



Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 62 October 2021

ISSN: 1327-9556 | <https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/>

The place of writing in intercultural and intermedial creative collaborations

Felicity Collins, Hester Joyce, Noel Maloney

To cite this article: Collins, F., Joyce, H., Maloney, N. (2021). The place of writing in intercultural and intermedial creative collaborations. In F. Collins, H. Joyce and N. Maloney (Eds.) *The Place of Writing in Intercultural and Intermedial Creative Collaborations*. TEXT Special Issue 62.

Felicity Collins, Hester Joyce, Noel Maloney

The place of writing in intercultural and intermedial creative collaborations

Introduction

Part 1: The symposium papers

This special issue of TEXT had its origins in a three-day symposium on Creative Collaborations in Intercultural and Intermedial Spaces, at La Trobe University, 7-9 July 2020.

Although it was originally conceived and funded as a live event, the symposium was delivered via Zoom when Covid-19 became the new norm. The convenors of the symposium and editors of this special issue of TEXT, Felicity Collins, Hester Joyce, and Noel Maloney, were part of a research cluster interested in exploring the proliferation of intercultural collaborations in creative arts across Australia. They were also interested in the phenomenon of intermediality across Melbourne's theatrical, cinematic, and performance spaces, and in the practice-led projects of graduate research students. The aim of the symposium was to bring writers, performers, and filmmakers into conversation with La Trobe academics and graduate researchers working across screen, theatre, creative writing, and the humanities more broadly.

In recent years, the intermedial repackaging of successful feature films for the stage has become commonplace in Melbourne, with live performances in 2019 of *Solaris* at the Malthouse (directed by Matthew Lutton, adapted by David Grieg from the 1961 novel by Stanislaw Lem, with film adaptations by Andrei Tarkovsky in 1972 and Steven Soderbergh in 2002). Other intermedial productions included *Muriel's wedding the musical* at Her Majesty's Theatre (directed by Simon Phillips; based on the 1994 film, *Muriel's wedding*, directed by P. J. Hogan); and *Kiss of the spider woman* at MTC (directed by Dean Bryant, a musical adaptation of the 1976 novel by Manuel Puig; film adaptation in 1985 by Hector Babenco).

While screen to stage adaptations can be considered 'pre-sold' products, Melbourne's more innovative intermedial events include a strong intercultural element. For instance, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and Chorus celebrated Beethoven's 250th birthday with a gala event at Hamer Hall (MSO, 2020). The gala opened with Deborah Cheetham (Yorta Yorta composer, soprano, and opera singer) who sang the Welcome to Country in Boon Wurrung language, and who also composed the opening orchestral tribute to Beethoven, *Dutala, Night filled sky*. The MSO's performance of *Dutala* was followed by an intermedial presentation of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The performance featured Brisbane physical theatre troupe, Circa, performing daredevil acrobatics in front of the orchestra throughout the four movements of the symphony. In the fourth movement, Circa's acrobats and the orchestra were joined on stage by a choir in street clothes, to sing 'Ode to Joy'. The spectacular intercultural and intermedial

combination of Cheetham, Beethoven, Circa, and the MSO brought the Hamer Hall audience of 2500 to its feet in a prolonged standing ovation (Collins, Healy, & Radstone, 2020).

A further inspiration for the symposium's focus on intercultural as well as intermedial collaborations was Bangarra Dance Theatre's remediation, in 2014, of the intercultural exchanges between young Eora woman, Patyegarang, and astronomer, William Dawes. More than two centuries later, their story has been told in multiple ways: as history in *Dancing with strangers* (Inga Clendinnen, 2003); as a template for stranger relationality in Episode 1 of the epic documentary television series, *First Australians* (Rachel Perkins, 2008); as historical fiction in Kate Grenville's novel, *The lieutenant* (2008); and as rediscovered notebooks (by Dawes) that became objects of rumination in Ross Gibson's *26 views of the starburst world* (2012).

