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creative writing practice***

Abstract:

This creative writing research takes as its basis both the plurality of time and the plurality of queerness and attempts to locate a hybrid form that allows six creative writers to explore the relationship between their individual practices and time: bringing them together into a reflexive space that allows them to be read together while holding them apart. By investigating an area of making and thinking composed of individual strategies, questions, challenges, contradictions, problems, logics, the writers discover in, first, the discrete space of the case study and, second, the critical space of the collaborative essay that queerness and time may meet on the shared ground of form; that form is a site for both creative and political/representational activity; and that a multiplicity of times and spaces, particular to each researcher and articulated specifically here, is not just the medium in which the work is made but fundamental to its content, elaboration, potentiality, and reception.

Biographical notes:

Dr Ronnie Scott is a Program Manager and Senior Lecturer in the Bachelor of Arts (Creative Writing) at RMIT University. His first novel *The Adversary* (2020) was shortlisted for a Queensland Literary Award – Fiction. His current project is the Australian Research Council Linkage Project, *Australian Comics: A New History 1980-2020*.

Sholto Buck is a PhD student in Creative Writing at RMIT. He works in poetry, memoir, and visual art. Recent work includes *Surfaces Without Shadows*, MayFair Art Fair, 2020, and *Elbow-room in the universe*, Enjoy Gallery Wellington, 2020.

J Butler is a writer of poetry and experimental nonfiction, PhD student, and sessional academic at the University of Melbourne. Their current research is on questions of affect and materiality at the intersections of creative writing practices and experiences of queerness and anorexia.

Dr Jhoanna Lynn Cruz is Associate Professor at the University of the Philippines Mindanao. She received her PhD from RMIT University in 2020. Her memoir, *Abi Nako, Or So I Thought* (2020), written as part of her dissertation, was published by the University of the

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Introduction

Time has been of concern for creative writers since before Gotthold Lessing’s *Laocoon* (1766) asserted that poetry (text) was extended in time and painting was extended in space. Yet this division, artificial as it may be, speaks to both the centrality of time to creative writing practice and the multifariousness of its expressions: time is a mechanical question, a representational and thereby political concept, the medium in which an object is thought about, read or written. In creative work it’s frequently a metaphor for something else, sometimes quite apart from itself – a range of phenomena that might include characters, themes, the relationship between events, spaces, or images.

Queer theorists working with, about, and around creative practice have taken structuralist/narratological or philosophical approaches to time and often extended them into a conceptual usage that blends and moves between: the representation of time within text; the extra-textual sense of the artist in time; and the handling or navigation of time within a text. Key theorists on time in a queer studies context include Halberstam (2005), Muñoz (2009) and Freeman (2010); indeed, when we brought our case studies together to compare results of experiments and work into a collaborative piece, the researcher–writers weren’t surprised to find that we engaged across our sections with all three. Muñoz, after Halberstam, writes against a ‘straight time’ that he characterises as ‘a naturalised temporality ... calibrated to make queer potentiality not only unrealised but unthinkable’ (p. 165). In this collaboration, we take time in the context of a queer studies which is based in creative practice – the concrete space of our case studies – but also remains a site of potential. This is often expressed in our sections as multiple. As Butler writes in their contribution to this article, *Hybridity and Anorectic Time*, some ways of working with time may be ‘both objects of

knowledge and modes of meaning-making'. As Haddad writes in his contribution *Now and Never*, 'we write about time, in time'.

This creative writing research, then, takes as its basis the plurality of time and the plurality of queerness – the latter's 'fundamental indeterminacy ... always ambiguous, always relational' (Jagose, 1996, p. 96) – as well as the need to find a form that can speak of its specifics (its concrete particulars, so to speak). It asks: through combining two concepts that are both significant to its authors and notoriously slippery – these being queerness and time – and putting them into discussion as a concatenation of practice and scholarship, what picture might we draw of queer, time-based (and -centred and -extended) creative writing – an area of making and thinking composed of individual strategies, questions, challenges, contradictions, problems, logics? What can we find out about our specific and shared approaches to queerness and time through collaboration – which is 'what begins to happen wherever artists talk about what they are doing' (Carter, 2004, p. xiii) – and specifically a meeting on the page (which is also 'what begins to happen wherever artists talk about what they are doing' – a dialogue)?

For our shared investigation into queerness, writing and time, the multifariousness is the message; the way of both producing and sharing knowledge. We invited each other to explore queerness and time in ways specific to our established creative practices, and to be brief and focused on one or two areas of our work. In this light, our contribution comes from our tacit knowledge of individual practices. We then met on the page to discuss our differences, contradictions, sympathies, antipathies, and strange resonances – both an acknowledgement that these individual practices participate in a wider network of creative research, and a contribution in the collaborative form. We hoped through the experiment to find differences and intersections, and to open the possibility to see ourselves in and against new contexts, while at the same time offering documentation of how the work is made.

