



# TEXT

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*RMIT University*

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***On form: Asynchronous promise chains and colliding metaphors between collaborative academic-writers***

Abstract:

As creative writing researchers, we are often expected to talk in and about writing's forms. For this "article," we set out to discover how collective thinking shapes form through creativecritical writing, investigating what emerges when creative writers across disciplines move through their respective thinking and forming of forms in a shared space. This article examines how collective authorship influences form. In Movement One, the authors explore their individual relationships with (the limits of) writing forms; Movement Two considers what form is possible when we "form" together through exchange, debate and play; Movement Three exits the more "playful" space of creative exchange to reflect more critically on our collective form-ing, before Movement Four offers a spatiotemporal metaphor for that form-ing. Creative writing academics are, it seems, at the forefront of expanding scholarly "forms" of discourse; we offer this creativecritical article as a contribution to this evolving literature, especially in relation to collective or collaborative writing scholarship.

Biographical notes:

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Stayci Taylor is Senior Lecturer in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University, where she co-manages the Bachelor of Arts Creative Writing stream. She is the coeditor of the *A to Z of Creative Writing Methods* (Bloomsbury, 2022), as well as two collections on script development published by Palgrave Macmillan. Stayci's creative and critical works are widely published in such journals as *TEXT*, *New Writing*

and the *Journal of Screenwriting*. She brings an ongoing screenwriting practice to her research.

Jessica Wilkinson has published three poetic biographies, most recently *Music Made Visible: A Biography of George Balanchine* (Vagabond, 2019). Her fourth (a work in progress) is on artist Mirka Mora. Jessica is the founding editor of *Rabbit: A Journal for Nonfiction Poetry* and the *Rabbit Poets Series*. She coedited the anthologies *Contemporary Australian Feminist Poetry* (Hunter Publishers, 2016) and *Memory Book: Portraits of Older Australians in Poetry and Watercolours* (Hunter Publishers, 2021). She is a Creative Writing academic at RMIT University, Melbourne.

Keywords:

Form, collaboration, metaphor, dialogic, play

## **Introduction: What we talk about when we talk about form**

Form has been on our minds as “solo” creative-writing practitioners. What mastery of conventional forms is required in our respective art forms to express writerly competence and convince our readership? Or how might we successfully challenge those forms to suit our own needs? We had asked specific questions of our individual writing: How can the poem stretch biography? What happens when screenwriting software is (mis)used and screen recorded? Which of poetry’s tools make sense in an essay? How can digital capabilities extend memoir? As creative-writing academics, we had also been considering how we *convey* knowledge arising from creative practice – what are the formal “limits” of exegetical writing, and what forms might our critical thinking take (before it starts to annoy the reader)? This last question has been explored by many a PhD candidate, as hybrid, braided, creativecritical forms are developed to find a fitting vehicle to carry creative writing’s thinking-through-craft alongside – or entangled with – scholarly discourse. [1]

As isolated practitioner-researchers, we are expected to situate our researcher selves within citational networks, observing and understanding our expanded community of practice. This grounding sets the stage for theoretical framing, where we might use literary case studies to argue unique contributions to knowledge. Less common is a mode of thinking-with-others: distributed authorship in which the “between” makes our emerging thought-forms become more than the sum of their parts. [2] As Julienne van Loon has posited, “there is much more to learn about best-practice research in and through dialogue” (2018, p. 156). What happens to exegetical form when several minds – several writers – think together?

We wanted to experiment with how form/s might emerge through our merging of formal preferences and desires. We draw on Caroline Levine’s observation that while each form claims “different affordances,” all forms share one: “shapes and patterns are iterable—portable” (2015, p. 7). We also draw on the “carrying over” that Stefanie Markidis (2024) argues is made possible through “creativecritical” writing, through a “transferring [of] meaning across forms” (p. 7) and creativecritical jostling with other writers’ ideas: “Creativecritical writing might carry over meaning from body to body, making present the space of relation between you and you and you” (p. 8). What if, in sharing and responding to one another’s formulaic gestures, we could discover what is “portable” across poetic, digital, theatrical and essayistic forms? And what productive tensions arise when four writer-researchers attempt to find a vehicle or house – or other capacious metaphor – for their poly-formal discourse on form? We begin with our respective practices: what might we contribute of our understanding of form to a shared space, for merging formal knowledges?

## **Movement One: Where the writers divulge their current thoughts on (creative-writing) form**

### ***JW: On form & poetry (+ biography)***

Form emerges, is a poem’s evolutionary potential.

Form groans out of the mind’s watery edges to become its own revolutionary vehicle.

Writing my three books, each one a “poetic biography,” research encounters seeded forms. For the first book (2012), disintegration and deterioration in the archive shattered words into flecks (Marion Davies was a fleet-footed historical fugitive, tracking her size-five heels across the frame of the page). My second book (2014) followed lines of composition – music, correspondence, walking tracks, whip marks (Percy Grainger’s solo tramp along desire lines). And my third (2019) followed choreographic instinct, rhythmic patterns of sound and body (George Balanchine’s spatiotemporal synthesis, a distillation of ideas into refined muscle singularity). Single poems, in each case, accreted into bigger bodies: film strip – score for performance – program of ballets.

The ear listens out

The eye corresponds

The page is a field

The reader is permitted

A poem wrests control from a narrative drive and bends it into body.

