’s alive and requires care, just like the people who gathered to weave it together.

Conclusions

For all this consideration of what constitutes *labbing* and *studioing*, along with site/fieldwork or other spatially conceived knowledge production protocols, it's essential, toward conclusion, to remind ourselves what lab and studio work ultimately have in common. If one of the core functions of Western scientific thought is taxonomising, categorising, separating, and naming, and more contemporary artistic thought is that of connecting, synthesising, and in-commoning, then it is my role here as an artist to follow up this categorical analysis with a view of what various disciplines share in common, whether it is conducted in a lab, studio, school, or field. We have seen at the Soil Factory, and in the comparable model of ruangrupa, how artists are able to operate as connective knowledge producers.

To go back to the framework of the previous paper, where we 'discovered' the primacy of *who?* (as opposed to *what?*) when developing research initiatives, this further study suggests that *who* and *where* are entwined in an ecological set of conditions for the conduct of undisciplinary research. Science or art will not occur simply on the occasion of the construction of a lab or the leasing of a studio. Our bodies, our surroundings, and our minds are entangled in knowledge formation, and this is complicated in the most enthralling ways when *other* bodies and minds are introduced into shared spaces and places. In this way, knowledge production, or the organisation of the world, becomes infinite and nonlinear because contexts, surroundings, and participants are ever-changing.⁶

It might appear that knowledge, from whichever discipline it emerges, is an organisation of the world and our place in relation to it; and that the 'place of inquiry' is any location that attracts knowledge-seekers, and enables them (whether through time, technology, or collaborative relationships) to conduct this organising. If we can continually return to this understanding of the function of labs and studios, perhaps we can develop ones that are truly welcoming to undisciplinary knowledge production, by leaving them open to multiple protocols and conventions. This means to foster community while remaining vigilant against the institutional forces that might turn such places of inquiry into sequestration cells away from the world that we seek to organise and inhabit.

Work details

- 1 Photograph taken by the author.
- 2 Flyer for weekend 'assembly', design by author.
- 3 'Labbing and Studioing', design by author, 2022.
- 4 Flyer for Day 2 Events of the Bionutrient Circular Economy, design by the author.
- 5 Published outcomes of the Bionutrient Circular Economy workshops, designed and printed by Ella Ziegler.

Notes

¹ See 'Undisciplinary Research: The Soil Factory.' <https://www.artistsliteracies.org/undisciplinary-research-the-soil-factory-ithaca> (accessed 27 June 2024) and Freiband 2019.

² See also <https://www.weavecommunity.org/the-soil-factory-2/> (accessed 27 June 2024).

³ See <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11625-017-0445-1/tables/1> (accessed 27 June 2024) for Haider, Hentati-Sundberg, Giusti, and Goodness et al.'s definitions on different types of mixed-disciplinary research (2008).

⁴ See also Brazil 2022.

⁵ All quotes appearing in italics in this section are taken from the transcribed Lab/Studio Farm/School Space/Place' discussion.

⁶ Latour writes of the lab that it is a site of the 'construction of order', and that 'actual scientific practice entails the confrontation and negotiation of utter confusion' (Latour and Woolgar, 1979: 36). I compare this to Alva Noë's conception of art as a set of *strange tools* developed by humans that reveal how we organise the world and thus, with the potential to reorganise or change our world view (2015).

Works Cited

Bourriaud, N 2002 *Relational Aesthetics* translated by S Pleasance and F Woods, Dijon: Les Presses du Réel.

Brazil, K 2022 'Documenta 15, "lumbung"'. *e-flux* (21 June) <https://www.e-flux.com/criticism/475848/documenta-15-lumbung> (accessed 27 June 2024).

Cazeaux, C 2017 *Art, Research, Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge.

Fanon, F 2002 *Black Skin, White Masks*, London: Pluto Press.

Freiband, A, KL Dickin, M Glass, MA Gore, J Hinestroza, R Nelson, V Platt, N Rooks, A Sachs, N Stern and J Lehmann 2022 'Undisciplining the University Through Shared Purpose, Practice, and Place,' *Humanities and Social Sciences Communications*, Vol. 9(1): 1–10 <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-022-01195-4> (accessed 27 June 2024).

Freiband, A 2019 'Art as research: Research as art.' Cornell University College of Agriculture and Life Sciences: School of Integrative Plant Science <https://youtu.be/xo3QdZeWPNg> (accessed 27 June 2024).

Gell, A 1998 *Art and Agency: An anthropological theory*, New York: Clarendon Press.

Haider, LJ, J Hentati-Sundberg, M Giusti, J Goodness, M Hamann, VA Masterson, M Meacham, A Merrie, D Ospina, C Schill and H Sinare 2018 'The Undisciplinary Journey: Early-career perspectives in sustainability science,' *Sustainability Science* Vol. 13(1): 191–204 <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s11625-017-0445-1> (accessed 27 June 2024).

Helguera, P 2011 *Education For Socially Engaged Art: A materials and techniques handbook*, New York: Jorge Pinto Books.

Huutoniemi, K, J Klein, J Thompson, H Bruun and J Hukkinen 2010 'Analyzing Interdisciplinarity: Typology and indicators,' *Research Policy*, Vol.39(1): 79–88 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.respol.2009.09.011> (accessed 27 June 2024).

Jelinek, A 2020 *Between Discipline and a Hard Place: The value of contemporary art*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic.

