Flinders University

Andrew Miller

Grunge blotto

Abstract
Traditionally, memoir writers use 'prose' to build narratives. Sometimes they use images, but often not. In the multimedia age some memoirists are turning to art, photography, design, typography, and technology to increase the range and scope of their research and 'writing'. Writing, in this sense, takes on a more Derridean flavour, and comes to incorporate all manner of inscriptions. Readers consequently become viewers, and texts shift from 'readerly' to 'writerly' in the Barthesian sense. Design software like Adobe InDesign helps make such bricolages possible, and helps overcome some of the design limitations of mainstream word processors.
By combining elements of a/r/tography, applied grammatology, autoethnography, and creative non-fiction, I have created a graphic memoir bricolage to explore the death of my mother and the difficulties of narrating it. By combining words and images—design and content—I have come some way to ***art****iculating the challenges of this process.*

Andrew Miller is a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Flinders University. He has published critical and creative work in Wet Ink, Creative Approaches to Research*,* English in Australia*,* Liminalities*, and* New Writing: The International Journal for the Practice and Theory of Creative Writing*. His research interests include graphic texts, memoir, creative non-fiction, travel writing, hypertext, and critical and creative approaches to research. Andrew uses Derrida's theories on 'picto-ideo-phonographic' writing to create multimodal and nonlinear texts. His work challenges the 'prose-centrism' of traditional university research by incorporating images and design into its meaning-making process. Andrew supports the expansion of the term 'writing' to include 'non-verbal' and 'graphic' elements as readily as it currently embraces words and prose.*

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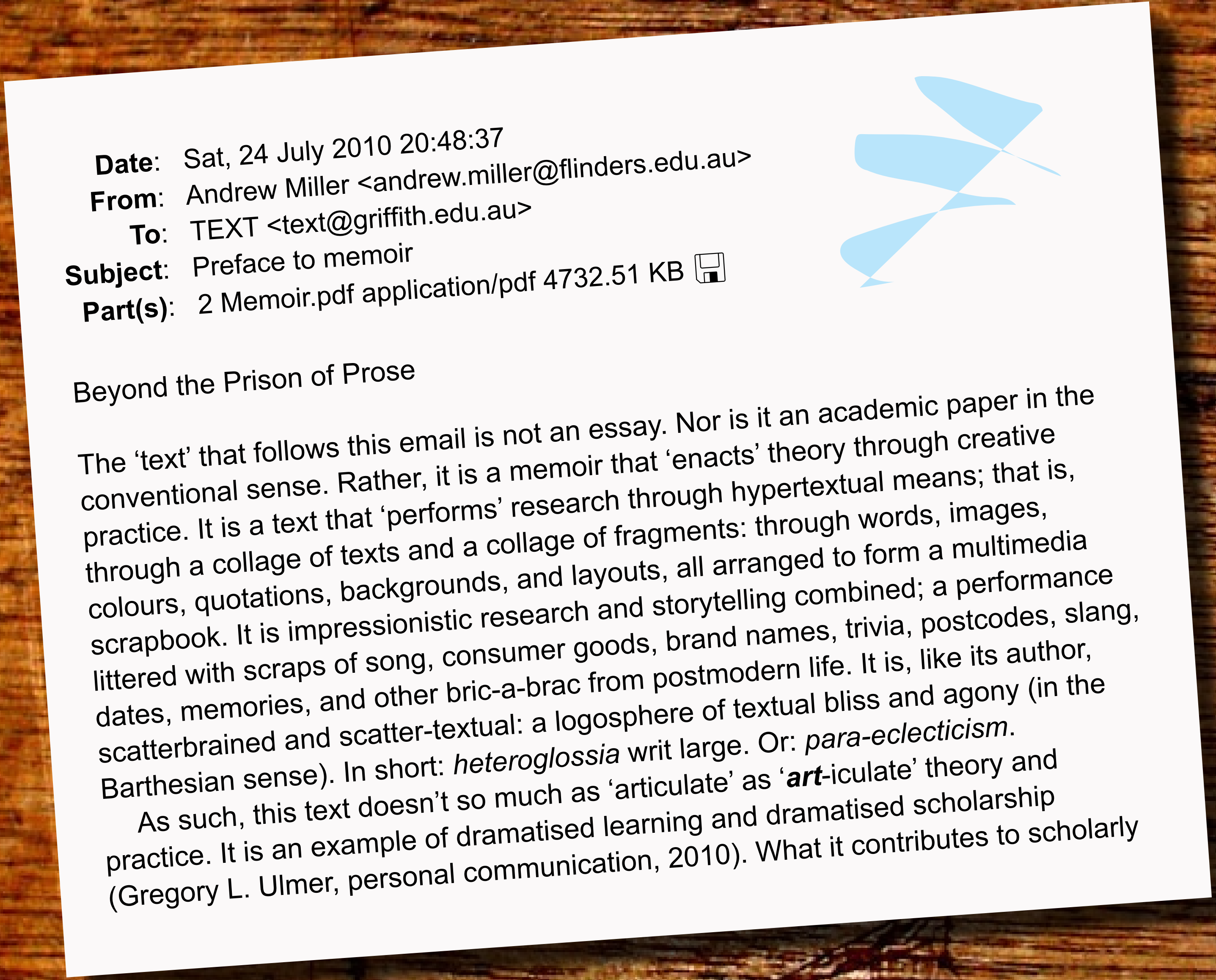
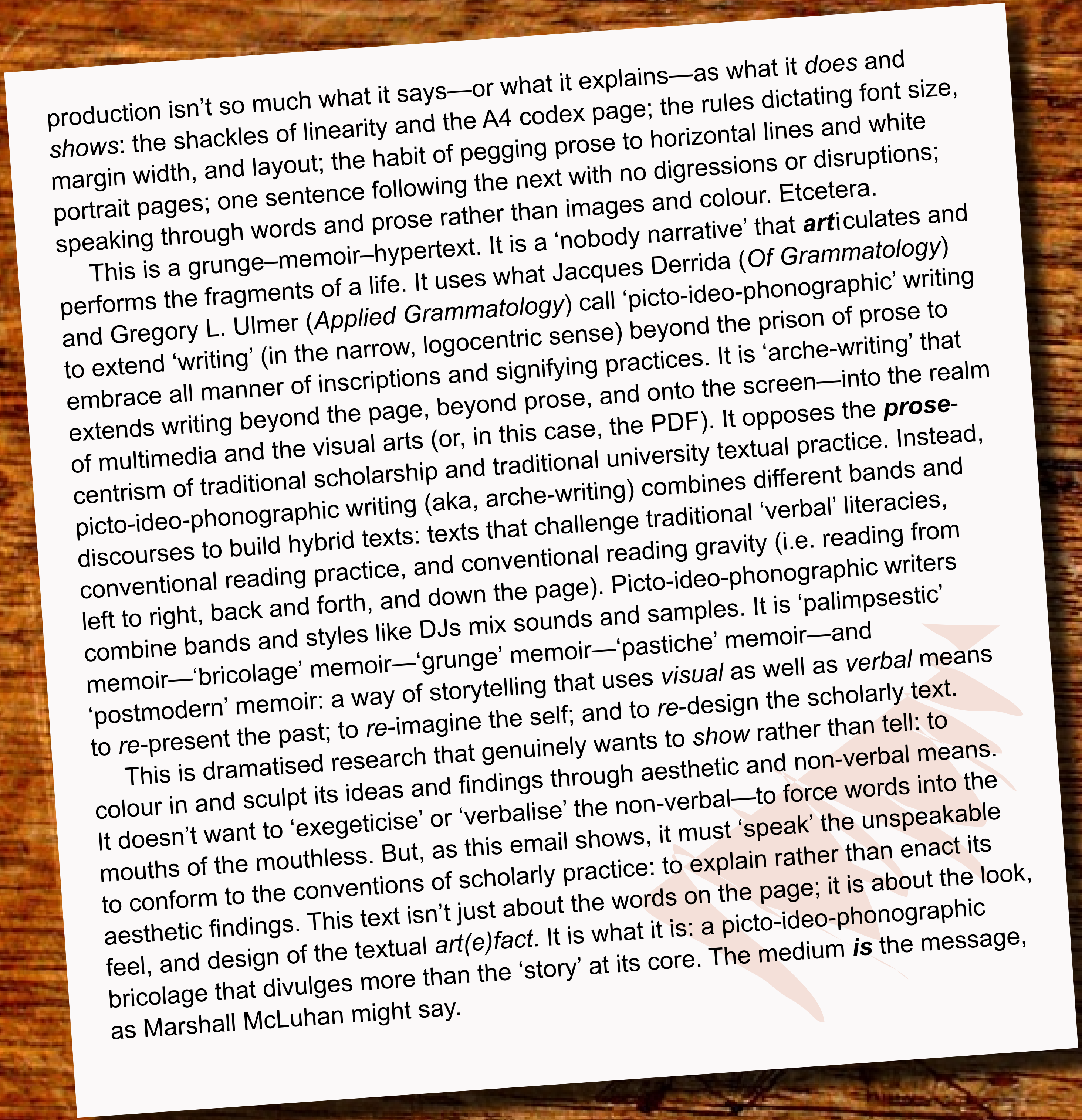