I have returned again and again to an untitled poem by Robert Lax, ever since I came across it in an article, “The End of Art” (1974), by poet Susan Howe. In that poem, which Lax had sent in correspondence to Howe, he notes that he has always liked the “idea of a poem or a word as a single / (arp-like) / alone on a page” (p. 4). He then talks to the “verticality” of a poem, which “helps the / poet withhold his / image until / (through earlier / images) the / mind is prepared / for it” (p. 4). Form brings unity, I like this idea. Though poems can hold multitudes, can lead a many-meaninged life.

Form carries, does not contain.

John Hollander said in the introduction to his book of calligrams, *Types of Shape* (1991), that a shaped poem “should work as a poem even if the shape were to be destroyed by printing all the lines flush left” (p. xi). Line resounds at the edges of shape, does not retreat when faced with some arbitrary visual limit. He is saying something about a poem’s embodiment, I think – that is, poems reside-resound.

I’m generally unimpressed by calligrams, which often present as a cheap trick or dodge. But I love the visual stimulus of Hollander’s “Swan and Shadow” (1966), which escapes the viewer’s grasp at the point of reading: “by then a swan will have / gone” (p. 177). The poet tests the porosity of representational forms – word, poem, image.

Robert Hass (2017) has said that “the poem embodies the energy of the gesture of its making” (p. 3). Said another way, a poem discovers its form through the process of composition. A poem is a form of thinking (Jane Hirshfield) that can “approximate the actual flavor of life ... [as] conceptual mind and the inexpressible presence of things become one” (1997, p. 32). A poem’s form is led by language carving through space. Form responds, as water finds its own level, fills a shape, or, as we – ourselves – draw lines between stars to find some kind of direction.

A poem, for me, is a problem-solving apparatus. Poems help me to draw lines between the intractable chaos of data and the inexpressible substance of being.

I dig through my old poetry notes for a quote from Charles Bernstein ... yes, here it is, from *A Poetics* (1992): “We can’t rely only on the tools and forms of the past, even the recent past, but must invent new tools and forms that begin to meet the challenges of the ever-changing present” (p. 3). In poetry, I find this tool for life writing futures – this shifty, buzzing vehicle *animates*.

Life – writing – living – forms.

Lyn Hejinian: “Writing’s forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics—they ask how, where, and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work’s motion” (2000, p. 42).

A first phrase can signal the length  
of a line, and those that follow  
might reveal the path of disruption.

Lines clump together, sometimes.

White space will exert pressure against a text’s intrusion, until equilibrium is found.

What is the shape/force of a poem and how does it have bearing on the poem’s movement? A poem’s shape may not be purely physical in the visible sense, but metaphorical, or metaphysical. This poem moves me,

the poem is moving,

the poem wants to walk off the page ...

and we have to chase after it or else it loses its license to poem.

So, what does poetry offer, specifically, to the writing of a life? I keep asking myself this question. What is it about poetry’s dynamic/s that can enliven a biography? Perhaps it is

something to do with the poem's ability to both say and not say (through pattern, space, mimesis). A poem is not narrative, not information, though it can contain those things. A poem is an objective gesture filtered through subjective consciousness. Perhaps this is what I mean when I say "poetry": this thought forming in the body, right now. Poetry can make biography *live*.

### ***GM: On essay form***

I think about form at this juncture in my writing life as if I am moving house, moving from poetry house to essay house. Sometimes I would read essays at the poetry house. I was impressed.

How did people write something so communicative?

I scorned the communicative essay from my perch at poetry house, clinging to Hélène Cixous's (1976) critique of prose as opposed to poetry: fuck "those allies of representationalism" (p. 879), I would say to myself, laughing the laugh of the Medusa, writing poems which subverted the symbolic order by not making sense.

What do I carry from poetry house to essay house? How does one form help to shape another, once idly conceived as its opposite?

\*

Theodor Adorno's "Essay as Form" (2019) conceptualises the (German) essay as standing against academia, the universal/objective, the rigidly thought, scientific purity – as a desirous personal medium of saying whatever it/one wants. The affordances of essay form are so great that essays are "here[tical]," violating "the orthodox[ies] of thought [to make] visible [that] which it is orthodoxy's secret and objective aim to keep invisible" (p. 47). For Adorno, essays can make the otherwise unthinkable thinkable. Adorno will write:

[T]he essay's innermost formal law is heresy. Through violations of the orthodoxy of thought, something in the object becomes visible which it is orthodoxy's secret and objective aim to keep invisible. (p. 47)

Reading Adorno (2019), I get an abstract idea of essay form but nothing specific. I get aims and ethics that justify being an essayist (which remind me of the aims/ethics of poetry that I gleaned in my training (Cixous) and so I wonder where *do* poetry and essay differ?), and I get a kick up the bum to go forth and write – heretically, personally, following my nose with prose. The absence of concrete metaphor to describe form is unnerving, but freeing. In my PhD project, the essay form has allowed me to "flow," as psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2014) describes, a state of pleasing, consuming, energised production/reception, where challenge and capability are perfectly matched. Flow says little about form (that is, the flow experience could take any form), or value for that matter (surely Trump experiences the flow state daily). Form words more helpfully refer to something material, though I find such forms as are featured in Jane Alison's *Meander, Spiral, Explode* (2019) not especially helpful as a

creative writer (maybe inhibiting my flow). Form for me is an afterthought. Or is it that form (that is, shape) is a misnomer, as Hejinian (2000) suggests, “not merely shapes but forces” (p. 42)?

