Australasian
Association
of Writing
Programs

TEXT SPECIAL ISSUES

Number 64 October 2021

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

Exercising the poetic muscle: A creative practice research method

Emilie Collyer

To cite this article: Collyer, E. (2021). Exercising the poetic muscle: A creative practice research method. In J. Wilkinson, C. Atherton & S. Holland-Batt (Eds.) *Poetry Now*. TEXT Special Issue 64.

RMIT University

Emilie Collyer

Exercising the poetic muscle: A creative practice research method

Abstract:

As part of my early PhD research I began, in a fairly intuitive way, writing poetry in response to other texts. I continued to use the technique and over time started to critically reflect on what I was doing, how I might name the method, and where it was located within a broader practice of writing in response to texts. I started to see what I was doing as key to my practice-led research, in that I was learning about my own practice by the doing of it. Noticing similarities to my (also burgeoning) running practice, I identified the method as one of poetic exercise. In this paper I will trace how this method emerged and how I situated it in relation to other writing techniques including critical arts writing, ekphrasis, intertextuality and assemblage. I will provide samples of poetic texts I wrote in response to four key works: *JOAN* (2017), a theatre production by Melbourne independent company THE RABBLE; Charles Altieri's theoretical text *The Particulars of Rapture* (2003); and the recent Australian essay collections *Blueberries* (2020) by Ellena Savage, and *The Thinking Woman* (2019) by Julianne van Loon. I will also draw on contemporary scholarship pertaining to practice-led research to demonstrate how this activity has played a key role in my own developing creative practice research. It is my hope that the tracing of this method might offer insights for other creative practice researchers.

Biographical note:

Emilie Collyer lives in Australia on Wurundjeri Country where she writes poetry, plays and prose. Her writing has appeared most recently in *Stilts*, *Axon*, *TEXT*, *Meanjin*, *Witness Performance*, *Cordite*, and *Rabbit*, and in 2021 she guest-edited *Teesta Review: A Journal of Poetry* (India). She is the author of the illustrated poetry book *Your Looking Eyes*. Collyer's award-winning plays include *Contest*, *Dream Home* and *The Good Girl*, which has had multiple international productions. She is currently a PhD candidate at RMIT, researching feminist creative practice.

Keywords: Poetry, creative practice research, practice-led research, poetic exercise

Introduction

As I commenced my creative practice PhD I started running. I did not have a set goal in mind, simply to run on a regular basis, for exercise. My brother recommended a podcast to me called *The Rewatchables*, where film buffs talk about movies they deem rewatchable. I found the energy of their enthusiastic recollection a good rhythm for running. As a playwright, I wondered what the equivalent activity would be. The point of theatre is that it's not rewatchable. It's ephemeral. While you might see a play more than once or even read a script, the unique experience of attending one specific performance can never be revisited. Theatre, rather, might be 're-rememberable'.

Puffing to a halt, I set myself the task of re-remembering a piece of theatre I had attended a few years back and writing about it. The work that came to mind was *JOAN* (2017) by Melbourne theatre company THE RABBLE. It was an imagistic and visceral work, the impression of which had stayed with me. I wasn't sure I would remember the specific details of the work. I set myself the challenge of recalling it without looking up photographs or reviews. I sat at my desk and reimagined myself in the theatre. I started writing, fairly swiftly, trying to capture something of my experience. The writing emerged:

A dark space

Bodies, women's bodies, in swift movement

Genuflecting, caught in squares of light

The squares of light keep moving

The women seem to move with lightning speed

Keeping up with the light

There is something brutal in this action

Is it their breath?

Do they fall to their knees each time?

The sequence goes on for a long time

It is mesmerising, worrying, exhilarating

What does it say to me?

It says there is more than one Joan

It says there is beauty in obsession. Or obsessiveness. These are different.

It says this is not a play

It says verbal language does not have primacy here

It says make your own meaning

It says: are you breathing differently now? How are you sitting? Are you aware of the people around you? The theatre you are sitting in?

It says: what of your body? As a woman (me). What do you kneel for? Pray for?

What might you be punished for? (Collyer, 2020a, n.p.)

The writing has rhythm and a sense of body and breath. It emerged on the page more like poetry than prose. There is a performative element in the words that evokes a body in place speaking to an imagined listener or audience. I am trying to account for my experience: part recollection, part explanation. The use of repetition echoes the process of remembering something, the returning to images in my mind, but equally to sensations in my body. I employ direct address and line gaps to invite the reader to be part of the attempted recollection but also to make their own connections. It becomes a conversation between the theatre work, my experience of it, and my memory of that experience and an accumulation of these that becomes a new creative – poetic – work in itself.

The exercise was both illuminating and enjoyable. I wondered if the activity would be repeatable and what might be revealed in writing similarly about other works. I wondered ‘what’ the writing was. Was it critical writing? Ekphrasis? A form of fictocriticism? In order to understand and position what I was doing I looked to what had been done before in this vast space of writing that responds to creative works.

