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Three women, one touchstone: writing through crises from the ‘girls’ desk

Abstract

A humble desk, handmade by my grandmother, is my current place of work, as I have been recently uprooted from an academic office space. It is talisman and anchor, witness to three generations of mastering craft, private grief and quiet resilience. Taking this unassuming object as a prompt, I conducted a creative interrogation into the impact of objects on writing practice. Simply moving my practice from an institutional space to a private one has teased matrilineal embodied narratives out of hiding. Stories of poverty and subversion suddenly speak through me, as if there are spectres in the timber of this so-called ‘Girls’ Desk’ that intersect with flesh-memory. This piece will reflect on the process of writing through my grandmother’s desk and include examples of the resulting prose and poetry.

Biographical Note

Heather Briony McGinn is a second-year PhD candidate with a research focus on Beat Studies and feminist literary criticism. In the first year of her postgraduate research she developed *l’écriture kinesthétique*, a corporeal-based creative writing methodology.

Keywords

creative practice – *écriture kinesthétique* – experimental poetry – writing through objects – writing from the body

Research statement

Responding to a writing prompt suggested by *TEXT* editors during the global pandemic crisis of 2020, this paper considers what narratives emerge through the process of writing through things. The following paper contributes to the field of creative writing research in three ways.

Firstly, this paper contributes to the discourse via the innovation of using an inanimate object as a writing prompt. Writing this way allowed a continuation of engagement with creative practice while in isolation as a practice of punk DIY, creating new work within a constrained environment (Stephens et al., 2019).

Secondly, this paper demonstrates the use of the developing methodology of *l'écriture kinesthétique* as well as the adaptation of this methodology to suit restrictive working conditions. The methodology of *l'écriture kinesthétique* is a corporeal-based creative research and writing practice that was initially reliant on the researcher being able to take on the rôle of the *flâneuse*. For this article, the methodology was adapted to work within a contained, domestic space, rather than an open urban area.

Lastly, this paper engages with developing creative practice methodology and draws upon craftivism and corporeal-based writing practices within the field of creative writing research and creative practice more broadly.

The starting point: writing through objects

Winter 2020. The customary darkness and cold is accompanied by a new challenge – social isolation. The new plague sweeping the globe has interred us. Building a creative writing thesis that was meant to be generated through the practice of a movement-based writing methodology is now infinitely more complex. No more urban explorations from which to launch an artefact. No more serendipitous flesh-to-flesh encounters. We must all be separate, at least in body. How to keep from stagnating? How to persist with writing when the world is reduced to two rooms? Return to the body. Return to the objects in the environment. Return to where literacy was learned in the first place. The desk.

Built by my grandmother, the desk is where I work now. No more academic office space with clean white lines, air conditioning, and stacks of library books within easy reach. Instead, I am in the home office-cum-study, surrounded by touchstones. I have a new desk chair and my rarely used laptop. I have the cat circling my ankles. I have a calendar optimistically pinned to the wall above a re-purposed bedside table. There are the hastily collected books and articles and teaching resources, lately supplanted from the university office. I have noise-cancelling headphones and too much stationery. Most of all, I have the desk. Small and only just tall enough to pass WHS requirements, it has survived many house moves, perhaps due to sentimentality, but mostly because it's on wheels. It has always been too useful to abandon, and it is being pressed into service yet again. It always shows up in times of crisis, a silent observer of three generations of women making do.

The prompt: creative interrogative memoir via the deployment and adaption of *l'écriture kinesthétique*

Wash your hands and wear a mask, because we must endeavour to reduce the spread of COVID-19. We are reminded of this every waking moment. It's the message that floods the newsfeeds of every screen we encounter. The principle of exchange pioneered by Dr Edmond Locard (Miller & Massey, 2016, p. 6) is easily remembered by way of a simple phrase: Every contact leaves a trace.

