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**Article:**

Richards, J orcid.org/0009-0004-9979-0715 (2023) *Storytelling With Books*. Writing in Practice: the journal of creative writing research, 9. pp. 101-110. ISSN 2058-5535

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vol 9  
2023

***writing in  
practice***



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Unsplash

*Writing in Practice: the Journal of Creative Writing  
Research*

Volume 9 (November 2023)

ISSN: 2058-5535

Issue Editors: Elen Caldecott and Celia Brayfield

Principle Editors: Kate North and Dr. Francis Gilbert

*Interested in contributing?*

**Submission deadlines:**

2024 Volume 10: 15 January 2024

2025 Volume 11: January 2025

For submission guidelines please [see online](#).

Publications Manager: William Gallagher,  
[publications@nawe.co.uk](mailto:publications@nawe.co.uk)

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the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE)

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## Writing in Practice Volume 9

We are excited to bring Issue 9 of *Writing in Practice* into the world along with our wonderful Issue Editors, Elen Caldecott and Celia Brayfield. This issue platforms powerful writing, dealing with ethical and social questions that are central to British cultural life in 2023, as well as reflections and conversations about textual craft and practice.

We are honoured to have Joan Anim Addo provide our guest article for this issue. In it she takes blunt aim at the excoriating lack of support for Black writers in Britain. Using her own libretto *IMOINDA* as a case study, Addo traces a history of structural inequality, tokenism and absence of opportunity for Black writers in Britain since the eighteenth century. She goes on to reflect on the further intersectional complexities for Black women writers in the UK and also highlights the notable vanguards who worked against systems to create chinks through which writers like Addo were able to present their work. It is a frank and necessary read for all involved in literary production in the UK.

Duncan Dicks's article draws out some vital ethical issues, many of which are explored in vital ways in Joan's article. He illustrates how creative writing and its narrative techniques can be used in many different educational contexts, including with medical students, to free learners to think about the moral implications of their work. His article is an essential primer for any pedagogue wanting to explore ethical issues with their students, showing the power of creative writing to bring sometimes abstract concepts – such as consequentialism and duty ethics – to life.

Alison Habens conducts an exacting reading of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, drawing on several translations, to consider how the text can be understood and questioned in light of #MeToo. Habens observes the necessity to reconsider the text for contemporary HE learners and demonstrates how creative practice can be used as part of this exploratory process.

Dr Sam Kemp picks up the visual theme with a wonderful re-evaluation of H.P. Lovecraft's haunted and haunting fiction of the early twentieth century by offering



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not only a detailed review of Lovecraft's work but also visual interpretations of the prose. Kemp's focus upon Lovecraft's weird, sci-fi city of Arkham leads to the generation of some fascinating visual poetry.

Prose poetry is posited as comparable to a literary form of amuse-bouche by Cassandra Atherton, Paul Hetherington and Alyson Miller. They also highlight how food is used in the prose poem, and poems more broadly to consider elements of sensory pleasure. The authors consider how these elements work in their own prose poems and those of others to centre the experiential.

Mimi Thebo shares with us a revelatory journey in the form of a manifesto. In travelling through Oklahoma and reflecting on her knowledge and experience of the landscape, within the context of taking her mother's ashes to Louisiana, Thebo comes to a deeper understanding of the climate emergency, of colonialism and how these relate to the business of contemporary storytelling.

Jess Richards provides a beautiful and poignant last article to this journal edition. The article illustrates and explains a marvellous creative project which brings together both art and creative writing. Taking 'dying books' from thrift shops, the project led to the creation of a story about a book transforming into a bird and a series of numinous art works, beautifully photographed in the body of the article.

A key theme of this journal is the emancipatory power of creative writing and its ability to shape-shift to suit the needs of incredibly diverse audiences. Creative writing can be combined with art works to create the bespoke artefacts we see in Kemp and Richards' articles; it can be used to rethink neglected texts and decolonise our thinking as Anim-Addo notes; it can offer ways of understanding and tackling the urgency of the climate crisis as Thebo perceives; it can offer re-interpretations of vital misogynistic myths as Habens illustrates; and it can reshape the ethical thinking of medics and many other areas of life as Dicks argues.

It has been a privilege and a learning experience to consider these articles. We have been reminded of the reality that things don't just happen, that if we wish things to change, we need to do something about them and keep doing something about them. If we want to write something into existence, then we simply have to write and keep writing.

Kate North and Dr Francis Gilbert (co-editors of Writing in Practice)



*Performing Imoinda, Or She Who Will Lose Her Name*

## A View From The Outside Looking In: Writing The Libretto

### Imoinda, Or She Who Will Lose Her Name

Joan Anim-Addo

#### ABSTRACT

Despite nearly four centuries of publication, Black British writing is only beginning to be recognised as an established body of work in the UK. In such a context characterised by sustained suppression of writing as explored in the recent report, *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Market Place* (2015), how might a libretto be written and developed by a Black British woman writer who must also earn a living lecturing part-time? The libretto in question is *Imoinda, or She Who Will Lose Her Name*, which focuses squarely on Atlantic slavery through a radical rewriting of Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1688). I argue that *Imoinda* emerges from precarious beginnings shaped by racialised and gendered conditions, and I question how a Black British woman writer might undertake and sustain such a task? I briefly sketch how Black British Writing, as a body of "Outsiders" writing, suppressed since it first revealed itself in the eighteenth century, remains stifled today. Turning to key institutions – publishers, agents, and the university – that have consistently disregarded the significance of the body of writing, I address the precarity that so often leads to potential Black writers under-performing or abandoning their writing practice, as I trace the long writing journey, lasting over a decade, to bring *Imoinda* from page to performance.