The initial activity of running and listening was formative to the technique: a kind of deliberate split cognition. Practising one discipline while bringing it into direct engagement with another activity. Running while listening. Writing while remembering. Reflecting while reading. It is also worth noting that one of my interests in embarking on the PhD was to disrupt my playwriting practice; to put it into closer conversation with poetry; to explore whether any new ways of writing might be available to me.

In this essay I will trace the process of how I applied and adapted this responsive, poetic writing technique over many months, and reflected critically on the process, as a key component of my

practice-led research. There is not scope in this paper to detail all the texts I responded to, or pieces I wrote. I will limit myself to four examples: the theatre production *JOAN* (2017), Charles Altieri's *The Particulars of Rapture* (2003), Ellena Savage's *Blueberries* (2020) and Julianne van Loon's *The Thinking Woman* (2019).

In tracing this process I aim to demonstrate how this activity, which began as a fairly intuitive task, became a method: a form of poetic exercise. It was not dissimilar to running in that I was doing the activity without a specific end goal (letting go of publication as a driving force); I started to find real pleasure in the doing (the regularity of flexing muscles); and found I was making incremental improvements (building skills, becoming more 'fit') over time.

Critical arts writing

I extended the *JOAN* response to include my remembering of three further theatrical works and it was published in 2020 as 'Re-remembering performance' on *Witness*, a website which describes itself as a 'forum for independent critique and debate about the Australian performing arts [that] wants to rethink criticism' (n.d.).

This got me thinking about whether my piece was indeed 'arts criticism'. In a practical sense I identify two primary modes of arts criticism. The first is reviewing, nearly always of new publications or productions, the primary purpose being linked to marketing. In his 2015 essay 'The poet tasters', Ben Etherington quotes John Dale: a good review 'gives readers a taste of the prose and the narrative so that they can decide whether to buy the book' (Etherington, 2015, para. 2). Etherington swiftly complicates this in regard to poetry: 'Most obviously, there is no commercial sphere against which 'literary' poetry defines itself' (para. 3). I draw on Etherington's essay for this very complication, as he writes about functions other than commercial imperative that review writing can fulfil. Given my poetic review of *JOAN* was written years after the production (and there was no connected artefact to purchase), its function could in no way be commercial. Etherington goes on to define what he thinks poetry reviewing should 'do', and that is push 'description of the material to the point of disclosing its value' (para. 41). In other words, pay close attention to a work, articulate that attentiveness. This connects to the second primary kind of critical arts writing I identify, which is scholarly or pedagogical. A text is analysed as part of research or as part of a teaching program and the focus is very often about contextualising a work in literary and cultural terms. I hadn't really performed this function either, as the piece was about my memory of attending the works in question. I included a little bit of framing but certainly not a thorough contextual analysis.

This is not to say the piece didn't have value. I received this email from a theatre practitioner in response to the essay: 'So rare to read someone's memory of performance as an embodied response rather than critique, was so great to read' (A. Jacobs, personal communication, 2 April 2020). This said to me that there was value in the writing to do with its own aesthetic properties

and further, that such a piece could contribute to my community of practice new ways to have conversations about artistic works.

Having written this poem and seen its impact, I could have done the same activity again but with a new suite of performance works. What I opted to do instead was to revisit the initial source text and try a different approach. A bit like mixing up running sessions in terms of pace or distance, to build different muscle and lung capacity. I had a sense that I didn't want to land on a repeatable 'poetry as theatre criticism' method, but rather to continue exploring what other ways I could employ poetic writing.

The second response piece moved much further away from the specific production of *JOAN* by THE RABBLE. This work, titled *Dear Joan*, took the form of a speculative playscript about the experience of waiting in a foyer for a play that does not happen:

A theatre foyer. Night. It is empty. The doors are locked. But if there was a woman there.

W: If I didn't know you and were to wait for you after the show.
In the foyer with the wooden floorboards and the jelly snakes where I have stood, smiling, waiting, so many times before.

Maybe she waits outside, under the covered awning. A cool breeze. Mosquitoes. Because there are always mosquitoes here. Something about the plants. Or the sea.
(Collyer, 2020b, n.p.)

There is no overt relationship between this piece and the original production I saw. And yet I would not have written the piece had I not seen the production. The key point here, in terms of my practice as research, is that writing in response to the production, more than once, unlocked something new in my approach. I 'found' a form that took my playwriting expertise and translated it into a poetic, literary work. By this I mean that the piece functions as a text to be read by a solo reader, as opposed to a usual playscript which is designed to be performed by actors and listened to by an audience. Where stage directions are normally invisible and inaudible, here they are presented as essential to the text, they add to the reading experience. The form is not quite script, poem, fiction or non-fiction but is a combination of all.