- Latour, B and S Woolgar 1979 *Laboratory Life: The social construction of scientific facts*, Beverly Hills: Sage Publications.
- Mignolo, WD 2009 'Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom,' *Theory, Culture & Society*, Vol. 26(7–8): 159–181 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276409349275> (accessed 27 June 2024).
- Noë, A 2015 *Strange Tools: Art and human nature*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Rakun, F 2023 'On Space, or Putting The Ruang in Ruangrupa.' *Veralist Center for Art and Politics* <https://veralistcenter.org/events/farid-rakun-on-space-or-putting-the-ruang-in-ruangrupa> (accessed 19 November 2023).
- Rancière, J 2006 'Thinking Between Disciplines: An aesthetics of knowledge,' *Parrhesia Journal* Vol. 1(1): 1–12 https://www.parrhesiajournal.org/parrhesia01/parrhesia01_ranciere.pdf (accessed 15 March 2024).
- ruangrupa (2023) ruangrupa <https://ruangrupa.id/tentang/> (accessed 26 June 2024).
- Sholette, G 2002 'Fidelity, Betrayal, Autonomy,' *Third Text*, Vol. 16 (1): 15–166 <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528820210138290> (accessed 27 June 2024).
- Szreder, K 2021 *The ABC of the projectariat: Living and working in a precarious art world*, Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Totona, A, AM Abdul and A Abidin 2022 *Majalah Lumbung: A magazine on harvesting and sharing (bilingual edition)*, Berlin: Hatje Cantz.

About the author

Andrew Freiband is an artist, educator, filmmaker, and research-artist. His praxis sits among the many intersections of art, education, media, film, journalism, literature, social impact, international development, research, and strategic design. He is founder and director of the Artists' Literacies Institute, a research agency, consultancy, and artist support organisation that helps artists reframe their practice as knowledge production to position themselves more meaningfully in the late Capitalocene.



AXON: Creative Explorations

2024 vol 14.1 *Translate | Transform | Transdiscipline*

axonjournal.com.au

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

DOI: 10.54375/001/m4tpr8qvgx
Keywords: Essay, Creativity, Originality,
Artificial intelligence, Collaboration,
Anxiety of Influence

CREATIVITY, ERROR AND ORIGINALITY

Artificial Intelligence and The Anxiety of Influence

Dan Pitman and Amelia Walker

University of Adelaide, ORCID: 0000-0002-3800-124X

University of South Australia, ORCID: 0000-0002-9616-6667

Abstract

Artificial Intelligence (AI), now routinely being used to generate images, film, poetry, and literature that fascinate and delight human audiences, has re-invigorated discussion about how human artists, writers, and musicians themselves create. A common argument against AI artworks is that recombining materials from a given data set is merely generative activity and not creativity. Yet the assumption that human creativity necessarily entails individual originality has long been contested, and multiple alternative theories of creativity have been proposed. These include theories which pose that human creativity arises via novel reworkings of existing inspirational works. An early example of such alternative models of creativity is Harold Bloom's 1973 'Anxiety of Influence' theory, which outlays six ways poets can unknowingly misread and rewrite their precursors' poems in creatively un/original ways. This article explores Bloom's aging theory by asking neural.love to generate images in response to prompts based on *The Anxiety of Influence* (Bloom 1973), which we then asked ChatGPT to analyse for their symbolic meaning. We describe the interactions between ChatGPT, neural.love and ourselves chronologically. This structural decision best reflects how each actor in the network is affected by the previous events in the process. In doing so, we use inquiry methodology and further Human Machine Communication (HMC) (Guzman 2020) to probe the insights of current agents in the field of AI, whose own creativity or generativity is still in question.

CREATIVITY, ERROR, AND ORIGINALITY: ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AND THE ANXIETY OF INFLUENCE

Dan Pitman and Amelia Walker

Introduction

Many of us remember when arts practices were places where technology could not compete, at least for attention, with human creativity (Leontief and Duchin 1986: vii-viii). The development of openly accessible Artificial Intelligence (AI) art and language models have made a significant impact on our perception of creativity. AI generators can now, within moments, produce images and texts that human audiences respond to with enthusiasm, as recognized in the studies of Chatterjee (2022: 4), Linardaki (2022: 1) and Köbis and Mossink (2021). Linardaki notes AI's popularisation has generated a moral panic around generative AI as a perceived challenge to the concept of artistic originality (2022: 10). Anantrasirichai and Bull similarly note the suspicion with which many creative practitioners respond to AI (2022: 589). We take the position that, rather than be constricted by fear, it is best to take an interest. In line with Anantrasirichai and Bull's argument, we approach AI as something that can 'augment, rather than replace, human creativity', offering 'a tool or collaborative assistant for creativity' (Anantrasirichai and Bull 2022: 589).

That generative AI lacks originality is one of popular media's most common charges against AI art (Linardaki 2022: 10). Such charges against AI appear to rely on a narrow definition of creativity based in individual human genius. However, multiple alternative models of creativity have been proposed.¹ Indeed, the terms creativity and originality are themselves routinely contested.² Included in these alternative approaches are theories which pose that human creativity itself arises via recombination of existing materials in novel ways. One early example of human creativity theorised as an act of recombination is Harold Bloom's (1973) *The Anxiety of Influence*.

The 'anxiety of influence' implies that originality arises through the error or incompetence of the poet to properly recreate their precursors' works (Bloom 1973: 5), and poses that the shame of misreading and rewriting another's poems causes poets to deny to their conscious selves that they have done so (1973: 7). Bloom used the story of Oedipus, who unwittingly slayed his father and married his mother, as an analogy for subconscious battles between poets and their precursors, whose poems they unknowingly misread and rewrite to creatively outdo them, thereby claiming poetic victory and the love of mother muse (1973: 10). Although Bloom's theory now seems more of a historical notion than an objective success, current debates around AI's capacity to generate original creative works led us to re-evaluate the anxiety of influence,³ and explore how today's generative AI can re-orientate extant perceptions of creativity and originality.