**Keywords:**

Imoinda, Atlantic slavery, Outsiders, libretto, Oroonoko, Black British writing, Aphra Behn, UK Arts market, art of writing, hostile Britain, suppression of writing, transnational

Black, British, transnational<sup>[1]</sup>, and a published writer of several genres, I claim the title, “writer”, only sometimes. Like other Outsiders – and borrowing from poet-philosopher, Audre Lorde – I have a deep quarrel with the history that my writing reflects. Unsurprisingly, reflection on the writing can seem a luxury that writers like me can ill afford. In a way, the writing becomes the mirror, I guess, especially thinking of authors such as Joan Riley who, with the *Unbelonging* was finally privileged to break through, via Women’s Press, the publication barriers of the 1980s and bring her novel to light telling of the hostile Britain so painfully familiar to Black readers. I remember, too, Amryl Johnson, poet, who died alone and is now perhaps largely forgotten. So, although when occasionally contemplating questions of process, I fantasise about becoming a more disciplined writer – focusing on a single genre, perhaps – it is problematic, now, for such single-mindedness. That is, even if such change were in my gift. My writing of the libretto, *Imoinda, or She Who Will Lose Her Name* (hereafter, *IMOINDA*), serves well to illustrate my meanings.

On presenting the libretto at the university of Trento before it was first published in 2003, I began with the following extract from my poem, “Creation story”:

Now in a space she claims  
that feels sometimes  
like home  
a woman poet of the new tongue  
at evening time  
sings alone

And whilst others not too distant  
hearing notes of fluid pain  
pause puzzling  
she gives voice  
that soars on high calling  
won’t you, won’t you  
trace the scars of my knowledge  
with your fingers  
to begin our knowing? (Anim-Addo,  
*Haunted by History*, 13)

To consider the process of writing *IMOINDA*, I shall attend, here, to selected particularities and a questioning of the nature of the art of writing in Britain; especially what such “art” might mean when one is on the outside looking in. Self-evident though the realities are for writers who discover themselves to be “Outsiders” – or, effectively excluded – examination of the field indicates that progressing one’s individual art practice still relates in good measure to privilege or support, or alternatively, “scars” that are too often residual of the process. Relatedly, and referring specifically to *IMOINDA*, I shall first attempt to sketch how Black British Writing, as a body of Outsiders’ writing, suppressed since it first revealed itself to parts of the national consciousness in the eighteenth century, remains with few exceptions largely hidden. That is, mainly not taught in the university by scholars of Literature. I turn to key institutions, discussed below, claiming to be most supportive of literary art – or so we are led to believe – even as they act to stifle specific parts of that body of writing. Thirdly, I address the situation in which Black writers, familiar enough with precarity in everyday existence, are all too often led to under-perform or abandon the written art they wish to pursue. I pay attention throughout to the question of Black British women artists, for whom, despite Lorde’s familiar twentieth century admonition, having their poetry published in the twenty-first century, remains a luxury.

Lorde’s highlighting of black women’s Outsider-ness, invariably intersectional,

certainly applies to the context of Black British Women’s publication suppression. Elements of these, above, will shed light on *Imoinda* and the creative process that the libretto has so far entailed. By this route, I hope to consider both practice and process, while focusing particularly on the tension between one’s writerly beginnings, and the self that discovers writing as simultaneously pleasure and responsibility realised at a particular historical moment in time.

*IMOINDA*, which I continue to think of as poetry, and which the scholar, Kristina Huang<sup>[2]</sup> identifies as “narrative poetry” was first performed as a *rehearsed reading* at The Oval House Theatre, London, in 1998. The work illustrates well the practice – or journey – reflective of many Black practitioners, specifically, Black women practitioners. Certainly, gender is highlighted as well as race, for while those on the inside can and will dismiss the history of Black British writing arts in Britain, it remains vital for *Outsiders*, or those whose experience tell of “unbelonging” in Joan Riley’s sense<sup>[3]</sup>, to remember. Also, in pointing to an outer and inner circle of the writing arts world – however much of an approximation that circle may be – I am indicating that which, though not often acknowledged, is widely known to be true. Namely, that race and gender still matter in arts production, especially given residual, colonial belief systems, embedded in thinking and practices within key institutions that continue to inhibit the development of Black British writing as a body of work. I am clear about the coloniality because the plural field of Black British writing is one in which my writing might be located, and carries many identifiable strands, including one that signifies the Caribbean. I also teach, research and lead in the field.

My research having led to the seventeenth century author, Aphra Behn, discussed further below, from her work I

borrowed the character, Imoinda, whose name entitles my libretto. In 1997, with centralised arts support, namely from the Arts Council, recognising gender and race as factors inhibiting cultural production in the UK, *IMOINDA* came to be developed through an Arts Council ‘women’s’ bursary. The bursary, awarded through Talawa Women Writers’ Project, and co-funded by Talawa Theatre Company, in effect, let me through the theatrical door. Talawa is a Black Theatre company co-founded by the legendary Yvonne Brewster, and it is very likely that, without such access – through one Black woman reading another – the project would not have gone much further than my desk. I had already had individual poems published, as a well as a short story in a Women’s Press collection.

The rehearsed reading of *IMOINDA* was billed as a “Spread the Word & Talawa Workshop” project. “Spread the Word” described, then, as London’s “literature project” and now known as “the writer development agency for London”, remains indispensable in the twenty-first century, for its inclusivity into London’s literary scene, and as such, it continues to be funded by the Arts Council of England. Bernardine Evaristo in the late nineties, was the engine driving Spread the Word, so that, in effect, I had broken into an outer arts circle led at that moment by Black practitioners. Even so, the project’s Summer 1998 programme featured among its feast of writers, only one other Black British woman writer, Malorie Blackman, described, then, in the programme, as having “over thirty books published for children”. It should be stressed that this is an exceptional accomplishment for a Black British woman writer in any period.

It is intriguing that highlighted again over two decades later, this time through Spread the Word’s, *Writing the Future: Black and Asian Writers and Publishers in the UK Market Place* (2015), Malorie is referenced by Danuta Kean as an established author who recalls “always”



being “the sole face of colour at any publishing event” and that she “stopped feeling lonely” only “a decade ago”. Malorie’s additional concern that she seems “to have gone back to being the sole face of colour at literary or publishing events” sadly chimes with what the highly influential and distinguished Black, British, transnational poet Kamau Brathwaite noted decades ago, namely, that there are moments when black writers are “let through” in Britain. If Brathwaite’s suggestion hints at lack of support, then this has been borne out through research focused on differing institutions, discussed below. As in publishing, the institutions appear to have suppressed rather than supported, the body of writing currently referred to as Black British writing.