Developed for the field of forensic science, this principle forms the basis for my own investigation, not into crime scene evidence, but into the storytelling capabilities of an object. When I moved from the university office to the home study, I soon discovered that the desk my grandmother built holds a peculiar power. It gives me back memories that I thought were lost to me due the PTSD I had developed since being violently sexually assaulted at the age of 26. When invited to undertake the creative writing activity of writing through objects, the desk was a clear choice. Forced to suspend the urban wanderings that ordinarily prompted my creative work, I chose to experiment with narratives that could emerge when I sat, still, at this unassuming piece of furniture.

Kinaesthetic writing, or *l'écriture kinesthétique*, is the process of writing with and through the kinetic body. In its initial development, this methodology had incorporated the figure of the *flâneuse* (Nesci, 2001) as a key component, and often revealed themes that were subversive, disruptive, and feminist – especially as they are produced by a writer who inhabits a non-normative body-mind. Walking through the world as a neurodivergent, queer-crip, and chronically ill woman impacts the way I produce text. Now that the walking part of my practice has been curtailed, how might I approach the task of writing through an object?

The response: examples of creative writing

Sitting down at the desk in the midst of a pandemic, I found it speaking to me as I worked. Taking a break from typing one rainy afternoon, I slid back the sarong covering the desk and placed my palms against the varnished, pock-marked surface, and the past was unlocked. One moment of contact with this desk had dropped the traces of precious memories, unbidden, into my despairing, memory-starved consciousness.

Firstly, I remembered that the desk used to have a shelf. It was removed when I grew too tall for my legs to fit underneath. I imagine it's been repurposed in one of my uncles' garden sheds. But before that, I filled the shelf space with all kinds of adolescent treasures and secrets. I can see them now. Notebooks full of poetry, stories, sketches. Love letters never sent. Sequins. Birthday cards and invitations. Ribbons. Lolly wrappers. Old schoolbooks full of red-inked asides penned by teachers. Must try harder. Shows promise.

Secondly, I remembered my nanna's hands, scarred and wrinkled and thin-skinned. She taught me how to play patience at this desk. Laying out the cards with a rhythm honed over decades. She taught me how to manicure my nails because a trip to a salon was never something she could afford. She taught me how to thread a needle. I can see the thread bending to her will while I struggled to be as deft as her. I can see her with the sewing scissors, cutting fabric to fit the patterns she'd drawn herself and traced onto brown paper.

Thirdly, I remember my mum helping me rearrange my room when I was still an adolescent. She cleaned the desk, scratched off the sticky residue that some masking tape had left behind. All the while she encouraged me to be conscientious in my studies, to make the best of it. I felt a great weight of responsibility. To make my mum and my nanna proud. This was my mission. Working class girls must never stop improving. Mum reminded me of the tremendous potential I possessed. She looked up at me – at 11 years old I was already taller than her – and I felt resolved. Compelled to excel.

2020 – here and now and I'm panting, heart pushing against my ribs. I want to scream. I want to cry. I want to run around the block with the joy of this moment. I look down at my hands. Chapped, cracked, strong, one thumb shorter and fatter than the other. The palms so broad they could never have belonged to a wealthy woman. These hands were made for working. And yet, they have just conducted a current of memories from the surface of this old desk and into my broken brain. I remember. I remember. I remember who I am, where I come from, why I am here, now, living. I can even remember the moment I realised that I couldn't remember anymore...

2010 and I'm hot, filthy, and hurting. Raped and left for dead on a summer morning. Later that night, I reach out to my brain for a comforting memory. I need a voice, a scent, a sensation of a long-lost hand on my shoulder. I reach out and they're not there anymore. They've been stolen. I fall apart. For months I will cry every time I need to get naked in order to shower. I will keep reaching for the memory of my nanna. Any part of her. A whisper of her voice, a fleeting glimpse of her silhouette, a hint of the fragrance of her lipstick. But no such luck. It's all gone. The only thing that keeps me alive is spite. Spite and rage.

2000 and I've left my year twelve English assignment to the last minute and it's due in the morning. I work through the night at the desk. Dad brings me coffee every hour. Silent, gentle encouragement and caffeine sustain me as I fill sixty pages of a workbook with my notes and reflections on three books, one and half of which I have only just finished reading at the dinner table mere hours earlier. I go to bed at five. Up at six to make sure I'm ready for the bus trip to school at seven. Workbook safely stashed in my backpack, wedged between my flute case and my lunchbox. Hyperfocus has saved me from failure for the umpteenth time.