This was exciting for me as a practitioner, but the piece moved well away from the primary function of arts criticism as proposed by Etherington in that it revealed nothing about the original work. Of course, there are other ways to define and understand arts-related writing that is critical in nature. I found vigorous engagement with this question in Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's *Touching Feeling* (2003) and Rita Felski's *The Limits of Critique* (2015). Sedgwick and Felski tease out notions of critical writing and look for what might lie beyond or adjacent to it as a primary mode of textual response.

Both writers engage critically with Paul Ricoeur's notion of critique and the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' whereby the role of the critic is 'to expose hidden truths and draw out unflattering and counterintuitive meanings that others fail to see' (Felski, 2015, p. 1). They do not seek to do away with this mode entirely but rather to challenge its place as 'nearly synonymous with criticism itself' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 4) and notions such as 'the assumption that whatever is not critical must therefore be uncritical' (Felski, 2015, p. 2). Sedgwick argues: 'It seems to me a great loss when paranoid inquiry comes to seem entirely coextensive with critical theoretical inquiry, rather than being viewed as one kind of cognitive/affective theoretical practice among other, alternative kinds' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 6).

This widening of the lens of what critical inquiry might be gave me permission to continue exploring the poetic exercise method and to adapt it to other source texts. As a theatre practitioner, shifting how I might write about performance at least came from a place of familiarity. In contrast I was coming new to the academy, with some trepidation as to how well I would understand critical theory and scholarly writing.

Reading Felski (2015) encouraged me to take more pleasure and be less defensive in my theoretical reading as she posits here a refreshing way to think about positionality:

Rather than looking behind the text – for its hidden causes, determining conditions, and noxious motives – we might place ourselves in front of the text, reflecting on what it unfurls, calls forth, makes possible. This is not idealism, aestheticism, or magical thinking but a recognition – long overdue – of the text's status as co-factor: as something that makes a difference, that helps makes things happen. (p. 12)

Following is an extract of a poem I wrote in response to Charles Altieri's book *The Particulars of Rapture*. I was trying to make sense of how he writes about art and affect. I was excited by his provocation that 'stressing the affects emphasizes modes of caring about the self and the world. It also creates opportunities for experiencing states like intensity, involvedness, and plasticity while encouraging us to reflect on who we become as we experience such states' (Altieri, 2003, p. 33). This put into words something I had intuitively considered, about why attending to affective states when engaging with – or making – art has value. That in noticing our affective responses to art and creative works, we open up possibilities of attending in more careful ways to both self and community.

crowds like dazed sheep
gallery dream state just because
tourism because fame
but also the moments of arrest

a corner of yellow peels open a hole
shapes seem to sing
make you sad or gasp in recognition

a falling in love

did anyone else notice pay attention
push charcoal onto page
follow the curve
thick bodies on a bench autumn day

old camera little black box
walking behind her swinging hair
can't get inside the memory skin
how it feels burn of teenage best friend

The poem goes on, tracing associative connections between my meditation on visual art, memories of being an art student, immediate reflections on current sociopolitical events and recollections of past negative affective experiences. I presented the poem, providing the above context, at a small public reading and one of the audience members commented it was the clearest understanding they had ever gained of affect theory. Poetry here can function as a tool for how we talk about theory together.

I note that had I not provided the context, nobody listening would have known I was writing in response to a book about affect theory. As with the second *JOAN* piece, the text I created has little direct relationship with the original source. Unlike both *JOAN* pieces, the poem has not been published. This caused me to question my practice and brought the running analogy into sharper relief. Mostly, as a practitioner, I aim for end results: publication, productions of work. But what if this responsive writing was something more like training or practice in the sense of sport? I run to keep my body active. I am not training for a marathon. Could I apply this philosophy to writing? And if I did adopt this attitude of poetic exercise, what, if anything, might happen?

As I kept exploring this approach the question arose as to why poetry, on the whole, continued to be my form of inquiry. In his 2017 book *Why Poetry*, Matthew Zapruder asks and answers that question in a multitude of ways. I am particularly drawn to this line he quotes from Anne Carson: 'I think a poem, when it works, is an action of the mind captured on a page' (as cited in Zapruder, 2018, p. 58). He goes on to extend this proposition in his own words: 'A poem presents itself as a kind of real-time movement of thinking, down the page, which the reader can enter, and follow. This can feel like something between watching a movie and listening to someone think out loud' (Zapruder, 2018, p. 58). He also writes that a poem acts as 'a record of the movement of the mind' (p. 58).

I lean into this definition via the further examples I provide below, as I start to use the page as a field for thinking; exploring how I use line breaks, white space and formatting to capture the 'real-time movement' of my responses to texts. In regard to poetry as a method for responding

to artworks, naturally the notion of ekphrasis started to come up and so I turned to an examination of this practice.