Furthermore, when the corpus of writing from the *letting through* years is listed, it becomes evident that between the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, the pattern of single publications does not cease until the mid-twentieth century. As a result, readers might well believe that Black British writers were somehow a fluke of the twentieth, perhaps even the twenty-first, century. This is emphatically not the case; Black British writing and its suppression is directly linked to the heyday of the British Empire and its historical realities, particularly enslavement and the long-term trafficking of Black people by white colonisers and their agents. Attempting to justify the lucrative trafficking of black humans, among the ideas widely propagated to preserve slavery was the so-called “science” of the 19<sup>th</sup> century which claimed to “prove” that Africans and their descendants were not as capable of reason as Aryans and thus not fully “human”. As the philosopher Sylvia Wynter – formerly, Outsider fiction writer and playwright here in the UK – reminds us, Black people constitute the only group of humans once placed outside the bounds of “reason”. The

impact of this widespread, colonial and racist belief has shaped white perception of Black people, globally, as limited in terms of intellectual thought, creativity and so on. A malignancy, the stark, seemingly implausible idea which structures the underbelly of European Enlightenment thought, lies dormant in British institutions. Tellingly, the influential Scottish philosopher of the period, David Hume wrote:

I am apt to suspect the Negroes and in general all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences.<sup>[4]</sup>

Linking the widespread racist ideology / philosophy that was popular at the time, to creative production, Hume specifically advises:

In JAMAICA, indeed, they talk of one negroe as a man of parts and learning; but ’tis likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, *like a parrot, who speaks a few words plainly.* (Italics mine)<sup>[5]</sup>

The concern that the Black British writer might be, “like a parrot”, merely imitative in their writing lingers in some circles. That is, as Joanna Russ reminds us, because the “prohibitions” that applied in the British Empire to Black people learning to read and write are not taken into account. Despite brutal punishment applied for daring to learn to be literate, many surprisingly did. Black writers Ottobah Cugoano and Olaudah Equiano are ready examples in the eighteenth century, and afterwards used their hard-won literacy through publication to contest white British supremacist views. This literary tradition – and *Imoinda* is an example –

continues to be challenging through form, content, and language choices in today’s submissions for publication, by Black writers.

In addition to the prohibitions, many forms of discouragement – formal and informal – are historically familiar to Black writers, whether they are authors *in the making* or already published. This is important for the historical contextualising of my own writing of *Imoinda* at the end of the 1990s. That is, a decade following the eruption of race riots in major UK cities in 1981. Those taking to the streets to protest the relentless racism and naked hostility encountered by Black people here in the UK, would, in time, increasingly come to refer to themselves as Black British, though not yet in that fateful year. The period might be read, rather, as one of bitter realization of many things, including, in relation to writing and publication, the extreme “discouragement” on finding that publishing doors were effectively closed to Black writers. Certainly, there had been some opening up in the 50s and 60s, primarily to those authors whose work held the promise of relating to post-independence markets, particularly the African market, though also that of the Caribbean, notable remnants of Britain’s erstwhile Empire built on enslaved bodies.

For those who had recently migrated from the outer spaces of Empire and were living here in the UK, access to publication was proving particularly difficult. As a result, pioneers among those who would later be referred to as the “Windrush generation” took to developing small independent presses, theatres and other arts spaces, intent on opening doors for others who, being Black, found their writing lives invariably restricted. Such a theatre space was Talawa Theatre, which would make possible the initial development of *Imoinda*.

In those years, as a qualified teacher of English, I had become particularly drawn to “theatre in education” strategies in the classroom. I routinely set up improvisation exercises with my classes, and invariably improvised “in role” with the pupils. In effect, habituated to thinking in terms of drama, and to staging scenes in my head, I began to consider writing a play. But what does one do with a play in the UK when one is not working in the theatre and one’s submission is drawn from the substance of Black lives? My writing, generally, in the final decades of the twentieth century would suffer the fate of most UK Black writers; it would reach a particularly limited public audience.

Yet, for those of us interested in literary arts, despite the exclusions, every opening was important. Such was the Alfred Fagon Award, linked at that time to Felix Cross’s Black Theatre Co-operative. As I understand it, the award was supported, at least in part, to gauge whether Black writers had any potential in the field. In its first round, I submitted my play, *At Gulley’s Edge* which was short-listed for the award.

*At Gulley’s Edge* signals an important shift in my taking my own writing seriously. After all, I had written a full-length play, an exercise that takes time, and sustained crafting. It had been shortlisted which meant some recognition of its merit. Furthermore, I found that I had moved from practice that involved hastily scribbling ideas on pieces of paper, only to archive them – in a manner of speaking – in the bottom of my bag, and find them months later, indecipherable. I had established a routine that was allowing me to develop my writing. How I did this in a climate ranging from discouragement to hostility involved the following:

- Gaining writing time by giving up my full-time job for one that was part-time
- Developing a group of my own to encourage each other to write. Until we

had enough material to give readings, we met regularly around my kitchen table

- Giving readings in community settings, particularly libraries
- once we had enough material that audiences started requesting our publications, I turned my hand to publishing.

While my submission did not win the Alfred Fagon Prize the following year, communication swiftly followed from Yvonne Brewster, co-founder and Director of Talawa Theatre inviting me to an interview. Having read my submission, she was offering me one of precious few Women's Bursaries. Her question, once we settled into the meeting, required me to consider what sort of writing I would like to do, if I had complete freedom to do so. That the prospect of "complete freedom" to write whatever I wanted was liberating should be emphasised. Black writers, certainly at that time, soon learnt that they are not free to write whatever they want; at the very least, considerable writerly contortion would be required to make submissions fit publishers' views. Yet, however crafted, the writing must first be let through by gatekeepers of what is increasingly referred to as *the creative industry* making judgements about work that they suspected would not sell and would not be worth their time. Consequently, not for any sustained period had I considered the prospect of freedom to write whatever I choose. I therefore surprised myself when my response was "opera", followed by a swift "but". I was not allowed to complete the sentence, and the outcome was that I had been awarded an Arts Council Women's Bursary. At the same time, my world had been opened to the possibility that I could write whatever I wanted. Much later, I would see that a women's bursary was very much to the point given the weight of the caring roles that so many women carry, and that

