University of Queensland

Hardheads and woolly thinking

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Statement:

I began exploring the essay form in radio. I wrote and narrated five features for ABC Radio National, two of which won AWGIE Awards in 2006 and 2009 (*Let's go Brazil* and *There's something about eels…*). These allowed me to experiment with the possibilities of the essay, give it a performative voice, and led to the development of the performance essay – a term I have coined to describe a hybrid which draws not only on the essay and the theatrical monologue, but also on field notes, the mash-up, memoir, solo performance, spoken word, stand-up, the blog, reportage and the tradition of the illustrated lecture. Although somewhat under-explored in Australia, the performance essay is a protean and accommodating genre. It can be abstract, personal, comic, lyric, speculative, discursive, experimental and much, much more. I believe in exploring ideas about writing through writing to contribute to debate about the nature and processes of writing.

Biographical note:

Noëlle Janaczewska writes for radio, print and performance. A graduate of Oxford and London universities, with a doctorate from UTS, her writing has won multiple awards and been produced, broadcast and published in Australia and overseas. The recipient of six AWGIE Awards, for both radio nonfiction and drama, her stage plays have won the Griffin Playwriting Award, the Playbox-Asialink Playwriting Competition and the Queensland Premier's Literary Award. Recent works include: *Cloud cover* and *My life in cookbooks* for ABC Radio National in 2013, *Eyewitness blues* for the BBC, and the performance essays *How to eat a thistle* (19th Australian Gastronomy Symposium 2013), *Loose gravel: a poetics* (Serial Space 2012, University of Queensland 2012) and *The Hannah first collection, 1919-–1949* for the Zendai Museum of Modern Art in Shanghai. In 2012/13, Noëlle has a University of Queensland/Arts Queensland Creative Fellowship.

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A thistle is a thistle is sometimes a thistle in name only. So it is with creeping knapweed, aka hardhead thistles or just hardheads. Its Latin name is *Rhaponticum repens*. Although maybe not for much longer. Since the 2011 International Botanical Congress voted to allow plants in plain English.

Knapweeds as a tribe are robust and adaptable. Popular with insects. Close cousins of thistles, and equally cosmopolitan, they cover a lot of ground.

Common or black.

Greater and lesser.

Spotted.

Diffuse.

The species that interests me however, is the creeping one. Known by a variety of aliases. As well as hardheads there's:

Poverty weed.

Russian knapweed.

Turkestan thistle.

In regional Queensland, funnel or thimble top –

The list of local names goes on. A colloquial lexicon, part of the poetic ecosystem. A shared cultural endeavour that reaches back centuries.

My father was the king of lists. For Dad, making a list was almost as important as the task. A point of view I've come to share – even extend. Put something on my to-do list, and often that's the end of it. Time passes and with it the imperative.

After my father died I found lists going back decades. Along with a huge collection of torches, camping lamps, and spare batteries. A collection that spoke of his worries over power cuts and being left in the dark.

The mind's fuse splutters.

I was back in England, in the place I grew up. Dogleg lanes, secret pockets, odd-lit hollows, drifts of stories, grunge.

I'm skipping along, my small hand in Dad's grownup one. We're out for a walk in the break between one downpour and the next, when everything is flung open. Oak and beech trees shake out the light, rainwater sparkles in ditches. And Dad explains the wildlife along the way.

It got its name from the white down on its involucre, you said – although I doubt you used the word 'involucre'. See how big they are, and spherical, like ping-pong balls or tiny globes.

The woolly-headed thistle towered above me, twice my height. A beanstalk of a plant.

'It has less the air of a native Plant of our country, than most others,' declared *The vegetable system* of 1762, where it is not only Woolly Headed but Bristly to boot.

They like roadside verges and grassland, you told me. Areas not too neat and tidy.

Every bloom is a massive cupped handful. A pink so intense it could be magenta. I wonder how it got there; imagine wolves leaping out of library books and beans sprouting into giants overnight.

Arise über thistle, your roots are Latin, your origin fuzzy.

Creeping knapweed has its origins around the Caspian Sea, in the scrub and steppes of Central Asia. From where it has spread across the temperate world to become a serious weed. The Smithsonian magazine labelled its spotted sibling 'a weed of mass destruction'. So rampant was the 'purple-flowered pest' in some states, that migrating elk changed course to avoid it.

We don't know exactly when or how creeping knapweed arrived in Australia. Best estimate is around 1900. Possibly, probably, introduced in consignments of imported seed-stock. It was recorded growing in Victoria in 1907, in southeast Queensland nine years later, and in South Australia by 1930. It is widespread across inland New South Wales.

The basic narrative goes something like this:

There was an outburst. A series of outbursts erupting from the rough ends and edges, from brush and paddock, yards and shoulders. In the pinch between spring's finale and midsummer, hardheads ran up to flower and ran wild.

