Murdoch University

Wendy Glassby

The writerly art of celebrating difference: Reading ambiguity in Ross Gibson's The Summer Exercises

Abstract
The subject of Ross Gibson's novel The Summer Exercises *(2008) is a past society of which the author allows his readers only glimpses. How might Gibson's work provide inspiration or direction for the fiction writer concerned with representing the other? In his work, Gibson utilises disparate real and fictional elements to reveal traces of a society no longer accessible: the city of Sydney, Australia, circa 1946. An analysis of the text, as it is understood by a creative writer in search of models for her own project, contends that the manner in which Gibson interweaves the miscellany of his narrative produces a 'crowded style', a form that eschews a dominant voice and invites a range of interpretive possibilities. The reader is thus encouraged to defer drawing any definitive conclusion from the text. Gibson's experimental form and its ability to create a sense of ambiguity in its reading thus provides a stellar example of how one writer's choices have mobilised imaginative and sensitive possibilities for representing the other.*
Keywords: extractive realism, crowded style, the other, difference, ambiguity

Introduction

Over some time, my curiosity has been directed toward texts that offer exemplary techniques for creative writers reflecting on how authors might represent 'the other'. This inquisitiveness came about through the process of writing a novel as part of my PhD thesis. My work of fiction is inspired by the distinctive history of a small (but important) culturally- and ethnically-blended group of people with ties to Papua New Guinea (PNG). The history and culture of this group is mostly untold, and for me only accessible as an observer, so the challenge I faced in my writing process was to find a form that allowed me, an outsider, to respectfully re-create a unique (and yet recognisable) set of circumstances and history to underpin my fictional stories. My search unexpectedly brought me to Ross Gibson's experimental novel *The Summer Exercises* (2008) [1]. I say unexpectedly, because Gibson's other is a society and a mood of a city from a past era, a subject with apparently little or no connection to mine. This paper explores Gibson's novel as an exemplar of creative possibilities for the celebration of difference within works of fiction.

The Summer Exercises narrates the journey of 'a foolscap workbook marked "Summer Exercises – 1946"' (Gibson 2008: 29) and an envelope 'containing hundreds of photographic negatives' (Gibson 2008: 137). It also represents the city of Sydney, Australia, circa 1946, as glimpsed through disconcertingly random and indistinct traces that a reader retrieves from between images and words on successive pages. To achieve this, Gibson uses a technique that he

calls ‘extractive realism’ for ‘the way it draws out the definitive, structuring elements of a scene’ (Gibson 2009a). This technique results in an absence of any omniscient or authorial voice directing a reader’s response, so that each reader is compelled to make meaning from the text by responding to the various elements and drawing from his or her own memories, experiences and (relative) knowledge of the city (past or present). Ambiguity is the reward for a reader of this text, a consequence of the author’s creativity. Thus *The Summer Exercises* shows itself to be a work of fiction that settles on no single perspective as it celebrates the difference of its elusive subject.

In light of my search for ways of responsibly representing the other, I also came to the work of Shameen Black (2010) who seeks ‘new interpretative lens’ (Black 2010: 3) to uncover howcertain border-crossing novels question ‘ideologies of inferiority” (Black 2010: Postscript). Using Black’s lens, in this paper I offer my analysis of Gibson’s novel, its impact on my reading in respect to representing the other, and how these interpretations influenced my decisions for my own emerging novel. For Black, narrating the other concerns any crossing of social borders; for Gibson, the other is a city and a society from an era outside of his reader’s reach; and in my work of fiction the other is a group of people whose experiences I have not lived, only observed. I contend that, as a consequence of Gibson’s creative choices, in particular his specific placement of carefully selected elements and the nature of those elements, *The Summer Exercises* displays at least one of the techniques that Black identifies as evidence of the vulnerability she claims is essential in texts taking up the challenge of narrating ‘‘the other’’. Black calls the particular form ‘a crowded style’, one that, according to Black, aids a reader in visualising a subject who is always changing and adapting. Reading Gibson’s work through the interpretative lens of Black’s notion of crowded style presents me possibilities for meeting the creative challenges of writing my own writing, as I explain below. But I must admit a small hope that other creative writers may also discover in Gibson’s novel points to ponder in respect of their own creative practices, regardless of their subjects of writing

Fictional narrative

Gibson’s novel tells a simple story. A brown-paper wrapped package is uncovered during the demolition of the Dead Letter Repository. The package contains a handwritten journal and a bundle of negatives noted as originating decades earlier in 1946. When no one claims the bundle, it is handed to a publisher who recognises that the jottings of the journal and the accompanying crime scene images are the result of a chaplain’s ‘exercises’ in which he regularly records his observations while accompanying police on their rounds over the summer of 1946 [2]. In them is revealed a city and its society recovering from war. When an investigation finds neither any official record of the chaplain’s time at the Central Street police station, Sydney, nor anyone to claim the artefacts, a manuscript is prepared for publication.