Date: Sat, 24 July 2010 20:48:37
From: Andrew Miller <andrew.miller@flinders.edu.au>
To: TEXT <text@griffith.edu.au>
Subject: Preface to memoir
Part(s): 2 Memoir.pdf application/pdf 4732.51 KB

Beyond the Prison of Prose

The ‘text’ that follows this email is not an essay. Nor is it an academic paper in the conventional sense. Rather, it is a memoir that ‘enacts’ theory through creative practice. It is a text that ‘performs’ research through hypertextual means; that is, through a collage of texts and a collage of fragments: through words, images, colours, quotations, backgrounds, and layouts, all arranged to form a multimedia scrapbook. It is impressionistic research and storytelling combined; a performance littered with scraps of song, consumer goods, brand names, trivia, postcodes, slang, dates, memories, and other bric-a-brac from postmodern life. It is, like its author, scatterbrained and scatter-textual: a logosphere of textual bliss and agony (in the Barthesian sense). In short: *heteroglossia* writ large. Or: *para-eclecticism*.

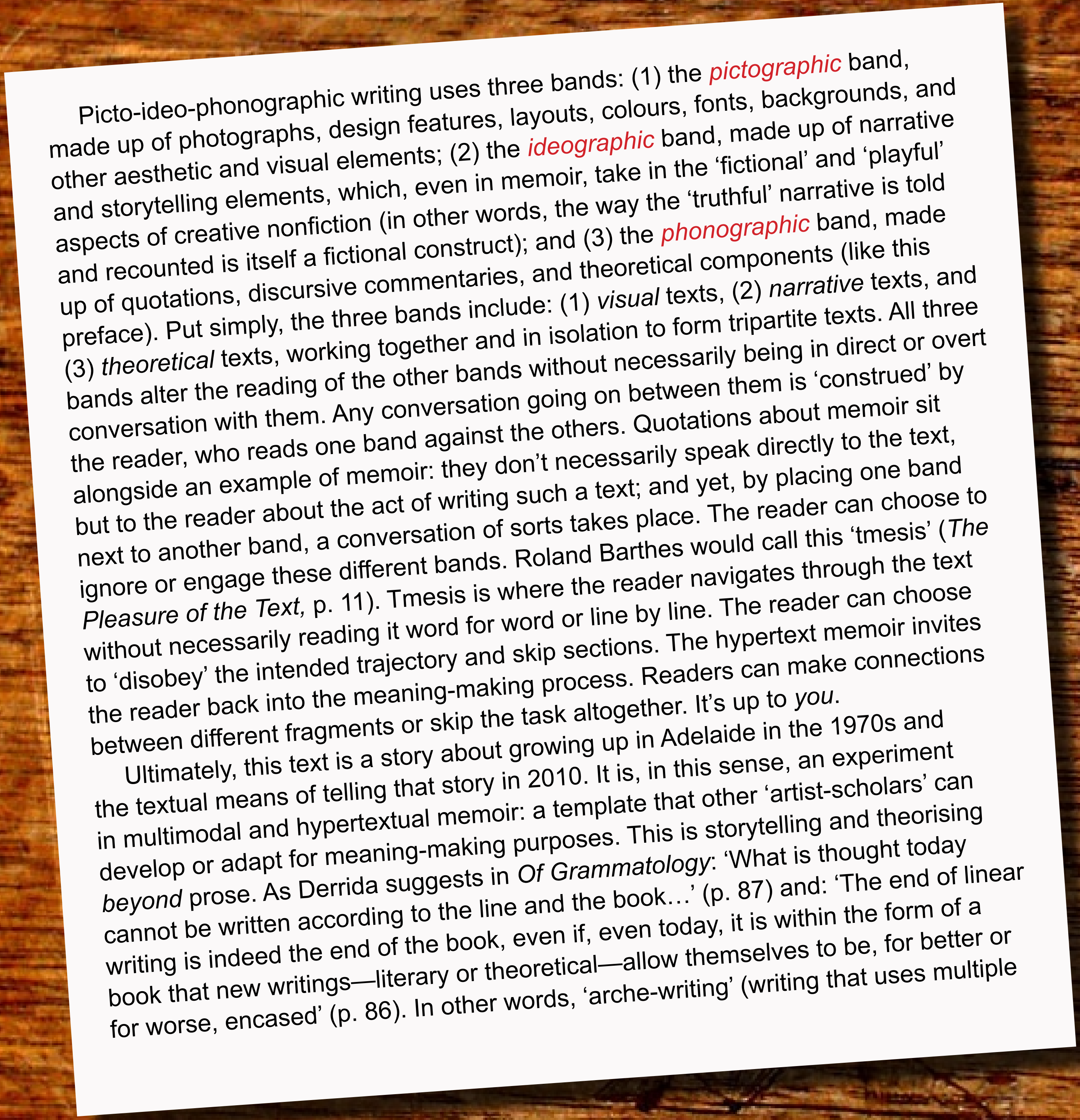
As such, this text doesn’t so much as ‘articulate’ as ‘***art***-iculate’ theory and practice. It is an example of dramatised learning and dramatised scholarship (Gregory L. Ulmer, personal communication, 2010). What it contributes to scholarly



production isn't so much what it says—or what it explains—as what it *does* and *shows*: the shackles of linearity and the A4 codex page; the rules dictating font size, margin width, and layout; the habit of pegging prose to horizontal lines and white portrait pages; one sentence following the next with no digressions or disruptions; speaking through words and prose rather than images and colour. Etcetera.

This is a grunge–memoir–hypertext. It is a 'nobody narrative' that **art**iculates and performs the fragments of a life. It uses what Jacques Derrida (*Of Grammatology*) and Gregory L. Ulmer (*Applied Grammatology*) call 'picto-ideo-phonographic' writing to extend 'writing' (in the narrow, logocentric sense) beyond the prison of prose to embrace all manner of inscriptions and signifying practices. It is 'arche-writing' that extends writing beyond the page, beyond prose, and onto the screen—into the realm of multimedia and the visual arts (or, in this case, the PDF). It opposes the ***prose-*centrism** of traditional scholarship and traditional university textual practice. Instead, picto-ideo-phonographic writing (aka, arche-writing) combines different bands and discourses to build hybrid texts: texts that challenge traditional 'verbal' literacies, conventional reading practice, and conventional reading gravity (i.e. reading from left to right, back and forth, and down the page). Picto-ideo-phonographic writers combine bands and styles like DJs mix sounds and samples. It is 'palimpsestic' memoir—'bricolage' memoir—'grunge' memoir—'pastiche' memoir—and 'postmodern' memoir: a way of storytelling that uses *visual* as well as *verbal* means to *re*-present the past; to *re*-imagine the self; and to *re*-design the scholarly text.

This is dramatised research that genuinely wants to *show* rather than tell: to colour in and sculpt its ideas and findings through aesthetic and non-verbal means. It doesn't want to 'exegeticise' or 'verbalise' the non-verbal—to force words into the mouths of the mouthless. But, as this email shows, it must 'speak' the unspeakable to conform to the conventions of scholarly practice: to explain rather than enact its aesthetic findings. This text isn't just about the words on the page; it is about the look, feel, and design of the textual *art(e)fact*. It is what it is: a picto-ideo-phonographic bricolage that divulges more than the 'story' at its core. The medium ***is*** the message, as Marshall McLuhan might say.