Our interest in Bangarra's intermedial dance-theatre-screen productions brought the prolific work of writer and dramaturg, Alana Valentine, to our attention and led to the opening session of the symposium on intercultural collaboration, featuring Ursula Yovich – singer, writer, stage and screen actor – who did voice-work for Bangarra's *Patyegarang* and, more recently, delivered the Inaugural NAIDOC Week lecture at NIDA (Yovich, 2020). The symposium's opening conversation between Yovich and Valentine focused on the friendship that enabled them to collaborate on writing the award-winning show, *Barbara and the camp dogs* – a high octane, pub rock, stage gig, produced by Belvoir in 2017, with Vicki Gordon Music Productions, and staged at the Malthouse in 2018. What emerges in the edited transcript of the conversation between Yovich and Valentine is the importance not only of prodigious talent but of trust built slowly over time through multiple collaborations that bring together First Nations, colonial and immigrant stories, characters, and audiences. Yovich and Valentine began to build this trust through *Barefoot divas*: a group of six Indigenous women singers (including Yovich) from Australia, Papua New Guinea, and Aotearoa New Zealand, best-known for their international tour of *Walk a mile in my shoes*. However, it was Yovich's impromptu performances of her alter ego, Barbara – 'the angry black woman' with an 'edge' – and the encouragement of Bangarra's Stephen Page, that initiated Yovich's collaboration with Valentine on writing *Barbara and the camp dogs*. The highly attuned exchanges between Yovich and Valentine in the first of the edited transcripts (in Part 1: *The symposium papers*), speak volumes to the kinds of truth-telling and intercultural relationality that are emerging in the cultural sphere, while the political sphere lags so far behind.

In the second edited transcript, Alana Valentine offers an expansive account of her prolific and original contribution to verbatim – or what she prefers to call 'close work' – theatre (Valentine, 2018). Valentine's 'close work' audio and stage plays draw on unheard voices of communities defined by shared experiences such as a natural disaster, the punitive incarceration of girls, or a threat to the local footy club. In her symposium presentation, Valentine brings to the fore the challenges and responsibilities of the writer who works with communities to which she (mostly) does not belong. Valentine emphasises the importance of the search for 'the premise' that underpins the story that she wrestles onto the page and hands over to a director and cast. We come to understand the uniqueness of Valentine's working methods, and her ethical

alignment with ‘unheard voices’, through her discussion of three case studies: *Letters to Lindy* (first produced by Merrigong Theatre Company in 2016); *Made to measure* (first produced by the Seymour Centre in 2019); and *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* (first produced by the Alex Buzo company in 2009). Each of these plays by Valentine speaks to ‘Australia’ at different moments in time: in *Letters to Lindy*, the extended time of Lindy Chamberlain’s trial by media following the disappearance of her daughter Azaria from a campground near Uluru in 1980; in *Made to measure*, the contemporary rise of obesity and its impact on young women and their sense of self; and in *Shafana and Aunt Sarrinah* the aftermath of 9/11 and its impact on women grappling with their Muslim, migrant, gender, and professional identities both in Australia and within their own families.

The third edited transcript features the trajectory of Katerina Kokkinos Kennedy from Shakespeare to live art. What emerges from Kokkinos Kennedy’s transcript (of two sessions over one day) is her paradigm shift from text-based theatrical productions in Melbourne to international site-specific collaborations, along with a reorientation towards her European heritage. In the symposium, Kokkinos Kennedy expanded on her 2009 decision to abandon theatre and ‘seize the means of production’ by setting up her own company, Triage Live Art Collective. In the process of developing a range of site-specific experiences to be ‘triaged’ by participants, Kokkinos Kennedy developed five principles for genuinely intermedial and participatory ‘live art’. For Kokkinos Kennedy, ‘live art’ happens in site-specific, immersive spaces that allow participants to move between different modalities, accessing affective and sensory experiences that remain elusive for audiences seated in conventional theatres. Rather than play to an audience, Triage performers are trained to be responsive partners in a dance with active participants. The symposium transcript gives us insight into six productions, from a reinterpretation of Ibsen’s Hedda in *The house project* (2009) to *Hotel obscura* (2014-2016), an international collaboration funded by Creative Europe and performed in eight cities to 1500 different audiences. As Covid-19 took hold, Kokkinos Kennedy made the shift to Zoom to produce the first part of a nature trilogy, *Banquet for bees* (2020-2021). Working online with partners in Denmark, she designed audio tracks and ‘follow films’ for participants to find their way through the performance site. While she writes constantly, Kokkinos Kennedy sees writing for immersive participation as a process of ‘titration’, whereby 50 pages reduces down to an ever-shorter script.

