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Did she dance: Referential melancholy in the life of Anne Brennan

Abstract:

This article reflects on the author's biographical poetry project on the life of Anne Brennan, the daughter of Australian poet Christopher Brennan and a figure of bohemian notoriety in early 20th century Sydney. Brennan poses challenges to historians due to limited resources on her life, as well as a legacy of misogynist representation. Through practice-led research, the project attempts to re-present the archive of Anne Brennan as a site of feminist grief and opportunities for empathy and curiosity. The project resulted in *No Camelias*, a manuscript of biographical poetry.

The objective of this article is to discuss the project's practice-led methodology; research on the life of Anne Brennan; a review of literature discussing feminist historical approaches, poetic biography and postmodern historiography, focusing on the role of the poet-historian and concepts of referential anxiety and melancholy; and the writing of two poems from the collection, 'Did she Dance' and 'Bitch Index'. The article is followed by the two poems.

Biographical note:

Rebecca Cheers is a writer from Brisbane. She has written poetry, plays, essays, and zines, and ran Brisbane-based zine *Woolf Pack* until 2019. She was recently awarded a Masters of Philosophy from QUT, and her work has appeared in *Overland*, *Voiceworks*, *Blue Bottle Journal*, *Leaf Pile Zine*, and the *House Conspiracy* anthology, *The Conspirator*. She was shortlisted for a 2021 Young Writers and Publishers Award at the Queensland Literary Awards.

Keywords:

Anne Brennan, poetic biography, feminist history, Australian poetry, archival poetics

Introduction

In *Exiles at Home*, Drusilla Modjeska's history of Australian female novelists, a woman called Anne Brennan makes an unlikely appearance. The chapter 'Isolation and Escape' focuses on the 'inhospitable environment' of literary culture in the 1920s for women, in which female writers 'battled in relative isolation from the respectability of family life' (Modjeska, 1981, pp. 16, 20). Brennan is depicted in this chapter as the writer of the 1924 article 'Psychoanalysis and Youth', published in the 'Red Page' of *The Bulletin*. Modjeska (1981) describes the article as 'a well-written, cogently argued article, not at all what one would expect from the alcoholic nymphomaniac' Anne had been portrayed as in previous primary and secondary sources (p. 18).

Born in 1898, Anne was the eldest daughter of Australian poet and professor Christopher Brennan. Anne lived with her family and, according to an undated letter from her brother Rudolph Brennan (Brennan & Howarth, 1896-1953), experienced familial abuse and violence until she was asked to leave the family home in her late-teens due to her bohemian lifestyle. She spent the following years in unstable housing, living with other women and sexual partners, and rooming for a period at the Café de Bohème, an infamous bohemian and literary meeting place. She supported herself through sex work and was known to have stolen and pawned family jewellery. She maintained intermittent and publicly troubled contact with her family and gained infamy through being portrayed – both at the time and posthumously – as a beautiful, vulgar figure in 1920s literary bohemia. In her late twenties, she married John Gibson, a department store heir from Melbourne, and distanced herself from her previous life. She died in 1929 of tuberculosis contracted during her time in the city, months after the death of her husband.

In Modjeska's work, Brennan is a cautionary case study; though her article indicated talent, literary culture was then 'antipathetical to women's intellectual endeavour' (1981, p. 20), and Brennan's only acknowledgement by that culture was framed, and limited, by her sexuality and sex work. *Exiles at Home* was my first exposure to Brennan, and researching her life became a preoccupation. I was intrigued by her authorship of *The Bulletin* article, and the puzzle of such a confident piece of writing being her only output. But Brennan did not write that article, which I learned through the writing of Peter Kirkpatrick at least six months into my research. It was written by Melbourne lawyer and Catholic intellectual Anna T. Brennan, and the misattribution appears to originate from writer Jack Lindsay's memoirs (Kirkpatrick, 1992, p. 231). No literary writing by Brennan, published or otherwise, survives; there is no indication that any was ever written.

I found this discovery as melancholy as it was shocking. Brennan's life only survives in primary sources through the family archives of her father, and discovering the misattribution of the article meant the loss of a rare document in Anne's own voice. Existing secondary sources that include Brennan are either focused on her father, or fraught with misogynist or

minimising framing, if not both. The only existing feminist works on Brennan are predicated on the error, and her utility as a subject in those texts is as a case of thwarted literary respectability.

I experienced a similar sense of loss when I first travelled to the State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW) to access the Brennan family papers. When I held the only known surviving piece of Brennan's handwriting – a letter to her mother apologising for stealing and pawning her jewellery – I felt the vivid presence of Anne Brennan falling away, and was confronted by the limits of what really survives of her.