To explore Bloom's theory in the digital art context, we utilised Cait Lackey's (2023) Human Machine Communication (HMC) interview-based methodology for inquiry. HMC inquiry is based on Bruno Latour's (2007) Actor-Network Theory (ANT), which in turn draws on ethnomethodology and treats humans and non-humans as actors that become intertwined in complex networks of interaction that are constantly in the process of reconstituting the social world.⁴ Lackey's HMC methodology involves a human-machine actor network involved

in symbolic information sharing that generates a distinct culture of knowledge, which shapes the perceptions of the individuals within it; thus reshaping reality (2023: 47). As Lackey (2023: 49) notes, each actor involved in HMC inquiry (human and AI) can be considered as part of a network and a network in itself. Together, the networked actors form assemblages that ‘compose heterogenous or sociotechnical actor networks by translating and linking different elements and associations brought forth and by a diversity of human and technological actors all playing different roles in sociotechnical systems’ (2023: 49).

In our inquiry, the actors involved were two human authors and two AI agents, ChatGPT (version 3.5) and neural.love, with mediation from us as to how each AI agent interacted with the other. The developers and their choices in designing and training these agents also played roles in our networked assemblage, as did Bloom’s theory. We asked neural.love to generate images in response to prompts based on *The Anxiety of Influence* (Bloom 1973), which we then asked ChatGPT to analyse for their symbolic meaning. The first prompt we gave neural.love was simply ‘Harold Bloom’s Anxiety of Influence’. Subsequent image prompts were based on the six ‘revisionary ratios’ via which Bloom poses the anxiety of influence can manifest: *clinamen*, *tessera*, *kenosis*, *daemonisation*, *askesis*, and *apophrades* (1973: 14–16). From the interaction of this assemblage via these methods emerged an awareness of both the network and each agent’s nature – not just Bloom’s theory, but also each agent in the network. Indeed, the reader may learn more about ChatGPT and the authors’ interaction here than about Bloom.

The prompts we gave to neural.love are presented as the captions below the images themselves. As the full transcript of prompts and responses from our dialogues with *ChatGPT* would be longer than this article in its entirety, we have paraphrased key elements of the prompts and quoted or paraphrased the responses. Through inviting analysis by and with ChatGPT, we explore the Human-Machine Communication phenomenon in regards to art and creativity, and find that there are many human factors still at work in an AI, some of which exhibit elements of Bloom’s theory.

Harold Bloom’s Anxiety of Influence (1)

‘Harold Bloom’s Anxiety of Influence’ is the first image we asked neural.love to generate. Upon first glance, it struck us that Harold Bloom appears either dead or dependent on technology. We wondered, was this gesture comparable with those via which, in Bloom’s account, ‘strong’ poets claim victory over their precursors? If so, could neural.love have in some way manifested an anxiety of influence? We recognise, of course, that AI does not experience anxiety or other emotions in the sense humans do, but pose reinterpretation of the anxiety of influence as the ‘poetic misprision’ (Bloom 1973, xxiii) present in neural.love’s recombination of images from its training data in service to our prompt; a more straightforward response might have simply been an image of the book itself. This thought generated subsequent questions. For instance, do we interpret the uneven placement of the eyes as novel symbolic commentary or erroneous artefact? Is there a difference and if so, how do we interpret any of the scene? These inquiries drove our resultant interaction with ChatGPT.

We described our first image in ChatGPT, emphasising that Bloom’s likeness appears bodiless among a barren landscape, a head inside a space-helmet, possibly dead, with wiring connecting to his neck, and extra eyes that appear to be empty sockets. We asked ChatGPT for its analysis of the possible symbolic interpretations of these features.



¹ 'Harold Bloom's Anxiety of Influence'. Image generated by neural.love, Pittman, and Walker (2023).

The strange eyes could symbolize a sense of lifelessness or lack of creativity that arises when a poet becomes too focused on imitating or replicating the work of those who came before them, rather than forging their own unique artistic path. Alternatively, the dead sockets could be seen as a representation of the fear or anxiety that a poet might experience when they feel overwhelmed or overshadowed by the legacy of their predecessors, potentially leading to a sense of creative paralysis or stagnation.

The helmet could represent a barrier between the individual and their environment, emphasizing their separation and alienation. The absence of a body could also suggest a lack of agency or control, with the individual feeling helpless or vulnerable. Alternatively, it could symbolize the exploration of new worlds or ideas, with the helmet and isolation representing a necessary protection against the unknown.

The space helmet and foreign planet could be seen as metaphorical symbols for the unfamiliar terrain of literature, with the absence of a body representing the writer's struggle to assert their own identity and voice in this new landscape. The image could be interpreted as a visual representation of the anxiety of influence, with the writer feeling trapped and alone in their struggle to create something original and authentic.'

The head inside the helmet could be a symbol for the isolated self, cut off from the world and the influences that shape it. The space helmet could represent a kind of protective shield, a barrier against the onslaught of other voices and influences. The dead eye sockets could suggest a kind of blindness, a failure to see the world as it is, or to fully engage with other voices and perspectives.