Picto-ideo-phonographic writing uses three bands: (1) the *pictographic* band, made up of photographs, design features, layouts, colours, fonts, backgrounds, and other aesthetic and visual elements; (2) the *ideographic* band, made up of narrative and storytelling elements, which, even in memoir, take in the ‘fictional’ and ‘playful’ aspects of creative nonfiction (in other words, the way the ‘truthful’ narrative is told and recounted is itself a fictional construct); and (3) the *phonographic* band, made up of quotations, discursive commentaries, and theoretical components (like this preface). Put simply, the three bands include: (1) *visual* texts, (2) *narrative* texts, and (3) *theoretical* texts, working together and in isolation to form tripartite texts. All three bands alter the reading of the other bands without necessarily being in direct or overt conversation with them. Any conversation going on between them is ‘construed’ by the reader, who reads one band against the others. Quotations about memoir sit alongside an example of memoir: they don’t necessarily speak directly to the text, but to the reader about the act of writing such a text; and yet, by placing one band next to another band, a conversation of sorts takes place. The reader can choose to ignore or engage these different bands. Roland Barthes would call this ‘tmesis’ (*The Pleasure of the Text,* p. 11). Tmesis is where the reader navigates through the text without necessarily reading it word for word or line by line. The reader can choose to ‘disobey’ the intended trajectory and skip sections. The hypertext memoir invites the reader back into the meaning-making process. Readers can make connections between different fragments or skip the task altogether. It’s up to *you*.

Ultimately, this text is a story about growing up in Adelaide in the 1970s and the textual means of telling that story in 2010. It is, in this sense, an experiment in multimodal and hypertextual memoir: a template that other ‘artist-scholars’ can develop or adapt for meaning-making purposes. This is storytelling and theorising *beyond* prose. As Derrida suggests in *Of Grammatology*: ‘What is thought today cannot be written according to the line and the book…’ (p. 87) and: ‘The end of linear writing is indeed the end of the book, even if, even today, it is within the form of a book that new writings—literary or theoretical—allow themselves to be, for better or for worse, encased’ (p. 86). In other words, ‘arche-writing’ (writing that uses multiple bands and multiple signifying systems) resists the repression levelled against 'pluri-dimensional' texts in and beyond the university: and the university, let it be said, has been—and continues to be—opposed to pluri-dimensional texts, even when it says it welcomes them. After all, *non*-verbal texts require verbal texts (i.e. the exegesis) to explain and validate them in Creative Writing and Creative Arts PhDs: the genuinely non-verbal or wordless PhD is still some way off (if conceivable at all). Finding places to publish such artefacts is difficult, particularly as most publishers tend to tame such texts by forcing them to fit pre-existing templates and established aesthetic guidelines before publication can occur. The hidden curriculum is clear: pluri-dimensional and multimodal texts are still largely illegitimate in the scholarly context.

This text resists those guidelines and that repression.

It was made using Adobe InDesign.

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GrungeBlotto

1970-2010

Drinking and drugging
as a means of
forgetting
...

`Amnesia´ holds us
together and stops the world
falling apart
...

Tully: 'You can really write. Why do you live like a bum?'

Henry: 'I am a bum. What do you want me to do? Do you want me to write about the sufferings of the upper classes?'

Tully: 'This may be news to you but they suffer too.'

Henry: 'Hey baby, nobody suffers like the poor.'

(Mickey Rourke, *Barfly* [motion picture], 1987)

WHAT IT WAS LIKE

○□[1]

The past. How to make amends to the past? The undertow, underflow, memory. Dream. No freeing yourself. No way out, but in.

(Beverley Farmer, *A Body of Water*, 1990, Queensland: UQP, p. 149)

1.

I was born in January 1970, the same year Jimi Hendrix drowned on his own vomit.

2.

My first memory was my Mum's death in 1974. I was four-years-old and my brother was two.

Our problem was that no-one told us what happened. The years unfolded through the 1970s with an unspeakable nightmare at their centre.

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[1] An American hobo symbol from the 1920s and '30s. Translation: 'A man with a bad temper lives here.'

Taking away the moments that make up the dull day.

Pink Floyd

We orbited this nightmare but seldom touched it. Sometimes Dad got drunk and sobbed over my bed, ‘Y’r mum was the mo–mo–most beautiful woman in the wo–wo–world.’

His silhouette shuddering against the golden haze of the doorway, his face dark, his breath thick and beery.

The absence and silence grew louder and denser.

Like Edvard Munch’s *The Scream*, we screamed in silence, an unspeakable and continuous and deafening silence.

‘She’d be pr–pr–proud of you,’ he would sob.

A forefinger skimming my brow, the lightest touch. His breath a fog of despair and spittle.

But this didn’t change the fact that this woman, aged 34, threw herself (or fell) from a 100-foot cliff and out of our lives on April 26 1974, just upstream from Blanchetown (5357) on the River Murray, in the still of night, beneath a sky full of stars and endless promise.

Twinkle, twinkle, little star,
How I wonder what you are!

To a bloody and brutal death in the rubble and

backwaters below.

Up above the world so high,
Like a diamond in the sky!

And for as long as any of us would live, her body would plummet through our minds and hearts, our dreams and nightmares, until the blood that sprayed from her head—spouts of red over the fossil-encrusted sandstone rocks at the base of the cliffs, on the edge of the lagoon, on the edge of the Murray, on the edge of the night—stained our very souls.

Like Jackson Pollock's *Blue Poles*, only in blood, brain, and tufts of blonde hair.

And even today I treasure an old comb my mum once used to hold back her hair.

And so I grew up with Dad's hands forever rousing me from my dreams—and a face twisted and pale with horror and terror. Eyes bulging from sockets. Skin stretched.

'*I don't know where your mum is*,' he said one morning in 1974.

And I didn't either. But as the 1970s unfolded I began to wonder. For she never returned. And so my life started with an absence, an active and

No doubt adversity
is a great teacher,
but its lessons are
dearly bought, and
often the profit we
gain from them is
not worth the price
they cost us.

(Jean-Jacques
Rousseau, *Reveries
of the Solitary
Walker*, 1792/1979,
Middlesex: Penguin,
p. 47)

volatile absence. An absence with body and shadow. My Mum's ghost stalking us through the banalities of everyday life. Nineteen seventy-five, six, seven, and eight.

And so I characterise my childhood as the Age of Uncertainty. As the Age of Chaos. As the Age of Terror. *Vertigo*.

I was so scared I didn't know I was scared. Fear was my default mode of being. I would lie awake at night waiting for the murderers. I was convinced they were coming, not for me, but for Dad. I would lie in bed, Scotty snoring softly in the bunk below, listening for murderers. And I would hear them. Nearly every night I would hear them. I would hear them watching TV in the room outside my door, chatting and squabbling and plotting. My heart would beat at my wrists and throat. My forehead would burn. I would marvel at their patience and confidence. My mind would race. And I would wait. Wait for day. Wait until Dad roused me from the chill of dawn to shower for school.

Insomnia, like fear, would never leave me.

IF I CLOSE MY EYES MY DAD WILL DIE.

Like my Mum.

In the life-story, the narrativisation always takes the form of a life course - facts and events selected as relevant and organised within a path, marked out by rites of passage: birth, school, first communion, first love, examinations, first job, marriage, birth of children and so on. The construction of the life course scheme refers, in the interaction with the audience, to a shared knowledge: the models of life experience taken for granted in a socio-historical context.

(M-F. Chanfrault-Ducket, 'Textualisation of the self & gender identity in the life-story,' *Feminism and Autobiography*, 2000, London: Routledge, p. 65)

IF I SLEEP BAD THINGS WILL HAPPEN. So I keep watch. But when the murderers come, and come they will and do, I stay perfectly still, gasping small gasps between the slit of my lips, waiting for Scotty and me to become orphans.

When the blazing sun is gone,
When he nothing shines upon,
Then you show your little light,
Twinkle, twinkle, all the night.

And I lived my childhood expecting doom and departure. I lived in nightly terror of a bullet entering Dad's head, behind the ear, in the jelly of the brain.

I had heard a story about a girl who answered the phone and door by saying her parents were asleep, and that callers and visitors should ring back or return when they finally awoke. This went on for weeks until one visitor smelt a rat. The girl had washed and clothed and taken herself off to school every day. She had thought nothing of her parents' endless slumber. For her, two-week sleeps were not yet unreasonable. Her parents were simply tired. And tired they were. The astute visitor decided to investigate. And—*fuck the world, God*

help that poor little girl!—found two decomposing bodies with bullet holes in the soft part of the head behind the ears. There was no reason for the little girl to suspect anything so hellish. Her parents were merely hibernating like bears. *As snug as bugs in rugs*. Peaceful to look upon, intact, sleeping.

And she was a good little girl who kept herself alive. Kept herself neat.