We also believe that research into and about how artists make work can be compelling and useful to other artists when put into discussion with each other. The form of the scholarly essay can be reshaped – Frankensteined – to allow for living discussions to take place.

Taking *form* to mean both a container for meaning and something that constitutes and shapes meaning, we hoped to find a form that would both (a) allow each individual writer space to explore and reflect on practice and (b) hold the ideas together within the shared space of the essay. The result is not a fully 'enmeshed' piece, but rather an essay that holds a position for each individual contribution while putting them into dialogue, an experiment which will continue towards future research. Following these individual contributions and openings to discussion is a conclusion that draws out some of the writers' shared ideas.

Fast time and its trapdoors – Sholto Buck

Sholto Buck, a poet and memoirist, locates his work in the present moment and examines the tension between doing, and the consequences/implications of doing 'in time'. And yet Buck is also suspicious of the benefits that accrue to writers through adopting an 'ethic of rebellion' as pertains to queerness and time, suggesting a return to invention and form that is mimicked by the form of the case study itself – through the 'I', observation, the surface, and rupturing, through which modes of time that are not necessarily rebellious can become agents of queering themselves.

i.

It is safest to grasp the concept of the postmodern as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place.
(Jameson, 1991, p. ix.)

It might be that to write life in an interminable present tense is to signify the author's enmeshed place in postmodernism and its bedfellow, late-stage capitalism. Let's say this writer writes at the pace the world has them move to. Idleness be damned there are no breaks it's gogogo until the end. Let's say the present is an ideal surface for the production of capital and for endlessly proliferating commodities ... This writer, in trying to keep up, has a lot to answer for.

But what if the present they write is useless? How pervasive is the influence of capital that any gesture of keeping pace with the world as it goes by is inherently linked to economic flows? Is there a useless way to spend the present?

By useless I mean not contributing to model citizenry. Not necessarily dissidence, but maybe ambivalence, like observing the present of a leaf as it falls to the ground. Well, we might link that leaf to the seasons, to which we might associate the inner workings of the produce industry and the role of the seasons in determining which fruits and vegetables are most saleable at which times and how these practices have been honed since the industrial revolution to optimise productivity at the expense of fair labour conditions OK I admit it! I wrote about buying raspberries.

Expensive red fruit best enjoyed in summer. *Raspberries are / On special / So I'm hurrying along* and with that I gave myself away. I gave my poetic voice to the whims of the produce industry and perhaps forfeited any serious claims to unproductivity-as-resistance.

There is writing done on queer time. Halberstam comes to mind. They explicate the ways queer communities carve out alternative times and in doing so, reject heteronormativity and

reproductive capitalism. They cite ravers, rent boys and drug addicts among others, as those who live queerly in relation to time as it is ordained by normativity.

There is an ethic of rebellion which surrounds Halberstam's notion of queer time. A sense pervades which dictates those who live in 'queer time' do it with intention and commitment, even if they found themselves there unwittingly. I am suspicious of it for this reason. Is it not seductive in certain circles, outside of the academy and in the grip of contemporary identity politics, to appear less privileged and by way of this, more unique than one's peers? 'In this context then, 'transgressive exceptionalism' refers to the practice of taking the moral high ground by claiming to be more oppressed and more extraordinary than others' (Halberstam, 2005). Is it not an observable aesthetic, particularly among those in the arts, for example, to present as 'poor' or 'unkempt', irrespective of whether they come from money? To perform as those radical figures who elude normativity, soaking in its cultural capital all the while secretly enjoying the financial benefits of its opposite. It seems to me that even Halberstam's radical vision for eluding 'productive time's' grip can be seized upon as a consumable aesthetic. Writing, being an aesthetically bound medium, must deal with this also.

So how might one present a kind of queer time on the page? George Haddad in *Now and Never*, appearing later in this essay, refers to the page as a public space wherein queer and non-normative practices can offer reparative and alternative futures and ways of being in time. I echo this sentiment and suggest we might enact these queer manipulations of time through inventive use of form. Form to rupture time ...

ii.

In my work across poetry and memoir, time is embodied by form. By form, I mean the way the words are configured on the page. The shape of each text reflects the way time is felt within them. For example, short lines in quick succession yield a quickness of reading which implies that time's movement is to be perceived as fast. In poetry I am often drawn to writing a fast time, a time designed to keep up with the present, begetting quick sentences and lines which jump from moment to moment. Take these from *Naming, Moving: The pavement's heating / I'm running / to the shops / through traffic*.

These observations bear the fast pace of an 'I' moving across time, keeping step with the present. They are tightly worded units of meaning which describe the world as it is encountered. In their descriptive function they are like snapshot photographs. This form creates a kind of surface upon which the reader skims.