\*

And yet I am stuck on the question of shape, craving something concrete. My current creative work in progress is a long essay built around a before-thought, not of form (“this essay will take the shape of ...”) but rule. “On, horses!” follows the image of various horses as they “appear” to me; “following horses” allows me to accumulate autobiography/life writing with energy; the rule provides opportunity to keep going, when another horse “appears”. As the essay is written, form reveals itself: I find this method generates pace and encourages accumulation. Thinking about essay form, I wonder what the horse (arbitrary metaphor) instructs. Horse = word = building block of the sentence; many horses = an essay. The horse stretches horizontal space in artworks, but also in literature. I’m building a house out of horses, out of sentences.

I hardly need the house metaphor when I have the horse one. I’m a horse-riding essayist! The essay is a horse pursued/ridden with the “derangement” (Rimbaud, 2004, p. 303) of a poet. Anything can be a horse here: language is full of potential, the essay is the freedom to speak “heretically,” and is there a link between flow and heresy? Really, my aims are energetic. Essaying gathers more energy than poetry ever gave me – partly to do with the scale of essays (though poems can be long, too) but more to do with the sentence as a unit of construction, and the natural abundance of horses. I’ve been writing a lot of sentences, one word-horse after another. And this is my house now: running the horse’s deranged track, one sentence at a time.

### ***JH: OnForm() ± digital poetics***

I came to writing as an acolyte of memoir, however writing through (my) lived experiences of mental distress, neurodiversity and trauma rubbed at the edges of generic formulae. It felt gross to enact repair through a formula of  $X + Y = Z$ , where

X = the ruinous, abjected self

Y = the narrative “journey” aka L355()N5 L3@RN#D

Z = the self, arisen from the depths of trauma porn

I turned to the digital space for a way to speak stories nested in data. Unspeakable stories, to start. I wanted my writing to enact ||conceptualisations|| ||fixations|| ||ruminations|| outside of psychopathological expectations, minus didactics pitched at neuronormative consumption.

```
function takeMe@faceValue() {
  const faces = ["dropout", "academic", "mother", "whore"];
  const pick = face => {
    return pseudoCodePsycho.value;
  };
};
```

}

Writing the self creativelycritically, I am caught up in what Lauren Fournier (2021) calls “intertextual intimacy” (np). References to (my) life are bound up with cultural and citational influences through non-hierarchical enmeshment. The body of this “I” – projected textually, digitally upon white-space – is a more-than-human assemblage. As researcher-body, the “I” is affectively attuned to a spectrum of materialities.

*What are your intentions?* Form asks.

And I stare back, goading it into a contest of will.

Jane Bennett (2010) sees human intentionality as being caught up in a swarm with other strivings and currents. Why shouldn’t form – as container for narrative assemblage – reflect such “congregational agency” (p. 34)? My practice detours into digital space, where distributed agency is more obvious. N. Katherine Hayles (2008) describes electronic literature as “enacting a new kind of subjectivity characterized by distributed cognition, networked agency that includes human and non-human actors, and fluid boundaries dispersed over actual and virtual locations” (p. 37).

Form tells me that I do not respect it enough, that I am prone to excess, indulgence.

I bite back: // formless \\ gormless // lacking teeth \\

A feeling-sense pilots prose, demands the word reflect the body. My obsessions and compulsions relate to the materiality of things, which must find their “proper” place, even/especially in a research sense. I crave an ever-unfolding text, caught in a processual wave of (un)becoming.

## <h1>How to Fold Neo-Materialist Longings into Practice Beyond Object-Oriented Literary Meditations</h1>

Grant me boxes within boxes, nested dolls, Easter eggs,  
stories within stories, frames within frames.

If a page is a rectangle, how might I breach the lines of containment – or exploit them? Enacting form-disruptions, I draw attention to the artifice – refuting the notion of form as static. The frame shifts, the eye of the “I” is fractally subjected (to sociopolitical dynamics: a self-mirroring, a revelation, a multiplicitous refraction of self).

I consider my digital experiments as a way *into* memoir, autotheory, poetry, et cetera – as if the digital were some spatial portal into form.

Espen Aarseth (1997) proposes “ergodic literature” as a category of texts which requires a nontrivial effort on the part of the reader, beyond mere page turning. The reader’s body plays a role in the enactment of the poem, affecting combinatory elements through

```
tap . tap . tap .           // swipe //
      | click |             ~ on hover ~ mouseover ~
```

haptics. If no one is there to execute the poem, it still exists in a state of potentiality.

The Oulipian tradition invoked combinatory mechanisms and formal constraint to nurture literary experimentation, and to radically resist the oppressive institutions who then upheld the canon (Motte, 1986). The language of code today carries colonial histories:

- HTML is particularly class conscious
- JavaScript fixates on matters of inheritance
  - To disinherit is to force a reset of properties.

What `<elements>//<we>` inherit determine in part our form.

Form is a negotiation between inside and out – what is visible and not. Form influences how digital poetics will be read/played/used. Form can be made to behave optimally, programmed to adapt responsively (responsibly?) according to screen real estate. Visual elements guide the reader; aesthetics trigger a call to mood.