The final symposium session began with a screening of the archival documentary film, *Homeland story* (2019), followed by a post-screening discussion with anthropologist, Neville White, and screenwriter, producer, and director, Glenda Hambly, on their eight-year collaboration with cultural advisor, Damien Guyula and the Donydji community in North East Arnhem Land. Drawing on White’s vast collection, since 1974, of photographs, film footage, and sound recordings, *Homeland story* offers an intercultural account of how a Donydji family changed dramatically over just three generations. The film brings to the fore the challenges the Donydji homeland now faces, and it tells the story of White and his collaboration with Vietnam veterans and the Rotary Club of Melbourne to develop on-the-ground projects with the Donydji community. The transcript of the conversation that followed the screening of *Homeland story* includes an afterword, *And then came the script*, by Hambly. The afterword provides an

important insight into the place of writing in intermedial and intercultural collaborations. In the case of *Homeland* story, Hambly acknowledges that, despite the convention that the script comes before the shoot, the production was guided by ‘structural notes’ and the script was written in post-production.

Together, the symposium papers ask us to rethink where and how ‘writing’ takes place across pub-rock and verbatim theatre, site-specific live art, and documentary filmmaking. Rather than position ‘writing’ as the origin and template (script or screenplay) for a performance or film, the four transcripts offer glimpses of ‘writing’ entangled in the relationships and processes that underpin creative collaboration in a variety of intercultural and intermedial spaces.

Part 2: Writing beyond the page

The second part of this special issue features intermedial projects undertaken by colleagues in screen and theatre studies at La Trobe University. Rob Conkie offers an ekphrastic image of writing wrapped around his own drawing of a famous artwork. What looks, at first glance, like an image becomes, on closer viewing, an intermedial text. In his discussion of National Theatre’s live streaming of Ivan van Hove’s 2019 stage production of *All about Eve* (1950), Noel Maloney develops an intermedial account of written, performed, and filmed revisions of Joseph L. Mankiewicz’s original screenplay. *On making Marvellous* brings together written responses (by the creators) to writing and performing *Marvellous*, a theatre work presented in February 2021 at La Mama Courthouse, Carlton. On both stage and page, collaborators Hester Joyce, Meredith Rogers, and Maude Davey explore the intimacies of motherhood and the challenges of staging ageing and dying from the point of view of adult daughters. As a series of anecdotal reflections, *On making Marvellous*, itself, becomes performative. The final article in Part 2, by Terrie Waddell and Nicole Skeltys, focuses on a creative collaboration between La Trobe researchers, the Young Writers Award Program, professional actors, and Montsalvat – an artists’ colony in the bush suburb of Eltham. The aim was to film the reading by actors of short stories by young writers, and to stage these readings in the gothic environs of Montsalvat, foregrounding the intermedial relationships between contemporary short-form writing, site-specific performance, and reading.

Part 3: The contingency of writing in graduate research

In Part 3, MA and PhD candidates in screen studies reflect on the complex intermediality of research projects where ‘writing’ is contingent – woven through creative practice and reflection. Writing’s contingency is evident, here, in three site-specific research projects: Atalanti Dionysus’s award-winning experiments with screenwriting and the production of virtual and augmented reality experiences for visitors to Pentridge Heritage Precinct; Aviva Reed’s ecologically attuned, performative, and immersive mode of nature writing in relationship with a ‘remnant grassland’ – a mode that contests nature/culture and mind/body

dualisms; and Amelia Latham's exploration of a Japanese character *ma*, translated as 'pause' or 'interval' and interpreted in a series of screendance improvisations conducted by Latham during Covid-19, using confined spaces such as the car, the couch, and the shower.