And I wanted to marry that little girl but didn't know how.

And so I thought it highly likely these assassins were on their way to 13 Centre Way, Belair, South Australia, 5052, to shoot my Dad in the head in the soft part behind the ear.

This would leave Scotty and me orphans.

And so I lay awake at night waiting for the end.

And so I had a sleepy and sleepless childhood hoping the world wouldn't stop. Lethargic by day, electric by night. *Vertigo*.

Then the traveller in the dark,
Thanks you for your tiny spark,
He could not see which way to go,
If you did not twinkle so.

I would answer the phone by saying, 'Hello, 2785832,' like Dad had taught me; followed by, 'Dad can't come to the phone right now—can I take a message, please?'

Just like the little girl.

A decade later I had my first drink. A mug of claret with my Dad as we sat around a campfire on the banks of the river at the very same 20-acre block Mum had stained with Miller blood a decade or so earlier. My Dad poured me the mug of claret. 'Try this,' he said. 'Don't finish it if you can't.' But I did. *And did I did I did I do, mug after mug, ha ha ha.*

As the fire spat sparks at the encroaching night and moths and bugs swarmed and burned against the spotlight, a new world dawned. It was as if I had been seeing the world in two dimensions only. As if life was projecting through the black and white television we got in the 1970s. As if I hadn't actually seen the world yet. But as this bitter syrup burned my throat and enflamed my gut, and the odd carp flopped and splashed in the darkness beyond, a wave of warmth and power spread through my body. I had arrived. At the age of thirteen I was finally born. The preceding years were a prelude, a

> The self is no longer understood ... as constituted by a history which *then* shapes its autobiographical performance. Rather, it is autobiography itself which produces the subject: the subject, that is, is textually constituted and that textual constitution has a history.
>
> (S. Radstone, 'Autobiographical times,' *Feminism and Autobiography*, 2000, London: Routledge, p. 203)

THERE IS NOTHING OUTSIDE THE TEXT.

Derrida, *Of Grammatology*

haze, a premonition. But now I was alive.

And angry. And thirsty. And shouting.

My life had been leading to this one fire-filled moment.

As your bright and tiny spark,
Lights the traveller in the dark—
Though I know not what you are,
Twinkle, twinkle, little star.

It had begun.

The next morning I arose feeling sick and full of dread. I knew something had happened but couldn't remember what.

The caravan smelt musty and sweet. Like the atmosphere had turned damp with claret, with a sticky, syrupy fug. An orange haze with dust suspended in blades of sunshine pierced the tattered curtains. And my head throbbed as if my brain were bruised and swollen. And my lips were caked in the jam of Dr Pat durries smoked too far down the paper. My eyes, glued with sand and grit, were blind but seeing. *Stars*. My throat felt torn. *Blistered*.

Yes, my first drink had led to my first drunk

We can't write sanitized, syrupy versions of our own lives. We have to write about problems, conflict, the dark night of the soul; we have to focus more on the bad than the good.

(Claudia Mills, 'Friendship, Fiction, & Memoir: Trust & Betrayal in Writing from One's Own Life,' *Ethics of Life Writing*, 2004, London: Cornell University Press, p. 105)

which had led to my first blackout. *Vertigo*. I was a blackout drunk from the beginning. *Sick*. The only thing that would change in the next twenty years was the frequency with which I would repeat the performance—always more often, always more disastrously. I was performing the march of the living dead. But with gusto. With life.

The clear-headed me was retreating into an alcoholic fog. Suicide by instalment.

When I finally lurched from the caravan my Dad eyed me off from his humpy shed. 'You're a bloody dickhead,' he said, with venom and verve.

I saw tufts of tobacco strewn over the dirt at my feet.

'Maybe you should learn to roll before taking up smoking,' he added, teeth appearing in his beard.

Sulphur-crested cockatoos squawked across the spinning sky, flashes of yellow and white against the distant blue. One of the dogs brushed my legs, tail wagging, tongue flopping.

In full drunken flight I had told Dad *what I really thought*. And one of my pronouncements was that from this day forward I would smoke *whenever* and *wherever* I liked. Which I more-or-less did.

Even better than the real thing.

U2

So, alcohol had freed me from the bondage of excessive thought and excessive introspection. It had freed me from the bondage of *me*. With liquor in my belly I was able to turn inside–out. An extrovert, an alter ego who spoke first and thought later, who lived beyond the reach of fear and shame, had hijacked my body and mind, like the Incredible Hulk, bursting out of my skin. But the thing I remember most about that night was the joy and fear alcohol brought me. I was both terrified and excited by its magical properties. It was the elixir of life with poison in its dregs. With alcohol in my blood I lived two lives: one as a sullen, sick, and silent introvert (for half the week), and the other as an excited, energetic, and loud extrovert (for the rest of the week). There were two of me. We were *us*. And we were at war with each other. And the world.

Through my teen years the silent and sullen self appeared more often than the loud and excited self did, but by the age of 32 there was little of the silent self left. The drunken lunatic had swamped him. And he took me all the way to hell.

To rehab in 2001.

We never cease to reinterpret the narrative identity that constitutes us, in the light of the narratives proposed to us by our culture. In this sense, our self-understanding presents the same features of traditionality as the understanding of a literary work. It is in this way that we learn to become the *narrator* and the hero *of our own story*, without actually becoming the *author of our own life*.

(Paul Ricoeur, in B. Byrne, 'Reciting the self,' *Feminist Theory*, 2003, vol 4(1), p. 32)

3.

Ah-dee-doo-ah-dee-doo-dah-day
Ah-dee-doo-ah-dee-day-dee

My Dad went all but bankrupt in 1980 when the bottom fell out of the building industry. To save our 20-acre riverside tract of mallee scrub and moonscape he sold our house in Belair—with its four bedrooms, three bathrooms, lounge, dining, TV, office, rumpus, heated pool, workshop, cellar, balconies, and city and coastal views—the house he had designed and built in 1971 for his wife, baby, and two-year-old son (me). Within three years Mum had jumped off the world and shattered his dreams.

He went to the pub and sent Scotty and me to our grandparents' house in Glenalta (5052), where we would spend part of every week. Omi and Opi spoke German to each other but English to us. I never did tell the kids at school that I was half kraut. There was no need: I had ginger hair and freckles; it was Scotty, with his blazing blue eyes, perfect skin, and thick blond hair who looked Aryan. I looked more like Muriel, my nanna from Marree (5733)—a dusty town 685 km north of Adelaide.

Sunburnt and windswept, Muriel's white-freckly skin was folded and lined like rock. She smoked and drank and cacked with the best of them. 'Tickle me pink,' she would say through plumes of Benson and Hedges smoke.

From 1974 to 1980 the house in Belair became a giant bachelor pad with three boys and two very absent girls. Mum was dead and her ashes buried in Centennial Park, Pasadena, 5042, and my sister, an older child from Mum's first marriage, went to live with Omi and Opi. Her old room, with its mock Queen Anne furniture, white carpet, and blue curtains, became something of a museum piece—a still and silent tableau that went untouched for five years. I sold the furniture twenty years later for a few hundred dollars when Dad died. It was still with him in 1993 in his dingy flat in St Marys (5042).

He whistled and he sang 'til the green woods rang
And he won the heart of a lady

In 1980 Dad, Scott, and I moved down to the Adelaide plains to a small dump on Kingston Avenue in Daw Park (5041) where we shared a

... I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends.

(Joan Didion, 'On Keeping a Notebook,' *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 1968/2008, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, p. 139)

room: a king-size bed and single bed side-by-side. We were moving, not from rags to riches, but from riches to rags: from a 15-room, two-storey mansion to a 4-room, sunken kennel. *St. Agnes' Eve—Ah, bitter chill it was!* The race to the bottom had begun. I was on my way to dereliction and a gypsy worldview. Instead of hearing magpies and kookaburras warbling and laughing outside my bedroom window, I now heard the ongoing thrum of engines and sirens on Winston Avenue, and Dad snoring like a lawnmower beside me. Where once there were gullies to roam and creeks to tiptoe and caves to smoke in and gawp at *Playboy* and *Penthouse* magazines, there were now vacant lots to jump BMX bikes in and exhaust fumes to breathe and condemned buildings to smash and pepper with stones. Our bedroom window overlooked a grey street rather than a pink horizon. My brother and I were mountain men turned rockers. Ripple soles, black beanies, and flannelette shirts: the bogan attire. Kiss cards were all the rage. In 1980 Kiss sacked drummer Peter Criss because of his drug addiction, and Bon Scott (age 33) from ACDC and John Bonham (age 32) from Led Zeppelin both

I am drinking my self `out of´ being.

