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'Irrigorous Uncertainties': Writing, Politics and Pedagogy

In contemporary literature the difficult dynamics made manifest by writers desperate to touch readers and readers who don't want sermons - the highly emotive spaces between author, text and reader known as affect and didactics - are now the real frontier of interpretive bargaining. (Juers 2002: 117)

For some time now, as a writer, I have thought, written and spoken of myself as coming from an Australian feminist experimental tradition, of writing as the substantive part of my political activity, and of all writing as political.

I situate myself in an Australian feminist experimental tradition because my particular formation as a writer included the critical influence of the Sydney Women Writers Workshop, even though I was a member for only a relatively brief period, approximately two years between 1979 and 1981. (In Australia, other influences, besides feminism, on the development of experimentation in writing have included working-class consciousness, multiculturalism, postmodernism and cyberspace.) While I was a member of the Workshop, the predominant form being worked on was short prose. To put it crudely, the genre of the novel was regarded then as monumental and patriarchal, and short prose could have multiple and diverse identities when incarnated variously as a prose poem, fragment, vignette, short story or essay. Not all members wrote experimental fiction, but the politics of the group was feminist, and the group had a radical critique of the industry context of their creative work. In discussions of their writing, they considered their experiences as women, and they engaged in alternative publishing strategies, self-publishing three anthologies funded by holding public performances of their work. They self-published in order to control and demystify the publishing process and 'to circumvent the discrimination against women in publishing' pervasive at that time (Sydney Women Writers Workshop 1981).

The term 'innovative' is perhaps overtaking the term 'experimental'. According to Ken Ruthven, the 'transgressive behaviour' of developing 'generic hybridities' is described as innovative (Ruthven 2001: 2). Such 'transgressive behaviour' has been present in Australian publishing for some time now. For example, in 1990, the University of Queensland Press published Beverley Farmer's *A Body of Water*, a text that combined journal writing, poetry and short stories, and McPhee Gribble/Penguin published Drusilla Modjeska's *Poppy*, a text that combined biography, fiction and

autobiography. Still, around 2001, Brian Castro's *Shanghai Dancing*, a text that is auto/biographical, could not find a publisher until it was picked up by the small independent press Giramondo two years later in 2003. It then went on to be judged best book of 2003 in the New South Wales Premier's Literary Awards, and was short-listed in South Australia's Festival Awards for Literature in the 'Innovation in Writing' category in 2004. The award for innovative writing sits alongside other awards such as fiction, nonfiction, multimedia, play script, poetry and children's literature (Arts SA 2004a). Judges' comments (Arts SA 2004b) on the short list for the 2004 innovative writing award were primarily directed at the hybridity of the texts which crossed fiction and essay, life writing, memoir, history (political, social and cultural) and geography. The lack of a 'stable authorial centre' was mentioned in the comments on *Shanghai Dancing*; a sensitivity 'to the many, sometimes contradictory, dimensions of perspective' in Anna Funder's *Stasiland*; and movement through 'a series of voices' in Simon Robb's *The Hulk* (Arts SA 2004b).

But the term 'experimental' still has clout. In 2002, Laura Hinton and Cynthia Hogue, in their introduction to a collection of critical essays on innovative writing by women (primarily American), and in 2004, Linda A Kinnahan, in her study of innovative poetry by women in North America and Britain, used 'experimental' and 'innovative' interchangeably. In 2004, the Creative Writing subject in the University of Canberra's Master of Creative Writing included 'innovative and cross-genre writing', while a similarly named undergraduate writing subject at the University of New South Wales included an emphasis on 'experimental methodologies'. (University of Canberra 2004)