This seemingly straightforward narrative is made complex by being embedded within a collection of disparate elements. Some are obviously fictional (the chaplain’s daily observations of the journal and notes recorded by the fictional publisher), and some apparently intended to be read as fiction (the photographs for example) but openly and repeatedly declared as also belonging in the real world. Included also are components from the present day lived in world, such as the content of the paratext (the book’s cover and flap) and the foreword [3]. Within these sections, the real or factual stories of the photographs emerge: in the present, as museum artefacts confirmed by the museum director and, in the

past, when the dates and locations of each crime they once evidenced as part of the judicial system are detailed in a list of illustrations. Thus, the fictional identity and role of the photographs within the fictional narrative is disrupted by their real world histories. Together, these elements, as they constitute the structural configuration of Gibson's composite novel, also demonstrate the author's endeavours to celebrate the elusiveness of his subject: Sydney circa 1946.

This paper maintains that within the 'what' and the 'where' of the novel's collation of words and images, there is evidence not only of an awareness of the text's inability to speak for its subject (a quality Black encourages) but also of extreme authorial restraint. Thus it is appropriate to begin the discussion with a general whole-text understanding of both Black's (2010) work and the philosophy behind Gibson's act of restraint by way of a technique of sketching 'quickly but exactly' (Gibson 2009a: 43). Following those discussions, to reinforce those interpretations, I offer a closer analysis of particular sections of the text.

Black's notion of crowdedness

For Black (as for me and my search for exemplary techniques), it is not the subject of fiction that is of interest but *how* fiction represents difference, that is, how the text works against 'familiar forms of invasive imagination in their encounters with difference' (Black 2010: 14). In *Fiction Across Borders*, Black challenges the once radical theories (postcolonial, feminist, ethnic minority and other beliefs) that present depictions of alterity as inevitably 'contaminated by discursive domination' (2010: 20) and hegemonic representation. She argues that any search for 'a clear and coherent path towards an ethics of representing social difference' (2010: 20) cannot be found in the approach of such metanarratives, which see that the representation of alterity comes from positions of relative privilege, encouraging two central ways of thinking about representing difference. The first reads 'any representations of others … as displaced representations of self' (2010: 20), and the second, 'locates alternatives to invasive imagination in spaces of silence beyond representation itself' (2010: 20). In contrast, Black suggests that 'if novels have the power to promote and perpetuate ideologies of inferiority, they may logically have the capacity to help us begin to question them' (2010: Postscript). To do so, Black argues, there is a need to find a 'new interpretative lens that will help us identify an ethics of representing social differences' (2010: 3).

To support her argument that crowded styles and selfhoods can aid in the identification of exemplary texts, Black gives her attention to certain works of fiction, those produced in the late twentieth- and early twenty-first centuries, a period defined by 'shifting landscapes of persons, technologies, capital media, images and ideas' (2010: 6), out of which come multiple perspectives inflected by historical, linguistic, and political situatedness. Arguing that selfhood and language are socially shaped and that self-knowledge is a fragile and often unreliable construct, Black suggests that the closer we look at such narratives, the more the boundaries between selfhood and otherness begin to blur (Black 2010: 35). She explains that those novels she identifies as attempting to cross social borders portray in their aim for the ethical representation of difference a balance between the known and the unknown by making visible an indebtedness to 'the other' by expressing a self-consciousness about the limitations of any knowledge (of self, other, or world, for example). They also incorporate an expansion of selfhood and style. Black suggests that 'in such an expansion, significant otherness counts simultaneously as part of what is

considered one's own and as a legitimate part of what is considered another's' (Black 2010: 40), wherein the act of imagining another requires re-imagining one's own social location (Black 2010: 42). Drawing from Levinasian tradition, in which 'admitting one's inability to inhabit the perspectives of others sometimes enables the very breakthrough that allows for the encounter with significant otherness once considered impossible' (Black 2010: 44), Black argues for such vulnerability to be modelled in the texture and tone of subjectivity and style of texts (2010: 44). Appropriate creative choices can mean that this 'vulnerabilty' is displayed in works of fiction by a 'generous dialogue between self and other' (Black 2010: 45). Simultaneously, such texts present themselves in a way that can be taken seriously by a reader so as to encourage reader identification with the characters. Texts can thus 'provide a reader with safe spaces in which to inhabit the perspectives of others' (2010: 45). By diminishing their privileged dispersal of knowledge in this way, texts have the ability to undermine the sense of mastery that writing about others is often said to afford its authors.