Andrew Miller

drowned on their own vomit: Scott in February and Bonham in September. Life in the fast lane was tough. But seeing Kiss live at the Adelaide Oval was a blast.

A gypsy rover came over the hill
Down through the valley so shady
He whistled and he sang 'till the green woods rang
And he won the heart of a lady

Scotty and I rode to Mitcham Railway Station every morning on our BMX bikes to catch a train to Pinera Railway Station up in the hills. We weren't about to leave Belair Primary School and our mates. The sprawling school on Main Road with its transportable buildings and unbeatable football teams was our emotional home. We dobbed Ross Faulkner footballs, not Sherrins. Belair Primary School was where we learned to kick, swear, fight, kiss girls, play foursquare, and smoke cigarettes. It was the golden era when kids could buy smokes no questions asked. In the late 1970s I'd buy a packet of Ardafs and mixed lollies after selling newspapers at the bus stop by the bridge above Pinera Railway Station. With tips I sometimes made $2 a night, but

> That was the problem with booze and drugs, wasn't it? At some point they couldn't stop that ticking sound, the sound of certain emptiness. And that, I suppose, is what I'd been trying to tell my mother that day: that her faith in justice and rationality was misplaced, that we couldn't overcome after all, that all the education and good intentions in the world couldn't help plug up the holes in the universe or give you the power to change its blind, meaningless course.
>
> (Barack Obama, *Dreams From My Father*, 1995/2008, Melbourne: Text Publishing, p. 96)

usually far less. A pack of smokes cost me about a dollar. And smoking was cool, even if it stunted your growth and made you spew.

Being a licensed builder Dad renovated the small dump in Daw Park and added rooms—*bedrooms*, thank fuck—before selling up to pay off more debt. We moved back into the Adelaide Hills—to Eden Hills, 5050—into the first of a string of rental houses within cooee of Blackwood High School (5051) and our old stomping ground. It was about this time I had my first drink with Dad at the river and got a taste for it. Dad went to the river most weekends, even though Mum died there. For him it was paradise. In the 1970s Scott and I went with him, but by the mid-80s we stayed home to play football or run amok. Scott sometimes stole Dad's Holden Kingswood and hooned around the streets of Blackwood even though he could barely see over the dash, Iron Maiden blaring from the windows. By Year 10 I was restless, irritable, and discontent—as *The Big Book* would say. Bludging school and binge drinking and smoking dope were more important to me now than playing football and cricket, even though I was captain of both

Post-structuralism:

Post-structuralists hold that the concept of 'self' as a singular and coherent entity is a fictional construct. Instead, an individual comprises conflicting tensions and knowledge claims (e.g. gender, class, profession, etc). Therefore, to properly study a text a reader must understand how the work is related to his or her own personal concept of self. This self-perception plays a critical role in one's interpretation of meaning.

(Wikipedia, 'Post-structuralism,' accessed 21.1.08)

... all memoir is a process of researching one's own life. By that I mean rethinking, or course. I also mean reimagining and perhaps revising—because to see the past anew is often to view it, even at great distances, more clearly.

(Michael Pearson, ‘Researching Your Own Life,’ *Writing Creative Nonfiction*, 2001, Cincinnati, Ohio: Story Press)

teams from Years 8 to 10. Like Jimi Hendrix said: ‘Excuse me while I kiss the sky—’

At the end of Year 10 I dropped out of school and bought a 125cc Yamaha and left home with a hot leather jacket and a death wish. I went on the dole for homeless teenagers and moved into a corrugated iron shed at the back of a friend’s house in Belair. Mouldy carpets and posters lined the walls to soften the harsh iron aesthetic and to ward off freezing winds and wildlife. There was no door but a flap of carpet, and no two sheets of iron overlapped. Each post tilted and water dripped in. The shed cost $20 a week to rent and the dole paid $45. With a disposable income of $25 I could afford petrol for the Yamaha, a tin of Dr Pat or Rider tobacco, a few scraps of food, and maybe some buds or Stone’s Green Ginger Wine. Although famished, and with my self-esteem plummeting, I took to starving myself until I had lost about one-third my bodyweight. Gaunt, with long hair, earrings, and the odd curling bristle on my chin, and wearing torn woollen jumpers from the Goodwill, I was fast becoming a grunge version of the Gypsy Rover I had sung about in school. Where Pip in

Great Expectations was becoming a Gentleman, I was becoming a bum—like Magwitch (before his deportation). I once grabbed an acoustic guitar from the Goodwill and simply ran from the shop. *Fuck the world—*

At this time Dad and Scott were living in Hawthorndene (5051) in another rental house. Weeks earlier Dad had discovered my dope plants and pipes and I had taken off. I would sneak back while Dad was at work and steal chicken and bread before escaping back to my humpy in Belair.

Months later I moved into a caravan in Dad's carport so I could come and go as I pleased. The deal was that I had to get a job and not grow dope in the garden or keep pipes or bongs in the caravan. I agreed and celebrated by taking magic mushrooms with a mate. We sat in the little van laughing and drawing pictures until dawn, sipping echoes of Coopers Sparkling Ale. We were in Middle Earth with Tom Bombadil and the hobbits. *No flies on me, mate.*

I started work in a factory making fold-up chairs for nine hours a day. I was the youngest mug on the floor and paid a paltry wage. 'There *is* a job here,'

> If we don't write about the hurtful, harmful, dark, dangerous things, we won't write anything anybody will want to read.
>
> (Claudia Mills, 'Friendship, Fiction, & Memoir: Trust & Betrayal in Writing from One's Own Life,' *Ethics of Life Writing*, 2004, London: Cornell University Press, p. 105)

said the floor-manager, 'if you want it. *If* you want it?' I remember it cost me $20 a week in petrol in 1986 to drive Dad's yellow Holden Kingswood from Hawthorndene to Unley (5061) where the corrugated iron factory sat oddly out-of-place in an otherwise upwardly mobile suburb. I received about $200 a week in wages, enough to buy smokes, beer, dope, and the odd hot guitar. With my 50 watt Peavey amp I could blast the neighbourhood with my own sloppy brand of heavy metal grunge. But I was no Jimmy Page and soon quit.

Working in the gloom of the factory—smelling sawdust, paint, sweat, and machinery, watching sallow faces and baggy overalls, listening to the endless hiss and clunk and tit and tat of machines and punches, feeling sick—sent me into a state of despair. I would watch the clock, second after tedious second. I would watch the chairs stack up, chair after tedious chair. I would watch the suits passing overhead on mezzanine walkways and sneer with contempt at their powerful demeanours and care-free gestures, hoping some inexplicable and random act of God and cruelty would rip the grates out from underneath their shiny black shoes

OVER NO.
TIME
OVER No
10
DAY
OVERS THIS BALL

and send them hurtling, flapping and screaming, to the concrete below, where a population of semi-literate waifs worked for longnecks of beer, flagons of port, and the weekends. As Pink Floyd had forewarned in 1975: ‘Welcome to the machine—’

I soon quit this job (‘No worries,’ said the floor-manager) and started working at the Tandoori Oven on Unley Road, Malvern, 5061, where I would set up the restaurant for evening meals and lug cartons of wine and beer and food to the storeroom. ‘What did you dream?’ sang Pink Floyd. ‘It’s alright, we told you what to dream.’ Chicken Tandoori and Buttered Naan very quickly became my favourite meal; particularly after fistfuls of cashews from the storeroom while vacuuming the floors all afternoon. And each time the Australian Cricket Team came to dinner or the health inspector came to scrutinise my work, my boss, Pomi, a tall, dashing north Indian Sikh, would give me the thumbs-up and say, ‘Well done, Andrew, well done, Andrew, well done, Andrew.’ It was a dream job for a sixteen-year-old: start at noon and finish at five; perfect for sleeping in and staying up late.

All-night sessions drinking and smoking with

Telling a narrative about one's life involves making oneself the subject of the story, claiming both intelligibility and agency for oneself. It often involves taking a particular approach to the self – as experiencing transformation and change.