1990s and I am trying to be good. Trying to be a smart girl. A genius. But I get sick. And the deaths. The deaths. The deaths. The grief is heavy. Undiagnosed neurodivergence is a tick I can't shake off. I can try to forgive that young girl now. I can hold onto the stories and the memories that have returned to me in this moment. I remember how poor we are, and how capable. I hold the stories in my bones. In the midst of a crisis, I place my hands upon this desk and I remember all of this...

1970s and Nanna got sick. So Mum took over. The boys' washing. The boys' ironing. The boys' meals. The housework. The groceries. Lists. Lists. Lists. And still did her homework. And still got on the bus with Poppa to visit Nanna. Delivered her clean clothes. Took away the dirty clothes. Back to the washing. Feed the boys. Then while Poppa listened to news, she would clear the desk. And do her homework. Gotta get the grades. Gotta get up that ladder. Gotta get into teacher's college. Poppa would answer the odd question. He had a brilliant mathematical mind, and an extensive vocabulary that he actively improved through his obsessive daily completion of the newspaper crosswords. He left school early – twelve, fourteen, nobody remembers which number is the right one – and credits his working for a

bookie, the crosswords, and reading as being key to his intelligence. If he'd had the chance, he would have studied to as high a level as he could. But that's not how class works. Nanna, too, would have continued exploring her love of design and hat-making. Instead she worked as a station cook to keep her family from starving in the 30s. Their brilliance held potential. Untapped. Here were architects, physicists, engineers, artists, philosophers – geniuses. Realising potential happens only to those of a certain class. As a society, we value only certain – allowable – types of knowledges, and knowledge producing practices. This is all tied up in class, status, and wealth. Who was your father? Who was his father? Who was your mother? And her mother? Was she a saint, a whore, from a good family or a bad one?

How do you pass a piano exam when you have no access to a piano? You make do. You get out the masking tape. You tear off eighty-eight strips – fifty-two for the white keys, thirty-six for the black keys. You stick them to the top of the sewing desk, label them, and get to work. Humming quietly, beating time with bare toes against the carpet so as not to disturb the rest of the household...because my mother wasn't going to let something as trivial as not owning a piano get in the way of her passing an exam.

1950s working class South Australia and Nanna Gladys sends Poppa Ross with a note to the local hardware store. The note is brief. Copperplate handwriting spells out precise measurements for a new piece of furniture. Nanna will build this. Our family couldn't afford to buy any more ready-assembled pieces. They would make do and mend. Nanna can turn her hand to almost anything. Station cook. Milliner. Housekeeper. Mother. Her strong hands assemble the pieces of cheap timber Poppa brings back for her. The work of twenty minutes. Then the sticky, cellophane yellow varnish. Then waiting for it to dry, under the front veranda, next to the pansies. The red cement. The spotless windowsills. Houseproud. A battalion of smart-mouthed children. Kind as well. Fond of animals. Bringing back strays for Poppa to tend and fawn over. He'd feed starving kittens flat lemonade with an eye-dropper while Nanna fed everyone else. Her housedresses were of cotton, clean and smooth and soft and worn into her shape over decades, through at least nine pregnancies, maybe more. Dark hair pinned back. Out of the way of stray pegs and toddlers gripping fingers. I wonder if her children thought she was magic, like I did. Nanna was my fairy god-witch, always. With her own shed, her own garden patch, and of course the sole ownership of that lino-bathed apothecary; the kitchen. Poppa had the greenhouse, the corner of the dining table, the best TV chair, and was in charge of keeping the box room stocked with beer and pop. The box room is haunted by two dead brothers and seems too small to have ever contained them now. Then, it was the boys' room. There were three girls, so they had the slightly larger room, bursting with dreams and ambitions. They would not be housebound. They would be career girls.