The practice of screenwriting is highlighted in three articles, each of which reminds us that writing for the screen has always been an intermedial practice. For Juliet John, the screenplay is less important than 'the screen idea', a collaborative process with many inputs. John's Australian case studies reveal how the director, production designer, and cinematographer collaborate with many others to give tangible form to the screenplay during pre-production. Shifting our attention to small screen collaborations during Covid, Charmaine Peters pays particular attention to writing comedy for multi-screen performance in *Retrograde* (ABC, 2020). Peters makes the important point that scripted drama and comedy have long-since moved to streaming platforms and that *Retrograde* (made for ABC iview) opened up opportunities for women from diverse backgrounds to develop online skills in writing and producing digital fiction. In an article on the transformation of classic literary texts, such as Jane Austen's *Emma*, into teen-girl films in the 1990s, Paige Tucker addresses adaptation as a process of re-imagination whereby filmmakers re-author texts and offer new interpretations of the 'makeover' in the context of third wave feminism.

The final two articles address the transformation of early intermedial genres into more complex modes of intermediality. Andrew Ty offers a forensic account of the music video *Heartbeat*, by South Korean pop group BTS. Ty focuses on *Heartbeat*'s debt to Hollywood musicals, the intermediality of on-screen writing and dancing bodies, and game-play options. Extending her interest in the genre of the fashion film, Nicole Pavich explores how fashion vloggers on YouTube promote thrifted apparel through User Generated Content in an effort to influence young consumers. Looking at the YouTube channel, "bestdressed", Pavich analyses the textual strategies of one such vlogger, Ashley, to position herself as both authentic and aspirational in her opposition to fast fashion.

Works cited

- Cheetham, D. (2020). *Dutala, Star filled sky*: Orchestra music.
[https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/search?type=work&sort=alphaTitleSort&wfc\[\]=Deborah+Cheetham](https://www.australianmusiccentre.com.au/search?type=work&sort=alphaTitleSort&wfc[]=Deborah+Cheetham)
- Clendinnen, I. (2003). *Dancing with strangers: European and Australians at first contact*. Text Publishing.
- Collins, F., Healy C., and Radstone, S. (2020). Provincializing memory studies: The insistence of the 'here-now'. *Memory Studies* 13(5), 848-860.
- Gibson, R. (2012). *26 views of a starburst world: William Dawes at Sydney Cove, 1788-91*. University of Western Australia Press.
- Grenville, K. (2008). *The lieutenant*. Text Publishing.

MSO, 2020, Beethoven 9, Circa and Cheetham: <https://live.mso.com.au/performance/2020-beethoven-9-circa-and-cheetham>

Page, S. (Artistic Director, Choreographer). (2014). *Patyegarang* [Dance]. Bangarra Dance Theatre.

Perkins, R. (Director). (2008). *First Australians* [TV series]. Blackfella Films.

Valentine, A. (2018). *Bowerbird: The art of making theatre drawn from life*. Currency Press.

Yovich, U. (2020, November 16), *Inaugural NAIDOC week lecture with Ursula Yovich*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YFHcZ08nR_w

Acknowledgments

We are indebted to our 2020 symposium speakers: Ursula Yovich, Alana Valentine, Katerina Kokkinos Kennedy, Neville White, and Glenda Hambly (and Donydji cultural advisor, Damien Guyula) for their generous contributions not only to the symposium but to the edited transcripts published here. We are also indebted to colleagues and graduate research students in the Department of Creative Arts and English at La Trobe University for their keen participation in the symposium and research seminars that led to the articles published in this Special Issue. The 2020 symposium on *Creative Collaborations in Intercultural and Intermedial Spaces* was generously funded by a grant from the School of Humanities and Social Sciences, La Trobe University. We are grateful to Merran Hunt for her tireless administrative support of the grant application and the acquittal process. Finally, a huge thank you to Nicole Pavich for the digital know-how she brought to preparing for and delivering the symposium via Zoom, and for her tireless work as editorial assistant for this Special Issue.