In her doctoral thesis, which includes analysis of Susan Howe's work as a 'poet-historian', Jessica Wilkinson (2011) asks of her own practice, 'How do I tell a story when the factual evidence is blighted with lies, riddled with blanks? How do I write a biography when the physical, material documents are failing?' (p. 123). Taking on this role as poet-historian, I have produced *No Camelias*, a 64-page poetry manuscript exploring the life of Anne Brennan, as well as the troubled, fragile archive that contains it. In this article, I give an overview of my methodology; describe the existing sources on Anne Brennan's life, and the gaps and tensions they contain; identify key concepts in my review of literature, focusing on the concept of referential melancholy, developed from David R. Ellison's concept of referentiality in *Of Words and the World: Referential Anxiety in Contemporary French Fiction* (1993); and reflect on two poems from the collection, 'Did she Dance' and 'Bitch Index'.

Life of Anne Brennan

To my knowledge, my historical research on Anne Brennan encompassed close to the entire available archive of her life, though minor references to Brennan as a figure in her father's life are still being published. One recent example is the memoir *Leeward* by the poet Geoffrey Lehmann (2018), in which Lehmann references an anecdote about the Brennans told by Kenneth Slessor. Anne is also mentioned in Frank Bongiorno's *The Sex Lives of Australians* (2012) in reference to her sex work. Bongiorno (2012) identifies her as one of a small group of sex workers who 'achieved celebrity status', 'progressing from juvenile delinquency to street prostitution (as 'German Annie' – her mother was German-born) to courtesan' (p. 183). Though these mentions of Brennan are recent, they are derived from a limited set of sources.

Existing knowledge of Anne Brennan's life can be divided into primary and secondary texts. The available primary sources include holdings in the State Libraries of Queensland and New South Wales, and the National Library of Australia, as well as documents held by the New South Wales Registry of Births Deaths and Marriages, and other state government archives. These collections include letters, legal documents, books and manuscripts, many of which are concerned with Christopher Brennan's career or extended family. Only some of this archive is pertinent to Anne Brennan's life; the most relevant primary source is a collection of Brennan family papers held by SLNSW, including family testimonials and letters (Brennan & Howarth

1896-1953), the majority of which are related to her father's publishing career. The collection contains Brennan's letter to her mother, the only existing words attributable to her. As my interest in Brennan as a subject extends to her family life, I also identified a wide range of materials concerning Christopher Brennan, including some of his poetry and prose, family photos, letters concerning his life and career, and works of creative autobiography by Anne's youngest brother, Rudolph Brennan.

Existing secondary sources on the life of Anne Brennan establish her as a marginal figure in both her father's life and the literary subcultures to which he belonged. Axel Clark's *Christopher Brennan: A Critical Biography* (1980) treats the events of Anne Brennan's life comprehensively and with respectful detachment, although she is ultimately a minor figure in the work – Clark's biography covers events prior to her birth and beyond her death, and focuses on critical readings of Christopher Brennan's poetry from a biographical perspective. Anne's life is thus only documented insofar as it intersects with that of her father.

In describing Anne Brennan, Clark (1980) draws on Jack Lindsay's *The Roaring Twenties* (1960), the second of three memoirs of Lindsay's early life. I was able to access a manuscript copy held by the State Library of Queensland (SLQ), complete with handwritten annotations. Lindsay's depiction of Brennan alternates between amusement, attraction, and hostility, as I discuss below. Elsewhere, her behaviour, personality, and motivations are attributed wholesale to her father's influence, to the extent that she is described as a personification or extension of him: 'his poetry, devilishly nestling between Anna's breasts' (Lindsay, 1960, p. 137). Lindsay's account of Anne relies on a biographical letter written at his request by his brother Ray Lindsay, to the point that he incorporates whole paragraphs and pages of it. Ray Lindsay's letter was later published as *A Letter From Sydney: Being a Long Epistle From Ray Lindsay to His Brother Jack Relating Mainly to Their Lives In Sydney In The Nineteen-Twenties* in 1983.

Peter Kirkpatrick wrote two book chapters about Anne Brennan: 'Gutter venus: Anne Brennan' in his book *The Sea Coast of Bohemia* (1992) and 'Tragic larrikin: Anne Brennan' in the anthology *The Larrikin Streak* (Gorman, 1990). His work is the most focused on Brennan as a subject in her own right, and is the first to recognise that Lindsay's reportage of Brennan's literary output – a false assertion of her authorship of 'Psychoanalysis and Youth', the article in the 'Red Page' of *The Bulletin* (17 April 1924) – was unreliable, and later attributed to a misunderstanding by Jack Lindsay (Kirkpatrick, 1992, p. 231). Kirkpatrick writes about Anne with compassion and directly addresses the role of misogyny in existing portrayals of her, including those by the Lindsay brothers. However, Kirkpatrick's chapters characterise Brennan as a passive responder to her father's violence – he describes her sex work as a passive and inevitable response to child sexual abuse (Gorman, 1990; Kirkpatrick, 1992). He also depicts Brennan as a personification of the 1920s – a decade characterised by post-war jubilation, excess, and shifting social mores, the end of which coincided with Brennan's death – and as a tragic figure whose decline and demise mirrored that of her decade. I believe Kirkpatrick's evocation of gendered archetypes – tragic heroine, decorative personification of an era, passive responder to violence – limits his representation of Brennan, and offers areas of opportunity