The many faces of ekphrasis

Ekphrasis is traditionally known as the ‘engagement of the visual arts by poetry’ (Swensen, 2011, p. 69); it ‘refers almost exclusively to a poem created by a poet looking at a painting’ (Krauth & Bowman, 2018, p. 11). The etymological and rhetorical origins of the term provide more leeway. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary offers: ‘The term ekphrasis derives from Greek, where it literally means ‘description’ and was formed by combining the prefix *ex-* (‘out’) with the verb ‘*phrazein*’ (‘to point out or explain’)’ (n.d.).

In his essay ‘What is ekphrasis for?’ Simon Goldhill finds origins in rhetoric handbooks from as early as the 1st century, where Theon wrote: ‘Ekphrasis is a descriptive speech that brings the thing shown vividly before the eyes’ (Goldhill, 2007, p. 3). Ekphrasis was the practice of ‘*enargeia* – the ability to make visible’ and as such was ‘one of the orator’s most important weapons of persuasion’ (p. 3).

Ruth Webb concurs and argues that the most common contemporary understanding of the term – ‘the poetic description of a pictorial or sculptural work of art’ (1999, p. 10) – was coined as recently as 1955 by critic Leo Spitzer. Webb is keen to emphasise that due to ‘a process of gradual redefinition’ there is an ‘absence of an agreed definition, apart from the broadest “writing on art”’ (p. 17). She writes extensively about the value of remembering the rhetorical function of ekphrasis as defined by the ancient Greeks. Where modern emphasis is on the subject matter and ekphrasis is most often described as ‘a description of an “art object”’, ‘the way ancient writers conceived of *ekphrasis* was very different’ and ekphrasis was ‘defined in terms of its impact on an audience’ (p. 12).

I find evidence of poets stretching both the function and expression of ekphrasis. Genevieve Kaplan (2009), in reflecting on what ekphrasis can do and be for writers, is keen to emphasise ‘poems that purposefully move beyond description’ and that ‘share how the artwork makes the speaker feel or what it reminds the speaker of’ (p. 3). Cole Swensen (2011) also takes up this line of inquiry, providing examples of how poets are taking ekphrasis in new, formal directions, often with an emphasis on mode, whereby ‘the operative relationship is not so much between a writer and a work of art as it is between verbal and visual modes of experience’, and where ‘instead of using visual art as subject matter, works ... increasingly use [visual art] as a model for formal construction’ (p. 71).

By any of these definitions my activity is not ekphrasis. I am writing about performed and written works. I try to pinpoint the most relevant question that pertains to my technique. James Heffernan (1991) suggests in his influential essay ‘Ekphrasis and Representation’ that ‘ekphrasis is narrational and prosopopoeial’ and it ‘enables the silent figures of graphic art to

speak' (p. 304). If so, how might I name what I was doing in writing poetic (verbal) responses to artworks (texts) whose primary language already was verbal? I came up with awkward phrases such as 'making the verbal differently verbal'.

It started to feel like a slightly tortured and perhaps distracting process to tie my technique to ekphrasis. I interrogate my reasons for needing to name the process: trying to locate myself within a critical and poetic writing tradition. I identify that the effort was part of situating my practice. That is to say, in stepping into a new context (as a researcher-practitioner), I used external reference points to locate myself. By naming what I was and was not doing, what it was and was not like, I could get closer to seeing the specific shape and aim of my activity. Each investigative step adds a piece to the puzzle, as I draw on and adapt definitions and turns of phrase that are useful.

As with Sedgwick's instructive prompt (to be in front of a text rather than trying to see behind it), I come away from my ekphrastic analysis with another positional reference. A lovely proposition by Cole Swensen (2011), where she suggests ekphrasis might be a 'side-by-side, a walking-along-*with*' where 'the two, poem and artwork, are presumed to be going in the same direction and at the same speed; they are fellow travellers sharing a context' (p. 70).

This resonates with my responsive writing technique. There is a 'witness' to the activity. I start 'next to' the source text and start writing. It and my new text 'run alongside' each other. I exercise my poetic muscle by reading, attending, responding. The movement of one inspires the other.

Stepping into a fictocritical inheritance

In examining how different written forms interact within an academic and research environment, I am stepping into an inheritance of the fictocritical movement that had a particular groundswell among Australian writers in the 1990s. My understanding of fictocriticism is that it emerged as a deliberate strategy to push against the limits of traditional academic ways of writing, researching and responding by firstly making the tools and language of these modes more visible and audible (i.e., not giving them unquestioned authority), and secondly generating a multitude of different kinds of writing as an antidote.