Hypertext Markup Language (HTML) tells the browser what to display by pointing to various (body) parts, each with its own open-shut container:

```
<head> crazy </head>
<body> !#$@%^& </body>
<footer> nerve-damaged </footer>
```

`<div>` Containers within (bodily) containers follow this open-shut logic `</div>`

Self-closing tags are called void elements because they cannot have children. Patriarchal judgment much? A feminist argument counters: where no nesting takes place, such childless elements are ecological – they might even save the world.

Form demands:

```
<p id="awaiting-contact"></p>
```

### ***ST: On screenwriting and good form***

I have spent a lot of my scholarly energies both defending and resisting the screenplay form, arguing on one hand that it should be taken seriously as a literary text (O’Meara et al., 2023), and on the other that its prescribed structures are heteronormative, patriarchal and colonial (Taylor 2024).

With the form(er), what I am really defending is the craft of screenwriting and how that craft is best demonstrated in the form of screenplays, and that these are rarely published in ways university libraries would consider compliant. But it is also true that screenplays’ “concision and economy share the poetics of imagist poetry” (Boon 2008, p. 260) and perhaps deserve if not the status of literature, at least “literature in flux” (Sternberg 1997, p. 27) to accommodate prevailing wisdoms around a screenplay’s subservience to the processes of producing moving image works (Maras 2009).

With the latter, what I am really challenging are universalising theories of how stories work, but screenwriters are over-represented in the congregations of those churches, and prolific in writing new versions of those bibles. Besides, form and narrative structure are often used interchangeably. The landmark text *Alternative Screenwriting* includes a chapter called “Critique of the Restorative Three-Act Form”. Within, the authors ask, “Is there such a thing as neutral form, one into which we can pour any story?” (Dancyger, Keyt & Rush 2023, p. 36). According to them, the answer is no because “form is inextricably linked to content” (p. 36). According to me, the answer is no because neutrality is the mask behind which default societal norms assert their dominance. Perhaps this is what the authors mean, later arguing that the three-act structure “privileges the individual [and their capacity for free will] over any social, historical, economic, and familial limitations” (p. 42). Documentary filmmakers Alexandra Juhasz and Alissa Lebow (2018) likewise argue that “forms are cultural, political, and ethical commitments in their own right”.

Both the former and the latter ideas bring new meaning to the phrase “good form”.

I have spent a lot of money in gyms and Pilates classes trying to achieve good form.

Upon reflection, I might consider that my screenplays have ranged from good (obedient) form, timed precisely for the commercial half-hour of legacy TV networks (22.5 minutes), right through to good (ethically committed) form with sincere attempts to push at screenwriterly limits as a radical and/or scholarly rigorous act. One of my most non-compliant experiments challenges the notion that “the screenplay looks forward to a film without becoming it” (Price 2010, p. 53) by making a film whose only visual element is the scrolling text of a screenplay. This play, where “play is – through movement – a doing, a shifting or reshaping towards a new form” (van Loon 2018, p. 149) has failed to impress the 24 film festivals from which my submission has been rejected. Is this a point of pride? Is this new form, good form?

The different ways form imposes itself on the screen idea (Macdonald, 2013) are not limited to screenplay formatting, although that is often what comes to mind. Here again come the interchangeable terms – form, format, structure – but what is formally consistent across the different documents produced by screenwriters over development processes (loglines, synopses, treatments or scene breakdowns and, eventually, scripts or screenplays) is the imperative to write exteriority: to write only what can be seen (and heard) in the frame. The red pen of the script editor forever asking, “but how do we know?” It is exhilarating to nail a piece of action or description; in any form no doubt, but there is extra satisfaction, when writing

for another intended medium, that any future misinterpretation of (say) this character's motivation could only be wilful.

If the language of form “is calibrated in specifications of scale, finding terms to respond to new technologies and their expanded or contracted mobilities,” (Fox and Melamed, 2018) then the language of the screenplay form might as well be Latin, still insisting on form(ating) that references the typewriters and celluloid of old Hollywood. As co-authors, here, we are collaborating on a piece that talks through and about practice, showing different ways to discourse practice and form, but I cannot quite bring myself to head up a playful slugline (scene heading), followed by big print (action and description) to give voice to these ideas, as I have done before, to try and put form to my claims to form.

CUT TO:

**MOVEMENT TWO:  
WHERE THE WRITERS CONSIDER WHAT FORM IS POSSIBLE TOGETHER  
THROUGH DIALOGIC EXCHANGE**

Formed by

Jen, Jess, Gareth and Stayci

OVER BLACK:

EMILY DICKINSON (V.O.)  
I dwell in Possibility -  
A fairer House than Prose -  
More numerous of Windows -  
Superior - for Doors - (1999).

FADE IN:

INT. STABLE - DAY

JESS and STAYCI sit on a hay bale, passing a Marlboro between them, because there are no health consequences. Behind them, JEN grooms a racehorse, EMILY DICKINSON.

JESS  
Yeah, someone's primary form might take the reins. Direct the conversation.

STAYCI  
Don't look at me. Screenplays are exactly not the place to be dialogic, despite how they might seem.

JESS  
Why not?