In relation to politics and the political, Inez Baranay, reporting on political activism by writers in the contemporary Australian context for *Australian Author*, described the 'political' in a broad sense as referring to 'ethics and the realm of personal behaviour and power, as well as the big news of public life and the nation's representatives' (Baranay 2002: 10). Sometimes I have used the claim of writing as political activity as a justification to myself to spend time writing and not go on another march for reconciliation, peace or women's rights or do more voluntary work for another small literary press. A number of writers have made direct links between writing and politics, despite what Baranay describes as a common reluctance among writers 'to admit to a political purpose in their writing' (Baranay 2002: 10). Nadine Gordimer has asked 'When, overtly or implicitly, could writers evade politics?' and answered that 'It seems there is no getting away from the relationship' (Gordimer 2000: 8). Brian Castro has said that 'writers must remain discontented' (Castro 1999: 95) and that 'the need to dissent is to carve out a life apposite to...a life of writing - which can exist only in interrogating the assumptions of culture' (Castro 1999: 27). The essayists in Hinton and Hogue's collection unreservedly made direct links between the experimental writing practice and the political activity of the writers they considered. For example, Heather Thomas said of writer Anne Waldman that 'her feminism, experimentalism and performativity advocate increased agency and social activism in the world...' (Thomas 2002: 212); and Kathleen Crown said of writer Tracie Morris that 'she uses the fully embodied, performative voice with the activist, feminist goal of developing, affirming, and mobilizing a social collective' (Crown 2002: 215). Kinnahan said that, as a reader, she is drawn to 'the experimental, innovative feminist lyric' partly because the 'risky strategies of social intervention' make the lyric into a form of public engagement (Kinnahan 2004: xiii). She describes writer Wendy Mulford as 'arguing a tangible relationship between textual disruption and social or

political change' because language is "'the crucial signifying practice in and through which the human subject is constructed and becomes a social human being'" (Mulford quoted in Kinnahan 2004: 198).

Writing, writers and politics intersect in a number of ways that include not only writing strategies but also activism, and the use of a range of methods to publish, market and distribute. In her report, Baranay highlighted writers holding street protests, conducting writing workshops and publishing work around the issue of refugees in detention centres. In terms of publishing and its associated activities, alternative strategies to counter global monopolies include use of the Web, street graffiti and performance, print-based zines, and the continuing creation of very small literary presses such as Cerberus Press in New South Wales and Wind and Water in Victoria. Diane Brown (Brown 2003) has argued that independent Australian presses, such as Magabala and Spinifex, publish the culture of specific communities in Australia, countering globalisation's homogenising strain, one of its many differing strains, coming through multinational publishing. In a similar vein, Hilary McPhee, former publisher and chair of the national arts funding organisation, the Australian Council, in her 2004 Colin Simpson Lecture for the Australian Society of Authors, noted the necessity of 'local cultures' to be strong if they were to survive 'in a globalised world' (McPhee 2004).

The contemporary political climate includes the active presence of neoconservatism or neoliberalism. Elsewhere I have written that in Australia the federal government formed by John Howard's ministry (1996+) 'systematised the promotion of privilege and the breakdown of community, encouraging fear, self-centred competition and conformity' (Costello 1999: 117). Under neoliberalism something has stuck hard on borders, against fluidity and boundlessness. It's a philosophy of cuts and breaks, of separation and division. Among neoliberalism's critics in Australia are Bob Connell, John Frow ('Res'), Carol Johnson, Mungo MacCallum and Drusilla Modjeska ('Present'). They are concerned about growing institutionalised inequalities; the privatisation of knowledge, information and institutions; a retreating democracy under managerialism, budgetary restraint and social conservatism; unjust dealings with refugees; and the devaluing of progressive ideas and abuse of language in the public sphere.

I don't expect a neoliberal regime to fall under the impact of writing. In their edited collection of essays, Hinton and Hogue wanted to create places or interfaces where writings of 'differing oppositional textual and aesthetic practices' (Hinton and Hogue 2002: 3) could meet; they wanted to create 'a metaphoric and textual common ground among audiences so that innovative writing could begin to have a greater "social existence in the world"' (Hinton and Hogue 2002: 3). What I would hope to happen is a contribution to continuing encouragement, diversely supported itself, to live with diversity and uncertainty, even chaos, without recourse to fear and to the building of exclusory borders.