Adopting Black's suggestion that writers be encouraged to make appropriate or particular narrative choices that 'may help to resolve controversies about the ethics of representing others' (2010: 20), my reading of *The Summer Exercises* contends that '"the other"' – the past city – is offered in a style that has evolved, intentionally or otherwise, through Gibson's extractive realism. His careful selection and location of elements within his novel (which I argue, in Black's terms, exhibits a crowded style) acknowledges the difference between past and present. This (crowded) style is enhanced by the juxtapositioning of selected photographs alongside Gibson's unique prose [4]. Reading of the text is influenced not only by the nature of the photographs' subjects (crime scenes, criminals, weapons, and so forth) but also by the reader's awareness of the photographs' history and original purpose, a mindfulness that is openly reinforced by other components of the text. Thus the past city and its inhabitants can never be represented by one dominant view. Ultimately the potential for intensified perception, for which Black disseminates, emerges from the practice of such authorial restraint. Such a practice is developed by an author's devout focus not only on her subject but also the manner in which she deems appropriate for its delivery.

While the publication of *The Summer Exercises* most likely came about in the usual way – as a sum of many collaborations: author, editors, designers, and marketers – I see the production of *The Summer Exercises* as an absolute statement of its writer's choices made explicit. A careful and critical reading of the novel, one that notes how those choices work, offers a master class for creative writers reflecting on questions of how, as authors, they might represent 'the other'. Gibson enacts the edict of 'say less' (Gibson 2009b), 'to spur rigorous speculation rather than lock down singular conclusions' (Gibson 2009a) [5]. Gibson uses this technique (extractive realism) in all his art practices (film, installation and literature) [6].

Extractive realism

For Gibson, his primary modus operandi is based on:

> a Lukácsian mode of realism …[when] … artists are determined to shuck away extraneous detail so they can learn how the *relationships between essential elements* all cohere contingently to make the overall, dynamic experience that is everyday existence. (Gibson 2009a: 48-9; italics in original)

To make his point, Gibson (2009a) enlists György Lukács' essay 'Narrate or Describe?', in particular Lukács' comparisons of Zola's descriptive naturalism that 'diffuses focus as more and more detail is added', and the realism of Tolstoy's narration that 'draws out the definitive, structuring elements of the scene' (Gibson 2009a: 48). In both examples, the question of focalisation – or 'who sees?' – is relevant. For Zola, an observer sees events; for Tolstoy, the narrator is a participant. One is distanced; 'the other' is at the heart of events. For Lukács, Zola's fine description is 'mere filler … events are loosely related to the plot and could easily be eliminated' but the narration by Tolstoy represents 'the crisis of a great drama … which provide a turning point in the plot' (Kahn & Lukacs 2005: 110-1). Readers become a participant or, as Jerome Bruner observes, drawing from Wolfgang Iser's notion of performance of meaning, the composer of the narrative (Bruner 1986: 25).

Gibson's (2009a) view that by selecting and incorporating only the 'essential' or significant elements in works of art, moments of intensified perception and interpretation occur, not dissimilar to those invoked by three lines of haiku is in full display in his novel. The individual elements that constitute *The Summer Exercises* have already been noted. Specifically, they comprise of the textual content of the paratext, the factual or real world texts of the 'Director's Note' and a 'List of illustrations', which envelope the fictional components of discontinuous prose labelled as 'The Summer Exercises' and 'Publisher's Note', and, inserted throughout, the numerous crime scene photographs. To consider the manner in which the elements work against and with each other to provoke the engagement of the reader, the Director's Note provides a useful example.

The Director intrudes from the real and present-day world where the Trust he heads is entrusted with the photographic collection and is co-publisher of the novel [7] [8]. A key phrase on the cover flap – 'richly imagined … and experimental form of storytelling' – is, a reader discovers, copied from the Director's Note. Clearly the Director possesses knowledge about the photographs, the content of the novel and its experimental form. Prominent inclusion of the Note, on page 7 immediately after the list of contents, suggests that the Director's words and the weight of his viewpoint are intended to influence a reader's approach to the reading, like the suggestion that:

> throughout the book the raw unpremeditated vision of the crime scene photographer insinuates its way into the story – punctuating, reverberating against, and commenting on the novel's various plot-twists, themes and emotions. (Gibson 2008: 7)