STAYCI ponders this, blowing a canonical progression of perfect smoke rings. She throws down the cigarette, stubs it out with her shoe, like Sandy in the final scene of *Grease*.

JEN  
What are you doing?

STAYCI  
Answering Jess's question.

INT. TEAMS MEETING - LATER

JEN, GARETH, JESS and STAYCI, framed by their separate squares.

GARETH  
You mean, show not tell?

STAYCI  
I was trying to avoid that cliché.

Beat.

STAYCI (CONT'D)

Okay - yeah. I was trained by gurus to use dialogue as a last resort (McKee, 1997).

JEN

I was trained to see dialogue as endlessly recombinatory.

GARETH

I was trained to put words in horses' mouths.

JESS

I wasn't trained.

STAYCI

So maybe dialogue isn't a stable device.

JESS

But I think it's through dialogue that we can find a way to gauge thoughts and uses of "play," exhibiting the sparks that ignite between thinkers. Like Julienne van Loon does in her manifesto, "In Defense of Play" (2018).

JEN

Like what Carolyn Guertin (2021) calls "a celebration of multiplicity" that often "refuse[s] single authorship" (p. 84) in cyberfeminist e-lit?

GARETH

Erm, I'm not so sure I could consider myself a cyberfeminist.

Shut down, JEN reveals her My Little Pony. Combs her hair. A comforting stim.

JESS

It's not just writing *about* form together, it's also about *forming* together, and thinking *through* form, together.

Beat as this sinks in.

JEN

So - what would that look like?

GARETH

Well, if we believe that form carries matter and makes it productive ...

JESS

Metaphorically?

Something clicks for GARETH.

GARETH

Hang on - were you all hanging out with *my horse*?

Last lines over ...

INT. STABLE - NIGHT

STAYCI (O.S.)

We just happened on the stable.

JEN (O.S.)

We were looking for somewhere to house our words, to give them meaning and purpose.

The light of a full moon through the open door. GARETH brushes EMILY DICKINSON's mane.

EMILY DICKINSON

Don't worry. I'm a metaphorse. I can take you *all* places.

INT. JEN'S LAPTOP - MORNING

The screen shows only JEN's avatar, and the words "waiting for others to join the meeting".

Another square appears.

It says "Gareth's Notetaker (horse.ai) has joined the meeting".

INT. SALOON - MORNING

JESS and GARETH on bar stools, mid-conversation. Behind the bar, STAYCI pours two whiskeys.

GARETH

All these noun metaphors - house, vehicle, saloon, ~~clay~~ - are structures and substances that hold and/or move. Then we have the verby forces exerting pressure on the forms: seeping, dissolving, eating away at form.

STAYCI slides the two shots down the bar. They glissade like air hockey pucks and skid to a stop in front of JESS and GARETH.

JESS

Your house metaphor tells us that you "carry things from the old house to the new one," but what do you leave behind?

GARETH downs his shot in one.

GARETH

Poetry poo.

Beat. JESS fixes him with a stare.

JESS

I'm only saying that it reminds me of Roethke's proclamation that a sonnet is "a great form to pick your nose in" (2001, p. 196). What does the old poet mean, exactly? Is he deflating (a) form, (a) tradition? Is he saying that it's pleasurable in a mundane way? Or that it needs to be cleaned out, to let the oxygen in?

The saloon doors crash open and JEN strides in, surveying the scene with disdain.

JEN

Is this what you call "looking for the right metaphor"?

GARETH

You can all borrow my horse. She's got a good thing going on.

INT. WORD DOC - DAY

Four initialed or avatar-ed circles stand sentinel above the

tool bar.

The coloured cursors collide throughout the document, creative personalities feeling out experiential space.

JESS'S CURSOR

Van Loon (2018) uses dialogue as a catalyst to break down boundary lines between disciplines and genres, so that new forms - of thinking, of communicating - might form. Can we do that here, now, together, to form thoughts about/towards form ... indeed, the form of the "peer-reviewed article"?

The colourful cursors are in full swing.

GARETH'S CURSOR

"Form and narrative structure are often used interchangeably", you note, Stayci, of the literature around screenplays. Are they different?

STAYCI'S CURSOR

Yes. Yes, they're different. Jen writes of form "as container for narrative assemblage" but for me form can resist narrative assemblage as well.

GARETH'S CURSOR

The form of a screenplay is a subform of a moving image text -

STAYCI'S CURSOR

Did you just call my form a subform?

GARETH'S CURSOR stops in its tracks.

GARETH'S CURSOR

(scrambles)

It makes me think of Samuel Beckett's more difficult works, such as *Quad*, where no is talking, and which might be more interesting to think about than to watch or read.

No movement from the other cursors. Until -

JEN'S CURSOR

No one wants to see us working  
towards making a point. Or do they?

INT. WORD DOC - EARLY MORNING

JEN's lone profile pic at the top of the drafty document. Her static cursor amid the half-thoughts and passages of different fonts.

The red circle containing GM's initials pings up beside Jen's.

The red circle disappears.

JEN's cursor springs into action. Types ...

JEN'S CURSOR

(sadly)

Did I scare you off, Gareth? Like a foal?

INT. WORD DOC - ALL DAY AND ALL OF THE NIGHT

The cursors are all over the place.

GARETH'S CURSOR

Without form, you have "just" words, presumably floating like gaseous components, full of potential but never landing.