Anna Gibbs writes in her 2005 essay 'Fictocriticism, affect, mimesis: Engendering differences' that 'Fictocriticism is a way of writing for which there is no blueprint and which must be constantly invented anew in the face of the singular problems that arise in the course of engagement with what is researched' (p. 1). The work done by writers such as Gibbs, Heather Kerr, Amanda Nettelbeck and Ania Walwicz created multitudes of possibilities as to how fictional and poetic writing techniques could be used to intervene with theoretical and critical writing. In reading some of these texts, there is often a sense of anger and challenge present, as if the writer is wanting to disrupt norms, challenge authority, mess with rules, name

difficulties, be irreverent with establishment. I love this sample from Walwicz's 1997 piece 'No, No, No: The Reluctant Debutante':

I always have to quote somebody. This is a form of gossip now. So-and-so said. That's the way to write about. The discourse, the formation of a discourse. This is what I am learning now. What somebody said and the interaction with that. That somebody says me now. Or I say that, I say that. I say what I think now. What I think about. (para. 6)

Repetition is key to Walwicz's poetic mode and serves here to demonstrate some of the experience of coming as a 'debutante' to the strangeness of academic writing. Gibbs writes that fictocriticism may act as 'a performance of repetition in order, ultimately, to do something differently, to undo something, to make a difference' (2005, p. 7). I interpret that Gibbs was referring to how repetition could 'undo' and 'make new' particular ways of using language pertaining to tradition and authority.

For me, repetition was key to trying to 'undo' and 'make new' my own writing practice. The seeds planted in the two *JOAN* responses demonstrated the value of returning to a source text more than once in this regard (i.e., breaking into a new form). This compulsion took deeper hold when I encountered Ellena Savage's essay collection *Blueberries* (2020). I found myself having a strange, magnetic, affective response. The writing got under my skin. It was clear, compelling and bold and also left me wanting. I wanted to tease the feeling out. I wrote a poetic, impressionistic piece which felt a bit insular. So I wrote two more analytical essays, about affect and its role in analysing creative works. Having thrashed some of the ideas out in this discursive mode, I wrote a further four experimental, poetic responses. I was turning the affective response over and over. Trying to elicit in words something about the relational quality of me reading the book, thinking about it, writing about it, and also the relationality I had to the author as a person within my community of practice.

These three short extracts, all written in response to the first essay in the book, 'Yellow City' (a recollection of a sexual assault), demonstrate how this approach of return and repetition elicited both different content and formal experimentation. The first piece is an experiment of poetry as intertextual assemblage. I bring other texts into conversation with the essay by Savage, to see how poetry can allow a nimble critical dialogue:

Cities full
of memories and bodies:
'She was positioned awkwardly,

defying gravity'.¹ Tales
and accounts, counting,
accounting:

'more than one in ten women

have been sexually assaulted
before they turn fifteen.’ⁱⁱ

Mouths trying to shape
what’s held in one body:
‘I had a scare one night;’ⁱⁱⁱ

- i. Tumarkin, Maria M. *Axiomatic*. Brow Books, 2018, p. 3
- ii. Lee, Bri. *Eggshell Skull*. Allen & Unwin, 2018. Kindle Edition, p. 40.
- iii. Savage, Ellena. *Blueberries*. The Text Publishing Company, 2020, p. 38. [1]

I lean into intertextuality (which I will discuss shortly in more detail) in order to test boundaries of ‘poetry’ and ‘scholarship’; where they meet and bleed and where they jar. It seems an effective way of writing into subject matter like this where facts and figures are both vital and overwhelming; poetry as a way to distil and to hold.

In the next piece I wanted to take the opposite approach and strip back all references to other texts and try to create a poetic account of the affective impact the essay had on me, both as I remembered its content and as a way of inserting my own memories of similar encounters:

Pop of sunshine
Journey bump train sway

Lazy hills
Roll over white paint

Where slipper tongues
Stab paper words

Peel back what is tight
Stinging pink

Clamp chested
Cries gargle

Thumb on thigh
Slide sweating

That thick skin
Gag pleading mouth

This final sample demonstrates how the technique can continue to move writer, subject and reader in all kinds of different, affective, poetic directions. I write here about how reading the

book became part of my broader, real-life relationship with the author and what this evoked for me in terms of my place within my community of practice:

And it's Melbourne and cold so huge coats are draped everywhere

You are planted in place

I go to the bar and put money in the jar and pour water in my paper cup

With kind words about all the writers reading that night

The snatches of text heat the room with bodies and sadness

You and your co-host bloom with superlatives

Like all of these events I belong and don't belong

And I think how this is a culture shift I like even if I have to push the cynical voice down in my brain

We all of us belong and don't belong

This shift to young women being almost violently kind to each other

In the bathroom someone smiles at me as if I am really there

I note the dialogic nature of this piece. My playwright origins creep back in, but the nature of the dialogue is not to drive action or reveal character (as would be standard in a piece of dramatic text) but rather to evoke a subtle process of shifting or jostling. There is an element here of Swensen's 'side-by-side' analogy. Both in the existence of my text alongside Savage's, and in the technique present in the piece itself. The poetic exercises taking different forms and lengths, attending to different urges, and employing different poetic muscles.