indeed I was carrying. Indeed, the intersectional impact of race and gender on Black British writing is yet to be examined and fully understood. Where such investigation might have been happening is the university. That is, in the space within which the publishers and writing agents might have learnt more broadly about their own history, including that of Empire, its resulting Englishes and creolised cultures, as well as the transnational peoples who not only came to Britain, but did so by virtue of their British passports linked to bearing the literal burden of Empire. Peter Fryer meaningfully refers to that history as "British Black History." Equipped with such knowledge, arts and humanities students might also have learnt more humility in the face of human diversity by studying a range of expressions of humanness, including varieties aesthetic representation from different cultures. They might have learnt to be multi- or even pluri-literate; but instead, the university and its humanities departments, steadfastly ignoring meanings of globality, invariably confirmed those meanings, akin to Hume's, reasserting white, male, cultural expression.

The university, founded upon Enlightenment ideas – decidedly unenlightened in relation to Black humans – most strikingly reflects these within its Humanities subjects, and has in large measure promoted knowledge as if only European thought – particularly that of the male – is to be valued. Wynter, referred to above, has been tireless in her condemnation of such practice and its disastrous effects for humankind. What is least readily learnt in such institutional space is knowledge and appreciation of human diversity and how this relates to an understanding of difference and similarities in the poetics of a range of human groups. While developing *IMOINDA*, and in a university job in an English department where Black scholars remain a rarity, I co-founded

our MA programme in Creative and Life Writing. In the years that followed, just after *IMOINDA* was first published – not in the UK but in Italy, in an Italian/English edition translated by Giovanna Covi and Carla Pedrotti – I founded another MA programme. I switched from teaching Creative Writing to the new programme, "Caribbean Literature and Creole Poetics", an area about which there was, and still is too little knowledge. It is also an area from which publishers and other literary gatekeepers might benefit immensely. Leading, recently, a publisher's in-house course on Black British writing, I came to appreciate, even more fully, the value of such knowledge for publishers, most of whom had never had any sustained opportunity to learn about the complexities of writing linked to different cultures or to several cultures simultaneously. In other words, they were overwhelmingly uni- or monocultural, meaning, importantly, that they were poorly equipped to value much of the cultural production of a super-diverse population such as those that people cities like London.

To return to the publication of *Imoinda*, I had always known that for more than the usual reasons of indifference or lack of interest, or even hostility, publication was going to be deferred. *Imoinda's* genre is, after all, not only a neo-slave narrative, challengingly re-writing the story of colonial slavery from the enslaved's point of view [6]. It is also a libretto; that is, written for a particular kind of performance, a process that usually entails a production prior to publication. For these reasons, I was especially delighted to be invited to submit the manuscript for translation and publication, albeit for a university's small press. In the circumstances, and though I am reliably informed that the Italian university system is no less shaped by European Enlightenment ideas than the UK's – in fact, probably more so – I readily accepted the invitation.

The questions remain to be asked: how and why does an African-Caribbean/Black British, non-musician, part-time writer even contemplate – let alone write – a libretto? The answer lies only partly in a moment of abandon, believing that one can, though Black in Britain – maybe should – as an artist, be able to write whatever one wants. More to the point is that having researched Caribbean Literature, particularly Caribbean women's literature, I discovered that despite the centuries of Empire, Black characters and particularly women were rarely to be found in English literary writing. While there are no surprises there – since it suited European financial interest to consider Black people to be less than human – in the process of research, I discovered the character, Imoinda, in Aphra Behn's *Oroonoko* (1776), a novel, perhaps best known for being the first ever published in English. After Behn's writing, Black women characters are rarely to be found in European writing. To offer a nuanced explanation about my borrowing from Behn, I quote from an introduction that I presented at the colloquium in which Giovanna Covi inaugurated the libretto at her university in Trento:

My quarrel with her [Behn's] writing concerns the location of the prince's lover, Imoinda, and the silencing of the black woman at the heart of Oroonoko's narrative. Imoinda, significant by virtue of being a first fictionalised black woman character, is drawn in Behn's writing, so as to be a mere 'shadowy presence' of black womanhood. I would argue that she is quite insubstantial in comparison with the character upon whom she appears to be based, one who defies tribal laws and the wrath of an all-powerful King to be with her lover. A crucial difference in my location of Imoinda is that I perceive her within her traditional setting,



though not trapped by it. (*Voci femminili caraibiche e interculturalita*, 83)

Whatever one's writing situation, the process is invariably shot through with tensions. I'll highlight a current tension between the intense marketisation of writing that marks the early twenty-first century moment and what might momentarily be called the romance of writing, namely, thinking about the practice of writing as "art". There is a tension, too, between the urge to write and the need to develop that writing if it is to be shared. For Black writers, a key question is where to seek the necessary development, for while within writing circles complete beginners are readily accepted, what happens afterwards? To illustrate, I distinctly recall sharing within the first and only writing class that I attended that I'd had my first short story accepted for publication by Women's Press. The tutor's response, "well, you've done rather well for yourself", signalled more incredulity than I, in my naivety at the time, might have anticipated. There is a tension, too, between the time that writing demands and what might be called woman's time, given the demands of caring that falls so heavily on women, as measured against the need to earn a living.