This quick surface is the perfect site for rupture. What happens when the pace shifts, or the focus moves from observation to imagination? The interjection of alternate times, such as those of recollection and ponderance, which I suggest are often slow, vague, and difficult to measure, does something odd to the present when its passing is already established on the

page. It sets forth a wobbling of the flow and pace of the text, previously governed by the efficient and tightly worded logic of observation. Imagine walking along and suddenly falling, as though through a trapdoor, out of looking and into thinking. I am interested in making this shift, from the time of looking to the time of imagining, evident in form.

For example, in *Naming, Moving* the above-mentioned quick observations give way to a moment of thought which takes the narrator out of their immediate environment and sense of time. *I always return to all the things I can't hold, tying / Like a ribbon to some huge clear body and it just flies off.* We see here an extension of the line, and a disruption of rhythm, occurring when the subject shifts from the observed to the imagined.

I suggest that this use of form to write time at different speeds is a simple but useful way of generating queer rhythms. If, as considered above, the present is a surface which lends itself to the time of capitalist productivity and normativity, then does its disruption by alternate, abstract, and slower times not resonate with a queer ethic? When we consider this in the context of a practice which makes the page a public space to enact queer ways of being, as discussed by Haddad, time can be utilised as a queering agent.

Hybridity and anorectic time – J Butler

J Butler, who practises hybrid and experimental nonfiction work, discusses the temporality of hybridity – a coalescence in which the history of a form is contained within its present, not only the history of hybridity itself but individual forms 'sticky with history'. For Butler, not only the experience of queerness but the experience of anorexia are mapped, approximated, and produced by hybrid formal plays.

There's a passage from *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* by Elizabeth Freeman (2010) in which she discusses reparative criticism:

Because we can't know in advance, but only retrospectively if even then, what is queer and what is not, we gather and combine eclectically, dragging a bunch of cultural debris around us and stacking it in idiosyncratic piles '*not necessarily like any pre-existing whole,*' though composed of what pre-exists... (p. xiii).

Idiosyncratic piles of cultural debris: knowledges stacked and piled and tied inextricably through process, dialectic in the sense that their wholes transcend the sum of their parts, but that their parts are visible to us still. To make new but not quite. Freeman's image stirs a curiosity, a question of through what practice these stacks of knowledge are made. What do these stacks, somewhere between sculptures and trash piles, look like exactly?

As a writer of hybrid and experimental nonfiction work, I sometimes feel like a practitioner of trash piles. Various knowledges and practices and forms are stacked against each other: memoir, verse or lyric, cultural criticism, reportage, personal essay, the fantastical, rumination. Digressions and turns in content and form are discernible still, but, hopefully, produce something that transcends these parts.

The activities aligned with hybrid writing – braiding, layering, standing over a simmering melting pot – are activities that necessarily happen in and across time. All writing, of course, is something that happens in and across time. I'd like to consider the temporal quality of hybridity a little further, conceive of it as an amalgamation or coalescence. Each formal facet of my work, each item of cultural debris, with it holds its own past and future. The personal essay has its own politics and traditions, just as free verse does. Even with hybridity's own teleological history as a genre, the discernible parts of my work are sticky with their own individual historicity. Piling or braiding or layering isn't just something that happens in and across time, but is a coalescence of this temporal stickiness, too. In hybrid amalgamation, the temporal quality of each genre or writing practice are brought into tension and dialogue.

In the previous section, Sholto Buck argues that 'time is embodied by form. The shape of each text reflects the way time is felt within them.' I agree with this sentiment. Anachronisms or non-regulatory temporal rhythms can queer texts in ways that mobilise and renegotiate their content. Queer temporalities expressed through form move beyond an intervention of a queer presence into a heteronormative present. Queer ways of knowing, of being in, of touching time, become not just matters of representation, but questions of hermeneutics.

There is a sociality to temporality, in that my relation to time is informed by the conditions and modes of engagement with myself and others. Two of these conditions are of particular interest in my work: my experience as a queer person and as a sufferer of anorexia.

While there is a great deal of writing on how conceptions of time are tied up in institutions, such as the nuclear family and reproduction, that queerness can resist and deviate from, literature on anorexia and temporality is thin. Like queer temporality, anorexia too opens potentials for alternate renderings of time. Similar to an expansion of queerness from sex act to relational position, anorexia shouldn't be understood as a pathology experienced in solitude or isolation, but rather as intersubjective and a mode of engagement. Megan Warin (2010) suggests that anorexia is relational, and spaces such as wards and pro-ana blogs are cooperative sites of meaning-making, even if to their participants detriment. Warin writes of a

logic of anorexia, one that deals with the shifting (and contradictory) forces of power, disgust, and desire. These forces do not unfold along a linear trajectory but are in constant motion, reflecting the back-and-forth strategies of making and remaking, and of connecting and disconnecting with people (p. 2).

Like queer temporality, anorectic temporal patterns of fasting, restriction, relapse, and recovery resist normative linear chronology. Physical experiences of anorexia such as an eclipsing preoccupation with the body or the totalising effects of hunger elongate the present, make it expansive and leaky, and refuse a stable futurity.