(B. Byrne, 'Reciting the self,' *Feminist Theory*, 2003, vol 4(1), p. 46)

mates became a staple way of life. I gravitated to people like myself, teenagers hungry for excess, loud noise, old cars, and parties. In September 1986 Glenelg won back-to-back Premierships and I was there, euphoric. Pink Floyd, Led Zeppelin, Alice Cooper, Midnight Oil, Cold Chisel, Black Sabbath, ACDC, and Metallica provided the soundtracks for a bogan generation. Ian Dury said it best in 1981: 'Sex and drugs and rock and roll / Is all my brain and body need.' The only thing he forgot was BEER. Something Bon Scott and Jim Morrison would never have forgotten.

Late in 1986 I nicked off again, this time to Kangaroo Island. I thought I'd build a shanty hut in the sand dunes near Kingscote (5223) and live like Colin Thiele's Storm Boy, scavenging for jetsam and fish on the beach with Mr Percival and Fingerbone Bill.

A bearded bikie with a shovel in one hand and a dead cat in the other found me on the beach at dusk and told me I was nuts. 'You'll freeze to death,' he shouted, eyes squinting against the sand and wind, beard sweeping back over his shoulders. He buried the cat in the sand and invited me to stay at

BREAK ON THROUGH TO THE OTHER SIDE.

The Doors

his place where he and his mate were hiding out from whatever mischief they'd been up to on the mainland. The bikies sipped and smoked their way through a dozen longnecks of Coopers Ale—and as many pipes—a day. Every day was a Saturday: 'Cloudy but fine,' as the Coopers mantra promised. Whilst I didn't find paradise, the bikies and I (and their bullterrier) did find a slab of Southwark Stout at the rubbish dump and a hippy living in a lean-to on a sand dune. They taught me to cook two-dollar meals with lentils, rice, and black bean sauce, and how to use Indian ink, cotton wool, and needles to make cheap jailhouse tatts. Their rental house in Parndana (5220) had little or no furniture, just mattresses.

When I returned to Dad's place in Hawthorndene with a rose tattooed on my foot, my brother gawped. 'Show me,' he said. I showed him the trick and soon Scotty was the youngest kid on the street to have a giant puma tattooed on his forearm. He traced the puma line-by-line from his sports bag. Dad said, 'You're a bloody dickhead,' and that was that. Twenty-five years later I still have that rose tattoo on my left foot. It was the first of many such

Children know that ships sink, planes crash and dams burst. Adults, by and large, do not.

(Richard Flanagan, *The Sound of One Hand Clapping*, 1998, Sydney: Picador, p. 28)

tribal tatts.

By February 1987 I was back at Blackwood High School, wasted and half-starved, and ready to take on Year 11. Finishing school suddenly seemed like a good idea. Building chairs in factories and cleaning toilets in restaurants and digging trenches at building sites and scavenging beer at rubbish dumps no longer seemed romantic. The lunatic self retreated, battered and bewildered. I settled back into my quieter, more introverted self and studied diligently, and left off binge drinking and joint smoking to the very occasional weekend. Cheech and Chong would have to wait. My head cleared, I put on weight, and I matriculated with straight As and nicotine stains in 1988. Having won the Year 12 Art prize, I was on my way to art school at The South Australian School of Art, at Underdale (5032), to follow my dreams.

Remarkably, a girl I had walked to school with in Year 10 appeared at my window one night just after I finished my Year 12 exams. I was drinking a longneck of Coopers Light and smoking a tailor-made. I had moved out of the caravan and back into the house in 1987 and was still there in November

IRON MAIDEN

I have become comfortably numb.

Pink Floyd

1988. She tapped on my window and told me she loved me. Just like that. I couldn't believe my luck. I had returned from a private nightmare and discovered life. The universe had delivered. Despite my oddities someone loved me. She slid through the window, took the longneck from my hand, and swigged. *Ahhh*. We smiled at each other through plumes of cigarette smoke: Escort Blue ribbons from her and Peter Jackson rings from me, curling together in a small room in a small suburb in a small town.

It wasn't until a year or so later when we were living in a small flat in Clapham (5062) overlooking the Adelaide plains that my drinking again took off. By now I had dropped out of Art school following a dispute over the legitimacy of my 'prose' paintings and was writing a novel about an old man and a canary while selling bags of dope to make rent. I took to drinking cans of VB while making revisions at night, and drinking goblets of port while ploughing through *Great Expectations, David Copperfield, Bleak House,* and *Hard Times*. Smoking dope and watching SBS gave me the holidays I couldn't otherwise afford. Life seemed

> We forget all too soon the things we thought we could never forget. We forget the loves and betrayals alike, forget what we whispered and what we screamed, forget who we were.
>
> (Joan Didion, 'On Keeping a Notebook,' *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 1968/2008, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, p. 139)

perfect. 'Sex and drugs and rock and roll.' And beer. And art. And dreaming.

December 1989 saw the death of Samuel Beckett and September 1990 saw the death of Patrick White. My favourite writers at the time, I drank to their memories. To Stan Parker, *drink*. To Gogo and Didi, *drink*. To Godot, *drink*.

'Hats off to Roy Harper,' sang Led Zeppelin.

By the age of 20 I was an alcoholic and didn't even know it. Drinking beer and chain smoking seemed normal and reasonable enough. In my world, we all did it. We were hell raisers and proud of it. 'Going off the rails on a crazy train,' as Ozzy Osbourne roared in 1980.

The only down side of living in the flat was when Scotty moved in. He was drinking more than I was. By 16 he had left school and was buying and drinking a dozen echoes of VB any day he could. I'd find him spreadeagled on the floor in a nest of stubbies and cigarette butts, muttering to the ghosts flapping around in his head. I found him one night with both wrists cut and bloody. He roused as I mopped his blood and bandaged his wounds—'Fuck'ff, leavmealone'—and staggered out into the

SEX 'N' DRUGS 'N' ROCK'N'ROLL

Ian Dury

night. Kamikaze, like Mum. I found him by the train line in the park at the back of the flats and checked on him through the night. After that I sent him back to Dad. Within two years he had turned to speed and made his way to Alice Springs, where he set up a caravan and an annexe and bought a bloody big dog, grew his beard, bought several rifles, and did drug runs from Adelaide to Alice in an old hearse. He was able to drink and drug himself to oblivion and beyond. Like one of his tattoos of Ned Kelly said: 'Such is life—'

One thing's for sure: he was a fucking good bloke. A maniac, yes, but a good bloke as long as you didn't catch him on the piss and on the rampage. Then he was dangerous, as I found out one night outside the Belair Hotel when he punched me half to death because I wouldn't fight back. He was disappointed that I had let myself go.

Ah-dee-doo-ah-dee-doo-dah-day
Ah-dee-doo-ah-dee-day-dee
He whistled and he sang 'til the green woods rang
And he won the heart of a lady—

Indeed, the rise of memoir as a literary genre has sometimes been linked with a growing culture of narcissism: 'And now for some more about me...'

(Claudia Mills, 'Friendship, Fiction, & Memoir: Trust & Betrayal in Writing from One's Own Life,' *Ethics of Life Writing*, 2004, London: Cornell University Press: p. 111)

As Ned Kelly once said: 'Ah, well, I suppose it had to come to this—'

4.

In 2002, twenty-eight years after my Mum's death, nine years after my Dad's death, four years after my brother's death, several months after leaving rehab and busting, and thirty-five dwellings later, I staggered into the rooms of an anonymous 12-step fellowship and started again.

Ah-dee-doo-ah-dee-doo-dah-day
Ah-dee-doo-ah-dee-day-dee

5.

In 2007 I started a PhD at Flinders University and began researching and writing memoirs and auto-ethnographies about my experiences in life. It was during this time I unearthed the Coroner's findings and police reports from my Mum's death in 1974. It cost $77.77 to have these documents retrieved from the archives and photocopied and sent to me. This, I thought, was a good omen: 7 had always been my lucky number, and here were four of them. These mysterious documents gave me a material link to

Space truckin'.

Deep Purple

a bygone era. I may not have struck gold, but I had certainly struck the heart of my own darkness.

After all the years of not knowing whether my Mum fell or threw herself from those orange sandstone cliffs that night in 1974, I now discovered that the Coroner couldn't quite say. But he did note two critical things: (1) an 'old scar on the left wrist suggests a previous suicide attempt' and (2) 'Liver shows marked fatty change most suggestive of chronic alcoholic liver disease.' *Bingo*.

I'd waited my whole life for this document. And now I knew, not only about her suicidal tendencies but also about her alcoholism. She was a blackout drunk like me. We were the same, son like mother, mother like son. I had been told at meetings that alcoholism was a 'family disease' and often genetic. And now I knew. I was an alcoholic like my Mum: wild, unstable, destructive, and scared. We were a family of drunks and a family of frightened children, even as adults. Catastrophe was in our genes. We were accidents waiting to happen: Mum's suicide, Scotty's overdose, my dereliction, and Dad's heart attack.