I have a pedagogic intent. I imagined a query coming from a new/emerging writer about how to write specifically in an innovative or experimental way. Part of my imagining was that the question came from a desire to consider a method or methods in their writing practice that might model different values to those espoused under neoliberalism, or to counter or ameliorate some of neoliberalism's worst effects.

In a moment of despair about unjust and undemocratic neoliberalist policies and of forgetfulness about the active presence of protesting forces, I looked for argument affirming that resistance and change were still possible. Such feelings of despair are not uncommon. Baranay pointed out that it was possible for people who were appalled at contemporary governmental policies to think they were alone in those feelings (Baranay 2002: 11). Haslett noted that 'marxist commentators warn that we are in danger of forgetting not just how to act but how to think in resistance to capitalism' (Haslett 1999: 100). Similarly, at the 2003 Adelaide Festival of Ideas, Erik Olin Wright said that in contemporary culture radical visions are mocked rather than taken seriously. As a consequence, elaborating alternatives has become an important task for critics of capitalism (Wright 2003a). Transformation can take place on many fronts, including the arts which can present a sense of the aesthetics of alternatives and prefigure them through practices which embody them (Wright 2003b). If, just for example, I think of intergeneric writing as one model of heterogeneity, then using McHoul and Grace's interpretation of Foucault, it's possible for me to see the following 'toolkit' [I owe the use of this term in the present context to Heather Kerr in conversation] as an attempt at joining varied resistance at a particular point. Writers such as Hardt and Negri in their book *Empire* (Hardt & Negri 2001) depict the 'multitudes' as heading toward revolution. But in explaining Foucault, McHoul and Grace say that:

...although great radical ruptures or revolutions have taken place...what is much more important are "mobile transitory points of resistance"... It is the mundane or everyday acts of resistance that potentially produce profound effects.
(McHoul and Grace 1993: 85-86)

Drawing on Laclau and Mouffe, and considering a postmodern marxism or postmarxism, Daly emphasised the 'contextual and pragmatic' nature of political engagement, advancing that 'there is always the possibility ... of contingent political disruption and subversion' (Daly 1999: 68, 78). Thieme, in the context of postcolonial texts writing back to the English canon, has stated that 'dialogue with [the West's] discursive hegemonies remains as necessary as ever' (Thieme 2001: 171).

Besides attempting to join in the making of a range of models of openness, plurality and diversity, I also have an abiding interest in the aesthetics or poetics of particular writing practices. I wanted to be able to nominate and articulate textual tactics in particular pieces of writing for myself as a practicing writer and as a teacher of writing. Related to this is a more generalised obsession with categorising and list-making amply demonstrated in my writing, a quirk possibly originating in my religious upbringing steeped in catholic liturgy itself characterised by categories and lists. But lists are also a fictocritical strategy (Gibbs 1997: 1), fictocriticism being seen as engaging in experimentation (Brewster 1996: 30). They're a form of evidence [I owe this idea to Ros Prosser in conversation], linking the textual to a material world. And they have an impressive literary heritage. Gérard Genette has been described as delighting 'in the systematic deployment of categories, functions, and domains', yet fascinated as well 'by the fringes and borderlands between regimes that these explorations open up' (Macksey 1997: xix). Moreover, Bakhtin and Rabelais, of whom Bakhtin wrote, have been described as having a 'stylistic tic of long catalogues' (Clark and Holquist 1984: 295-296).

I note the signalling for caution about attempts to develop models and specific aesthetics or poetics.

In relation to working with models, two writers in different contexts - Espen Aarseth in his book *Cybertext* about 'a framework for a theory of cybertext or ergodic literature' (Aarseth 1997: 17), and Ross Gibson in a talk, 'Life after Wartime' (Gibson 2003), about his multimedia project working with a crime archive of post-World War 2 Sydney - have proposed that in their own projects they are working with models, but notably models which are provisional, changeable, inconclusive, inadequate and fragile.