Intertextuality and assemblage

Julienne van Loon's *The Thinking Woman* (2019) has proved a generative text via which to explore intertextuality and assemblage as they relate to my method. In this collection, van Loon uses encounters with key female philosophers to examine themes such as anger, love and friendship. Reading the book provoked deep questioning about writers and texts that have influenced me. I wrote a number of poetic responses where I implicitly and explicitly explored these questions. I built on the 'formal diversity' I had started to investigate in the Savage

responses, attempting to use the page as a field via which I could test different ways of thinking, associating and assembling.

In describing Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of 'heteroglossia', Andrew Robinson writes that it is 'a challenge to the idea of linguistic creativity as an original and individual use of language. Even within a single perspective, there are always multiple voices and perspectives, because the language which is used has been borrowed from others' (2011, n.p.). I find great relief in this provocation, and others writing about intertextuality and assemblage, as it lifts the burden of originality. In using van Loon's text to work through some of my perceptions about writing, feminism, inheritance and creativity, I am in step with Julia Kristeva's definition of intertextuality, as outlined in her essay 'Word, dialogue and novel' where she writes about the 'insight first introduced into literary theory by Bakhtin: any text is constructed as a mosaic of quotations; any text is the absorption and transformation of another' (1986, p. 37).

This poem is titled 'At the top of the hill'. It was sparked from a striking image in the book where van Loon describes cycling with great speed down a steep road. I never learned to ride a bike so this image fills me with excitement, trepidation, envy and watchfulness. The poem tumbles down the page, veering from my encounter with van Loon to connections with other writers I find myself in conversation with:

Sara Ahmed (not the author
of this book) writes about
feminist companion texts.
In my notes I find:
'from where did I
learn feminism?
what are my
feminist companion
texts? Who are

the role models
I inherited from?'
I mostly remember
my childhood role model
as Trixie Belden.
Am I a Thinking Woman?
My partner says
I think too much

... and finishes with me encountering a shift in relationship with my mother and by association, my sense of relationship with other girls and women:

My mother emails
to ask what books
she should recommend
for her book group
she tells me how
at the last one, her
friend – a teacher – praised
her for leading it well.

This small girl
who lives inside her
has slipped into my care,
her watchful eyes
and worry she
won't know
the right thing
to say. We are at

the top of a hill,
having weaved
through bitumen
back streets and
past plum spattered
footpaths, waiting,
sweat on skin
for the other girls to come. [2]

Examining my technique of using poetry to tease out these relationships, associations and connections, I find further insight in Kristeva's essay. She writes of the function of poetic language: 'A vertical (hierarchical) division between signifier and signified, cannot be applied to poetic language' as 'the minimal unit of poetic language is at least *double*, not in the sense of the signifier/signified dyad, but rather, in terms of *one and other*' (1986, p. 40). Kristeva offers that 'poetic language functions as a *tabular model*, where each 'unit' ... acts as a multi-determined *peak*' (p. 40).

My intention when writing these pieces is not to provide an evaluative or definitive, critical or hierarchical response to the original texts. I want to capture the fluidity and mutability of how I am constantly being jostled and moved, reshaped and reconstructed by these intertextual relationships within my community of practice.

In the following piece, 'reckoning with', I put van Loon and myself into conversation with Goenpul author Aileen Moreton-Robinson:

reading *The Thinking Woman* while reading *Talkin' Up To The White Woman* while
being a white woman who tries to be a thinking

seeing Distinguished Professor Aileen Moreton-Robinson in conversation on
screen to mark 20 years since her seminal

women in this book are far away from me, geographically and successfully, blue light
emanates from their stars transmitted via van Loon's interviews

was a warm-blood invitation her soft uttering about how she came to a
decision early on that she had to learn about white knowledge because she didn't
understand

something unattainable in the kind of seriousness of endeavour the deciding from
early on to make a mark in the world and the not easy sometimes troubling ways in
which [3]

This is a troubling space, one where I don't have answers. I try to make a form that can account
for the confluences and tensions between different feminisms, including questions of race. I
invite the reader to participate in this leaping back and forth, to put their own position into the
gaps, the empty spaces between attempts at articulation.

There is a delicacy and a friction when writing in response to feminist arguments that include
race. I am a white woman born and raised in colonial Australia, with a Western literary
education. How to make sense of that and how to be an ethical writer and reader within that
context raises many questions and challenges. Approaching the problem via poetry does not
solve it nor does it replace other acts of writing or social action that I engage with, but it may
provide a way of finding language, or seeing gaps in language that enliven the dilemma in a
nuanced way. Questions arise as to how long a piece could be sustained in this way and where
such a piece might 'live' in the world of marketed or published text (is it a poem, an essay?).