Nanna was a career girl too. She had just stopped being paid. Instead, her labour made room for the success of all those around her. It's hard to lose with her in your corner, keeping you fed and happy and warm and laughing and destined to be gentle and clever. I'm not sure when she left school. Maybe twelve, certainly fourteen – nobody seems to know the correct number. She had to work. Poverty stains fast. No amount of bleach will ever rid you of the traces of it. It is just there. And so nothing is wasted. Nothing is taken for granted. Nothing is needed beyond the absolute bare essentials for survival. Nothing too nice, please. We're superstitious. Nanna makes everything. Poppa fixes everything. Together, they grow, and save, and build, and lavish us with such riches of care and humour that we will never have to go hungry or cold. We will never have to know what they knew in those lean years. Not if Nanna can help it. With

her family growing and the long-awaited and saved-for sewing machine now taking pride of place on her existing desk – covered now in orange vinyl, held in place by brass tacks, octagonal in shape and with raised facets, they are a delight under the fingertips, so smooth – a second desk is required. Seamstressing is a complicated practice. If you can spread out, you will. You must. There are communion dresses to make, wedding dresses, school uniforms, army uniforms, navy uniforms, nursing uniforms, work clothes, bridesmaids dresses, mending to be done, hats to be made. Re-purposing every fabric. Transformations are ordinary everyday occurrences. Curtains into dresses? Not so much. But nappies into sunhats? Certainly. Hemming. Endless hemming. Off the rack may be cheaper now, but the legs are all wrong. The tailoring is relentless. Poppa is only 5' 4" in old money. My height now. There's skinny boys, busty girls, pregnant bellies, and growth spurts galore. Nanna sews through them all...

There was war. There were deaths. Nobody ever talks about how the boys died. I just know that they died within the same month. Her two eldest. From her first marriage. Did she take their clothes and alter them to fit the younger boys? Did she keep anything back as a memento, apart from the precious pictures? Or did she stick to her hardwired resourcefulness. I like to think there's a handkerchief, or a shirt cuff, or a collar, or an inseam that survived the recycling drive. Tucked away in her dressing table. Secreted into a hatbox. Something private. A hidden grief for the rare moments she got to herself. Maybe when Poppa made the first cup of tea in the morning. His job. She made all the rest, he reasoned. He worked two, sometimes three, jobs. Gotta get all of these children an education. Get them moving in higher circles. Get them out of the housing trust class of people. It worked. It worked. It worked. Privileges we enjoy now are not down to our own efforts alone. Their hard graft laid the foundations. Their sacrifices mean I have freedoms my nanna would have never dreamed of. Studying at university? No husband? No KIDS? Unfathomable. But she taught me how to sew a button on. Just in case. Women's work. Passed from her hands into mine because that's the way it had always been. No granddaughter of hers was going to go out into the world without the cards stacked in her favour. She taught me to play patience as well. It still helps me think. Women must always be occupied, lest they appear idle. They would still be interrupted. Their first duty is always outside of themselves. They are in service to others at all times.

2020 and I am trying to hold on. Grit. Get through this year and come out the other side with enough of a word count to prove myself still capable and worthy of the status of fledgling researcher. Everything I produce seems to be not-quite-right. Always masking and trying to be good. How can I make myself understood when I'm at the bottom of the pack? This brief interlude of prose writing is finished now, with poetry returning. Inevitable. It is my first language. Grandmother-mother-tongue:

This is how ~~poor~~ capable we are

We do not need new shoes

We have leftover linoleum to patch the holes

All that stands between us and a ballgown

Is imagination and industrious hands

Give us a broken spirit and we will mend it

With tea and humour

Stitch hope into every seam
Drain the blood from us with your fists
And witness our rebirth
We are made of stronger stuff
Flint, grit, and hospital corners
We do not need new coats
We have the legacy of a quiet, burning rage
Warmer and more enduring than any furs or fabrics

Reflections on the writing activity: new avenues of expression and making do and mending with creative practice

Adapting the kinaesthetic writing methodology to be fit for purpose within a contained environment, I needed to explore the text that is already within the flesh, and be curious about the small, domestic movements that provided me with the liminal space from which to recover matrilineal stories (Nyeet et al., 2015). The practice of reframing and forging new paths within my creative practice methodology is a do-it-yourself approach often seen within punk creative practices. It is a way of making do with what I have; a well-trodden working-class attitude that I have inherited not only from my mother and grandmother, but from my sorority of punk creative practitioners. A punk-based DIY practice has the dual purpose of making things on a very small budget as well as resisting capitalist structures (Way, 2020).