For a Black woman embarked on writing a libretto in the UK in the late twentieth century, the tensions now appear to have been not only innumerable, but almost irreconcilable with productive habits of writing. As a result, reflecting on the writing of my libretto, currently, many tensions have only gradually revealed themselves concerning my writing as practice. I wrote, then:

As a black woman claiming a public voice in the twentieth century, I am forced to confront this voiceless past which bears directly upon the 'scars of my

knowledge'. While I have found, in London, the heart of the former British Empire, the process of publication extremely challenging for my fiction and poetry, the difficulty is trifling compared to having work produced in the English theatre. (*Voci femminili*, 85)

The question might be re-iterated: especially given the larger racial context, who writes a libretto? I remain uncertain, though I've come to understand that the writing of librettos is particularly niche. It appears to be writing by invitation, more or less; and usually the invitation comes from a composer. As I would come to appreciate, such a practice has become ingrained in composer/ librettist relationships in which the final product becomes 'my opera' for the composer, while the librettist becomes a mere name on the page. Confoundingly for my own practice, I had written the libretto, and would have to find an interested composer. Despite all of this, in many ways, *Imoinda* represents the strangest recognition of my writerly self for very many reasons. First, it was the moment that I felt I could think of myself as a writer, partly because of the scale of the project. That is, bigger than a single poem or a short story. Also, I'd been free to choose the subject matter, form, language style and so on; *Imoinda* was, after all, neither the result of a writer's competition nor submission invitation. I had been mentored, albeit for a full weekend after which the mentor slipped out of my life and was not heard of again, but I was completely hooked on the project. Still, by the time the libretto was due to be published, a particular aspect of the precarity disproportionately affecting Black creative writers had become visible. I wrote:

Just recently, an article in the national press, *The Guardian*, discussed the demise of black British

theatre. It is a story of political recognition in the 1980s giving rise to the collapse of black theatre by the end of the twentieth century in Britain. Therein lies the tip of the monumental production iceberg for black writers, and gender has not even begun to be explored relative to this. So, the conditions of literary production are difficult, and it is an audacious African-Caribbean woman who makes independent claims to literary authority. It is, if we pursue this logic further, a distinctly foolhardy writer, who, being African Caribbean, and woman, takes on the operatic world with all its meanings of high and low culture, status, class and so on. (*Voci femminili*, 85)

Looking back on the process of writing *Imoinda*, I only sometimes recall that it was not utter madness that led me there, but a combination of reasons with theatre in education at its centre. Concerning the publication itself, the response is worth some examination. As indicated above, the university of Trento was especially interested and undertook both translation and first publication. One of the many things I learnt from my colleague and translator, Giovanna Covi, is that opera in Italy is by no means the fetishized middle-class domain that we understand it to be in the UK. In contrast, opera is a popular art form, open to audiences singing along with their favourite arias. In addition, familiar with my writing, my translator perceived the epic potential within *Imoinda's* narrative and appreciated that potential *as opera*. Without her genuine interest, the libretto would not have been published in 2003, and may well have remained one more bundle of papers in my collection.

The response that followed from the USA was immediate and was led on the other side of the Atlantic by Maria Helena Lima, an esteemed scholar of Caribbean and Black British Literature,

who was adamant not only that she wanted to see a production of *Imoinda*, but that she knew the composer most likely to be interested. That composer was Glenn McClure. Lima's particular interest led to publication of the libretto in a stand-alone, slim volume in 2008. As I explained in interview to the Italian literary scholar, Lisa Marchi, it was being contacted by Glenn McClure and listening to his ideas for working with young people to develop a world premiere that prompted the second edition:

It seemed clear that a portable text was urgently needed, one that young people could physically carry around with them. The first bi-lingual edition, published in Italy in 2003, was a scholarly edition including several essays. Although extremely important, it was not pocket sized. The second edition of *Imoinda*, in English only, was published in 2008, the year of the world premiere at the School of the Arts (SOTA), in New York. (Marchi, 'Transformative Potential', Interview)

The 2008 *Imoinda* publication enabled high school students from the School of the Arts (SOTA) Rochester City School District, Rochester, New York, working alongside scholars, educators, and professional artists to compose a musical score. Together they developed and produced a full cast and full orchestra production of *Imoinda* with the support of an \$85,000 grant. Glenn McClure, a recipient of the prestigious Continental Harmony Commission by the American Composers Forum led the 'multi-generational' team composing the music for the production. The outcome was the only full production of *Imoinda or She Who will Lose her Name* as a World Music Opera. The team developing the writing from libretto to opera included SUNY Geneseo Faculty Members: Glenn McClure (Composer/Project Director); Dr. Maria Helena Lima (Literature

specialist); and Dr. Gerard Floriano (Opera and Vocal Technique). Musical Direction was by Alan Tirre (SOTA); and Sarah Mattison; and Choreography was by Clyde Morgan. Supported by the New York State Music Fund, the World premiere of *Imoinda* enjoyed a much-appreciated run from 1<sup>st</sup> to 4<sup>th</sup> May, at SOTA's Main Stage Theatre, and attracted rave reviews.

Publication of the 2008 edition has also led to a trickle of publications from scholars based primarily in European universities and the USA. Greek scholar, Mina Karavanta, for example, in her paper, "The injunctions of the spectre of slavery: affective memory and the counter writing of community" (2013) places *Imoinda*: alongside the recent work, *Zong!* by M. NourbeSe Philip, in order to examine how the two "Caribbean texts" counterwrite the history of the slave plantation. On the other hand, writing in Margarete Rubik's book, *Aphra Behn and her Female Successors* (2011), Aspasia Velissariou is certainly dismissive of my writing. Indeed, as Professor Sue Thomas states, in her review of Rubik's collection of essays, Velissariou's is "an invective against" *Imoinda* clearly revealing a lack of knowledge of Caribbean writing and key elements of its tradition that need acknowledgement as with any other tradition of writing. Most significantly, as Thomas emphasises, Velissariou misses the point by being unaware of "the cultural context and the intertexts" of the writing of *Imoinda*. Thomas highlights further, "the final sequence of *Imoinda*" and the "important concepts in African-Caribbean literature and culture" to which the writing alludes. Thomas both lists and references these. Thomas' point reinforces the concern raised above, about how limitations of literary knowledge can be influential in terms of gatekeeping. Uninformed reading by cultural gatekeepers

confidently unaware of their own cultural limitations produce distortion. In the case of such reading within publishing and reviewing, for example, outcomes of rejection and non-publication can be deeply damaging.

This is not the case with Kristina Huang's "Carnivalizing *Imoinda's* Silence" (2021), which showcases a thorough mining by the author of several genres of my writing, including poetry and essays. Huang's is a sustained and successful attempt – as I consider it – at understanding not only why someone like me might claim an interest in opera, but also what that might mean in terms such as "carnivalizing" to which, as she emphasises, I have returned over the years. Huang also documents a range of performances of *Imoinda*, mainly in the USA. Additionally, collaboration, first with Juwon Ogungbe and more recently with the composer, Odaline de la Martinez, has led to several musical performances of sections of the work here in London.