for exploration in creative work. Kirkpatrick also co-authored *Literary Sydney: A Walking Guide* with Jill Dimond (2000), which includes the locations of homes, workplaces, and social venues associated with the Brennans.

As discussed in my introduction, Drusilla Modjeska (1981) addresses Brennan in 'Isolation and Escape', a chapter in her chronicle of Australia's female writers, *Exiles at Home: Australian Women Writers, 1925–1945*. Brennan is mentioned, briefly and in the same spirit, by Dale Spender in her book *Writing a New World: Two Centuries of Australian Women Writers* (1988) – Spender cites Modjeska's analysis and mourns Brennan as an 'aspiring writer' who faced prohibitive disadvantage (p. 244). In light of Kirkpatrick's (1992) correction, after which no signs of Brennan producing writing exist, Modjeska and Spender remain illuminating sources on the politics of the period, despite their texts being built on a misrepresentation of Brennan's life. The debunking of Brennan's authorship has left an opportunity for feminist readings and writings that can reckon with her life as it seemingly was, without treating it as a thwarted but talented literary existence to retrospectively canonise.

Brennan's life has also been the subject of poets. Kirkpatrick (1992) asserts that works by Brennan's contemporaries, including Leon Gellert and Jack Lindsay, address her as an inspiration or muse. These representations draw on her beauty and, in the case of Lindsay's verse play *Helen Comes of Age* (1927), contrast her beauty against her alleged promiscuity, cruelty, and duplicity. Leon Gellert's *Isle of San* (1919), a volume of poetry illustrated by Jack Lindsay's father, Norman, makes repeated reference to a 'grey-eyed girl' said to be inspired by Anne (Kirkpatrick, 1992, p. 224). Timoshenko Aslanides' 'Anna Brennan' (1986), the most contemporary poem I identified that focuses on Anne Brennan as a subject, draws on Lindsay's depiction of Brennan as a raucous, sexually available gateway to her father's poetry. The poem is in part a fantasy of sexual romance between the poet persona and Brennan (perhaps reflecting Christopher Brennan's preoccupation with Ancient Greek literature, which Aslanides notes is a preoccupation of his own [2018, p. 103]). More broadly, the poem uses Brennan as a symbol of the era and the masculine literary community in which she was a figure, and Aslanides immerses himself in it through her: 'Oh yes, I was born there, and written into Crown / Street / like your father...' (1986, p. 70).

As my research asks what opportunities the lyric form can offer in creating a feminist representation of Brennan's life, my poetry responds to this existing discourse, offering a text focused explicitly on Brennan as its subject. In doing so, my practice is informed by my immersion in feminist historiography, and the ways in which existing creative works either fail to represent Brennan as a central figure or impose limiting gendered archetypes on her character. I have attempted to build a text that avoids casting Brennan as a passive participant in her life, while acknowledging the apparent role of familial trauma in the instability she experienced.

Above all, I have attempted to invest curiosity in Brennan. My reading has indicated that depictions of Brennan, especially in primary sources written by contemporaries, were

disinterested in her inner life; subsequent works are built on these sources. Rather than depicting her as a person of agency, actively responding to the challenges of her life, these texts depict her as a passive figure whose behaviour, especially in her sex work and relationships, was a reflexive response to her relationship with her father.

Feminists in the archive

My work on *No Cameliars* was based on my conviction that a fundamentally different formal approach to presenting the life of Anne Brennan could produce a new and subversive presentation of her life, even if built from the same finite and troubling set of representations as previous efforts. This conviction was inspired in part by Hélène Cixous' 'The laugh of the Medusa' (1976, pp. 875-893), which argues for formal literary experimentation as an essential mode of feminist praxis. Cixous writes that literary conventions, which were generated in a patriarchal public sphere, have evolved to represent a monolithic male understanding of the world. In order to combat this masculine orthodoxy of literature, she calls for writing that 'inscribes femininity' (1976, p. 878). While Cixous' concept of women's writing is open-ended – in the essay she clearly believes it is yet to be realised – it is a concept I have found influential for my creative practice. While her belief that 'woman must write woman' (1976, p. 877) may appear reductive, she argues that there is 'no general woman', that the variety of female experience is 'inexhaustible' (1976, p. 876). She declares that new writing by women can act as an 'anticipation' of the future – while 'the effects of the past are still with us', she refuses to 'strengthen them by repeating them, to confer upon them an irremovability the equivalent of destiny' (1976, p. 875).