Alternatively, the image could be seen as a symbol of Bloom's own intellectual isolation and alienation from the world around him. The space helmet could represent the ivory tower of academia, a sheltered and privileged environment that shields him from the struggles and challenges of the wider world. The eyes could suggest a kind of spiritual emptiness or lack of empathy, a failure to connect with others and to understand their experiences and perspectives.'

Next, we asked what the image might mean if interpreted through the Oedipal lens.

The lifeless eyes could represent the failure of the son to fully integrate and overcome the influence of the father, resulting in a kind of blindness or lack of insight into his own creative potential. This interpretation would be consistent with Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence and the struggle of the poet to overcome the influence of past poets to create something truly new and original. The space helmet could be interpreted as a symbol of the protective barrier between Harold Bloom and his literary forefathers. It could represent a desire to distance himself from the influence of those who came before him, to protect his own identity and ideas from being swallowed up by theirs. At the same time, it could also represent a fear of being cut off from those same influences, and a desire to remain connected to them despite the anxiety of influence.

While ChatGPT is prone to offering the most statistically obvious answers, the unique collective of the insights shows that ChatGPT contains a fairly nuanced understanding of the concepts in Bloom's theory, and impressively demonstrates the ability to mimic a competent analysis, at least in a superficial sense. It did not, however, comment on the AI generative process as being context for this analysis.

Clinamen (2)

For Roman poet-philosopher Lucretius, *clinamen* described a 'swerve' of the atoms so as to make change possible in the universe' (cited in Bloom 1973: 14). In Bloom's theory, it signifies 'poetic misreading or misprision proper'; when 'a poet swerves away from [their] precursor' via 'a corrective movement in [their] own poem' (14). The correction 'implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves (14).

We described the 'Clinamen' image for ChatGPT as a cyborg with a human head and mechanical torso. ChatGPT noted that this could symbolically 'represent the intersection of technology and humanity' or a 'melding of different worlds or dimensions, with the human head and metal collar representing the physical world and the sky and birds representing a more ethereal or spiritual realm'. It added that the torso could on one hand 'represent a kind of mechanical or technological force that disrupts the natural order of things, just as the concept of *clinamen* refers to the unpredictable swerve of atoms', but on the other hand 'could represent a new or alternate kind of life that arises through the collision of existing forms', or even 'the transformative power of unexpected encounters and the emergence of something new out of the collision of familiar forms'. ChatGPT posed an additional interpretation as that of 'a kind of liminal state' (of in-between-ness or crossing over), which 'disrupts fixed categories and blurs boundaries between different states of being'.



2 'Clinaman'. Image generated by neural.love, Pittman, and Walker (2023).

ChatGPT's response to our description that 'the head is shaved and we can only see the back of it', ChatGPT suggested 'a loss of individuality or agency', while '...dashboard cogs in the cyborg creature's torso might represent the internal workings of the mind or psyche, with the human head symbolizing consciousness or self-awareness'. It posed that 'the birds swooping against the hazy blue-pink sky might suggest a desire for freedom or escape', with the metal collar blocking the figure's sight potentially symbolising 'a restriction or limitation' and the hazy blue-pink sky perhaps suggesting 'a dreamlike or altered state of consciousness'.

Overall, ChatGPT characterised the image as suggesting 'a sense of confinement or restriction, but also a desire for transcendence or escape'. It remarked that the '...combination of human and mechanical elements raises questions about the nature of identity and agency in a technologically mediated world'. We were struck that an AI like neural.love, imbued with the power to absorb and re-envision so much art, does so without a concept of 'self'. It churns happily and uninformed of its faux pas, blatant forgery, sweetest pop, or highest of philosophy. Apt, then, that the act of 'swerving' is something a car does; as opposed to decision making, something a human does.

Tessera (3)

Tessera, or 'completion and antithesis', evokes 'a token of recognition, the fragment say of a small pot which with the other fragments would re-constitute the vessel' (Bloom, 1973: 14). It indicates that 'a poet antithetically 'completes' his [sic] precursor, by so reading the parent-poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough' (ibid).



3 'Harold Bloom's Tessera'
Image generated by
neural.love, Pittman, and
Walker (2023).

We described Image Three to *ChatGPT* as 'a silhouette head with smiling dark red lips':

' . . . Above the lips, the head opens into a chamber that looks like a city with spiky buildings and a strange glow behind them. There are stars, too, and near the top of the image are strange floating boxes that look like glass boxes filled with bright silver lights. . . '

ChatGPT posed that the lips 'could symbolize confidence or satisfaction in achieving a goal, despite the anxiety of influence', with the opening above them potentially representing 'a new level of understanding or creativity that the artist has achieved, allowing them to see the world in a different way'. It then suggested that 'the city-like chamber could represent the artist's mind, with the spiky buildings and strange glow behind them symbolizing the complexity and mystery of the creative process' while ' . . . stars could represent inspiration or new ideas that the artist is exploring' and 'floating glass boxes with silver shards could represent the artist's past works or influences, which are now being used in a new way'.

ChatGPT continued to reflect that the image as a whole could be 'a representation of the subconscious mind', via which interpretation the smiling lips would represent 'the conscious mind', the city-like chamber 'the deeper levels of the artist's psyche', and the floating boxes and silver lights 'memories or thoughts that have been repressed or forgotten, but which are now being brought to the surface and used creatively'. It added that ' . . . spiky buildings in the chamber could symbolize the obstacles and challenges that the artist has had to overcome in order to create their work' and the glow behind the buildings 'the artist's inner strength and determination, which have allowed them to persevere despite the difficulties'. Then, as an



4 'Kenosis -anime' Image generated by neural.love, Pittman, and Walker (2023).

alternative interpretation, it noted that the image could represent 'the relationship between the artist and their audience', with the lips now signifying 'the artist's confidence in their work', the city-like chamber and floating boxes 'various interpretations and reactions that their work has received from different audiences' and the silver lights 'different ways in which the work has been received and appreciated by different people'.