Brewster has said of fictocriticism specifically that, given its political implications, 'it is unproductive...to seek to define it according to a specific style or aesthetics' (Brewster 1996: 29); to do so is to flatten out its indeterminacy and to override its status as a practice. And in his project to develop a poetics for creative writing pedagogy, Paul Dawson is concerned not to develop one that establishes 'a hierarchy in which "experimental" modes of writing are more radical or politically efficacious than "mainstream" genres' (Dawson 2003). However, I work primarily in what I think of as an 'experimental' mode (my work is also representational), so it's the strategies of this mode that I want to be able to describe in response to the imagined query from my imagined student. In teaching writing I understand the need to consider diverse resources and writing strategies. In my experience, fictocriticism and neorealism sit within the same or neighbouring programs in a university, though not without contention. Despite fictocriticism's combination of theory and fiction, it can be received as an esoteric practice producing incomprehensible writing based on inaccessible theory. On the other hand, neorealism can be regarded as ignorant about theory and hence naive. The common occurrence of tension between creative writing and theory in the academy has been documented by Kevin Brophy (Brophy 1998: 216), and Drusilla Modjeska has described the divide between creative writing and research students as 'painful to witness' (Modjeska 2002: 210). Kinnahan sees her work as contributing to problematising or disrupting the sense of opposition between the binary categories of 'experimental and mainstream' and describes the relations of these categories as 'ongoing discussions' or 'a web of interconnections that can be traversed through multiple and multiplying strands' (Kinnahan 2004: xiii).

I think the contentiousness is largely about attempts to cope with some of the challenging qualities of our present everyday. In *Authenticity*, David Boyle describes the culture of what he has termed New Realism (Boyle 2003: 15), apparently in place after the expiration of postmodernism with the Twin Towers collapse in New York in 2002 (Boyle 2003: 291). The culture of New Realism includes the desire for and valuing of ethics, story and the human (Boyle 2003: 15-21, 274).

I think of Helen Garner's fiction, which is largely realist and representational, as source code for how to live in a morally determined way. It's not plot-driven fiction and nothing much happens at the level of action, but I read it to examine ideas in a moral universe. And I read fiction by Amanda Lohrey, again largely realist and representational, for similar reasons to my regard for Garner's fiction: there is an investigation of everyday and wider social ethical practice.

The 'human' counters the concept of posthuman with its aspects of partiality and virtuality, and it's not surprising that the posthuman is

regarded with fear if it is defined as antihuman, the end of humanity. But Hayles maintains that as thoroughly engaged with technology as the body is, we can look forward to a number of things: the expansion of 'embodied awareness' rather than the loss of the body, where embodied means contextualised, performative, improvisational, fluid, interconnected and incorporated (Hayles 1999: 200-205); a subjectivity that is 'emerging from and integrated into a chaotic world rather than occupying a position of mastery and control removed from it' (Hayles 1999: 291); and a future, marked as it will be 'by contingency and unpredictability', that is open (Hayles 1999: 285).

The desire for 'authenticity' is associated with the comfort of meaning and the determination of origin. But rather than guarantees and coherence being prevalent, 'workable solutions within given parameters' are immanent (Hayles 1999: 285). We might experience the pleasure of 'pattern' when 'a certain set of possibilities' are realised, but 'everything else' - which includes phenomena 'that cannot be rendered coherent' to those that cannot be perceived at all - is characterised by randomness (Hayles 1999: 286). Similarly to Hayles, Gibson (2004) considers that the digital database is a cultural form that has arisen to model the quality of our present everyday in its 'tendencies towards coherence'. This process of tendencies contrasts with what Gibson said Meaghan Morris has called 'a paranoid narrative charge'. The compulsion of that charge, the temptation of order and certainty, was attested to at the symposium where Gibson spoke when another speaker (mis)interpreted his phrase and repeated it as 'coherent tendencies'. Given the real presence of phenomena such as environmental degradation, the unequal distribution of wealth and resources, and the folding of our lives into technology, my everyday experience has become sensitised and acutely attuned to chaos, fragmentation and hybridity.