(beat)

I seem to be talking essayistically. I open my mouth and out falls an essay.

JEN'S CURSOR

Yes. We're experiencing "form seepage" - this screenplay is taking on the essay form.

GARETH'S CURSOR

Don't blame me! Stayci's writing up the dialogue.

STAYCI'S CURSOR's on the move.

GARETH'S CURSOR (CONT'D)

~~Don't blame me! Stayci's writing up the dialogue.~~

GARETH'S CURSOR (CONT'D)

Haha, you think you are silencing me  
but really you are just making this  
screenplay into poetry.

STAYCI'S CURSOR's on the attack.

GARETH'S CURSOR (CONT'D)

~~Haha, you think you are silencing me  
but really you are just making this  
screenplay into poetry.~~

JESS'S CURSOR

Would anyone know  
there was a poem here -  
verse dissolved in screenplay -  
with Dickinson dashes -  
if I didn't make a fuss?

STAYCI'S CURSOR

Would anyone know if you're wearing  
a hat with a quill in it?

INT. WORD DOC - AT ALL HOURS

JESS'S CURSOR

Is form like love? It's one  
thing to talk about it, but  
another thing to move  
around in it - to feel it -  
to practice it.  
(beat)  
Are we resolving form or  
are we just standing off at  
a remove?

GARETH'S CURSOR

(comments two hours later)  
This makes me think of the  
manifesto as a space for  
creativecritical debate. A  
space for sharing values  
without being prescriptive.  
Perhaps this *is* a kind of  
manifesto?

DISSOLVE TO:

Ninety minutes later ...

STAYCI'S CURSOR

Jen, you say, "Form tells me that I  
do not respect it enough, that I am  
prone to excess, indulgence" and then  
later: ""Form is a negotiation  
between inside and out - what is  
visible and not". Are you simply  
talking about being editorial?

STAYCI'S CURSOR (CONT'D)

And, if so, do you think we're done here?

JESS'S CURSOR

Right! Dialogue is demonstrated not only as a method through which to discuss research approaches and concepts, but also as a space for playful thinking (jostling, but also finding kinship) together.

JEN	GARETH	JESS	STAYCI
Dialogue enables the conversation and the play but what can we say or produce that's new about form?	I guess talking together enables us to reflect on tacit knowledges, conventions and limitations that we can push past and experiment with across our own forms.	It also allows us to propose possibilities for playing together. "What if we ...?"	Execution of a shared form across forms while talking about form is hard. Just look at the state of this screenplay.

JEN	STAYCI	GARETH	JESS
This is hard to articulate.		The horse of course is also a force which is the other idea of form.	So the horse metaphor lets us draw together the strands of our sensibilities. The horse can be kept in the stable but also run wild/be unstable.

DISSOLVE TO:

An older version of the document, four hours earlier.



JEN'S CURSOR

Jess, your saying "Form emerges" suggests that form is a process of becoming known, bringing to light. "A poem's evolutionary potential" speaks to form's capacity for continual transformation. Why are you being so abstract?

JESS'S CURSOR

That's a feeling I have when shaping a poem - this emerging in the present and a trust that there will be a satisfying landing place in the future.

GARETH'S CURSOR

Working together called upon us to build trust that we would find a form for this article ... coordinating across time and space.

JEN'S CURSOR

A promise to future form!

JESS'S CURSOR

Like Gareth's "afterthought" and Jen's "potentiality". And Stayci referring to the "ethically committed" form as a way to push against the limits of "obedient" form. Has writing scholarship pushed us towards disobedience?

STAYCI'S CURSOR

Webb's (2010) "catachresis", as "disobedient writing [that] disrupts the ability of discursive domains to restrict the flow of language" (p. 7).

GARETH'S CURSOR

But you have to earn the horse's trust before you ride it into unstable terrain. Or am I squeezing that horse metaphor too tightly?

STAYCI'S CURSOR

The horse is growing, the horse has promise ...

GARETH'S CURSOR

Its feet are spatial and temporal ...

JEN'S CURSOR

```
async function OnForm() { const
writers = [poet, essayist,
screenwriter, digital]; const
textualBody = new Promise(async
(resolve, reject) => { while
(admin.quotidian.rhythms) { try { for
(const voice of writers) { await
voice.snatchMoments().between
(admin.tasks).contribute(thread.email
, file.frag, shared.docs); } if
(Teams.meeting. active ||
cursors.overlap) { await
realTime.edits.sync(); } const
responses = await
Promise.all([
writers[0].respond(setPrompts),
writers[1].
challenge(designated.collaborator),
writers[2]. engage (previous.work),
writers[3].presume.agree()
//out.of.cellular.range ]);
this.promiseChain. add(responses); }
catch (formClash) { await
forms.comingle(formClash); } } await
dialogic.engagement();
resolve("What We Talk About When We
Talk About Form Together"); });
return await textualBody; }
```

STAYCI'S CURSOR

Code is seeping into the screenplay!

JEN'S CURSOR

No, screenplay is seeping into the code! It makes no sense laid out as dialogue.

STAYCI'S CURSOR

Try this.