The Director writes, 'punctuating, reverberating' against the vision of the crime scene photographer (2008: 7). The exploding assumptions, like shrapnel strike against each of 'the other' (mis-aligned) elements that comprise the novel as the brutal and thought-provoking images contrast the beauty of the poetic prose. Indeed, the text itself is a narrative bomb delivered to its reader. The several sections entitled 'Publisher's Note' provide examples of the metaphoric bomb's impact. If perchance a reader has already suspended her disbelief sufficiently to imagine that the image of the brown-paper package featured on page two (implying its significance) contains the chaplain's workbook and negatives of photographs shot 'by policemen just after the war' (2008: 137) rather than a 'bomb sent to private citizen' as listed in the 'List of Illustrations', perhaps she might also allow herself to imagine that the fictional publication of The Exercises together with the photographs is represented by the published novel, *The Summer Exercises*. In my reading I am keenly aware that it is in this way that a fracture between image and word is opened: on the one hand,

between the declared real of the photographs' history – their purpose as evidential, their journey from the judicial system to a museum – and, on 'the other' hand, their role within the text as part of the fictional narrative, part of the imagined world of the novel, that narrates a different journey – from Central Street police station to the Dead Letter Repository, to the publisher and eventually into the (fictional) published text. Thus, one and the same image may tell different, distinct (multiple) stories that come together within the novel. Potential meanings are distended or delayed pending confirmation later, or perhaps not at all. Reading the text requires contemplating one element that has been carefully selected and located as a consequence of an author's deliberations with another (also carefully selected and located) or many other elements. Out of the ambiguity of meaning comes moments of intense speculation that encourage the reader to ruminate further on the meanings and significance generated by the text.

Notwithstanding such restraint, we can also identify in *The Summer Exercises* the crowded style of which Black writes, which also, but by different means, evokes alterity.

Photographs, words, crowdedness and the subjunctive

> Ross Gibson uses approximately 230 carefully selected black and white photographs … a fraction of the vast, historically significant collection held by the museum. (Peter Watts AM, Director, Historic Houses Trust in Gibson 2008: 6)

As a curator at the museum, Gibson had thousands of glass-plate and acetate negatives to choose from, all removed from their original context through the absence of court reports that framed their meaning, except for pencilled notes scribbled on the envelopes that held them: mostly only crime, location and date of each photograph (the information of the novel's List). Gibson (2009b) has explained that he was at once enthralled but also overwhelmed by the emotions viewing the photographs evoked in him. He admitted he had struggled for more than a decade to articulate them into the form of *The Summer Exercises* [9]. What is remarkable is that (by way of his method of extractive realism) Gibson has recreated in *The Summer Exercises* the very same challenge of interpretability. I argue, referring to scholars who focus on the subject of photography (Sontag 1977) and on photographs' role in memory (Zelizer 2004), that it is the very nature of photography that has enabled this re-creation: the way photographs are perceived and read, particularly photographs such as these – the nature of their subjects, their judicial history and their life as museum artefacts. For example, the photographs are stark and shadowless, as befits their original purpose. Thus they resemble, as Susan Sontag explains in her discussion of similar photographs, 'a virtue of plainness' (1977: 7), as they expose the grim nature of their subjects and their serious purpose within the justice system [10]. Furthermore, as crime scene photographs, they can be seen as 'enrolled in the service of an institution of control … the police, as symbolic objects and as pieces of information' (Sontag 1977: 21). Later, when Gibson came to them at the museum they provided him, in each viewing, with what Sontag calls 'a thin slice of time' (Sontag 1977: 22). These original attributes of the photographs – their significance, the 'weight' of their content – contribute significantly to their interpretive potential in the novel.

The effect of the placement of images with other elements is that Gibson's work modifies or challenges the significance both of that attributed to the events captured by the original act of photography and, later, in the archiving of

the images as a documentation of history. In *The Summer Exercises*, the 'disgusting' (Taylor 2008: 59) photographs that obviously do not sit entirely comfortably with the prose are a means of halting assumptions, whereby there is a potential for the random and confronting images to pause or slow down the reading process as a reader reflects upon each image's content in an attempt to make meaning. Ultimately, within the photographs selected for *The Summer Exercises*, what is read is (again) exceptional restraint – extractive realism in practice – and, with that restraint, a high degree of creativity in the selecting (and discarding) and then the ordering of photographs within the text. 'The other' – Sydney of another era – hovers like a ghostly shadow, never fully visible but, always, softly present; never fully articulated but open for reader's contemplation and consideration. This is a demonstration of representational respect being offered to a subject that must be conceded to be neither fixed or unchanging, nor fully or ultimately knowable. Rather, this technique validates the subject as ultimately flexible, its representation constantly being adapted to satisfy the multiple interpretations that the (con)text demands. By shifting focus from crimes captured to an invitation to imagine a sense, mood or impression of the past Sydney in which the crimes occurred, Gibson has blurred the boundaries between past and present, between events and location.