By writing about and within queer and anorexic temporalities, my practice doesn't only create different and resistant objects of knowledge, but different and resistant affective and hermeneutic responses to the urgencies faced by queer and anorexic publics – urgencies of corporeality, of relationality, of affect. Returning to my opening image of Freeman's idiosyncratic piles, the cultural debris with which they are built have a temporal quality that can map, approximate, and produce queer and anorexic experiences of time, a suturing of content and form. In this sense, the collusive ties of varying contents and forms in hybrid writing are cross-temporal, offering a means to produce knowledges outside of hegemonic linearity or chronology. It is an intellectual plane able to produce meaning through its connections made across aesthetic and modal, and therefore temporal, bounds. A non-linear, non-chronological space allowing the logics of queer and anorexic temporality to be productive as both objects of knowledge and modes of meaning-making.

Disruption of linearity in lesbian texts – Jhoanna Lynn Cruz

Jhoanna Cruz, a memoirist, writes of the disruption to narrative forms that takes place through different codings at the level of title and events themselves, for example through development of plot points that subvert heteronorms, but also through structure, use of language, turning points, and also techniques such as the braided essay, which encompass political tyranny in the country where Cruz lives and works. The narrative thus exceeds boundaries of discourse, structure, and metaphor, which are coded as lesbian.

Marilyn Farwell's (1996) theory of lesbian narratives posits that there is no need to renounce conventional stories written by lesbian writers and then privilege non-conventional ones when emphasising textuality in our lesbian readings. Because postmodern theories assert the instability of the signifier and of identities, it would seem that writing experimental, non-linear texts is the only way to affirm the lesbian subject. I found Farwell's position compelling initially because even though I do not see myself as an 'experimental writer', I wanted to assert my lesbian subjectivity as counterdiscursive. Farwell offers an alternative way of reading that can locate moments of instability even in conventional texts by defining the 'lesbian' as a disruptive force that 'steals the narrative' (p. 16) from the heterosexual paradigms. For a text to be lesbian, it should create a narrative space for the lesbian subject to 'interrogate the gender positioning of the narrative elements' (p. 23); it does not accept the old codes of narrative. For instance, it can reposition woman as lover, not beloved, which unsettles the traditional binary that defines the man as the lover. It can also restructure plot by

rejecting the rule that events in a story need to be linked causally and by refusing the necessity of closure. Farwell acknowledges that these re-plotting moves – the ‘feminine disruption of sequence’ (p. 48) have also been deployed by feminist writers like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray, who are not necessarily lesbian.

Farwell’s examination of narrative is based on the idea that ‘marginal groups dispute the values of the societal norm and therefore challenge the narrative system which encodes those norms’ (p. 41). The oppression of groups like homosexuals is not only seen in quotidian life, but also in narrative structure or how stories are told. Thus, in order to assert our own stories, we must disrupt the very system that perpetuates our oppression on the level of discourse. My memoir, *Abi Nako, Or So I Thought* (2020) can be read as a woman’s journey from the failure of her heterosexual marriage to rebuilding her life, featuring in particular a disastrous relationship with an older male writer and the promise of a new lesbian relationship. Despite the overarching narrative of my first ten years in Davao City, the narrative does not follow a neat linear path of development as in a conventional *Bildungsroman*; instead it brings to the fore the ways by which the woman keeps failing due to her own false expectations about herself, other people, and starting over. This is emphasised in my choice of the title, *Abi Nako, Or So I Thought*. It does not pretend to be a story about a woman’s redemption or defeat as narrative closure; it is clear-sighted about her accountability and agency. Farwell explains that the drive towards closure is the ‘fulcrum of feminist narrative theory’ because it is in narrative closure, through either death or marriage, that the female character is ‘finally encased in the authoritative social/sexual/narrative system, never again to escape’ (p. 48). By the traditional standard, any story written by a woman that ends clearly in her death or a marriage to a man defeats itself and sustains the patriarchy. With the chapter ‘Buying the House on Macopa St.’, my memoir ends in a marriage-of-a-kind when the narrator-protagonist moves in with her lesbian partner, but I thwart the ‘happy ending’ suggested by this ‘marriage’ with a more open-ended final sentence, ‘Or simply allow the house to expand and contract through the years’. This signifies movement in space and time.

My memoir is divided into three sections, which may be read as a three-act structure, but they correspond only loosely to turning points in the 10-year period. But I did not put titles on them, in order to disrupt reader expectations, similar to how Ronnie Scott in a later section, *The Three-Act Structure is Floating in Space*, rediscovers the function of the narrative convention by ‘demoting’ its status as only one of many other narrative effects used in his novel. In my memoir, to informally mark the three acts, I use details from three nude portraits of me done by photojournalist Lilli Breininger in 2013, highlighting the role that my lesbian body plays in my living and my writing. I also added the words in the lingua franca Binisaya that have played a significant role in my understanding of my life in Davao City. I place the definitions, but they don’t specifically define the sections that follow as section titles normally do. I use the words like Buddhist koans.