> Had it not been for the war, with its consequent diversion of manpower from rural enterprise, the weed might easily have been eradicated and its spread to other districts prevented, but the six years of international conflict, when everyone's attention was focused mainly on the combat theatres gave the weed every opportunity of undetected advance (*The chronicle* 1946).
>
> The Weeds Adviser to the Department of Agriculture (Mr H.E. Orchard) said yesterday this weed was one of the most menacing of the State and most difficult to kill (*The Adelaide advertiser* 1947).

Rewind a bit further and overseas infestations were retold in Australia as cautionary tales.

US authorities warn farmers about Russian knapweed contamination 'following the promiscuous purchase of alfalfa (lucerne) seed from Turkestan' (*Townsville daily bulletin* 1914).

England in the early 1970s was dull, dull, dull. Literally.

December 1970. Power workers banned overtime in pursuit of a wage claim. The lights went out. The government of the day banned the use of electricity for non-essential purposes. Christmas trees were stripped of their fairy lights. Our house was plunged into chilly darkness.

That first week of blackouts our kitchen transformed into a candle-lit war room where we tracked the dispute. Ads for emergency lighting sat on the table next to plates of sandwiches.

Dad panic-bought a dozen torches.

February 1972. The miners were on strike. More freezing weather. More power cuts. On the upside, evenings the electricity blinked off provided the perfect excuse: The miners ate my homework, Miss. Power to the Miners!

The price of candles skyrocketed. Dad acquired several more torches.

Winter 1974. The miners worked to rule, the rest of the country worked a three-day week. Politicians urged us to switch off and save.

Newspapers predicted food shortages, public chaos, crisis on all fronts. Since he got into sociology Dad had been predicting the collapse of capitalism. But now it seemed imminent, he was annoyed.

The hardware shop refused to sell him any more torches. Wouldn't be fair to his other customers, the manager said. And my mother refused to queue in the cold to buy extra batteries.

It was dark, but Dad wanted to conserve his supply. So Mum arranged candles on the window sill. Their flickering seized by the snow outside, magnified, and tossed into the air like fireworks.

What's in a name?

Latin was the lingua franca that let scientists and scholars speak to each other.

But not any more. Plants will keep their double-barrelled Latin monikers, but the validating profiles can now be in English.

Actually Latin isn't always the guarantee of precision and consistency we assume. Creeping knapweed was originally described by Linnaeus as *Centaurea repens* in 1763. *Centaurea* after the hybrid creatures of Greek mythology. And *repens*, a disposition to crawl. In 1838 the Swiss naturalist and avid classifier, de Candolle, placed it in the genus *Acroptilon*, where it remained until a different classification was proposed in 2006. Based on DNA analysis, researchers suggested that *Acroptilon* should be submerged in the genus *Rhaponticum*. Thus creeping knapweed became *Rhaponticum repens*.

Outside the botanical establishment most of us prefer a simpler ID: Woolly-headed thistle rather than *Cirsium eriophorum*. Names which log particular characteristics or habitats. Names redolent of superstitions and kids' games. There's a whole landscape of vernacular poetry out there.

The shift to English was prompted by the need to accelerate the cataloguing process for the estimated 100,000, as yet unnamed, species. Before they disappear off the face of the earth.

A rose by any other name might smell as sweet, but a plant without a name has no advocate. No one to defend it from the forces of extinction, no one even to notice when it's gone. To give something a name is to begin a relationship with it.

Plus Latin is difficult, opaque. Spiked with arcane references.

The vernacular is about home turf and the story-seeds we carry with us.

Hardheads might be hard to grasp taxonomically. Not so in practice. Unlike thistles, the hardhead, all knapweeds in fact, are spineless.

Appearance-wise it's nothing special. Between 40 and 100 centimetres tall, leaves with a hint of grey, florets anywhere on the dusky pink to reddish-purple spectrum. These sit atop a tough receptacle that looks a bit like a miniature pineapple. Hence the hardhead tag.

Drought resistant and salt tolerant, creeping knapweed generally colonises disturbed terrain. Able to reproduce by root as well as seed, it forms dense patches. Inhibits the growth of adjacent vegetation by releasing toxins into the soil. Effectively clearing the ground for more of its own kind.

> In the fruit growing settlements of the Murray it has been known to send its roots right underneath a road, and to produce new top growth on the other side. A concrete irrigation channel several feet deep also proved ineffective as a barrier against the creeping advance (*The chronicle* 1946).

You've got to admire, or at least respect, this plant's vigour and don't-mess-with-me attitude.

There's a report – it's that South Australian Weeds Adviser, the aptly named Mr Orchard again – about using electricity to control weeds. Field tests in California had apparently been successful in containing knapweed. 'The machine, known as the Electrovater, generates a very high voltage which is passed through rake like electrodes to the weeds' (Burra Record 1948).

Nobody loves a hardhead thistle. Its tenure threatens the agricultural order. It pushes its way through dirt and crap, shrugs off pesticides and competitors to grab the sunlight. A plant 'at whose name the verse feels loath', as Shelley put it.