I have drawn on selected writings, primarily but not exclusively Australian, to put together a partial, contingent and transient toolkit. I've grouped the textual and aesthetic practices into 'themes', in the hope that this may make the temporary 'toolkit' of practical use in the moment.

To take risks, to challenge. As part of the process of your writing, you work with its 'weakest parts'; you don't eliminate 'vulnerability', but keep it present and visible, to feel the danger in the writing, its teetering on the edge, its potential to fall over (Muecke 1997: 159); so that while you write, or while the reader reads, the 'lines which threaten to escape' are pursued (Muecke 1997: 160). You are then putting the writing 'at the very juncture of risk' (Castro 1999: 115). You challenge the reader to stay with a work when there may not be 'easy or passive pleasure to be obtained' (Crown 2002: 226).

To change, transform, question, disrupt. You change the way texts 'generate meanings' (Gunew 1988: 6); you work at transforming the 'signifying process itself' (Gunew 1988: 6). You don't work to create 'an apparently seamless fabric' (Couani 1993: 5). You are 'changing the themes of fiction' and 'altering the formal structure[s]' or 'modes of narrative' (Page 1998: 111). You might make use of 'deconstructive questioning' that disrupts narrative flow, foregrounds process and 'exposes the instability of subject and object'. You are 'reclaiming...terms and unmaking conventional syntax' (Page 1998: 121). You are interrupting 'paradigms of naming and identity reified as immutable and universal...

shatter[ing] the cohesion of...narratives or mythic structures that map us unthinkingly into social bodies' (McCabe 2002: 46). You might cultivate 'a range of destabilizing discursive positions, a discursive mobility and fluidity that holds open the prospect...of a certain kind of...dislocation, irritation, and disorientation...that opens the door to new possibilities...' (Monroe 2002: 101).

To be uncertain, indeterminate, contradictory. In your writing you might abandon 'rationality, common sense and self-conscious identity' (Castro 1999: 82), '...the transparent transition of knowledge' (Hinton and Hogue 2002: 1). You might have meanings that are 'active, perceptible but not fixed' (Silliman 2002: 34). You are trafficking 'in insecurities' (Taylor and Saarinen 1994: 'Styles' 2). You want your writing to exist 'in a space of debate and dialogue without foreclosing on the struggle for meaning and without striving for taxonomic closure' (Brewster 1996: 30). You might exempt your writing 'from establishing absolute meaning' (Castro 1999: 93) while you stay with 'uncertainty...and indeterminacy' (Keller 2002: 103). You might foster 'polyphony, polysemy, disorder' (Keller 2002: 103) and embrace "'oppositional stances'" and "'contradictory impulses, ideas, motions'" (Maso quoted in Page 1998: 117). You might insist 'that the word is never simply a word but also an image', and you might free 'the play of signs' (Taylor and Saarinen 1994: 'Styles' 3, 7).

To transgress, to be hybrid. You have a belief 'in art's ability to stretch and expand the established boundaries of form' (McCabe 2002: 53). You declare 'understood categories...as volatile' (Nettelbeck 1998: 14). Your practice might be that of 'crossing thresholds, testing boundaries' (Castro 1999: 83). In this you use the transgressive property of hybridity to 'destabilise genres' (Castro 1999: 115) and 'relieve the schizophrenic pressures upon the dichotomy of authenticity and inauthenticity' (Castro 1999: 122). Your writing is 'deliberate miscegenation' (Castro 1999: 116). With 'no regard for the conventional terms novel or short story or novella', you allow 'each piece of...fiction to find its way to its natural end' (Murnane 2002: 25). You have a 'complex interweaving of disparate writings': you cross 'genres of verse and prose freely' (Page 1998: 127, 118), blend 'essay and fiction...make use of indeterminate forms like the prose poem, and also of lists, fables, clichés - all manner of literary detritus' (Gibbs 1997: 1). You lay out 'several registers of varying levels of discourse, from comic to metaphoric to elegiac' (Joyce 2002: 87). You mix 'high levels of abstraction with the language of the ordinary, the everyday' (Monroe 2002: 96). You open 'onto a range of discursive, cultural locations, positions, genres, discourses, audiences, and communities...' (Monroe 2002: 101). You use 'vocabularies drawn from the sciences, philosophy, politics, and sociology' (Harryman 2002: 116). You allow 'for a completely different medium to infuse the text, to take words which are supposed to function in one way in one domain...and let them reproduce and play havoc in a new one' (Muecke 1997: 230). You intersect 'word, image and sound' (Taylor and Saarinen 1994: 'Telewriting' 6).