Another early influence was art historian and feminist academic Griselda Pollock's *Differencing the Canon* (1999), which provides an ethos of feminist engagement with art history. Pollock defines the canon of art, with its 'old masters', as 'the legitimization of white masculinity's exclusive identification with creativity and with Culture' (1999, p. 9), and she criticises feminist attempts to retrofit female art icons to its structure as simplistic and counterproductive. Her work, which comprises readings of art and historical moments for 'inscriptions of the feminine' to create 'a view from elsewhere' (1999, p. xv), echoes Cixous by rejecting canonicity and institutional respectability as an inherently hegemonic structure. She reads for signs of plural feminine identities across class, respectability, and other marks of social difference.

'The laugh of the Medusa' and *Differencing the Canon* are optimistic texts. They believe that creative practice can not only highlight gendered injustice or erasure in areas like literary history, but that it can generate new knowledges. By encouraging a proliferation of female writing and historical readings, they aim to weaken the grip of orthodox, masculine understandings on female experience. They strengthen my belief that the reduction of Anne Brennan to a series of broad archetypes, and the incuriosity about her thoughts or experiences

shown by writers like the Lindsay brothers, is best interrogated by approaching her life from a grounding in creative practice.

My project was also conceived as practice-led research. Reflecting on creative writing as qualitative research, which she asserts is ‘a valid form of research, with detectable research outcomes’, Enza Gandolfo also says that ‘the practices and processes used to make art (including literature) are specialised and can lead to specialised insights and knowledge’ (2012, p. 64). As described by Smith and Dean (2009), the relationship between creative practice and research is ‘bi-directional’; while ‘creative practice can revolutionise academic research’, they argue that it is equally important to ‘ponder how academic research can impact positively on creative practice’ (2009, p. 1). This model of research is not only suitable because I am a creative practitioner; it is also compatible with the theoretical underpinnings of my project. Smith and Dean explain that the emergence of practice-led research has led to new understandings of the concept of knowledge as ‘often unstable, ambiguous and multidimensional ... emotionally or affectively charged’ (2009, p. 3). As my research draws on feminist theories of subjectivity and reading for plural feminine experience in historical margins, it is fitting that I draw on a research methodology that challenges conventional values of ‘knowledge’. Further, my research explores the potential of a creative form, lyric poetry, in examining a problem: the existing historical representation of my subject, Anne Brennan.

In these texts, ‘research’ refers to postgraduate academic research, and my ambitions in this project have been both academic and literary. However, theories of a bi-directional relationship between creative theory and practice also inspired my approach to the historical research I conducted on Brennan’s life. As I accessed archives of family papers, read primary and secondary sources about Brennan, and travelled to historical locations, I acted from the position of a poet reading a body of historical material for possible sites of poetry: tensions within or between sources that could be interrogated through poetry. I wrote poetry throughout, as opposed to conducting a period of research followed by a period of writing; alongside my review of literature around the lyric, feminist theory, and postmodern historiography, these practices operated symbiotically. Rather than considering my project a creative work derived from, or based on, research, I adopted a model of poetry-as-research.

In the reading I conducted alongside my historical research, I engaged with feminist theories of archival engagement. As the editor of *Tupelo Quarterly*’s ‘Feminist poetics of the archive’ forum, Karla Kelsey defines feminist archival poetics as a practice that ‘entails openness and an investment in valuing the undervalued, of preserving the over-looked, of raising to the level of the ‘archive’ materials and architectures that have not previously qualified’ (2020, para. 2). The forum’s ten participants included artists who had conducted research in existing archives, participated in the establishment and preservation of archives, or had brought, through their work, the archival principle that ‘a thing is a document worth preserving’ (para. 1) to artefacts of their own lives. Kelsey speaks to the power of this work, in its ability to ‘overturn a sense

of orderly rule, orderly access, of patriarchal law that often dominates historical objects' through creative approaches (2020, para. 6).

I locate my practice in this field of archival poetics, a term also used by Narungga poet Natalie Harkin, whose 2019 poetry collection was titled *Archival Poetics* (Vagabond Press). Harkin's work, including her 2015 collection *Dirty Words* (Cordite Books), offers insight into the practice of archival poetry as activism. Reviewing Jeanine Leane's *Walk Back Over* (2017), Harkin describes poetry that 'writes back / Black to those archival 'institutions' ... that have collected, catalogued, contained and displayed insurmountable data on Aboriginal lives' (2017, p. 2), illuminating such archives as both evidence of, and active apparatuses of, colonisation. Alongside Wilkinson, whose collection, *Marionette: a biography of miss marion davies* (2012), tropes on the conventions of biography to reveal the decaying archive and controlling male presences complicating her subject's legacy, Harkin was a major influence on my collection.