I place the activity within the context of Bruno Latour's theories about how human and non-
human agents interact: 'To be accounted for, objects have to enter into accounts. If no trace is
produced, they offer no information to the observer and will have no visible effect on other
agents' (2005, p. 79). My interpretation of this is that objects (such as a creative text) are in
conversation with and have an impact on other agents (such as readers and audiences). If the
traces of these objects and our encounters with them are not captured, they go unexamined and
an opportunity is missed to notice new connections, to see how relationships happen, to
question 'givens', to make space for the new. Whereas if we do take time to account for objects
and our encounters with them, much possibility opens up: 'You begin with assemblages that
look vaguely familiar and you end up with completely foreign ones' (Latour, 2005, p. 77).

In accounting for the objects and the encounters, the anxieties and tensions, a new assemblage is made that is fruitful for generating more ideas and questions about what poetry is and what it can do as a social act. I embrace the notion of taking seriously all the elements of this activity, including possible and perceived failures. Just as with running, I return to the writing even on the days when it feels difficult, when I am tired, or can't see the progress. It is the return that constitutes the practice, the poetic exercise.

Close examination of creative practice

Ultimately, these investigations, comparisons and ruminations are means by which I am making my own creative practice clearer to myself.

What began as a curious, responsive activity (repurposing 'rewatchable' into 're-rememberable') and a desire to shift my playwriting practice set in train a practice-led research project. By slowly developing and identifying the poetic exercise method, I have taken up Barbara Bolt's provocation to let go of self-conscious attempts in the 'quest for the new' and to let newness emerge that is 'realised through our dealings with the tools and materials of production and in our handling of ideas, rather than a self-conscious attempt at transgression' (2010, p. 31).

The most formally ambitious piece I wrote in response to van Loon's book was called 'A Choral'. I wanted to make a piece that reflected something about identifying feminist companion texts and influences. In it, I write in three columns across the page: the left side accounting for my lived history, the right side accounting for theoretical reading and the centre column being where I try to bring multiple influences together. It is not as neat as this description would suggest. Content swims between each of the columns. I bring in photographs and scraps of old writing and other media (for example, snippets of reviews of my past work, a video of a friend singing classical Indian music). I am not trying to make a new form as much as stretch an existing form to suit my research purpose.

The poem on the page becomes a way to try and map reading, critical thinking, memory and internal dialogue; showing the multiple strands but also, importantly, them being held together on one page. I include a sample (minus the images) here:

About 18 when
I did this show:
Flowers for Algernon.
I played
Gina/Chairwoman/Jackie
and developed a crush
on Colin
who played

the lead, he was
a journalist who
loved acting
but chose to
do it as a hobby,
in his spare
time because,
as he put it,
he wanted to be
able to eat.

‘I first came across Kristeva’s
writing at the age of nineteen,’ (2019, p. 114)
writes van Loon.

you want this to line up
with the note about
being eighteen in your first
amateur play
it doesn’t quite match
you might cut and paste
it later
you might not

About reading
Kristeva’s essay
‘Stabat Mater’
van Loon writes:
‘The text was presented
in the form
of columns –
sometimes one,
sometimes two – so that
the reading experience
itself was discontinuous’ (116)

(inheritance #1)
I didn’t know this
but am doing it
what a writer
passes down

I want to try and depict with words how an artist is always holding multiple influences and positions even as they try to create a singular work. I didn't know how to 'do this' in advance, but trusted that, through poetic exercise, something would emerge.

In this way, my research sits within a creative arts research frame that Webb and Brien name 'agnostic', whereby the creative arts researcher is constituted by having 'a tolerance for complexity and confusion, and both a willingness and a capacity to be led by the data rather than by a predetermined point of view' (2008, p. 3). That is, I did not set out to 'prove' poetry could be used as a tool in my practice-led research, but rather, I started using poetry and then worked to identify and articulate how the poetry could lead the research.

I liken the approach to how Barbara Bolt describes a process whereby she discovered something new about her practice by encountering a material problem. A visual artist, she recalls an encounter with the harsh Australian light that disrupted how she painted, where 'light fractured form rather than revealed it' (2010, p. 32). This prompted a shift in her understanding and practice of landscape painting. The 'tools' she had as a painter were insufficient to the task at hand, and she had to adapt. She highlights that while her struggle to render form was 'particular and probably only relevant to me, the realisations generated by and through this encounter have offered an alternative conception of the work of art' (p. 33).

My two material problems – first, how to shift my practice away from playwriting and second, how to deal with an idiosyncratic desire to write about theatre as if it were re-rememberable – prompted me to use the materials of my practice. In doing this, and in repeating the task, I began using poetry as exercise. This not only 'solved' the two problems but, by putting the materiality of my practice (words on a page) at the centre of my research, I found new ways to make texts.