To be silent. You might use "'forms characterized by silence'" (Retallack quoted in Page 1998: 117).

To fragment, to trace, to be incomplete, open, nonlinear, nonhierarchical. You work with the fragment to figure 'the partial image rather than the whole' (Nettelbeck 1998: 3). You hold out 'no promise' (Prosser 1997: 18). You might offer 'only the most minimal narrative...context for the work' (Silliman 2002: 32). You demonstrate 'the impossibility of totalisation and closure of any written text' (Castro 1999:

121). Your writing is a set of 'traces...fading in the rear-vision mirror' (Campbell 1998: 219). Your writing defies a 'desire for resolution and clear-cut answers' (Keating 2002: 72). You are not 'complete, not direct, not thorough, but brief, quick and allusive' (Taylor and Saarinen 1994: 'Styles' 7). Your writing is not only 'an open fabric of heterogenous traces and associations' but these are also 'in a process of constant revision and supplementation'; these 'traces and associations' have a 'lateral dispersal that 'disseminate' rather than 'integrate' (Taylor and Saarinen 1994: 'Telewriting' 6). Your writing is 'open to contingency, chance' (Crown 2002: 219). You make use of 'arbitrary patterns' (Keller 2002: 104). Your writing uses alternative constructions to 'linear prose' (Page 1998: 112). You challenge 'symmetries' (Daniel and Modjeska 1994: xiii). Your writing is 'entirely...ungeometric' (Castro 1999: 187). Your style might be 'spare rather than expansive'; you make use of 'vignettes rather than continuously developed action or panoramic description' (Page 1998: 128). You compose "'in clusters...constellations of associations...a series of blossomings'" (Maso quoted in Page 1998: 116). You unravel 'closure by reversing the order of expectations' and delay the 'sense of directedness... without losing the tangible evidence of internal connectivity' (Silliman 2002: 31, 35). You resist 'the idea of closure or conviction' (Castro 1999: 251). Your writing does not have 'narrative roundedness'; rather, it is 'interactive or conversational...open-ended and process-oriented' (Costello 1999: 116). You make use of forms characterised by "'multiple, associative, nonhierarchical logics; open and materially contingent processes'" (Retallack quoted in Page 1998: 117).

To have a metadiscourse. You embed 'manifesto and critique in both the narrative and the topography of the writing' (Page 1998: 118), incorporate 'thinking about texts into fiction' (Page 1998: 131). This metadiscourse says that 'the strategies of the telling are part of the point of the tale' (Gibbs 1997).

To be intertextual. Within your text you might invite 'the reader to move freely both among texts and between texts' (Page 1998: 127). You deploy 'intertextual echoes and analogies, to write (back) to a parallel text in a way that invokes that absent text' (Nettelbeck 1998: 6). You 'implicitly' acknowledge and create "'the possibility of other/additional/simultaneous texts'" (Retallack quoted in Page 1998: 117).

Two Australian women, Rosslyn Prosser and Jenny Weight write in the fields of fictocriticism and cybertext respectively. I will briefly consider some specific works of theirs to see how this toolkit might be put into practice.