Ultimately, the questions that lie behind any understanding of the text are what is it that can be known about the past city, and then, what it is that has been irretrievably lost to the present? Thus, the text reveals itself to be an excellent example of a text that displays Black's crowded style, a representation that expresses self-consciousness about the limitations of *any* knowledge of post-war Sydney.

In my own project as a novelist, what had been perceived by me as a creative challenge – limited accessible knowledge of a particular Papua New Guinean community – was resolved by taking heed of Black's insights into representing alterity and by considering these in light of Gibson's literary example. Gibson's technique of blurring the lines between the known and the uncertain presented me with a possibility: in my choice for form, the known – widely disseminated national and international histories – anchor the non-indigenous group's mostly inaccessible (and fictionalised) stories to particular locations and times. As Gibson successfully creates a past era of Sydney to hover as a ghostly presence over the real of the Sydney visible in the images, my goal is, by overlaying the real with the imagined (the unknown entwined with the known), to encourage in any reading a degree of curiosity that promotes further investigation into a barely acknowledged presence in Papua New Guinea's past and present.

Returning to Gibson's novel to more fully examine the impact of Black's crowded style, I offer Exercise 1.3 (Gibson 2008: 16). First there is the selected image, a shot that appears to have been taken from a balcony or through a window several storeys up. In the foreground is a stone parapet and, with the photograph's focus on the foreground, the background, into which the city street retreats, is slightly hazy. This image is given, in the List of Illustrations at the back of the book, as 'Suicide, "Herald" Building, Pitt Street, Sydney City, 23-10-52 FP08_0146_002' (2008: 262). However, on the page where the image appears, the text reads as follows:

> 1.3 This stifling day hits its zenith. Heat thick with humidity is lurking
> at the window-sills. Sweat is smudging every eyelid and lip. A
> few hours away, a downpour will come and rearrange the air. But
> it's lunch time right now, and the electric fans are

blowing.

Nothing is moving. (2008: 16)

My critical response leads me to consider the possibility that some readers might grant themselves subconscious permission to suspend disbelief and skip past the distractions of the List's information. Others might struggle with the ambivalence; for some the battle for meaning that this text demands might mean some 'clues' are over-scrutinised, some connections forced, such as the one that might be assumed to exist between the haziness visible in the photograph and the words 'heat thick with humidity' in the prose. The precarity of such connections, at best only hinted at, destablises any sense of meaning as definitive. The words 'a few hours away, a downpour will come', for a reader familiar with Sydney's weather, might be read as an explicit reference to the southerly changes that can bring instant relief to a humid city. But to another reader, the words might be understood as merely general fictive speculation about the weather on the day, nothing more. In this way, in *The Summer Exercises*, any connection between photograph and words continues to remain elusive and pending, awaiting (always awaiting) substantiation. Beyond these speculations, a multitude of other narrative possibilities are evoked by the photographer's subject, the most obvious being those opened by the naming of the crime this particular photograph identifies as suicide. The suiciding character is not part of the scene captured by the image. Thus, only within the reader's imagination can that story be told.

Gibson seems to have chosen elements that not only limit any direct assertions about the past Sydney but simultaneously also open readings to multiple interpretations. Yet, *The Summer Exercises* also presumes some familiarity with the landmarks of Sydney (if only minimal and perhaps via other forms of media). With or without any degree of familiarity with Sydney (past or present), meaning will be equally ambiguous – any significance garnered from each of the novel's components will undoubtedly differ in some way. In my reading, the known could be argued to be the generally recognisable images of architecture and monuments of today's Sydney, which are featured in the crime scene photographs of the past. The barely changed bricks and mortar, glass and steel of such edifices as the Harbour Bridge or Central Station, or the appearance of renowned locations such as Bondi Beach or Circular Quay, provide a mnemonic link between present and past, between what is knowable and what has been lost in the passing of time. As Zelizer (2004: 159) points out, images help us remember the past by freezing its representation. Broadly applying this quality to the images of the text in Black's terms, as discussed earlier, what is recognisable as frozen reminders of the past city (or ones that reside in a reader's memory) is 'a part of what is considered one's own' (Black 2010: 40) and what remains obscure, 'part of what is considered 'the other's' (2010: 40), where 'the other' is the past city, a loss accentuated by elusive interpretations. Between these differences, a reader is invited to take up opportunities to discover her own understanding of 'the other' that is the past city. This technique or style alsodemonstrates the border-crossing quality identified by Black as a decision not to enforce mastery over 'the other'. The text, in this case, limits privileging either the author's or the reader's knowledge of a past Sydney.