Farwell asserts that the lesbian as a subject in the twentieth century represents the woman who ‘exceeds discursive and narrative boundaries’ (p. 17). She adds that, in general, ‘the metaphoric lesbian subject stretches the narrative boundaries by the tension it creates between form and content, between the conventional system and its text images’ (p. 18). In the spirit of exceeding boundaries as a lesbian writer, I have explored this tension between form and content through the technique of the braided essay, in which the conventional single-point structure of the essay as a genre is challenged. I propose that the technique of braiding two or more narratives is inflected as lesbian when a lesbian writer uses it.

In a braided essay, the juxtaposition of disparate elements allows the writer (and the reader) to pop in and out of two (or more) realities. And each toggle reveals more about the other somehow, thus giving the essay texture. I think the looser braids have more potential to open up meaning because they push the reader harder. For Nicole Walker (2017), ‘The further apart the threads of the braid, the more the essay resists easy substitutions and answers’ (p. 21). It’s like finding a good metaphor for a poem, one that is new enough but also still recognisable, providing the keys to open the door. While again I do not consider my work hybrid or experimental, it struck me that in the previous section, *Hybridity and Anorectic Time*, J Butler identifies braiding as one of the ‘activities aligned with hybrid writing’, explaining that these activities ‘necessarily happen in and across time’, the use of which in their queer texts suggest temporal ‘coalescence’. This idea has shed new light on the way I read the movement of time in my own braided essay.

In my initial understanding of braiding, the disruption of linearity by the lesbian subject challenges narrative sequence because linearity entraps the woman in the forward movement towards closure, which, in traditional narratives is marriage or death, from which the woman cannot escape (Farwell, 1996). For instance, in the stand-alone chapter ‘In the Fellowship of the Martyrs’, I explore the development of my political consciousness alongside the lives of some martyr–saints and the children killed in the drug war of President Rodrigo Duterte. It does not provide any closure to any of the narratives or the issues it raises, just like the helplessness I feel in the face of the tyranny of the Duterte regime. But through Butler’s concept of ‘coalescence’, I see now how it is not only narrative sequence that braiding can disrupt, but time itself, in the way I’ve selected which aspects of my past to include in it. In this light, my political consciousness didn’t ‘develop’ in time, it has coalesced to reach this burgeoning point in which I have begun to use my writing explicitly for political ends despite the dangers of doing so.

Now and never – George Haddad

George Haddad, a novelist, discusses choice of timeline, tense, and age alongside factors such as ambience and invokes conscious deviance, and links this to personal formation of character. Atemporality in this fiction is a queer response to heteronormative and

reproductive anchoring; signs are eschewed in favour of 'my time', which is contrasted with 'generative, familial time'. Through disrupting time, Haddad necessarily thinks of awareness, precision, degrees, and purposes of activity.

Joan Didion (1976) described the writer as 'a person whose most absorbed and passionate hours are spent arranging words on pieces of paper' (p. 270). It is an endless practice and inescapable in that even when we choose not to write, the words are still there as ghosts or angels.

As composers of publishable articles of consumption, we are trusted by readers as the arbitrators of our own imagination. Choosing timelines and tenses and ages and ambiance runs concurrently with the very act of writing. We write about time, in time. While there is a status quo to the practice, it suffices to say that some writers have been and are consciously deviant, myself included. And yes, there is something to be suspicious of about such a claim, as highlighted earlier in this paper by Sholto Buck in *Fast Time and Its Trapdoors*, but I consciously try to avoid using my hardship for access to the prestige party.

I believe it is important to question, matter of factly, the origins of this declaration of eccentricity and how it pertains to time in text and in life. Building characters is a process fraught with decision making and one that is inescapably coloured by the writer's experience. As a queer person, I spent my formative years performing a rendition of myself that diminished authenticity to moderate the prejudice of the heteronormative world. My adolescence progressed at different rates to my heterosexual peers. I was growing as a human but my sexuality was halted forcing me to mediate between altering levels of maturity until in adulthood I experienced a hurried sexual maturation. As an adult, I am forced to reflect on my past self with a heightened sensibility and with concerted awareness that disrupts and takes up time. The process has distorted my understanding of linearity, postponed my burgeoning of character, and has ultimately been arduous, lengthy. Much like writing a novel – a course I'm entering the final stages of. A pivotal creative choice I have made in the novel is to avoid specificity of time to eschew the heteronormative and reproductive anchors that we are accustomed to in literature and in the everyday. It feels necessary to me, and to Jhoanna Cruz in the previous section, *Disruption of Linearity in Lesbian Texts*. She makes similar decisions in her writing by omitting titles or juxtaposing disparate realities to play with the conventional.