But the most disturbing thing unearthed in

Childhood, looking back on it, is like this—a mess of memories and impressions scattered and clotted and pasted together like a mulch of fallen leaves on a damp autumn pavement.

(George Johnston, *My Brother Jack*, 1964, Sydney: Angus & Robertson, p. 1)

those documents was the statement my Dad made to police the following day. Not only did he have to cope with his wife's brutal death but he was also a suspect. In his statement he said he returned with his four-year-old son (me) from a short drive to Morgan to find his wife passed out in the tent and his two-year-old son, Scotty, crawling in the dust like a baby troll. He found a bottle of gin and a bottle of brandy beside Mum's bikini-clad body, both nearly empty. He slapped her face and shook her until she roused. She said something like 'fuck you' and lurched into the setting sun and gathering gloom. She was dressed now in a miniskirt and dragging a red suitcase; a strange silhouette against the mallee scrub and wind-swept paddocks; a spot of read against a shimmering mirage. She would never return. She headed straight for the cliffs and straight for oblivion.

A stunning, beautiful, blonde, blue-eyed, German woman, aged 34, pissed as a newt, scrambling to her death.

My Dad built a bonfire that night hoping to give her a guiding light home. She never saw it. Dad roused himself early next morning and searched

Who made who.

ACDC

the cliffs and scrub and lagoons for any signs of life. He says in the statement that I asked to go fishing. I forgive myself for being oblivious to the horror unfolding around me. Dad found Mum’s battered corpse floating in the olive-green lagoon at the base of the cliffs in what would have otherwise been an idyllic river sunrise. The police found a spray of blood on the rocks where she had landed head-first from the 100-foot cliffs before bouncing and rolling into the lagoon. It wasn’t the fall or blow to the head that killed her: she drowned as she floated face-down, unconscious, in the spume.

I’ll never get over that death or the horror of discovering that Dad found her body.

Buddha says ‘life is suffering’ and I believe him. Jimi Hendrix says: ‘Purple haze all in my brain / Lately things just don’t seem the same / Actin’ funny but I don’t know why / Scuse me while I kiss the sky’, and I know what he means. Pink Floyd sing: ‘Hush now baby, baby don’t you cry / Mama’s gonna make all of your / Nightmares come true / Mama’s gonna put all of her fears into you / … Of Course Mama’s gonna help build the wall’, and they were right: she did!

> How to begin again? How to recover the knack of swimming smoothly from one minute to the next, to keep on fitting each new day into the puzzle the way everyone else does without thinking?
>
> (Janette Turner Hospital, *Charades*, 1989, Queensland: UQP, p. 37)

That wall is still towering in a huge fortified ring around me.

Who would have thought a fun-filled family camping trip could have caused so much pain? And for so long?

In the coming weeks I will be submitting my PhD and moving into a cheap house I had built by Sarah Homes at Maslin Beach on the Fleurieu Peninsula of South Australia, 5170. I'll be starting a new life there and planting a tree. I hope my future is better than my past. Two things about Maslin Beach strike me as symbolic: (1) that the southern end of Maslin Beach was named 'Blanche Point' by the nineteenth-century Governor of South Australia, Sir Richard MacDonnell, after his wife, Lady Blanche, just as he did 'Blanche Town' where my Mum died; and (2) that Maslin Beach is surrounded by towering sandstone cliffs just like the ones my Mum threw herself from in 1974. It seems I have turned my back on the river and found a home at the beach, but this beach has all the traits of the place I supposedly left behind. I have come a long way to find a landscape that resonates with all the ghosts of yesteryear. The postcodes have

changed but parts of me have not. But that, as they say, is another story.

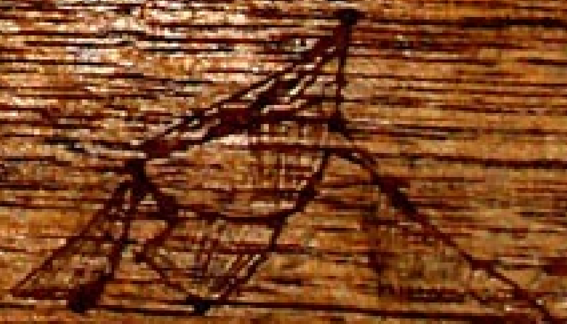
Ah–dee–doo–ah–dee–doo–dah–day
Ah–dee–doo–ah–dee–day–dee

Mum, I forgive you.

Wine is the greatest curse to man — It is wine that causes unhappiness, misery, death and eternal damnation ...

(William Cawthorne, *Literarium Diarium*,
Adelaide 3 November 1842)

We are built from
layers of text, meaning,
& experience
...



Ben: 'I came here to drink myself to death.'
Sera: 'How long will it take you?'
Ben: 'I'd say about three to four weeks.'

(Nicolas Cage,
Leaving Las Vegas
[motion picture],
1995)

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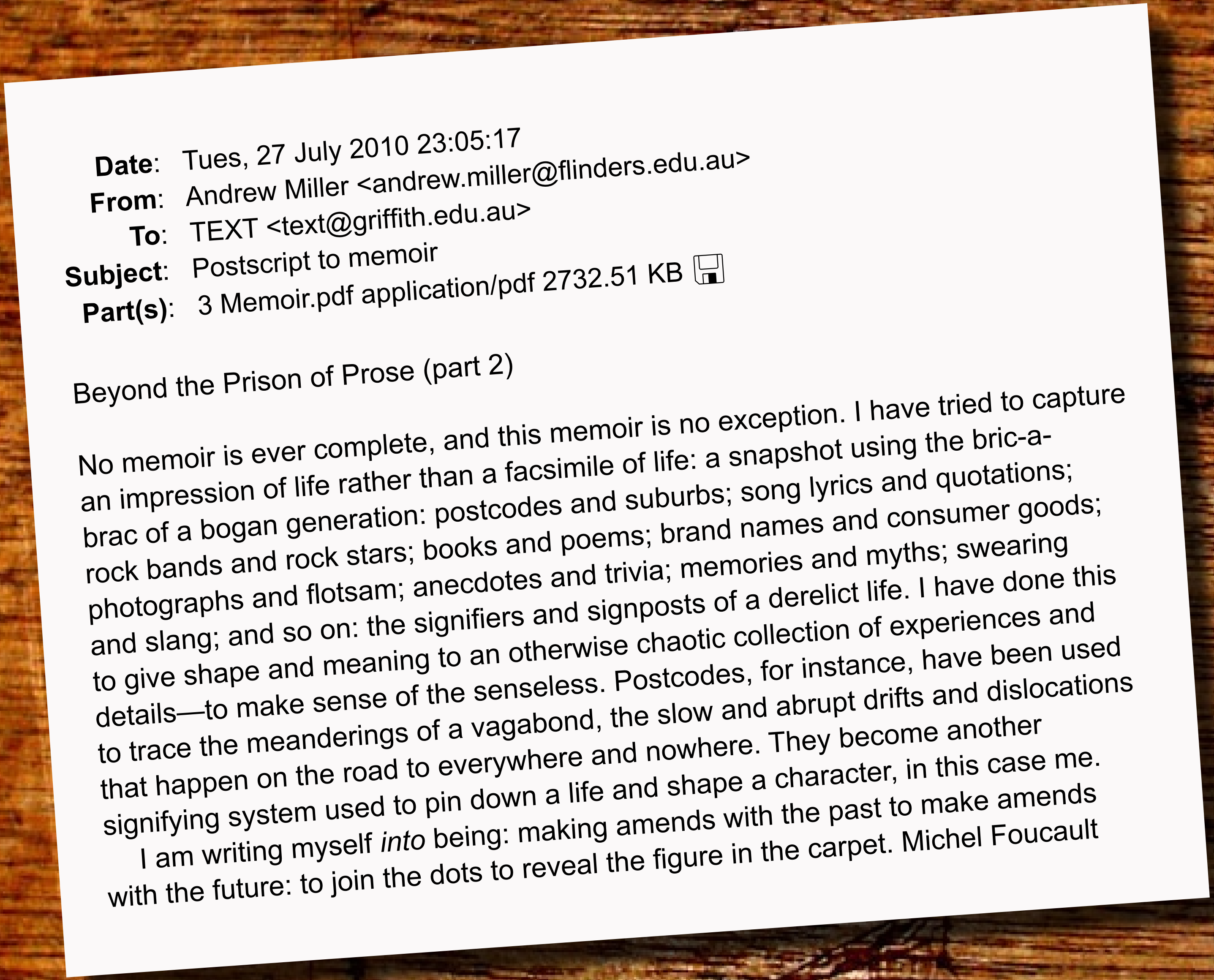