Conclusion

I come to the end of this run through my responsive writing technique, returning to the provocation of *The Rewatchables* podcast and my amateur running practice. Both have proved instrumental to how I have developed and now reflect on this poetic exercise practice. In pausing the very specific (and perhaps somewhat limiting) professional 'end goals' of practice that I am habituated towards, and in viewing poetry writing as a creative practice to simply return to over and over, I have built new poetic 'fitness' and skills.

In a very concrete way this has taken me forward into my next phase of practice-led research, which is interviewing writers. As I respond to these interviews, I find I have stronger poetic muscles and a growing range of techniques I can apply, and the confidence to continue to write through and into the unknown, nudging form along, learning by doing. Thinking by poeming. Researching through writing.

Notes

[1] 'Yellow is complicated' is published in the Creative Works section of this Special Issue Number 63 of *TEXT*.

[2] A later version of 'At the top of the hill' is published in the Creative Works of this Special Issue Number 63 of *TEXT*.

[3] 'reckoning with' is published in the Creative Works of this Special Issue Number 63 of *TEXT*.

References

- Altieri, C. (2003). *The Particulars of Rapture: An Aesthetics of the Affects*, Cornell University Press.
- Bolt, B. (2010). The magic is in handling. In E. Barrett & B Bolt (Eds.) *Practice as research: Approaches to creative arts enquiry* (pp. 27-34), I.B. Tauris.
- Collyer, E. (2020a, 31 March). *Re-remembering performance*. Witness: performance, discussion, community. <https://witnessperformance.com/re-remembering-performance/>
- Collyer, E. (2020b, 21 July). *Dear Joan*. Imagined Theatres. <http://imaginedtheatres.com/dear-joan/>
- Davis, K. & Valente, E. (2017). *JOAN. THE RABBLE*. Theatre Works. Theatre.
- Etherington, B. (2015, January 30). The poet tasters. *Sydney Review of Books*. <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/essay/australian-poetry-reviewing/>
- Felski, R. (2015). *The Limits of Critique*. University of Chicago Press. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rmit/detail.action?docID=4416681>
- Gibbs, A. (2005). Fictocriticism, affect, mimesis: Engendering differences. *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, 9(1). <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april05/gibbs.htm>
- Goldhill, S. (2007). What is ekphrasis for? *Classical Philology*, 102(1), 1-19. <https://doi.org/10.1086/521129>
- Kaplan, G. (2009). Ekphrasis for writers: John Ashbery's 'Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror'. *TEXT*, 13(1). <http://www.textjournal.com.au/april09/kaplan.htm>
- Krauth, N. & C. Bowman. (2018). Ekphrasis and the writing process. *New Writing*, 15(1), 11-30, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14790726.2017.1317277>
- Kristeva, J. (1986). Word, dialogue and novel. In T. Moi (Ed.), *The Kristeva Reader* (pp. 34-61). Columbia University Press.
- Latour, B. (2005). *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford University Press. <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/rmit/detail.action?docID=845911>
- Lee, B. (2018). *Eggshell Skull*. Allen & Unwin. Kindle Edition.
- Merriam-Webster. (n.d.). Ekphrasis. In *Merriam-Webster*. Retrieved February 4, 2021, from <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ekphrasis>

- Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). *Talkin' Up to the White Woman: Indigenous Women and Feminism*. University of Queensland Press.
- Robinson, A. (2011, July 29). *In Theory Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia*. Ceasefire. <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-1/>
- Savage, E. (2020). *Blueberries*. Text Publishing.
- Sedgwick, E.K. (2003). *Touching Feeling Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Duke University Press. Kindle Edition.
- Swensen, C. (2011). *Noise That Stays Noise*. The University of Michigan Press.
- Tumarkin, M. (2018). *Axiomatic*. Brow Books.
- van Loon, J. (2019). *The Thinking Woman*. NewSouth Publishing.
- Walwicz, A. (1997). No, no, no: The reluctant debutante. *Meanjin*. <https://meanjin.com.au/essays/no-no-no-the-reluctant-debutante/>
- Webb, R. (1999). Ekphrasis ancient and modern: the invention of a genre. *Word & Image*, 15(1), 7-18, <https://doi.org/10.1080/02666286.1999.10443970>
- Webb, J. & Brien, D. L. (2008). 'Agnostic' thinking: Creative Writing as Practice-Led Research. *Working Papers in Art and Design (Online)*, 5, 1-21. http://www.herts.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0014/12434/WPIAAD_vol5_webb_obrien.pdf
- Witness. (n.d.). *About Witness*. Witness: performance, discussion, community. <https://witnessperformance.com/about/>
- Zapruder, M. (2017). *Why Poetry*, Ecco, an Imprint of Harper Collins Publishers.