I was lucky to discover an article discussing complex issues of feminist archival ethics in the context of Australian literary archives: 'The intimate archives' (Dever et al., 2010). Drawing on the authors' experiences researching the lives of Marjorie Barnard, Aileen Palmer and Lesbia Harford, the article attempts to 'tease out both the conceptual and practical issues involved in archival research into the more intimate aspects of women writers' lives' (2010, p. 97). They identify their work as motivated by 'feminist desire', a term they attribute to Griselda Pollock, and elaborate as 'a desire to find in our archival sources a whole where there can only ever be random parts, to perform acts of reconstitution' (2010, pp. 97-100). The article informed my decision to embrace my subjectivity as a researcher and poet, and suggested pathways through the challenges of depicting an incomplete set of historical sources, compiled without the input or permission of my subject. It also influenced my focus on the concept of referential melancholy, as an expression of my specific experience of feminist grief in the archives of Anne Brennan's life.

Referential anxiety and melancholy

The concept of referential anxiety, developed by David R. Ellison in *Of Words and the World: Referential Anxiety in Contemporary French Fiction* (1993), describes the tensions that emerge when building a representation from other representations, as opposed to a representation drawing on 'the real referent – that is, the object in the world beyond the confines of the text' (1993, p. 7). In the case of my project, and in other biographical poetry based on long-dead figures, these tensions manifest between the representation of history assembled by the poet and the primary and secondary sources they draw on, which are themselves representations of historical events. The 'real referents' – in this case, historical figures and events – are inaccessible. Ellison describes the relationship between these texts as 'an agonistic state of

dialogue that pits one poet against another and makes of intertextuality an active duelling rather than a passive receiving of tradition' (1993, p. 6).

While Ellison's (1993) description focuses on exchanges of artistic influence between generations of poets, the concept is equally relevant in the relationship between poets and the historical sources with which they contend. Drawing on Ellison, Rohan Wilson (2014) describes this anxiety as resulting in a 'turn away from the referent towards self-referentiality' (pp. 70-71). I believe this turn is evident in the texts I have analysed, and my own manuscript, in their treatment of historical sources as untrustworthy or hostile witnesses as well as sites of speculation; in these texts, the anxiety of these referential relationships are revealed, and in some ways addressed by, the poet's own presence in the text.

I interpret referential anxiety as a sense of tension and instability generated by the reliance of one representation – one subject to the onus of truth and authority expected from historical writing – on a network of other representations, each with their own relationship with truth and fallibility. This instability can be a source of anxiety in both writers and readers. It articulates my experience, as mentioned above in my introduction, of tracing misinformation through sources on Anne Brennan's life; a realisation that truth could not be recovered, and no longer existed, while only imperfect representations remained.

However, my experience suggests an adaptation of Ellison's concept, describing my attempt to express these referential tensions through poetry. I believe that referential tension as represented in creative work – achieved, in part, through Wilson's 'turn' towards self-referentiality – can take on different tones, only one of which is anxiety. These tones differ according to the relationship the poet establishes between themselves and their subjects. The tension between my aim to create a representation of Anne Brennan and the instability, incompleteness, and perversities of existing representations inspired anger and frustration. But I identify the main tone of the experience as referential melancholy, a sense of sadness and loss at the impossibility of *knowing* Anne Brennan, verging on grief. The sense of loss I describe in the introduction never left me, and my ambition in writing *No Cameliass* is to recreate it vividly for readers. I intend the poems of *No Cameliass* to vary in tone, from funny to angry to sentimental, but I intend this sense of referential melancholy to pervade the whole. In doing so, I aim to hold the tension between the apparent strength and distinctiveness of Brennan as a presence in the poems, against the fragility of her presence in historical representations, so it is always apparent to the reader.

In writing the two poems I analyse below, I was faced with different tensions in the Brennan archive. In 'Did she Dance', I respond to a lack of information, revealed by a detail treated as self-evident and unworthy of discussion by previous writers. In 'Bitch Index', I respond to a surplus of representation – a depiction of Brennan that is overwhelming in its sexism and superficiality. In both poems, I have attempted to weave through this sense of melancholy at the state of Anne Brennan's historical legacy.