In *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories*, Elizabeth Freeman (2010) suggests that 'Schedules, calendars, time zones, and even wristwatches inculcate what the sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel calls 'hidden rhythms', forms of temporal experience that seem natural to those whom they privilege' (p. 34). The characters in my novel, although not overtly queer in action and in familiarity, have had their trajectory skewed by a choice to disrupt conducive anchors of the conservative. They are subject to my time: queer time. Dates and heteronormative signifiers are dissolved into the fabric of the plot rather than explicitly

stated. Although there is a necessary palpability to the era of the text, the characters are not provided with the comfort of an emphatic claim to their world but are instead liberated from the need for it.

In *Queer Time and Place: Transgender Bodies, Subcultural Lives*, J. Jack Halberstam (2005) says, ‘Queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of those paradigmatic markers of life experience – namely, birth, marriage, reproduction, and death’ (p. 14). As a writer operating in the corridors of alternative temporalities, I can’t help but invite my characters along for the walk. The novel largely centres on what happens to a family when the accumulation of their collective trauma topples over. Nothing extraordinary. Their experience is mostly heteronormative, reproductive, and they lack the possibility to live outside of generative, familial time. They partake in escapist tendencies, like drug taking and gambling, but they operate on the outskirts of the non-lucrative and in fact are oblivious to it. I hope that the results of my choices transcend the fictive world of the characters and activate a queer disruption of its readership. Though the characters are tragically bound to birth/death markers, the reader is privy to the queer possibilities of the text – something the characters are unable to access. The story is not driven by the character’s chronology, but by individual moments that seek to accentuate the discrepancies in their experience. The work invites the reader to the subtleties that operate in between heteronormative markers to spur them to move through the story emotionally rather than linearly – as though they are encountering a sculpture of ‘cultural debris’ as described by J Butler in *Hybridity and Anorectic Time* earlier in this paper.

Writing about time in text is compelled by the future. José Esteban Muñoz (2009) questions if the future can ‘stop being a fantasy of heterosexual reproduction’ and claims that the ‘binarised logic’ we are accustomed to can be disrupted on dance floors and sites of public sex and in the theatre (p. 49). Literature too, in its content and more importantly its construction, can be the site of similar distortions. Assemblies of words are public spaces where we gather and where sermons are reproduced and delivered. It is a place where, when writers are deliberate and measured in their choice, a nourishing and queer futurity can burgeon. Harnessing time, manipulating it, doing away with it entirely, is political, accessible, and cathartic.

Bertukar terbalik (‘upending’) – Ann Lee

Ann Lee, who makes work for the stage, explores time and space as a continuum which depends on time being not so much fixed as observable. Time and space are plural and interpretable, ‘time-localities’ – both as formal properties within the work and as sites that may disrupt homogenisation within academic discourse and queer studies. Lee uses the term

bertukar terbalik, translated from Malay as a type of ‘upending’, to characterise these purposeful uses of time and space together.

So far, it may be said that a commonality of practice has been mentioned, comprising an ‘ethic of rebellion’ (that surrounds Halberstam’s notion of queer time, as mentioned in Sholto Buck’s work) and the notion of being ‘consciously deviant’ (as mentioned in George Haddad’s work). To these I add *bertukar terbalik*, translated from Malay as turning something upside down (or even back to front or inside out, though neither explanation has the alliteration of the original) – in short, ‘upending’. My practice or method of *bertukar terbalik* is experimentation with structure and convention, and I demonstrate it with specific reference to time and locality in my first play, *Happy Families* (Lee, 2010), performed in 1993. I begin by outlining what is understood as time and locality here, and why these are important.

An agreeable, widely understood definition sees time as a continuum of both time and space. This is derived from a Kuhnian paradigm about the impact of relativity theory, whereby spacetime serves to explain the relativistic effects that arise from travelling near the speed of light (see, for example, Markosian et al., 2016; Einstein and Infeld, 1938); Kuhn, 1996). There is the all-important incomprehensible but observable truth that light appears as both waves and particles. For me, this latter truth gives ‘artistic licence’ to uses of time that need not be fixed, as in chronological or logical, so much as observable.