In both 'Three Moon Creek' Prosser (1997) and 'Writing + Memory = Memory Writing' (Prosser 2003), Prosser usually doesn't signal seemingly spontaneous shifts between first, second and third person narrative points of view/voices, between fictional narrative, history, autobiography, biography, memoir and theory, and the narrative persona shifts between detective, fiction writer, daughter, poet and theorist/critic. Different kinds of knowledge and ways of knowing appear alongside each other: 'How does space inscribe memory?'; 'Where are the best echoes?'; 'Cartographers like all text makers are culture, history, society and gender bound'; "'Do you put egg in the stuffing of a chicken to be baked?'" (Prosser 2003: 161-163). These staccato shifts in narrative voice/persona and content are dissonant and unsettling. In 'Writing + Memory' the layout

and formatting does a little of the signalling otherwise absent: there are breaks between and within chunks or nodes which look like both prose-based paragraphs and stanzas of verse. Whole worlds make an appearance with each constant shift:

My skin is melanoma prone.
 White, fair even...
 White must protect itself from the sun and white often runs
 from
 this and from its past. White will not wear hats.
 'Where's your hat?'
 White sweeps under the carpet...
 I am guilt.
 I am shame...
 I am the dog, the blue heeler, out of the dingo, cowering
 under the tank stand...
 Blue who is really red. (Prosser 2003: 158)

The surface texture is not necessarily always a permeable membrane. Crab-like, a reading that is familiar with a traditional plotted trajectory tracks ruptures from sentence to sentence, node to node in an effort to hold onto meaning. The structure can have the appearance of the erratic, being quite unpredictable, non-rhythmic and non-flowing - the rhythm is 'jerky', like a jump to another box within the same game in hopscotch. The build up, if any, is crystalline, constellate, combining 'fragmentation and clustering' (Bail 1981: 113). The writing is a kind of clash of narrative incidents and discussion around a common theme. Self-reflexive commentary is dispersed in the narrative: 'While something is set in motion in this work it is not a machine for understanding' (Prosser 1997: 20). Yet the writing itself is poetic - for example, people and incidents are focused through metaphor: 'In the water the swimmers breathed like fish. They plummeted down, returning for breath at intervals, regular, attended by great exhalations' (Prosser 1997: 45). And Prosser makes abundant use of a form of literary detritus (Gibbs 1997), lists:

Why this house and not that house, the sanctity of the
 family or the rebellion against family, patriarchal and
 matriarchal relations, schooling, the state economics,
 interest rates, rentals, the church. (Prosser 1997: 75)

geniwate's (Jenny Weight) impressively extensive online projects include *rice* and *concatenation*. She refers to *rice* as 'prehistoric work' (Weight, 'Jenny') because, in my understanding, she's moved on to more complex 'algorithmically enabled art' (Weight 2003: 3). I am aware of Weight's anxiety about literary studies co-opting the field of cybertext, distorting its aesthetics (Weight 2003: 3). However, continuity and points of contact have been affirmed. As Hayles has said, the technology does not come into a vacuum, but rather into 'a social and cultural matrix' which inevitably 'shapes how the technology will be conceived, understood and implemented' (Hayles 2002: xiii). And Tofts has warned that to view cybertext as a wholly radical break with older technologies is 'a kind of cultural amnesia' (Tofts 1999: 9).

In *rice*, created under the name geniwate, irony and a bitter humour underscore or even undercut and belie sadness and distress at destruction and loss. *rice* opens with a lark, a ruse, a trick on the reader - poetic images of Vietnam that have been garnered not by the poet from empirical experience but by reading online: 'The previous things never happened to