As an emerging novelist, I am particularly sensitive to the effects generated by a given text; however, it becomes apparent to me that this crowded style is particularly demanding on a reader's interpretive efforts. Hope of meaning is offered and then retracted or contradicted. For example, each Publisher's Note that is spliced between Exercises contains snippets of information not available in the chaplain's diarised meditations. What may appear to be useful

knowledge, however, only brings more questions, more ambiguity because those snippets arrive late in the progressive act of reading, disrupting already (if temporary) formed conclusions. In a search for understanding, a reader is encouraged to adopt an heuristic approach, as she seeks to forge patterns and connections between the visual, the imaginary, the evidence of the real world found in the Director's Note and List of illustrations, and the fictional narrative. The reward from reading *The Summer Exercises* is therefore neither clarity nor resolution but, rather, a sense of something just out of reach, a perplexity that lingers long after reading is finished.

The disjunction between the elements and the layered meanings of the images maintains a distance between reader and text, and in Black's scheme for the representation of alterity, this provides yet another way that the text offers itself as crowded. When Black looks to read crowdedness and suggests that this is achieved through sameness and difference, she also points out that these terms are never stable ones (Black 2010: 12). She stresses the importance of the blurring of boundaries between selfhood and otherness, the avoidance of assumptions and residual essentialism, and the potential for the expansion (with a capacity for multiple perspectives) of selves and styles (2010: 36). All of these privilege the implicit, rather than the explicit. Implicit readings are encouraged in *The Summer Exercises* through the ongoing interaction, and sometimes contest, between what is read in the prose and what is read in the images, which variously complicates a reader's efforts to understand. In respect of the reading of the photographs, this is especially true. There is a conflict between the photograph's denotative and connotative meanings. In the crowded style of the text a subjunctive space is created where, according to cognitive psychology scholar Jerome Bruner, the reading becomes a site that traffics 'in human possibilities rather than in settled certainties,' an 'as if' space that works 'in multiple ways with, through, and beyond the text' (Bruner in Luce-Kapler 1999: 267) [11].

When this understanding of the subjunctive is applied to the crime scene photographs of *The Summer Exercises*, as Zelizer (2004) argues in her work on photography's role in stimulating memory then, although removed from their original purpose and production as evidence, a trace of the original 'voice' of each photograph remains. The photographs are unlabelled and links to their former role are not definitive since a reader can ignore the List of Illustrations [12]. Yet knowledge of their former 'important and official' purpose as artefacts lingers in the reading of the images (Sontag 1977: 22). These contest the (different?) purposes and interpretations that come from their subsequent uses (such as the fictional world of the chaplain narrated as memoir or, later, in the real world, as an element of the novel Gibson has created). Meanings generated by these photographs are held open in the divergence between the implicit status of their original significance (official, recorded) and their understated and ambivalent function within the novel as relics attached to the chaplain's exercises.

Crowdedness can also be read in *The Summer Exercises* through a cacophony of perspectives, beginning with those quasi-perspectives offered by the selected elements themselves through to the muted but always present perspectives of the criminals and other inhabitants of the past city making their appearances by way of the photographs and the prose. This multi-perspectival complexity can be read as demonstrating Black's view of crowdedness, that 'no single perspective … will ever offer a fully complete account' (Black 2010: 35). Multiple perspectives, according to Bruner, keep meaning open or 'performable' (1986: 26), yet another technique for subjunctivising reality. Bruner likens multiple perspectives to 'beholding the world not univocally but simultaneously through a set of prisms each of which catches some part of it'

(1986: 26). As the subjunctive encourages imaginative and multiple compositions of the fictional world, so can multiple perspectives provide opportunities to cross the boundaries of difference. If the past city of Sydney and the post-war era can only be recognised by traces, then it is only through imagination that the past can be recreated; only through visualising the possibilities of 'the other' (the past city) that the differences between what is available to a reader and that which cannot be fully known can be approached.