In the UK, there has been no critical response to the libretto, as far as I am aware. However, an AHRC postgraduate 'student-led initiative' research funding has supported some exploration of the libretto. Former students, Natasha Bonnelame, Mar' Ene Edwin and Tendai Marima organised activities including a hybrid virtual/ in-person conference in which key interested scholars participated. The project, "Words from Other Worlds", was concerned to address the absence of Caribbean voices such as *Imoinda's* by producing a virtual and print collection of student perspectives on what they referred to as a "minority text". In so doing, *Words from Other Worlds* sought to "make African-Caribbean presence known" beyond the standard reading list of the English university classroom via the virtual global space of the internet [7]. The student-led initiative sought to create a shared arena through the interactive and collaborative framework

of the workshop, journal and web space. Their concern was to explore what they referred to as "the malleability of the text when read through the eyes of drama, music, art, literature and museum studies." They hoped through such a dynamic approach to IMOINDA, to produce a range of contemporary, "new" ways of looking at and going beyond the text within the radical context of the "ever-changing digital world".

Did the 2009 digital focus by postgraduate students make a difference, and if so, to whom? What difference did the 2008 School of the Arts Project in New York make, either to the students involved or to the opening of possibilities for production or sharing the work? The answer must certainly be that it is too early to tell how each influenced, changed, or shaped subsequent audiences or range of audiences. That the intervention by the University of Trento and the initial act of publication turned the tide of the project is evident. Initial publication led to curiosity about how the text might work on stage, leading in turn to a second edition and the beginning of performances that might be considered experimental. As Huang reminds us, however, a consistent theme of my writing is carnivalizing, including that of opera set within a Caribbean context. From that vantage point, in many ways, the published text is only the beginning.

I stated at the outset that *Imoinda* was reflective of the familiar route for Black writers in Britain, especially women. Since the various institutions remain largely exclusive, it also continues to be the case that our work is often better placed to gain exposure if we are positioned to do it ourselves. This is undoubtedly an additional burden. However, having long discovered that I could either spend precious time writing or beseeching agents to have me on their books, I do not have an

agent. Notably, some surprise has been expressed about Black writers not having agents. Why? Surprising or not, life is simply too short. At best, agents might open doors. With no such organising force, *Imoinda*, for example, had no direct route to the theatre, publication and so on, except my own and that of my networks. Despite it all, this is how far *Imoinda* has travelled. That there is no critical response from the UK does not surprise me. I am not holding my breath. Perhaps it is worth reiterating: the mirror is in the writing.

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### Endnotes

1) The term 'transnational' is privileged here, not to obliterate or hide specific belongings, such as Caribbean countries, important though they certainly are, but to emphasise the multiple spaces of belonging that cannot be reduced to size or geographical positioning of country of birth in which one has perhaps not lived longest. Also, I capitalise Black in line with my understanding of Kim Hall's "tropes of blackness" in relation to "relations of power". See Hall, Hall, *Things of Darkness: Economies of Race and Gender in Early Modern England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1995), 6-7.

2) See, Huang, Kristina, 'Carnivalizing Imoinda's Silence'.

3) I refer to the novel, *The Unbelonging* by Joan Riley.

4) Hume, quoted in Eze 2000, p.692. For a discussion of the ongoing debate concerning the significance of Hume's footnote reasserting his racist views, see Eze, Emmanuel Chukwudi, "Hume, Race and Nature".

5) Hume quoted in Eze, p.692.

6) What I did not realise while writing *Imoinda* was that it was part of a new wave of generic writing, namely the neo-slave narrative which would become important for Black writers across many nations. See, J. Anim-Addo and M.H. Lima, "Introduction" *Callaloo* 40, no. 4 (2017), "The Power of the Neo-Slave Narrative Genre" (3-13), <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2017.0132>.

7) The digital repository of videos and content from the November 2009 interdisciplinary workshop is "Critical Perspectives on *Imoinda*," <https://www.gold.ac.uk/wow/>.

8) *The Good Place: The Trolley Problem* clip on YouTube; part 2

9) A cluster of cases seemed to make this story resonate particularly with students who'd read about the murders of Sarah Everard, Julia James, Bibaa Henry and Nicole Smallman; and the reports of inappropriate police behaviour at vigils. Themes related to rape culture were particularly evident in undergraduate creative writing coursework that academic year (my anecdotal data).

10) Earlier still, William Caxton produced a medieval *Metamorphoses*, translated not straight from the Latin but a French version, that isn't covered here. (Ovid, *The First Book of Ovid's Metamorphoses*, 1480)

11) 'His attempt on Daphne... was no sudden impulse. He had long been in love with her, and had brought about the death of his rival... who disguised himself as a girl and joined Daphne's mountain revels. Apollo, knowing if this by divination, advised the mountain nymphs to bathe naked, and thus make sure that everyone in their company was

a woman; Leucippus's imposture was at once discovered, and the nymphs tore him to pieces.' (Graves, 2017)

12) If the fact that such a widespread governmental operation on US soil doesn't cause more public scrutiny seems odd, Lovecraft does provide prohibition as a cover, stressing that only the 'Keener news-followers' and 'liberal organizations' may have followed up on the fate of the prisoners, and these were met with 'long confidential discussions'. Presumably the same can be said for the destruction of Hodge's prison. (103).

13) See Joshi (p. 901).

14) The sequence is contained in *That This* (2010).

15) Mary Ruefle, via private letter on receipt of my book, *Birds and Ghosts*, in 2023.

### About the Author

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# Finding the Value in Teaching Ethics to Writers

## Duncan Dicks

### ABSTRACT

This article adopts a teacher-practitioner stance to reflect on the value of embedding basic ethical frameworks in the pedagogy of Creative Writing. It takes the use by Atkinson (2008) of narrative techniques to help teach ethics to medical students as a starting point. It then provides an account of the author's inclusion of basic ethical frameworks in teaching delivery of Level 4 prose lectures at a UK university (2018-2021) as a case study. The author drew on Narrative Ethics, Consequentialism, Duty Ethics and Virtue Ethics in lectures to help student writers develop their understanding of character-, plot- and conflict-development in their fiction. The article provides summary thoughts on main benefits for Creative Writing students' learning. It includes consideration of the author's application of ethics in their own creative practice. The article builds on a paper given at the 2019 NAWA conference in York.