In *Happy Families* (1993), time and space are integral and plural for being expressed in social, political, economic and cultural terms in the form of four young girls also friends. The play has one apparent use of time as ‘observable’. One night, at a stayover where all four are together, one of them reveals two truths in the same breath – that she has had her first period and her godfather asked her to touch his thing. The play continues with dialogue among the girls – but only about the girl’s first period. This serves to cast doubt on whether the full confession was heard by them, and in so doing, audience members must check for themselves what they believe they heard (indeed, observed). The play continues non-chronologically to the same moment of confession but now continuing with a second trajectory of dialogue about the girl’s mention of her godfather. This time, audience members must not only check what they believe they heard, but must try and deduce who is the ‘godfather’ referred to by the girl. During the dialogue of the second trajectory, it becomes clear that ‘godfather’ is the girl’s code for the sexual abuser who could be the father of one of her three best friends (she calls him ‘Uncle’) or perhaps her own father. The audience’s observations in time are influenced by my ‘playwright’s instruction’ that each actor who plays one of the girls must also play their girl’s parents. In the play, each girl has a mother and father. This may appear as a cis-het norm in today’s parlance, but in 1993, when I wrote the play, I was interested in complicating, undermining, or making unstable easy assumptions about the identity of the sexual abuser, and in reflecting dynamics of gender and sexuality within the context of power relations.

Another importance about time and locality is that, within the context of transnational sexualities, locality has been rightfully described as ‘a contentious but important site to disrupt the universalising tendencies of queer academic and activist discourses’ (Blackwood, 2005, p. 221). I extend ‘time-locality’ here to include the influence of other specific, coexisting understandings of time and space in my experience. These include a familiarity with conventions of roadside Chinese opera shows (in which breaks between scenes sometimes featured magic tricks or songs), Tamil and Hindi cinema (part of the genre of Indian cinema known today as ‘Bollywood’, in which songs feature dance and editing with random times and places that have little or no direct relation to the main storyline); *wayang kulit* or shadow puppet theatre (with scene breaks, during which clowns ‘take over’ and comment or satirise the main action) and finally the Christmas pantomime, with its convention of the person who randomly enters with a ladder. Interrupting the main action, s/he says, ‘Oh sorry, wrong play’ and exits (usually to laughter for the incongruity). These nonlinear breaks with time provide influence for bertukar terbalik as a suitable method for queering storytelling on stage.

Another influence on my choice of bertukar terbalik is that I was not formally trained in playwriting. However, I was a member of the Royal Court Young Activists group with then writer-in-residence, Hanif Kureishi, whose film *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) had recently been released. It centres on a relationship between two men, and was an early influence on me for having ‘queerness and hybridity its main concern’ as Berghahn (2011) writes, and for its ‘inverting’ of social class and power structures that belied ‘uncomfortable continuities of colonialism in Britain and beyond’ (p. 137).

As I work on a new play, I am aware of a more gender-fluid history, such as in Barbara Watson Andaya’s landmark work on women in early modern Southeast Asia, *The Flaming Womb* (2006). The book opens with the tale of Ken Dedes, a local governor’s wife in the Javanese *Pararaton* (Book of Kings), who is endowed with mysterious and formidable sexual powers. (As Andaya recounts), while out riding, her sarong falls open and a gleam of light is visible between her thighs, a ‘glowing secret part’ that indicates an *ardhanariswari*, or embodiment of ‘the perfect balance between male and female’. The influence of this on my practice may mean a period drama other than ‘modern day Malaysia’, which has been the time and setting of previous plays, including the most recent, *Tarap Man* (Robson & Mellor, 2016).

Via these three ‘time-localities’, the juxtaposition of apparently random ruptures and fluid suppositions provide for extensive uses of bertukar terbalik. Ultimately, however, a playwright’s influence can be upended by directors, actors, and audience – as Stewart writes, no two accounts of ‘the reading of a particular performance will ever be the same; and performances themselves are not repeated, but iterated’ (1999, p. 304).

The three-act structure is floating in space – Ronnie Scott

Ronnie Scott, a novelist, describes contrasting the Aristotelian three-act dramatic structure with events that take place within that structure, using the power of tradition to assign weight and emphasis to those events; but also suggesting that structure, as both a temporal and a spatialised form, participates in narrative within a more complex web of associations, links, and relational styles – such as contrast and image. Through spatialising structures that are often seen as being based in time, Scott aims to open further possibilities for understanding and representing stories and characters.

In *Meander, Spiral, Explode*, Jane Alison (2019) surveys contemporary alternatives to three-act narrative structure, the well-known arc derived from Aristotelian narrative theory in which dramatic events are organised in sequence of rising tension. Alison acknowledges the power in this arc, with:

its sense of beginning, midpoint, and end; no wonder we fall into it in stories. But something that swells and tautens until climax, then collapses? Bit masculo-sexual, no? So many other patterns run through nature, tracing other deep motions in life. Why not draw on them, too? (p. 6)

Although Alison names the works she discusses as ‘mostly unconventional’, the power of the book – whose identified forms encompass the three in the title, and additional categories, like fractals – is that each of them ‘deal[s] powerfully with core human matters’ (p. 247), in other words grounded in emotion and experience.

While in some respects its argument could be read as conservative – with a base idea that literary fiction is a representational form, meaning that it does its primary work in service of mimesis – I read it as liberatory in triplicate. First, it frees existing fiction from the lens of three-act structure, which is frequently an imperfect fit. Second, it has the potential to free the works of future writers from understanding that structure as an established mean (whether to stick to or deviate).