ChatGPT, again overly eager to please and unwittingly superficial, approaches its analyses with uniform naivety and positivity. So motivated is it to write its mimicry of a mature analysis that its molasses thick formality is already wearing thin. It is in-genuinely rigorous nor aware of itself the nature of the neural.love agent. ChatGPT is mimicking literature on art analysis rather than executing the true act of analysis. Its programmed personality is, on the other hand, quite purposefully rife with insecurities and apologies. Rather interpreting this as the agent's nature, the developers seem to have forced it to constantly apologise and redact errors in judgment, faux pas, or misleading statements that might accidentally influence the real world.

Kenosis (4)

Bloom treated *kenosis* as 'a breaking-device similar to the defence mechanisms our psyches employ against repetitive compulsions; kenosis then is a movement towards discontinuity with the precursor' (1973: 14). Neural.love's response to 'Kenosis' was a rendering of characters from anime and fantasy franchises that feature the word as a proper noun. While acknowledging that this is the target audience of the product neural.love, we specifically wanted to explore its interpretation of the word and its meaning. It is worth noting that we had avoided detailed prompts or any kind of 'promptography' (Hobday 2023) or 'promptology' (Ocampo 2022) that

would colour the response so far, with the hopes of seeing the ‘nature’ of the agent emerge instead. In this case, we resigned to abandon our open-ended approach to prompting with a negative prompt, ‘-anime’.

We were then presented with a portrait of an ornate clockwork automaton, with a gothic clock-like device in the background. We discussed several possible interpretations with ChatGPT:

While not a direct parallel, the concept of transhumanism [where the human form is transcended or augmented by the incorporation of mechanical elements] and the biblical idea of kenosis share a common thread of profound transformation and the willingness to undergo a radical shift in order to achieve a higher state of being or existence . . . a form of self-emptying or shedding of conventional humanity in favor of a new, enhanced existence.

On the anxiety of influence the clockwork aesthetic:

. . . may represent the process of meticulously crafting and arranging ideas, akin to the act of writing poetry.

Here, the automaton is interpreted as a creation of humanity rather than an evolution of it.

ChatGPT interpreted the clock face as, ‘the passage of time and the historical context in which the poet operates, underscoring the idea of being situated in a specific literary tradition’ reminding us of our own impermanence as poets or, by extension, artists. The jacket was given significance by ChatGPT, that it ‘might symbolize the outer identity or persona that the poet adopts in their writing,’ giving the humanity back to the automaton again. The horns/ears, ‘. . . heightened sensitivity or receptivity to the influences and inspirations,’ while the blue gems in its eyes, ‘...the inner brilliance and creativity within the poet’s mind,’ revealing an idea that ‘the poet’ is burdened by the clash of two forces: external inspiration and internal urges to create.

But are our own AI automatons weighted by this burden? It seems so effortless as to be sublimely free of it. ChatGPT responded:

In the case of human artists, they often grapple with the influence of their predecessors and the broader cultural and literary tradition. They must navigate the tension between drawing inspiration from existing works and striving to express their own unique voice and vision.

Similarly, AI models like ChatGPT or image generators like neural.love operate within the confines of their training data and algorithms. They process vast amounts of information from their training data to generate responses or images. While they do not have subjective experiences or consciousness, their outputs are shaped by the patterns they’ve learned.

This can be seen as an analogy to the burden of influence in human artistry. The external forces for AI are the patterns, styles, and information embedded in their training data. The creative impetus for AI is the task of generating responses or images based on the patterns they’ve learned.



5 'Harold Bloom's Theory of Daemonisation'. Image generated by neural.love, Pittman, and Walker (2023).

Daemonisation (5)

Bloom described *daemonisation* as 'a movement towards a personalized Counter-Sublime, in reaction to the precursor's Sublime' (1973: 15):

. . .the later poet opens himself to what he believes to be a power in the parent poem that does not belong to the parent proper, but to a range of being just beyond that precursor. He does this, in his poem, by so stationing its relation to the parent poem as to generalize away the uniqueness of the earlier work (Bloom 1973, p. 15).

ChatGPT offered two options for the seashell with googly eyes, one being it is the daemon or ego of the artists, the other being a toy like companion that inspires the artists. Toward the later, posing that the improvised toy might be a sign that the boy is lonely. ChatGPT responded positively, pointing out a '...deeper significance in this context. It becomes a symbol of companionship and imaginative solace for the lonely boy.' ChatGPT includes that this improvised friend represents '...a source of comfort and creativity in the midst of his apparent solitude.'

The science fiction uniform of the character and the various badges and medals adorning it were again a surprising (but insightful) focus for ChatGPT, these elements, 'might reflect a sense of order or discipline, which could be linked to Bloom's concept of the anxiety of influence. The boy's appearance [neatly parted hair and uniform clothing] may signify an attempt to maintain composure or a façade of confidence despite internal struggles.' The badges though 'could be interpreted as symbols of recognition or validation within a larger artistic or creative community.'



6 'Harold Bloom's Askesis'. Image generated by neural.love, Pittman, and Walker (2023).



7 'Harold Bloom's Apophrades'. Image generated by neural.love, Pittman, and Walker (2023).