Date: Tues, 27 July 2010 23:05:17
From: Andrew Miller <andrew.miller@flinders.edu.au>
To: TEXT <text@griffith.edu.au>
Subject: Postscript to memoir
Part(s): 3 Memoir.pdf application/pdf 2732.51 KB 💾

Beyond the Prison of Prose (part 2)

No memoir is ever complete, and this memoir is no exception. I have tried to capture an impression of life rather than a facsimile of life: a snapshot using the bric-a-brac of a bogan generation: postcodes and suburbs; song lyrics and quotations; rock bands and rock stars; books and poems; brand names and consumer goods; photographs and flotsam; anecdotes and trivia; memories and myths; swearing and slang; and so on: the signifiers and signposts of a derelict life. I have done this to give shape and meaning to an otherwise chaotic collection of experiences and details—to make sense of the senseless. Postcodes, for instance, have been used to trace the meanderings of a vagabond, the slow and abrupt drifts and dislocations that happen on the road to everywhere and nowhere. They become another signifying system used to pin down a life and shape a character, in this case me.

I am writing myself *into* being: making amends with the past to make amends with the future: to join the dots to reveal the figure in the carpet. Michel Foucault would call this a 'technology of self'—the capacity to revise the 'self' to make a more meaningful future. I am using memoir to create a 'survivor self'—a self who has survived the travails of life and emerged renewed, wiser but bruised. I am, in effect, writing the story of this other self so that he and I can reconcile our differences and let sleeping dogs lie: to shed the shame and sorrow of yesteryear like an old skin. As Joan Didion suggests: 'I think we are well advised to keep on nodding terms with the people we used to be, whether we find them attractive company or not. Otherwise they turn up unannounced and surprise us, come hammering on the mind's door at 4 a.m. of a bad night and demand to know who deserted them, who betrayed them, who is going to make amends' ('On Keeping a Notebook,' *Slouching Towards Bethlehem*, 1968/2008, p.139).

Memoir, then, is a technology of *self* and a technology of *survival:* a means of bringing order to chaos and meaning to confusion. As Lucy M. Calkins suggests in 'Memoir: Reading and Writing the Story of Our Lives':

> Being human means we can remember and tell stories and pretend and write and hope and share, and in this way add growth rings of meaning to our lives. Being human means that in addition to going through the motions of our lives, we need to turn back and celebrate our lives. We need to paint and map and write and make believe and tell stories and represent and reminisce. We need to develop the eyes to see. What human beings fear is not growing old, but growing old without things adding up.
>
> (*Living Between the Lines*, 1991, p.185)

I am the author and sculptor of my own 'story' and my own 'self'. And this self, I have decided, will climb out of the gutter and up into the street, and from the street he will walk into an '**art**ful' life and a life-worth-living. He will emerge in a month from his PhD and begin his life as an academic, or so I hope. This is the only way I know of telling the dead how much I love them; for it is in their name and their memory that I live on. I am, ultimately, a product of my history and my capacity to revise that history to serve future and present needs. As Christopher Butler suggests, 'We live, not inside reality, but inside our representations of it' (*Postmodernism*, 2002, p. 21), while Gloria Anzaldúa reminds us, 'I change myself, I change the world' (*Borderlands La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, 1987, p. 70); so the work of 'revision' and 'reimagining' is essential. Stories hold us together and stop the world falling apart.

No memoir is ever complete, and nor should it be. To stop narrating the stories of our lives and the people we are and have been would be to slip into the mud of history—marooned in language and the sludge of defeat—and become fossilised by definition. *By words*. And words, Derrida reminds us, don't give a fuck (*Glas*, 1974/1986, p. 233). *But we do*, so the onus is on us to tell our own stories rather than have them told for us. To help in this textualisation process I have created a multimodal grunge memoir. The self, in this poststructural sense, is never finished or truly begun; it is, as Derrida might say, always already *to come*, a fiction and a possibility simultaneously.

And this gives me hope.

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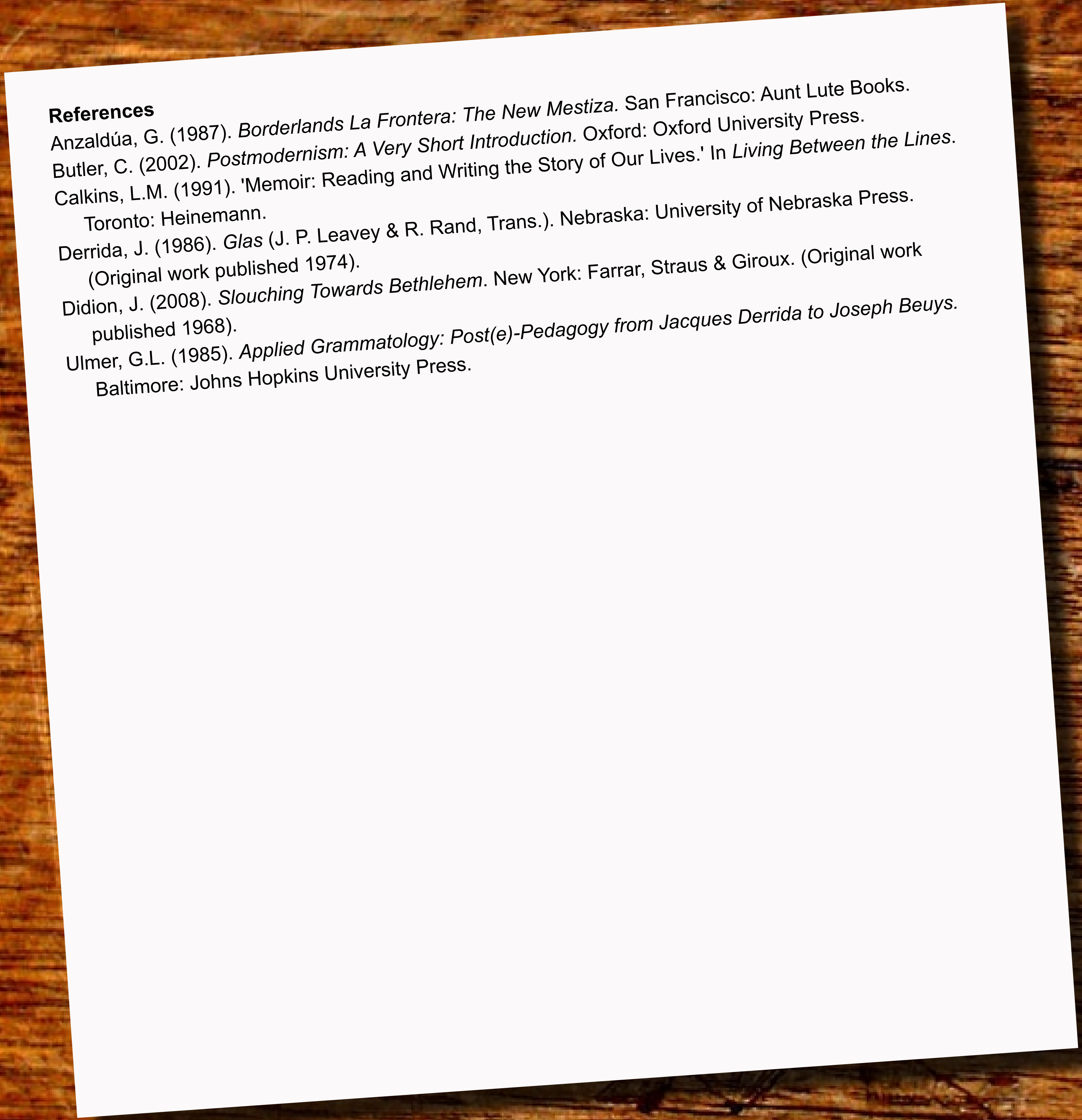
Many thanks to the anonymous reviewers who suggested that I needed a greater theoretical underpinning to bring this experimental memoir up to academic speed. Their suggestions and support were most welcome. Thanks also to my supervisors, Lyn Wilkinson and Rick Hosking, for not only believing in this type of research, but believing in me.



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