A key theme that emerged in the writing was that of women's work, and sewing and mending in particular. Taking the hint from this theme, I extended my experiment beyond the writing activity, and engaged in the practice of craftivism via a number of sewing projects while I was stuck at home in isolation. This practice led to digital reconnections and collaborations with other creatives, all engaged in the traditionally feminine practice of handicrafts. Punk DIY is manifested here in the making of something from nothing but inexpensive scraps of fabrics – a cheap form of entertaining oneself and others as well as a way to make a non-violent statement through artistic expression.

Through this extension of my creative practice – from solitary writing to collective making – I discovered the phenomenon of Nannagogy, a form of social movement learning and activism for older women in Australia discussed by Lorraine Larri and Hilary Whitehouse in 2019. Nannagogy reminds me of the significance of women's handicrafts as rich sources of knowledges that have the potential to break through the barrier between the domestic feminine and the public masculine spaces. Larri and Whitehouse assert that

Metaphorically craft can represent traditionally, women-centred forms of connection and collaboration, that of drawing threads together in which home-based activity becomes visible in the public sphere as deliberative actions, and gives voice both physically and visually to women's place in the environment of contestation. (2019, p. 34)

Crafting and writing are both tactile activities that make room for expression borne out of the body. Green proposes that

writing is a physical act and the physical body is subject to political and as well as social and biological constraints...These temporary physical restrictions which make the act of writing difficult seem to echo the more complex and subtle social restrictions. (2012, p. 170)

With this idea in mind, I approached the writing prompt as an opportunity to experiment with memoir writing. The desk could serve as a symbol for the lived experience of my grandmother, my mother, and myself.

If my traumatised brain could reclaim stolen memories through the tactile practice of touching the desk, then I could attempt to transcribe previously hidden narratives of working-class women. Jukes posits that 'Things work as texts, and we can use them to rekindle the past, even if they somehow, concurrently, suggest our separateness from it' (2017, p. 499). Working from this assertion, I found that the text that was spilling from me organised itself into snapshot stories, which is unusual for this poet. Poetry returned later, but the first instinct was prose. Kate Meheuron describes memoir as 'a rebus of skin; its hieroglyphics allude to the field of forces which have inscribed its surface' (1993, p. 81). The memories flooded from me almost faster than my fingers could form them into words upon paper, as if they had been waiting impatiently to be written, lurking just beneath my fingertips.

Concluding thoughts: coping with a crisis through transformative craft

Writing through an object provided the opportunity to transform my creative practice and experiment with alternative writing styles. The necessary adaptation of my own creative practitioner persona from *flâneuse* to craftivist meant a shift from writing within the urban, public, and academic spaces to writing within the suburban, private, and domestic spaces.

Writing outside of the safe bubble of academic space revealed the discomfort and challenges associated with being a first-in-family researcher and presented new lines of enquiry into possible narrative approaches in my broader creative writing practice. Being required by circumstance to adapt and overcome the perceived restrictions to my writing practice instead prompted an opportunity to embrace and explore punk DIY and craftivism, as well as discover that I can reclaim stories and memories through connecting with significant personal objects.

At the outset, the global COVID-19 pandemic seemed to spell disaster for the ongoing development of my creative practice methodology, but instead *l'écriture kinesthétique* has moved beyond its initial building block of being a process engaged in writing through and with the kinetic body. It now includes the seemingly innocuous movements we make. Threading needles. Spooling thread. Cutting fabric. These smaller movements, as well as the more expansive ones – walking, dancing, running – also elicit text. Restriction has induced expansion.

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