Third, it has a peculiar liberatory effect on the use of three-act structure itself. Through shifting it away from its fixed ‘default’ location, and repositioning three-act structure as one of many possible forms, this scholarship refreshes three-act structure as a viable narrative choice, which takes place amid a range of optional effects.

I have been considering recent work on time and form because I am a practicing writer of literary fiction, positioned between: the publication of one novel, written from first-person point of view, which organises events into three acts in linear time; and the development of a second novel, which in its current form is also first-person singular, in three acts, in linear

time. I'm seeking now to better understand the behaviours of these formal choices, and to work with them actively, as opposed to working within them.

In the first project, I sought to exploit the strength of dramatic convention by contrasting it with the type of event the convention shaped and conveyed. My intended topic was a close friendship between two gay male protagonists. Through varied experiments, I tried to develop and change the friendship across different sequences of events, and found these experiments failed. I eventually finished the project by effecting a shift in my own way of looking at the interplay of subject matter and dramatic structure: I came to see the friendship as both the core of the narrative and an aspect that wouldn't develop along a causal, sequential line. Instead of rising tension, I drew meaning from effects like contrast, for instance by developing lines of conflict with secondary characters across three acts, while the central friendship appeared to change but didn't. Through a process of trial and error, I resolved the narrative by demoting the status of three-act structure. It remains a presence in the narrative, but acts as one of a larger handful of narrative effects, each of which is involved in temporal development and time, but none of which proves dominant.

Just as this required a shift in my perspective on form, perhaps the thing with three-act structure is to reorient our way of seeing it. The forms explicated by Alison are essentially spatial, and these stand in contrast with the livid temporality of three-act structure; rising tension; and climax. Yet as Grosz (2001) points out, after Bergson, '[t]he division of duration – which occurs whenever time is conceptualized as a line' or made discrete, 'transforms its nature, that is to say, reduces it to modes of spatiality' (p. 140). Time and space in written narratives are both just metaphors, so why not use them interchangeably as writers, depending on what makes the work possible?

In *Fast Time and Its Trapdoors*, an earlier part of the current dialogue, Sholto Buck writes that the shapes of his texts 'reflect the way time is felt within them'. For a writer of my subject position working with characters of cognate backgrounds within a broader queer context, it feels important to stick with some version of masculinist narrative tropes – because my own position within the queer context is partly composed of them, and because narrative text can be representational and critical at the same time (able to inhabit forms equivocally). In other words, I think it's only a mix of convention and experience that makes us believe we are beholden to traditional structures and historical forms; they can be 'used' in practice, to both 'reflect' (or represent) 'the way that time is felt' – and sometimes this accords with three-act structure – and do so reflexively and critically, this being a capability of narrative art.

So: in recognising three-act structure as a spatial form, rather than a totalising temporal line, it becomes an optional structure among many which together shape a project through different relational styles. In *Disruption of Linearity in Lesbian Texts*, another section that precedes this one, Jhoanna Cruz engages with Farwell's (1996) notion that lesbian content

‘steals’ the narrative; I adore this verb, and it reminds me of the rare but excellent moments when fiction I am writing seems to run away with its form. But I’m interested in the ability of form and content to feed into each other – a shift in hierarchy (don’t we understand theft differently depending on our understanding of who is doing the stealing and who is being stolen from?) that makes possible a spatialised notion of productive, mutual thieving.

This recognition makes possible my current experiments in the project-to-come, opening space to treat different elements as provisional and creative – conceptual structures, rather than limitations built into medium or form.

Conclusion

By investigating an area of making and thinking composed of individual strategies, questions, challenges, contradictions, problems, logics, the writers discover in the critical space of the dialogic, collaborative essay that queerness and time may meet on the shared ground of form; that form is a site for both creative activity and representational/political critique and play; and that a multiplicity of times and spaces, particular to each researcher and articulated specifically here, is not just the medium in which the work is made but fundamental to its content, elaboration, potentiality, and reception.

Through each separate reflection on practice, commonalities include attraction to specific forms (the braided essay); suspicion of the politics of form; attraction to form itself; a sense that time is located in structure and space, rather than being something separate; a desire for queerness to extend beyond the strictures of itself (for example, into anorectic writing, or the Duterte regime); influence from specific theorists (Freeman; Halberstam; Munoz); priority accorded to those aspects of practice which are relational, i.e. most of the writers are interested in responsibilities of work being made and shared.

Most significantly, each writer is interested in form, not only as the medium through which time moves and queerness works or is communicated but as an element with its own weight and purpose – hence adding this third noun to the title of the experiment. It may be unsurprising that contemporary queer practice can be partly read as an expression of the new formalism – a committed and politically engaged formalism that ‘we will have already been committed to for some time without knowing it’ (Mitchell, 2003, p. 324), where states and works of queerness, time, and writing can be made to meet.

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