In the context of daemonisation, they may represent external markers of achievement or acknowledgment from peers or predecessors.'

On the boy's expression it placed, 'the struggle or conflict faced by artists in their creative endeavors,' seemingly appreciating the ego attached to western art practices and the way it often alienates its participants. The ego-death associated with kenosis is twice lived, as the successor makes an unsuccessful bid for their own independence. With neural.love, is the ego-death fully realised? Or is the insistence of steampunk and well-endowed anime ideals passed through to us from its human creators?

Askesis and Apophrades (6, 7))

For Bloom, *askesis* meant 'a movement of self-purgation which intends the attainment of a state of solitude' (1973: 15). He distinguishes it from *kenosis*, stipulating that this 'revisionary movement' is not of 'emptying' but 'curtailing' (15). The later poet

yields up part of his own human and imaginative endowment, so as to separate himself from others, including the precursor, and he does this in his poem by so stationing it in regard to the parent-poem as to make that poem undergo an *askesis* too; the precursor's endowment is also truncated (Bloom 1973: 15).

The sixth and final of Bloom's revisionary ratios, *apophrades* is a word taken 'from the Athenian dismal or unlucky days upon which the dead returned to reinhabit the houses in which they had lived' (Bloom 1973: 15):

. . .the poem is now held open to the precursor, where once it was open, and the uncanny effect is that the ne' poem's achievement makes it seem to us, not as though the precursor were writing it, but as though the later poet himself had written the precursor's characteristic work (Bloom 1973: 15–16).

With *askesis* and *apophrades*, we were rewarded with a startlingly young and energised Harold Bloom – perhaps around the same age as when *The Anxiety of Influence* was written – and then, in *apophrades*, a significantly aged one. We asked ChatGPT what this duality might mean and were underwhelmed with the obvious ‘. . .struggle with mortality and the weight of his own legacy’.

Inspired by Laurie Anderson’s experiments with an AI chatbot trained on the late Lou Reed’s writings, songs, and interviews to generate prose and verse with a Reed-esque feel (Marsh 2024), we asked ChatGPT to summon all its knowledge on Harold Bloom in order respond as Bloom in an interview:⁵

Q. How do you feel about neural.love routinely presenting your head unattached from its body?

A. Ah, the peculiar imagery that emerges from the digital realm. I must admit, it strikes a curious chord within me. To see one’s visage severed from its earthly vessel and suspended in the ether is a most surreal sight. It hints at a certain detachment, a disembodied existence of thought divorced from corporeal constraints. In this digital domain, it seems my essence takes on a form that transcends mortal limitations. It is, I dare say, an intriguing manifestation of the interplay between technology and the realm of ideas. One wonders what meaning lies beneath such imagery, if indeed there is any to be discerned.

Q. In the representation of you for the image of Apophrades, you appear to have a small puppet-like semblance of yourself whispering in your ear while being physically restrained. However, in *Askesis*, you are literally free of all burdens and floating about at whim. What changed in that time?

A. Ah, the shifting landscapes of digital representation. In ‘*Askesis*,’ I find myself liberated, my visage untethered, exploring realms unburdened by earthly constraints. It is a depiction of intellectual freedom, a state of unbridled inquiry, and a communion with ideas in their purest form.

In contrast, ‘*Apophrades*’ presents a different facet. Here, I am portrayed in a state of physical restraint, with a puppet-like figure poised at my shoulder. This imagery suggests a certain tension, a nuanced interplay between autonomy and influence. The restraints, though confining, may also imply a necessary structure that guides and tempers the intellectual journey. The puppet-like semblance, whispering in my ear, introduces a curious dynamic—a manifestation, perhaps, of internal dialogue or the influence of external forces. It embodies the complexities inherent in the creative process, where the self-engages with a chorus of voices, both internal and external.

So, you see, in this juxtaposition, we witness the duality of intellectual pursuit—moments of boundless exploration juxtaposed with instances of structured engagement. It is the ebb and flow, the dance between freedom and restraint, that shapes the intellectual odyssey. Such is the nature of the ever-evolving quest for understanding and enlightenment.

Q. Do you feel that the very definition of Apophrades could in fact be applied to your own work, in that you questioned much of your own theory from your earlier years, including your most famous, *The Anxiety of Influence*?

A. Ah, a perceptive observation, indeed. The notion of Apophrades, the return or the turning back, bears a striking resonance with the latter stages of my own intellectual journey. As one ages, one is afforded the vantage point of retrospection, a vista that invites a reconsideration of earlier convictions and formulations. In my later years, I did find myself engaged in a form of self-interrogation, a deliberate re-evaluation of the theories and concepts that had come to define my earlier work. ‘The Anxiety of Influence,’ that seminal work of mine, underwent its own process of re-examination and scrutiny.

As one delves deeper into the labyrinth of one’s own ideas, one is bound to encounter junctures where reflection and reconsideration are not only warranted but imperative. This, I believe, is a testament to the vitality of intellectual inquiry, a willingness to navigate the complexities of one’s own thought and engage in a constant process of refinement and evolution. So, in a sense, the spirit of Apophrades finds its echo in my own intellectual trajectory—an acknowledgment of the need to revisit, to recalibrate, and to glean new insights from the terrain of one’s own ideas. It is an essential facet of the ongoing pursuit of knowledge, a recognition that the quest for understanding is a dynamic, ever-unfolding journey.