## JEN'S CURSOR

```

async function OnForm() {
  const writers = [poet, essayist, screenwriter, digital];

  const textualBody = new Promise(async (resolve, reject) => {
    while (admin.quotidian.rhythms) {
      try {
        for (const voice of writers) {
          await voice
            .snatchMoments()
            .between(admin.tasks)
            .contribute(thread.email, file.frag, shared.docs);
        }

        if (Teams.meeting.active || cursors.overlap) {
          await realTime.edits.sync();
        }

        const responses = await Promise.all([
          writers[0].respond(setPrompts),
          writers[1].challenge(designated.collaborator),
          writers[2].engage(previous.work),
          writers[3].presume.agree() //out.of.cellular.range
        ]);

        this.promiseChain.add(responses);

      } catch (formClash) {
        await forms.comingle(formClash);
      }
    }

    await dialogic.engagement();

    resolve("What We Talk About When We Talk About Form
    Together");
  });

  return await textualBody;
}

```

## JESS'S CURSOR

Jen, could you translate that?

## JEN'S CURSOR

Appending the keyword `async` to JavaScript functions (reusable blocks of code), enables tasks to run for an indeterminate time without forcing the rest of the code to wait. Our talking through form has been mostly

JEN'S CURSOR (CONT'D)  
asynchronous, moments snatched  
between the demands of the  
university, international  
conferences, parenting and the  
everyday. Unbounded by time/space  
(yet curtailed by external demands)  
ideas could accumulate and compound  
across weeks of iterative refinement.

CUT TO:

**Movement Three: Where the writers reflect on their collective form-ing**  
*Here the writers encounter the difficulty of collective form-ing*

JESS  
I was working on the essay and it  
just disappeared! Won't let me back  
in!!! Does anyone know what happened?

Collaborating in rooms, online meetings and shared documents comes with challenges, most beyond simply the technical (see above). Thinking in-between the cracks communally proved to be labour-intensive. Finding our formal playground meant both pushing past the moments where it would have been easier to break into four parts, while also resisting the temptation to make the challenges part of the work itself. We debated to what extent we might share the mechanics of creativecritical co-authorship, the synchronous and asynchronous labour, the crude arguments, to be “relentlessly meta” (Guertin 2021, p. 81).

TOP TEN DELETED SCENES

- The one in which the metaphors multiplied and couldn't be reined in.
- The one in which we all became overinvested in the storyline where Gareth was out of town.
- The one where we considered responding to the reviewers' comments by dividing the labour instead of continuing to attempt real-time, synchronous collaboration.
- The draft that was set entirely in a server room and we were all personified cursors.
- The one where we went off on a tangent after we quoted Salman Rushdie.
- The one where left and right justifications took on political connotations.
- The one where Stayci tells us our dialogue is too verbose and needs serious editing.
- The one with too many citations that turned us into talking heads.
- The one where we debate conical versus canonical progression of smoke rings.
- The one where we deleted scenes from “deleted scenes” due to word count.

These deleted scenes are residual traces of a labour-intensive mode of collaboration which is not to be romanced as an unqualified improvement upon sole-authorship. Our open and shifting dialogue across forms – and platforms – provided informal peer review: an intellectual jostling where collaborators engage substantively with ideas rather than dwelling on what has been left out.

***Here the writers discover the asynchronous promise chain as collective methodology***

The collision of methods in our development of this work (Teams meeting, shared docs, track changes, individual writing, feedback loops and asynchronous collaboration), together with the cacophony of metaphors, gave rise to an `async` “promise chain” methodology extending from Jenny’s knowledge of digital coding. Unbounded by time/space (yet curtailed by external demands), ideas could accumulate and compound across weeks of iterative refinement. We could see how the asynchronous quality of our OnForm() functioning, while symptomatic of late-stage capitalism and the voracious demands of the academy, created a gestational space for our forms and thinking on form to iteratively unfold. From one blinking monitor to the next, we observed how each of our `async` literary modes was embedded within a promise chain; each promise pending, fulfilled or rejected, as we strove communally to execute our guiding function OnForm(). Our process demonstrates that scholarly thinking need not be static across the arc of an article or the lifecycle of a particular research inquiry; the formal architecture of asynchronous thinking, of promise chains and the processual seeping between researcher selves is designed for ongoing iteration. Although we have formalised one iteration of our thoughts for this paper, the `async` promise chain of our OnForm() function remains productively pending. Our discursive modes have embodied agnostic flexibility through our asynchronous promise chain, allowing fluid movement between the explanatory rational and ambiguous poetic knowing.

***Here the writers encounter metaphor as a meeting ground for common exchange***

What surfaced in Movements One and Two was an abundance of metaphors – a veritable collision of metaphorical nouns and verbs that both helped us to hold in mind a variety of spatial forms, and to convey to one another how forms “move”. These metaphors became shareable offerings, structures and actions to help each other to redefine modes of forming thought. But further to this, we found ourselves thinking metaphorically about methodology. Just like the screenplay pulled us all together, the metaphor of the asynchronous methodology helped us reflect on how our working together across locations and timelines was made possible – and what, in that making, we had collectively produced.