me in Vietnam. I acquired the Vietnam experience on the internet before I left Australia' (geniwate 1998). The self-reflexivity forms a commentary on uncertainty and ambiguity, and places authenticity under question. There is a sense of anxiety in the poet not to be taken too seriously, not to be sentimental or pompous or have her readers be so. There is a jester at work. The piece in total is also self-reflexive about poetry: there is a visit to 'the poetry factory' where ancient writers are praised in stone, and later 'it's off to the Army Museum / (where touching / photos of War Mothers / serve like slaves / for poetry)' (geniwate 1998). The opening of *rice* forms, too, a statement about history, advertising, the technology-based information society, and the definition of knowledge. (When I think about Weight's work now simultaneously with Prosser's, I notice how both writers unabashedly and courageously place critical contemporary political, cultural and social issues at the centre of their work.) Visually *rice* opens with images of detritus, some consumer products (elsewhere in the series, the text 'truth, freedom and happiness' appears alongside a Wrigley's gum packet [(geniwate 1998)]). The images can be read in a linear way from left to right, top down, but since they're also links they can be activated at random. Images work toward meaning, as text does: a poem about the concept of productivity - thongs, brooms, cyclo drivers, and travellers actually not arriving at their proposed destination - is set ironically and self-reflexively against a background image of iterative text 'Vietnam is working for you'. Screens operate differently - for example, linking into others or returning to 'home'. While at one point a whole poem is on screen, at another point another poem appears line by line with access via links. A pattern is built up of commentary on neocolonialism, the pervasiveness of consumer capitalism, and destruction and loss: 'Junk is the past. It makes us. Small truths in the gutter collecting for me' (geniwate 1998). The series can make a rounded narrative if a reader wants, but that's not the point either: you can travel like a tourist, picking up impressions, understandings at random, in differing experiences of ways of 'reading'.

concatenation is 'a disintegrating elegy' that 'explores a nexus between language and violence, contextualised by contemporary world events' (geniwate n.d.). It is a combination of sombre music and animated text in small poetic mouthfuls, set against a background image of cut-up text/letters. Text appears and reappears but with differences in associated text and in a different order. And finally the text itself begins to disintegrate, becoming undone. Though a reading can move compulsively/compellingly on, still a trace remains in memory of its impact of sadness. If a reading stops in the middle of chasing text, then a heartbeat, a foot slog of pulsed music continues in pursuit like marching soldiers, like persistent violence, like the presence of war. This seemingly small, but moving and subtle piece is haunted by the appalling horror and fear induced by living under certain conditions of neoliberalism/neoconservatism, globalisation, media concentration, overpopulation, inequality, environmental degradation, religious and racial intolerance, that make the heart and mind crack open as the poetic text does under its own references and resonances.

Despite the significant quantity of publications considered innovative in the contemporary scene, there still exists among writers and readers anxieties about immediate access to meaning in a text and a lack of clear distinctions between imaginative projection or fiction and what is often implied or stated openly as self-indulgent autobiography which is treated as being strictly nonfiction. When these anxieties are not aired, discussed, even countered, they can congeal as signals to the writer to contract, to be

predictable and head for safety. At this time, when neoconservative forces have had considerable success, I want to contribute, via writing practice, even in the smallest way, to resisting and challenging the undemocratic and unjust effects of those forces. Murray Bail suggested of the painter Ian Fairweather that, 'even late in his painting life, he continued taking exemplary risks' and 'even his failures were distinctive and often demanding' (Bail 1981: 214). Staying open to possibilities within a milieu of uncertainty seems to me to be a difficult but necessary place to be.

Note

The quotation in the title comes from Paul Carter's *The Lie of the Land* (Carter 1996).

Addendum

This paper 'talks with' Jennifer Webb's *Text* paper 'Depression and creative writing students'

<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text/april03/webb.htm> (Vol 7, No 1, April 2003) and Hazel Smith's newly released textbook *The Creative Writing Experiment: Strategies for Innovative Creative Writing* (Allen & Unwin, 2005). Webb notes the rise of depression under conservative governments. 'What can we do about it?' she asks of this and related issues, and specifies the use of a writer's imagination as one of the alternatives. Smith notes that 'to write experimentally...can be a means to rethink cultural mores...to...suggest many different meanings and encourage conflicting interpretations', and to explore 'political, psychological and philosophical ideas without reducing them to the level of dogma, description or propaganda' (ix-x).

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