In summary, Gibson (as a creator of fiction with relative freedom of expression) might have chosen (if he so desired) to offer Sydney circa 1946 in more concrete terms. Instead, he chose to demonstrate his respect for a past that is not fully accessible. He declares that respect by his choice of form, one that ensures the past can only be glimpsed through the photographs. And it is within this void that a reader is invited to compose her own meaning, in Bruner's 'as if'' space of the subjunctive mode. It is here, too, that fictional border crossing is enabled, as Black envisages; thus a style can be created that leaves open understandings of the subject of writing. The subjunctive mode privileges the perspective of otherness, as it opens interpretation to the crowded style of many, rather than dominant or singular, versions of the world. So it is that Gibson's text demonstrates to the curious novelist a sensitive way of navigating the risks of doing discursive violence through representing 'the other'.

Through my own reading of Black and Gibson, my practice was directed to techniques that invite implicit readings and multiple perspectives. My choice was to intersperse within the narrative (as part of a character's search for clarity of identity) acquired photographs, news articles, documents and the like, some factual and authentic and others merely borrowed (stolen?) and chosen to enhance the fiction, as gestures towards the lost as well as the known histories behind the fictional stories of individual characters' lives. While calamities and characters' responses are essential to maintaining tension within narrative fiction, when I choose how I might deliver them, again, my decisions are influenced by Black and Gibson. I do so through presenting my narrative via multiple impressionistic snatches of inner thought, each of which is subjective, and a snapshot of a moment in the larger history that softly frames the immediacy and significance of a personal crisis. I hope in this way I may be able to encourage reader identification with the characters (as Black suggests) by offering an opportunity for a sympathetic moment of understanding of shared human frailties and strengths, fears and wisdoms; a 'safe space in which to inhabit the perspective of others (Black 2010: 45).

Conclusion

The Summer Exercises is a novel through which a reader is prodded to search for meaning by forging relational connections between its disparate elements. Through reading the selected elements of the text and 'the other' of the past city made visible within the chaplain's 'summer exercises', a subjunctive space is manifested, a space where meaning is open to several possibilities and that requires a reader's own imaginative composition of the narrative. From the creative fragments of images and words, a Sydney of 1946 is recreated in fiction as an amalgam of open possibilities rather than as settled certainties. The possibilities for interpretation opened by the text are thus also temporal, extending the past into a reader's present.

I have focused my critical reading to responses evoked by the juxtaposing of text and images, but the positioning, timing and content of prose is equally significant to how the text is read. For me, as an emerging novelist and as a

critical reader, *The Summer Exercises* highlights specific techniques for evoking an elusive subject. Most importantly, Gibson's novel represents for me a manifestation of Shameen Black's ethics of representing social difference, wherein the act of imagining another requires re-imagining one's own social location (2010: 42). In my view, Gibson's text is an exemplar for writers who seek to mobilise imaginative and sensitive possibilities for representing 'the other'.

Notes

[1] This paper has been built from a section of the author's PhD thesis *As much as fits upon an aibika leaf: Writing/reading fiction in a globalized world* (Murdoch University 2015). return to text

[2] Gibson's term 'exercises' is borrowed from the Jesuits (members of the Society of Jesus) and the followers of St Ignatius:

> Spiritual Exercises are a compilation of meditations, prayers, and contemplative practices developed by St. Ignatius Loyola to help people deepen their relationship with God. For centuries the Exercises were most commonly given as a "long retreat" of about 30 days in solitude and silence. In recent years, there has been a renewed emphasis on the Spiritual Exercises as a program for laypeople. The most common way of going through the Exercises now is a "retreat in daily life," which involves a month-long program of daily prayer and meetings with a spiritual director. The Exercises have also been adapted in many other ways to meet the needs of modern people. (See http://www.ignatianspirituality.com/) return to text

[3] According to literary theorist Gérard Genette, 'paratext' is the material that surrounds the author's text, usually supplied by editors, publishers, designers and so forth and typically includes cover art, typography, and front and back matter (Genette 1991: 261). Paratext provides the means by which 'a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers' (1991: 275) as it provides 'a service' by suggesting a more 'pertinent' reading – that is, a more pertinent reading 'in the eyes of the author and his allies' (1991: 261). The prominent delivery and placement of the paratext insinuate a ranking of the services to the reading of the text. In *The Summer Exercises* that contents of the paratext are ranked as being significant. return to text

[4] The focus of this paper is on crowded style*,* but my reading also recognises in *The Summer Exercises* the protagonist (a partial representation of a past city, the emotions of its population and its mood in a particular moment in history: post World War Two) displays a 'crowded self'. As a crowded style is encouraged by multiple interpretations so is a 'crowded' self or, as Black describes it, a self that is 'always already multiple, flexible and open to future metamorphosis' (Black 2010: 47). return to text