### Keywords:

ethics, narrative, consequentialism, duty, virtue, Kant, pedagogy, crime fiction

### Introduction

The study of ethics includes the exploration of the actual ethical frameworks which people use in their everyday lives, and the questions around what is ethical and how

best to live ethically. The first of these explorations informs our understanding of human nature, and helps us to create believable and realistic characters in works of fiction. The second, the exploration of what ethical really means, is relevant to creative writers because plot, setting, relationships and conflict are often intimately involved in complex questions of ethics. Conflicts based upon differing views of ethics create tension for the reader, derived from the uncertainty of who is wrong and who is right.

In addition to the impact of ethics on writing as character study and source of tension and conflict in plot, the importance of ethics for writers as members of a wider society has been written about many times, especially in the areas of truth in autobiography (for example, Lejeune's *The Autobiographical Pact*, 1989) and in discussing issues around representation. Shady Cosgrove, in her 'WRIT101: Ethics of Representation for Creative Writers' (2009), discusses how writers should be held to a high ethical standard because their writing has an impact on readers and on society as a whole. She particularly argues for the importance of research, identifying issues that push students away from carrying out the necessary work ("it's not very creative"), and highlighting reasons why research is so important (it increases realism, avoids errors that will put off the reader, superficiality that might alienate readers, and the propagation of untruths and myths about the Other). Cosgrove discusses three strategies for teaching ethics of representation to writers: the workshop, readings, and assignments. She quite explicitly argues against separate lessons on ethics of representation because "it sequesters these considerations away from the 'real' classes of writing" (Cosgrove, 2009: 137).

In this paper, while the great importance of ethical behaviour for writers is recognized, we are mostly concerned

with the ways in which a basic understanding of the philosophy of ethics can give writers new tools and techniques to help them improve their writing. Pedagogical approaches to teaching ethics to undergraduate Creative Writing students are discussed. Over the last three years, the author has increasingly incorporated ethical frameworks into lectures on prose writing at a UK university, taking care to include writing exercises, and to pull out explicit "writing tips/reflections", including how these frameworks can be used in plotting, in building tension and conflict, and in creating realistic, and believable characters. Finally, examples are given from the use of ethics in the development of a crime fiction novel completed for a PhD, as well as giving examples from other works.

Exploring ethics through creative prose Although the aim is to look at ethics as a way of improving writing, it is interesting to consider an almost opposite approach, discussed in a 2008 paper, *Using Creative Writing to Enhance the Case Study Method in Research Integrity and Ethics Courses* by Timothy N. Atkinson in the *Journal of Academic Ethics* (Atkinson, 2008). Atkinson's claim was that creative writing techniques could help improve students' understanding of ethics. He carried out research with medical students on Master's degrees in Public Health and Physician Residents (Atkinson, 2008: 40), looking at the interplay between creative writing and ethics from this perspective. In conclusion, as we shall see, he clarifies some interesting strengths of creative writing as a research tool.

Atkinson notes that a weakness often pointed out in using traditional case studies to teach research ethics is that of "excluding student experiences" (Atkinson, 2008: 33). He wants to get closer to "the real thing" because "the case study approach sidesteps the learning that emerges from actual encounters with real life problems"



(Atkinson quoting McCarthy and McCarthy, 2006). He argues that “using creative writing techniques ... would get inside the case in a cognitive level.” (ibid: 35) and that by using ethics frameworks alongside creative prose stories students can “pull out many creative solutions to the case.” (ibid: 35). The essential difference between the case study and the creative writing scenario is the expected engagement of the student with the development of the scenario. The case study is a static fiction, given to the student fully formed, while the creative writing scenario encourages the student to create back stories, characters, and further plot to explore the issues that occur to them.

Atkinson’s pedagogical approach involved giving case studies to students each week as a starting point. The students were asked to examine each case based on four main pillars of story construction: Setting, Plot, Character, and Conflict. In each case they were then asked to write a Conclusion to the story perhaps introducing characters that help examine the moral development of the principle characters, the consequences of the actions, and act to create a morally sound solution. This was not a creative writing exercise in the sense of being judged by prose writing standards, but more of a creative essay, proposing how the story might end given all the factors already considered. Each student wrote a short essay discussing the importance of setting, plot, character, and conflict to the ethical decisions being made, sometimes including relevant back stories which might alter the consideration. By creating their own narrative, students generated an ownership of the decision-making process, and an immersion into the factors to be considered.

Ethics researchers and teachers are very concerned with motivation.

Atkinson continues

We need to explore what motivates actors to act against the rules. We ask ourselves: did the actor do it on purpose, did they do it to get ahead, did they do it simply because they were ignorant, was it the environment (setting) or did someone else (antagonist) use the perpetrator as an agent of evil? I think many decision makers in ethics today are too quick to find fault with individuals without exploring the myriad of contexts that could be causing the problems and prevent them. (ibid: 35).

It is clear that ethics cases create a rich environment for key elements of prose narratives – those specific areas of multi-dimensional characters, motivation, and plot, and of complex relationships are critical to understanding ethics. Unsurprisingly, Atkinson focuses on conflict: “Moral dilemmas involve conflict.” (ibid: 39), but perhaps unexpectedly Atkinson also talks about the importance of setting.

What are the organizational culture and/or climate? What are the norms, laws, and rules of the organization? How does organization affect people? This is a more abstract, social and cultural discussion of setting than we might use in creative writing, but it also prompts us to think about description of location in these terms. If we are creating moral conflicts then what do we describe physically that conveys these factors of culture, norms, rules? (ibid: 40)

So, what does Atkinson’s perspective suggest about the relationship of ethics to creative writing? Ethics is a practical subject, and to really understand what it feels like to engage with ethical decisions we have understand from deep within the factors that affect those

decisions. Atkinson highlights the importance of the external environment, and the internal pressures on characters (through personality, motivation, relationships), and this writing process helps the student to develop empathy with the decision-makers in the case studies. Writers immerse themselves in scenes to better understand the characters and to make them as real as possible to the reader. An understanding of the types of decision processes that people experience when they make decisions with an ethical element seems as valid to the writer as it is to the ethicist.