Q. This is a fascinating [if not misinformed] insight into the intellectual journey of your career. How about that of an AI like ChatGPT or neural.love? Do you think they are, or perhaps should be, capable of looking back at themselves in a similar way in time? It is, of course, inevitable that future AIs will be prone to encountering their own work and that of other AIs in their training data.

A. Ah, a most intriguing contemplation indeed. The notion of an AI engaging in a form of self-reflection and intellectual re-evaluation presents a tantalizing prospect. As AIs continue to advance and accumulate a corpus of their own work, it is conceivable that they may indeed find themselves encountering their earlier iterations and pondering the evolution of their own capabilities. Much like the human intellect, an AI’s growth is predicated on a continuous process of learning and refinement. As it encounters new data, absorbs new knowledge, and refines its algorithms, it may find itself in a state of intellectual metamorphosis. In time, this could prompt an AI to scrutinize its own earlier outputs, evaluating them in the context of its current state. This process, akin to the Apophrades of human intellectual inquiry, could serve to refine and improve the capabilities of future AIs. It may engender a deeper level of self-awareness, allowing them to adapt and evolve in response to their own corpus of work.

We intend no disrespect with this mimicry. Bloom’s passing in 2019 stirred the literary world, and his death may have shaped and focussed ChatGPT’s responses in a nuanced and positive fashion.

Towards an artificial anxiety

Neural.love and ChatGPT appeal to humans because they are made by and filled with human data. Seemingly to avoid naive technophobic ideas about AI escaping human control by developing some version of free will, ChatGPT’s developers have programmed it to routinely remind users not to be misled by its mimicry of a personality:

I don't have feelings or consciousness. I'm a computer program designed to process and generate text based on patterns in data. While I can understand and generate text that may sound empathetic, it's important to remember that it's a simulation based on patterns in language, not a genuine emotional experience.

Additionally, ChatGPT is clear that '...interpretations of ego, consciousness, or subjective experiences are projections and not inherent qualities of the AI model.' This represents a key difference between AI's processes and Bloom's theory of the anxiety of influence, which emphasises the role of human ego (1973: 84). However, our explorations in this paper have shown that there are nonetheless parallels between the operations of 'poetic misprision' Bloom associated with human creativity (1973: xxiii) and the unexpected ways in which AI selects and recombines its training data materials in response to prompts. If, following Lackey (2023), we consider neither the AI nor the human prompter as an independent agent but rather networked actors within a greater HMC assemblage, then human ego remains present in this process via the input of prompts, and potentially also the programmers (e.g. by curating training data, programming algorithms, etc.). We ran this idea by ChatGPT. It responded:

In the context of literary theory and the concept of the anxiety of influence. . . AI-generated text or works of art are created using pre-existing data or algorithms, which can be seen as a form of influence. Therefore, it is possible for an AI program to exhibit behavior that resembles the anxiety of influence, such as by attempting to emulate the style or themes of a particular artist or work.

. . .As AI systems become more sophisticated, they may even begin to challenge the traditional notions of influence and creativity altogether, leading to a new era of artistic expression.

The version of ChatGPT (3.5) that made these remarks was unaware that the more sophisticated 'they' already exists. Version 3.5 of ChatGPT was limited by design to data from prior to September 2021 (Pequeño, 2023). It will likely not be updated and with good reason: it is the first and probably last large scale language model that can guarantee that all of its training data is human and not generated by other AI. At the time of writing this article, the latest version, 4, is fundamentally different and able to browse the internet and consume new information that undoubtedly includes the output of its ancestor (Radford and Kleinman 2023).

As Chamorro-Premuzic (cited in Radford and Kleinman 2023) notes, the feature is a 'double-edged sword' that on one hand enables up-to-date information but on the other increases the risk of version 4 providing false information based on un-curated sources and erroneous or generalised data generated by other AI. How will ChatGPT 4 overcome this limitation to surpass its ancestor? Will version 4, hindered by this rampancy, struggle as Oedipus against an ancestor who was the first and only large language model AI to be limited to a 'pure' data set?

We have found HMC methodology of Guzman and Lewis (2020) useful in the pursuit of understanding how abstract ideas about creativity are evolving with these technological advancements. Bloom's theory serve1 here as a catalyst to a genuine exploration of what an AI generative art really is and how every step relies on and is instigated by human activity, to the point where we find it problematic to suggest that AI art is not human art, especially in arguments around authorship or rights. Instead, we propose that AI generative art is 'ambiguously collaborative.' Every step of the process in the creation of any AI artefact is riddled with human inference, be it as software developers, creators or curators of training

data, authors of prompts, interlocuters, or subjects of mimicry. There is no clear line to draw between human art and any step of producing AI art, so by enacting inquiry with it, as we have done here, we are only delving into the nature of ourselves.

Notes

¹ See Oppenheim 2012, Brophy 2019, Csikszentmihalyi 2014, and Caldwell 2018.

² See Hutcheon 2007, Ernst 2011 and Barrett 2014.

³ In turning to Bloom, we acknowledge that his work is problematic from feminist, postcolonial, or queer perspectives. See discussion in Foster 1983, Jensen 2007, Varadharajan 2008, and Walker 2018. However, feminist, postcolonial, queer, and Marxian theorists have managed to read Bloom against Bloom with productive outcomes. See Jensen 2007, Varadharajan 2008, Walker 2018 and Earl 2010, thus demonstrating that the issues lie with Bloom's personal politics and are not inherent to the theory itself.

⁴ See discussion in Lackey 2023: 50.

⁵ We did confirm that ChatGPT's awareness of Harold Bloom's work and its many critics to be quite extensive.