What forms of writing emerge through the collective? We are reminded of the words of mathematician Kerry Landman in conversation with Julienne van Loon (2018):

A lot of people say, “Oh, that was sort of a negative result. You didn’t actually confirm or deny something,” but you explored something, right? You explored this question but you haven’t got a definitive answer, there’s nothing wrong with that. (p. 151)

In our efforts to explore “collective form,” we arrived at a gathering of metaphors. In attempting to define (collective) form, we ironically found ourselves “turning away” from the thing of the form and towards its many more graspable likenesses. Somewhere along the way, between the lines of all the “deleted scenes,” we steered Gareth’s “horse” as an agile metaphor to guide our investigation. “Horse” serves as vessel for apprehending what it means to take shape together; it offers a common language for reflection. The horse is the hybrid form that

carries us, lending an embodied intelligence to our movement across genres. As George Lakoff and Mark Johnson (1980) argue: “Because we conceptualize linguistic form in spatial terms, it is possible for certain spatial metaphors to apply directly to the form of a sentence” (p. 126) – and so the horse becomes the shape and pace of our collaboration, stable trotting through reflection, or unbridled play. The horse seems to straddle elegantly the spatiality and force/motion of our collective form.

Erin Manning (2020) writes that in the “process of coming to form” a “perspective is born” both on the form itself and on form’s formation (p. 78). Process-based eventings – such as this overall OnForm() project – invite “a cleaving, in the now of experience, of an always-differing force-form composition” (p. 78). And yet, as much as metaphors tend to depend on a “metaphysics of physical presence” (Webb, 2010, p. 23), the materiality of this kind of shared labour remains stubbornly, productively awkward as bodies think together across blinking monitors, promises pending.

***Here the writers consider what this all means for collaborative creativecritical scholarship***

Ross Gibson (2010) writes about going “consciously and interrogatively into and then out of an experience, knowing it somewhat by immersion and then somewhat by exertion and reflection” (p. 5). We began this “article” with a simple prompt (Movement One), each of us offering to the group a short treatise on form in the context of our respective creative-writing practice. We then forayed into a shared space, capturing exchange and “horseplay” (Movement Two) as we attempted to think about and through form together. In this Movement, we have exited the “horseplay” and attempted to frame and understand what may have formed. This may be seen as an extension of Gibson’s concept of creative practice research, as it brings it into a space of collective practice. As we have developed Movements Two and Three, we found ourselves oscillating between experiential thinking-through-writing and reflective practice, each cycle informing new iterations of creative and critical thinking. We deleted scenes and improved upon others, as we attempted to find a “stable” form for our collective play.

Where Markidis (2024) writes, “Creativecritical writing might carry over meaning from body to body, making present the space of relation between you and you and you” (p. 8), we make space for form, meaning and metaphor to carry over, to morph and fractalise in the space between “I” and “I” and “I” and “I”. This collective *formation* promotes “getting beyond the self” through attunement to other creativecritical thinking bodies as networked actors.

This idea of “carrying over” echoes Caroline Levine’s (2015) “portable” forms and Jen Webb and Donna Lee Brien’s “agnostic research” (2008). In creative-writing research, agnosticism represents “a tolerance for complexity and confusion, and both a willingness and a capacity to be led by the data rather than by a predetermined point of view” (Webb & Brien, 2008). The data here is provisional musing via metaphors which demonstrate a failed attempt by us to ground form “in” space. This is unsurprising given our shared desire for form to be something constantly eluding capture, something porous, and further, perhaps our difficulty to land “in”

a shared space is also reflective of the asynchronous methodology of shared docs, Teams meetings, et cetera. The form our “academic article” takes is chaotic, crafted asynchronously in stolen time between gigs, familial responsibilities, teaching, travel, sickness and so on.

Formal properties – not the Formers themselves – ended up contributing to this in separate ways. Finding ways to move together involved not just coming up with a hybrid form in the formal sense – as in, a recognisable textual body – but finding ways to merge properties. We could have produced a screenplay/poem/essay/code Frankensteinian form to say, “Here we are enacting the coming together of forms in our talking about form together”. But that seems, perhaps, old hat. Instead, here is a horse. The horse has some “formal sensibilities” in its DNA, forces or potentialities that we have each brought into the shared space; these properties were not necessarily consciously deployed but were discovered on reflection as being prominent aspects of our collaborative negotiations.



## Notes

[1] Gareth and Jenny are current PhD candidates testing their respective creative writing forms alongside the possibilities of the creative writing “PhD form”. Stayci and Jess have supervised all manner of hybrid, interwoven, creativecritical dissertations. Nigel Krauth (2011) drew attention to the “changing shape of the doctorate” (p. 1), though since then the PhD in creative writing has continued to radically transform and evolve as writers attempt to find fitting forms for their creative and critical thinking.

[2] Recent texts gesturing towards collective or collaborative creativecritical discourse include Stefanie Markidis and Daniel Jukes’ two introductions to the *TEXT* special issue ‘Creativecritical writing now’ (2024a; 2024b), where formal discussion and informal dialogue merge and mingle; Peta Murray and Ames Hawkins’s (2024) exploration of sharing “an ethics of aesthetics” in scholarly reflection on practice; Peta Murray, et al.’s (2017) staging a “collective writing event” through collaborator “skull-bumping;” Jessica Wilkinson and Tammi Jonas’s (2021) hybrid essay testing how creative writing forms can accommodate collaborative thinking about food ethics; and Francesca Rendle-Short et. al’s (2023) testing of *communitas* – intense, community spirit and fellowship – in the context of collective creative and scholarly writing.

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