Words clash against hardheads. Their prevalence generates a kind of heated rhetoric. Sentences that bristle with razor wire.

Provide a label and you gather a body of thought.

From ideas pitched in theoretical registers discussion spreads into feelings about belonging, about displacement and ownership, about individual rights over the land. And the nature of change.

As a migrant to Australia from England, with my own anxieties about belonging and distance, I'm drawn to the story of this thistle look-alike.

A few years ago my partner and I rented a cottage in the Blue Mountains for a summer break. It had the classic holiday home inventory:

> Mismatched china.
> Jigsaws with missing pieces.
> Random field guides – not to local nature, which could have been useful, but to the wildflowers of Great Britain.
> Black nightshade.
> Cow parsley.
> Bittersweet.

I could recite their names in a way I couldn't Australian flora. Despite more than 20 years' residence. I was shocked. Then sad. It made me feel like – like one of those puzzles with lost pieces.

I was looking for a box to hold my father's stash of torches, 39 in total, when I came across a typical list scribbled on the back of an envelope. I was struck by grief. It was not only the familiarity of his blue-biro handwriting, the reminder of the details of a life that was now, definitively, over. But also the intentions of that list. Had they been fulfilled? Had those thoughts been completed? Those tasks accomplished? I envisioned other lists, scores of notes running through my imagination, lurking at the back of drawers or in the oily dusk of the garage. My father's writing, the letters he sent me at university, and later, when I moved to Australia (before he discovered email), the vivid sense of his being, returned to me in that back-of-an-envelope list.

It began in a poetic register:

> As the light crumbled over park benches
> Where they lay under newspapers –

Then switched to the prosaic:

> Pay the papers. Tick.
> Confirm Friday. Tick.
> Headway re parking.
> Library – must pick up by 7. Underlined.

When did libraries get rebranded learning centres? A library is a noun with a history. A place where manifestos might be researched, sonnets composed, databases or rare volumes opened. Where the subplots are prolific. A place of serendipitous discoveries. Somewhere a recent immigrant might go to find a novel in her mother tongue.

A library invites, it suggests the wider world. A learning centre suggests – well, remedial education. Somewhere people are crafting stuff with raffia or plasticine.

My first library was a wooden shed. A matchbox of a building.

I learnt from the ancient one behind the desk that I was overdue. Fines needed to be

paid before I could borrow my four books.

I didn't have any money.

Then you'll have to wait until you do, she snapped.

I was at that waiting age. Waiting for holidays. Waiting to go back to school. Waiting to be a teenager. Waiting for life to come to some kind of point, the way it came to a point on the printed page.

And now I'm going to stretch a point and cross-pollinate flashlights with thistles so I can mention the plant old texts dub torch thistle.

Another misnomer. In this case it is a cactus from Mexico. A candelabra-shaped species whose buds open for just a few hours once a year, on a night when there is a full or near full moon.

Hardline economics versus woolly liberals …

Australia's relationship with hardhead thistles digs into in a series of deeper, thornier questions.

About what we believe counts as responsible citizenship.

About evolving notions of national identity, the siting of frontiers, and how we relate to each other across our differences.

About deserving and undeserving nature. All those shades of green –

Legal.

Scientific.

Romantic.

Tragic.

I organised my father's effects. But it wasn't enough.

So a drizzly September afternoon I revisited the spot where we'd seen the woolly-headed thistle and counted its swollen heads. It was long gone of course. A new estate in its place. Houses secured behind electronic gates.

In my mind the woolly-headed thistle had gown to a dizzying height. Bloated, bulbous, it was a plant I suspected of sentience. A shape-shifter. A thistle more akin to fairyland or Middle Earth. When your back turned it might open an eye or move a limb.

It occupies a murky space. Where it's not clear which plants are weeds and which are not.

Have a closer look, Dad said, and lifted me up to thistle level so I could touch an inflorescence. I doubt he used that word either.

Clouds part, a crab apple tree drops its load. The scene is suddenly flush with colour and shadow play.

I picture you in a museum, the past illuminated, where men of science wear their eternity.

Latin erected into names. Stumbled into steps. Fashioned into narrative.

Entrance. Exit. Lights out.

I didn't appreciate until I reignited my childhood interest in nature that by migrating to a different nature on the other side of the planet, I'd lost a connection. The thread by which you continue to weave a relationship with the place you came from before you came here.

> There scabious blue, and purple knapweed rise,
>
> And weld and yarrow show their various dyes.

That's from *Amoebaen eclogues* by John Scott. Poet and reformer.

Hardheads remind us that life doesn't always rhyme. Remind us that humans entering new environments tend to change them, often irrevocably. As indeed they change us.

But in their different ways, hardheads and woolly-headed thistles suggest to me that maybe a part of being Australian is feeling a part of somewhere else.