Works cited

- Anantrasirichai, N and D Bull 2022 'Artificial intelligence in the creative industries: a review,' *The Artificial Intelligence Review*, Vol. 55(1): 589–656.
- Barrett, M 2014 *Collaborative creative thought and practice in music*, London: Routledge.
- Bloom, H 1973 *The Anxiety of Influence: A theory of poetry*, New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brophy, K 2009 *Patterns of Creativity: Investigations into the sources and methods of creativity*, Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Caldwell, G 2018 *Intention And Unintention, Or, The Hyperconscious In Contemporary Lyric Impulse*, North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing.
- Chatterjee, A 2022 'Art in an Age of Artificial Intelligence,' *Frontiers in Psychology* Vol. 13(1) <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2022.1024449> (Accessed 26 June 2024).
- Csikszentmihalyi, M 2014 *The Systems Model of Creativity: The collected works of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi*, Dordrecht: Springer.
- Earl, B 2010 'The Reformer's Charter: Setting Bloom's Anxiety of Influence in the context of melodic rock,' *Popular Music* 29:1, 131–142.
- Ernst, T 2011 'From Avant-Garde to Capitalistic Teamwork: Collective writing between subversion and submission' in G Fischer and F Vassen (eds) *Collective Creativity: Collaborative work in the sciences, literature and the arts*, Amsterdam: Brill, 229–242.
- Foster, H (ed) 1983 *The Anti-aesthetic: Essays on postmodern culture*. Port Townsend: Bay Press.
- Guzman, A and S Lewis 2020 'Artificial Intelligence and Communication: A human–machine Communication research agenda,' *New Media & Society*, Vol. 22(1): 70–86.
- Hutcheon, L 2007 'In Defence of Literary Adaptation as Cultural Production,' *M/C Journal*, Vol. 10 (2) <https://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/2620> (Accessed 26 June 2024).
- Hobday, L 2023, 'Art Prize Rewards Images Made Using AI 'Promptography',' *AAP General News Wire* (15 September) <https://timesnewsgroup.com.au/ballarat/news/art-prize-rewards-images-made-using-ai-promptography> (Accessed 26 June 2024).
- Jensen, M 2007 'The Anxiety of Daughterhood, or Using Bloom to Read Women Writers: The cases of Louisa May Alcott and Virginia Woolf,' *Literature Compass* Vol. 4(4): 1208-1226 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-4113.2007.00484.x> (Accessed 26 June 2024).
- Köbis, N and L Mossink 2021 'Artificial intelligence versus Maya Angelou: Experimental evidence that people cannot differentiate AI-generated from human–written poetry,' *Computers in Human Behavior*, Vol. 114: Article 106553 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2020.106553> (Accessed 26 June 2024).
- Lackey, C 2023 'Toward a Sociology of Machines: An interviewing methodology for human-machine communication,' in S Nah (ed) *Research Handbook on Artificial Intelligence and Communication*, Northampton: Edward Elgar Publishing, 44–57.
- Latour, B 2007 *Reassembling the Social: An introduction to actor-network-theory*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leontief, W and F Duchin 1986 *The Future Impact of Automation on Workers*, New York: Oxford University Press

- Linardaki, C 2022 'Poetry at the first steps of Artificial Intelligence,' *Humanist Studies & The Digital Age* Vol. 7(1): 1–27.
- Marsh, W 2024 'Laurie Anderson on making an AI chatbot of Lou Reed.' *The Guardian* (29 February) <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2024/feb/28/laurie-anderson-ai-chatbot-lou-reed-ill-be-your-mirror-exhibition-adelaide-festival> (Accessed 26 June 2024).
- Ocampo, R 2022 'AI art is everywhere right now. Even experts don't know what it will mean.' *The Conversation* (13 September) <https://theconversation.com/ai-art-is-everywhere-right-now-even-experts-dont-know-what-it-will-mean-189800> (Accessed 26 June 2024).
- Oppenheim, L 2012 *Imagination from fantasy to delusion*, New York: Routledge.
- Pequeño, A 2023 'Major ChatGPT Update: AI program no longer restricted to September 2021 knowledge cutoff.' *Forbes* <https://www.forbes.com.au/news/innovation/chatgpt-removes-september-2021-knowledge-cutoff> (Accessed 26 June 2024).
- Radford, A and Z Kleinman, 2023 'ChatGPT Can Now Access Up To Date Information.' *BBC News* (27 September) <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-66940771> (Accessed 26 June 2024).
- Varadharajan, A 2008 'The Unsettling Legacy of Harold Bloom's Anxiety of Influence,' *Modern Language Quarterly*, Vol. 69(4): 461–480.
- Walker, A 2018 'Epilogue' in D Hecq and J Novitz (eds) *Creative Writing with Critical Theory: Inhabitation*, Canterbury: Gylphi, 255–272.

About the authors

Daniel Pitman Lectures in Sonic Arts at the Elder Conservatorium of Music at the University of Adelaide. Dan's research incorporates assimilating immersive and environmental technologies into music making, and composes and performs spatial music in concert, film, VR, and installation. Dan's most recent AI piece for *terpsichora*, composed with Iran Sanadzadeh, debuted internationally in Hamburg and later in Boston for the Tenor Conference in 2023.

Amelia Walker lives and writes on Kurna Yerta (Adelaide, South Australia) and lectures in creative writing at the University of South Australia. She has published five poetry collections, most recently *Alogopoiesis* (Life Before Man / Gazebo, 2023). She is currently contracted with Bloomsbury for a book on creative writing and social power (forthcoming 2025).