Did she dance

The poem 'Did she Dance' references a detail of Anne Brennan's time at Betsy's, where she used to dance on the tables. Almost all depictions of Brennan, brief or extensive, contain this detail. In his short poem 'Anna Brennan', Aslanides describes Anne's 'drunken feet / on Chinatown tables' (1986, p. 70). The most illustrative example is from *Literary Sydney: A Walking Guide* (2000), which introduces the site of Betsy's to literary tourists as the location where 'Anna Brennan danced on the tables and Ray Lindsay once vomited on the head of Anne's father, Christopher Brennan, from an upper storey window' (p. 17). The table dancing is an iconic detail, a microcosmic shorthand for the subculture with which Brennan is associated.

'Did she Dance' is a poem that responds to this breadcrumb of information, often repeated but never explained. Other poems in the collection respond to similar details, like 'Salon ohne Decke', about a photograph of the Brennan family home with an enigmatic caption, or 'Salpingectomy', which explores the possibility of Brennan undergoing surgery based on a throwaway line in Jack Lindsay's memoir. These small details suggest questions. The more I read, the more these questions arose, and the more bizarre their absence in previous texts seemed. In the case of Brennan's dancing, I am struck by the lack of further detail; it seems to reveal a lack of curiosity about Anne's interiority on the part of those repeating it. Why did she dance on the tables – was it organised public performance? Did she dance regularly, did she solicit tips? Was it skilful, impulsive? Was she drunk or rebellious? How did the bar's owner feel about it, or the patrons?

In these poems, I attempt to approach gaps in the information in a way that makes them visible, rather than attempting to smooth them away. I do not want to reconstruct events, allowing the reader to suspend their sense of referential anxiety. However, I also aim to present an Anne Brennan who occupies a body, rather than a figure of myth. I want to evoke the physicality of Brennan's dancing, whether it was spontaneous or rehearsed. I resist attempts to fit Brennan to feminine archetypes – fallen woman, villainous beauty, emblem of the jazz age – present in previous representations. As an antidote to mythologising, I focus on Brennan's corporeality, her existence as a person who lived, thought, and died.

These aims are in tension. In grounding the poem in descriptions of Brennan's physicality and sensations, I intend an illusion of 'realness' and corporeality, encouraging the reader to suspend disbelief. I simultaneously underscore my, and the reader's, lack of access to Brennan's experiences from her point of view, by framing the descriptions as unanswerable questions. I abdicate the claim to authority and truth-telling that historical writers may make, backed up by their research. My first person presence in the poem does not aim to uncover or deliver knowledge, but to identify its absence. However, while I reject authority on Brennan's experience in structure, I speculate on the level of imagery. I imagine the physical thrills and tolls of her performance, her centre of balance, the wobble of the table, strained ankles in the

morning. In speculating about her intentions, I imagine the reactions she wanted from her audience. Did she intend sexual provocation – ‘did she want wide eyes / blood vessel swells’ – or a rejection of men’s gaze, cast as anachronistic punk performance, a desire to ‘stick / in throats’?

The poem’s final stanzas transition from immersive images of Brennan’s daily life to a scene of meta-commentary, a move towards self-referentiality. The section refers to an anecdote told by Jack Lindsay (1960), in which poet David McKee Wright hides his false teeth to avoid leaving Betsy’s for the night, forcing his companions to search for them. By invoking this detail, which reads as myth-making on the level of Brennan’s table dance in its absurdity and literary name-dropping, I aim to reintroduce a sense of the dance as myth and memetic detail in her archive. Reimagining her dance as a performance that she is obligated to repeat every time it is represented in history, I imagine the scene taking on a tone of fatigue, abrasiveness, and resentment. This concept of Brennan as a human woman reduced to iconography, a decorative detail of her age, is an example of the referential melancholy I attempt to express.

Bitch index

‘Bitch Index’ is a poem composed of footnotes written to accompany a passage from Lindsay’s memoir *The Roaring Twenties* (1960). My reading was conducted on a manuscript copy held in SLQ. Like many sections of *Roaring Twenties* describing bohemian Sydney, this passage is reproduced near-verbatim from a letter Jack requested from his brother Ray Lindsay, with whom he lived during parts of the memoir’s events. Ray Lindsay’s letter was later published as *A Letter from Sydney* (Jester Press, 1983). Because of the level of detail and space afforded to Anne Brennan in their texts, Jack and Ray Lindsay have become key sources on her life. Jack Lindsay’s writing in *Roaring Twenties* is more formal than Ray’s letter; he details scenes of squalor and sex, but always does so with euphemism and soft-focus description, drawing them into comparison and contrast with his neoclassical poetry. Ray’s language is blunt, and his profanities are frequently censored by Jack. The ‘queen of all bitches’ passage, which is a long and uninterrupted inclusion from *A Letter from Sydney*, combines Ray’s bluntness and profanity with Jack’s more artistic pretensions.