[5] These words are used by Gibson to describe his approach to *Seven Versions of an Australian Badlands* (Gibson 2002). In this text, Gibson claims, he 'nudged the reader into asking questions by using all 'these scrappy details to help people think about the absences and silences between all the pinpointed examples' (Gibson 2009a). return to text

[6] Gibson has used these crime scene photographs in various other works, particular his collaborative art installations with Kate Richards. (See http://www.rossgibson.com.au/ and http://www.lifeafterwartime.com/). return to text

[7] The paratext (cover flap) notes the collaboration between the University of Western Australia Press and the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales for publication of *The Summer Exercises* (Gibson 2008). return to text

[8] One of the museums under the control of the Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales is the Police and Justice Museum. See http://sydneylivingmuseums.com.au/justice-police-museum). Ross Gibson served as curator at this museum for a period of time as currently does Dr Peter Doyle. Using the same forensic photographs that had captured Gibson, Doyle has

curated an exhibition entitled 'City of shadows: inner-city crime & mayhem 1912-1948' and authored a book *Crooks Like Us.* The Police and Justice Museum has featured several exhibitions on particular themes also using the same forensic photographs including the numerous collaborative installation works of Gibson and Kate Richards. return to text

[9] Gibson made this admission May 2009 when as Professor of Contemporary Arts at Sydney College of the Arts he conducted a master class at the Institute of Advanced Studies, University of Western Australia, Perth. return to text

[10] In her book *On Photography* (1977) Sontag remarks:

> to photograph is to appropriate the thing photographed … what is written about a person or an event is frankly an interpretation, as are handmade visual statements, like paintings or drawings. Photographed images do not seem to be statements about the world so much as pieces of it, miniatures of reality that anyone can make or acquire... Each still photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object that one can keep and look at again. (Sontag 177: 4, 18) return to text

[11] Bruner, with other scholars, especially Wolfgang Iser, argues that fictional texts are inherently 'indeterminate', and that this 'relative indeterminacy of a text' allows a spectrum of actualizations whereby 'literary texts initiate "performances" of meaning rather than actually formulating meaning themselves' (Bruner 1986: 24-5). According to Iser, says Bruner, forms of discourse 'must make it possible for the readers to "write" his own virtual text'. The many means by which discourse can keep 'meaning open and performable succeed in doing so by "*subjunctivizing* reality"' (Bruner 1986: 26; italics in original). return to text

[12] According to Zelizer, when the sources of referentiality of images are blurred, 'spectators begin to ask not "what are we looking at?" but "what possibilities does this raise?"' (Zelizer 2004: 163), thus creating a hypothetical or subjunctive space. return to text

Works cited

Black, S 2010 *Fiction Across Borders: Imagining the Lives of Others in Late Twentieth Century Novels*, Columbia University Press, New York return to text

Bruner, J 1986 *Actual Minds, Possible Worlds*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA return to text

Gibson, R 2008 *The Summer Exercises*, University of Western Australia Press, Perth WA, in association with Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales return to text

Gibson, R 2009a 'Extractive Realism', *Australian Humanities Review* 47: 43-53 return to text

Gibson, R 2009b 'Mnemonics, Forensics, Aesthetics', paper presented at an IAS Masterclass, University of Western Australia Institute of Advanced Studies, Perth, 29 May return to text

Luce-Kapler, R 1999 'As If Women Writing', *Journal of Literacy Research* 31, 3: 267-291 return to text

Sontag, S 1977 *On Photography*, Doubleday, New York return to text

Taylor, B 2008 'Adorable, Disgusting, Mesmerising…' *Bookseller + Publisher Magazine* 88, 5: 59 http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=511170654520490;res=IELLCC (accessed May 17, 2006) return to text

Zelizer, B 2004 'The Voice of the Visual in Memory', in KR Phillips (ed) *Framing Public Memory*, University of Alabama Press, Tuscaloosa AL: 157-186 return to text

Dr Wendy Glassby holds an Honorary Postdoctoral Research Associate position in the School of Arts, Murdoch University, in Perth. She has chosen an experimental form to challenge the representation of difference for her yet

unpublished novel, the characters of which fictionally represents former non-indigenous residents of pre-Independence Papua New Guinea.

TEXT
Vol 21 No 1 April 2017
http://www.textjournal.com.au
General Editor: Nigel Krauth. Editors: Kevin Brophy, Enza Gandolfo & Julienne van Loon
text@textjournal.com.au