I encountered this passage early in my research. Having read *Exiles at Home* (1981), in which Modjeska interviews Jack Lindsay before his death in 1990, I identified *Roaring Twenties* as one of the only substantial works to discuss Brennan in detail. Reading it for the first time was a confronting experience. I remember reaching the passage and experiencing strong, bodily-felt anger, queasiness, and light-headedness. The book, which contained rare first-hand accounts of Brennan’s adult life, was treating her with utter contempt.

However, its elements of aggression towards Anne – the surreal repetition of ‘bitch’, its dismissal, hatred, and sexual objectification of Anne, its appeals to male artistic authority in depicting feminine complexity – are what make it a failure of description. The passage offers

a sketch of Anne's appearance, blonde and graceful, but offers no 'insight' into what makes her a 'bitch'; it suggests a relationship between her beauty and her 'bitch status', but the nature of this relationship is positioned as so obvious as to need no explanation. As a commentary on Anne, it only offers insight into the minds of the Lindsay brothers. This is a significant referential tension in the archive of Anne Brennan. Secondary sources on her life, however well-intentioned, rely on texts written with clear ill-intent.

In defining her concept of feminist ekphrasis, B. K. Fischer describes an approach which 'comprises acts of description and interrogation, improvisation and analysis, homage and backtalk' (2014, para. 18). The concept of 'backtalk' as a feminist intervention in history resonates with my approach. Jack Lindsay is a literary institution, with his authority to define the legacy of Anne Brennan institutionally granted; his work on Brennan was published, distributed, archived, and referenced. She held no power to respond. I do not hold comparable institutional power as an emerging poet, though my ability to reply surpasses Anne Brennan's. My power is in access to Lindsay's work, especially his work in manuscript form, as well as access to his references to paintings. Ray Lindsay attended art school, and his knowledge of paintings was a form of cultural capital not easily available to the public; for me, those paintings are only an online search away.

In 'Bitch Index', I address my 'backtalk' to the Lindsays directly, speaking in first person. The poem operates as hypertext, building from Ray Lindsay's passage, as quoted by Jack. Its presentation of the full passage, with my own emphasis through bolded text and footnotes, acts as a response; it also comes from a desire to break down, even demolish, the original. I interrogate its content, but I also insert my own words between its lines, blowing them apart. This desire involves damaging or destroying it, but also breaking it down to its rubble, revealing that the word 'bitch' is the material from which it is built; it is a load-bearing word in the passage, standing in for the qualities of Anne the brothers did not, or could not, genuinely express.

I sought works by the painters mentioned by Ray Lindsay, looking for resonant details. I included the shattered pitcher from Jean-Baptiste Greuze's 'The Broken Pitcher', and the long black gloves draped to descend a staircase in Henri Toulouse-Lautrec's 'Les Gants Noirs D'Yvette Guilbert'. In my framing of these images, I wilfully misinterpret Lindsay's intent. It is contextually clear that the brothers – Ray Lindsay in his original statement and Jack in his quotation of it – are referring to those painters' sexually charged depictions of women. I recast details, vessels emptied through breakage or removal from the body, as signifiers of emptiness or refusal of meaning. I also recast bitchery as feminine defiance, punning on Greuze's broken vessel as being 'nothing but mouth / and handle'; Toulouse-Lautrec's gloves, intended as seductive, lie 'palm-spread in refusal'.

The poem is written in second person, addressing the author of the passage directly. As an act of backtalk, it is designed to confront the author with the referential instability of their work. Their referent, Anne Brennan, is nowhere to be found, any insight absent from their description.

Instead of Brennan, I make their failure to describe her, and the empty ornamentation of their misogyny, my subject. It is the Lindsays, and their self-proclaimed ‘bitch-insight’ that are ‘restricted’, ‘slipping’.

However, as in ‘Did she Dance’, I attempt to reintroduce a sense of melancholy; while the brothers speculate about her ‘bitchery’, depicting Brennan in their ‘cheap postcard’ photocopied over and over, she slips away ‘as her days spilled like pearls off their string’. The line can reflect the loss of her truth or perspective, through historical neglect and lack of preservation; it can also reflect her declining health and death, while the Lindsays survived to the late 20th century. As a poet-historian, I am capable of intervening in the archive of Brennan’s life through literary backtalk. However, her story will always end the same way.

Conclusion

The experience of writing a finite manuscript of poetry about Brennan has forced me to face the impossibility of addressing every aspect of her life. It has taught me how to resist the temptation to present it as a coherent whole. In early drafts, almost every poem began with an epigraph taken from a primary or secondary source on Anne’s life. In some cases, the epigraph was included to place it in conversation with the poem’s addressing persona; in some, it was included as a starting point for the poem, which was extrapolated from a detail contained within it.

However, as the project developed, I realised that I was including epigraphs without engaging with them meaningfully in the poem, in order to contextualise its events. I had included frequent epigraphs out of a pressure to convey as much information about Brennan’s life as possible. I experienced a desire to download everything I knew or had read about her into the head of the reader. I was encouraged in feedback to write a ‘Notes on the Poems’ section in which I could provide historical context and sources, and I have edited the collection to include only epigraphs that I feel are meaningfully re-contextualised in the poems.

I have accepted that completionism has no place in this project. I confront the impossibility of ‘knowing’ Anne Brennan; some knowledge or understanding will always elude me. If I had continued working on this project until I had written every poem I wanted to, I never would have stopped. In the course of the project, I identified an archive of documents, held in New South Wales (NSW) state health archives, concerning the institutionalisation of Anne Brennan’s aunt Julie Werth, who emigrated to Sydney alongside Brennan’s mother and grandmother. The ramifications of this family history in Brennan’s life struck me as important, resonant with my themes and inadequately addressed in previous writings. However, accessing those documents and addressing them through poetry lay beyond the scope of my project, as did my desire to write about Brennan’s brother, whose biographical statements on their father contribute significantly to knowledge on the Brennan family.

All biographers must face this limitation, and the limits of my own research and understanding contribute to the uniqueness of my manuscript – it presents the Anne Brennan that only my position, in time and space and culture, could write.

Did she Dance

When the old piano's tune
came through the walls
did Anne ever stumble
in her running leap to tabletop

did the glasses ever fall
were they full, or empty
did she wedge balled-up stockings
under wobbling table legs

did she creep down
one Tuesday morning
to practice, one foot planted
so the other freely scissored
past the plates

did she wear shoes
did her ankles strain
did she rub new knots away
next morning

did she wink or smile
did she take requests
did she want wide eyes
blood vessel swells
in chests of watching men or

did she get sick
of being so digestible
whipped light, fruit pitted
did she ever want to stick
in throats

did she ever take a swig
of some cobber's drink
arch her throat

and spray
more bile than wine

did they have
to pull her down
arms locked at her back
legs kicking

...

One night, David Mckee Wright
lifted that piano's lid
dropping his false teeth inside
for Jack to fish out
long after the last tram

did it jump on the strings
when the hammers hit
like a rat
on an electric fence

did Anne ever feel
like David's teeth
bones jerking and scraping
on the beat

Bitch Index

Amendola's, Ray says, will always remain in his mind as the place where he first saw **that fabulous beautiful bitch**⁵ Annie Brennan. I will never forget how, one Saturday afternoon, she came in drunk and danced among the bottles and glasses on the table.

It was an old stunt of hers, but to my goggled still-adolescent eyes it was the most spectacular event I had ever seen. I whispered to Hugh Brayden, 'who is she?' 'Annie Brennan,' he said. 'How beautiful,' I sighed. 'You should have seen her a couple of years ago,' he replied, bored. I was horrified at such blasphemy. **But that bitch**⁷. How she dominated all that crowd in those days. Leon Gellert was inspired to write **The Isle of San**⁶ by the thought of her downfall. Everybody was in love with her, even Gruner, although everybody knew what a slut she was. I always think it was a sad waste that **her particularly choice piece of feminine bitchery**⁴ has never been immortalised in paint, so many artists were in love with her. But I do not know of any who would have had the ability to record her unique charms. He would have had to possess the bravura of **Augustus John**³, the sentimental sensitivity of a **Greuze**¹, and **the bitch-insight**⁹ of a **Toulouse-Lautrec**². But her beauty, vivid as it still is to me, was very subtle. Her small delicate features with the Germanic colouring inherited from her mother, her slow smile, the soft cadence of her voice, her grace of movement, were all factors that went to **disguise**⁷ **the Queen of All Bitches**⁸.

Jack Lindsay, *The Roaring Twenties* (manuscript)

¹ bitchery is a broken jug, nothing but mouth
and handle, so that anything you pour inside escapes.

² bitchery is two black gloves left armless on the stairs,
one empty hand still palm-spread in refusal.

³ the chronicler of bitchery will spread the smears
of paint which, from a distance, come to form her face

⁴ but even with the dry high ground of hindsight
you will find – her bitchery eludes you every time.

⁵ ontological knots defy untying, even after years,

like: was her beauty side-effect or symptom?

⁶ when Leon saw her eyes *that god had painted*
like the skies, were they the bitch's hiding place, or herald?

⁷ and if the latter, what's the nature of her mirror
image? What truth's beyond the scope of memoir

⁸ written of the dead? What unspeakable female
excess did she so exceed, to be their queen?

⁹ your bitch-insight restricted to her vista
recreated on cheap postcards, photocopied

¹⁰ into grey-streaked mockeries. her signifier slipping,
as her days spilled like pearls off their string.

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