It can be seen that Atkinson has found common ground between the writer and ethicist through the importance of empathy, and that might lead to thinking that by understanding ethics we can improve our writing.

Main ethics frameworks for writers  
To teach ethics to student writers, it is necessary to simplify the subject and give the writers ethical frameworks that can easily be related to the stories that they tell. In lectures (Dicks, 2019a), four simple, but rich, theoretical frameworks have been used to help writers think about ethics and their use in developing plot, character, and conflict. The first, *Narrative Ethics*, is an overview of how ethics touches upon narrative from the perspective of different actors within the production and consumption of narrative literature. This is very well discussed and explained in Phelan’s online project (Phelan, 2014) *The Living Handbook of Narratology, Narrative Ethics*, which allows students to stand back and see how everything they do as writers, from first conception to reading, has an ethical component. Three more major approaches to understanding ethical decision making are then considered: Consequentialism (utilitarianism), Duty ethics (Kant’s deontology), and Virtue ethics, giving the students enough knowledge to allow them to consider a complex case study from the perspective

of each framework.

Narrative ethics

Phelan explains narrative ethics (Phelan, 2014) as exploring “the intersections between the domain of stories and storytelling and that of moral values”. The approach looks at ethical issues from the perspective of four positions of (real or imagined) agents involved in stories and storytelling (ibid: 1):

1. The ethics of the told – the content of the narrative as a real-world simulation. The ethical actions and positions of the characters in the narrative. This is what we might usually consider when we talk about ethics in a story. One example, that has been well-received by students, is the complex ethical behaviour of well-known characters such as Severus Snape in the *Harry Potter* novels (Rowling, 1997-2007). Snape bullies Harry throughout these novels, treating him unfairly at every turn, and yet we discover at the end, that Snape has been Harry’s protector, and that he gives up his life to protect Harry’s secrets.
2. The ethics of the telling – text-internal matters relating to the author or narrator. This considers the use of storytelling techniques and their ethical dimensions. Choices such as the point of view, the reliability of the narrator, and how much the narrator discloses of the characters can have a big impact on how the reader feels about the morality of the events as they unfold. Writers can often convey the values of the storyteller to their audiences (not necessarily the values of the writer, of course). The example of Severus Snape can be used in this situation, too. Rowling hides Snape’s true nature, choosing to disclose instead aspects of his

personality that trick the reader into believing him to be Harry's main antagonist for much of the series.

3. The ethics of writing/producing – text external matters. The ethical responsibilities of writers and how they engage with them. Examples include portrayal of real people who may have formed the basis of characters, or of real, or presumed real, events in the story. This subject also includes the ethics of the topics that writers explore— socio-political conditions, for example—and asks under what circumstances writers might be justified in choosing not to reflect certain social injustices. Writers might consider whether they can help their readers, or indeed themselves, develop as ethical people.
4. The ethics of reading/reception – an often-ignored aspect of the process, considering the audience/reader and the consequences and responsibilities of engaging with a narrative. We might ask about the duties of the reader, about the ethics of reading choices, and about the depth of engagement with a text, as well as asking whether the writer's past history should affect these questions.

One valuable lesson from this framework, pointed out by Phelan, is the intimate connection between rhetoric (the persuasive nature of the language used) and ethics. Writers use rhetoric, whether consciously chosen or not— everything they write has an effect on the audience so they can only choose what kind of rhetoric to employ (Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, [1961]1983). The effects include cognitive, aesthetic, affective, and ethical impacts in close interaction with each other.

### Consequentialism

When considering specific ethical frameworks in a lecture, it is useful to use simplifications and illustrations that have a memorable impact on students. For consequentialism, two short clips from the Netflix series *The Good Place* (The Good Place[8], 2016-2020) provide an excellent and entertaining introduction. These clips show the character Chidi teaching the other main characters (including demon, Michael) about ethics using the trolley problem, and this gives an opportunity to discuss trolley problems and some of the practical problems with consequentialism as a model for ethics. Trolley problems were first introduced into ethics by Phillipa Foot in her 1967 paper *The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of the Double Effect in Virtues and Vices* referenced here from its appearance in her 1978 books (Foot, 1978). In their simplest form, they ask the student to consider what the ethical decision should be if they are in charge of a trolley that is hurtling down a track towards five people who cannot move in time and will certainly be killed, unless the driver changes track to one where, instead, there is just a single person who will die. While many people will argue the consequentialist solution that the greatest good is served by switching tracks, others see this as a purposeful and deliberate decision to kill someone. Complexities can be added in asking about the known moral worth of the potential victims, varying the numbers involved, exploring how it might feel different if you had to carry out the killings in a more direct “hands-on” manner. Some of these questions reflect the earlier discussion on Atkinson's work about creating a more realistic narrative in which to consider the scenario. In *The Good Place* the characters are asked to consider the difference between the trolley problem and the “doctor's dilemma”—the decision a doctor could make in using organs from one healthy person to save the lives of five sick people.

In short, students are told that the moral good of a decision can be judged by the consequences of that decision (sometimes the harm done), and that all that has to be done is to carry out a ‘moral calculus’ working out which option results in the most good (or least bad).

The clips demonstrate that consequentialism can be criticized because:

- It doesn't tell us what to consider as good and bad (harm done to people is only one way)
- We often don't have all the information we need to do the calculation required (or the time, or perhaps judgement)
- In real life, “battery”— personal, physical violence—is often given greater weight by the decision-maker.

### Duty Ethics

Here the term “Duty Ethics” refers to the deontological perspective (essentially underpinned by Kant's Categorical Imperative, Kant, 1996). For an overview see the online Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy entry (Johnson & Cureton, 2016). In creative writing lectures, three simplified formulations of Kant's Categorical Imperative (which Kant claims are entirely equivalent, although this is not at all obvious), are given, putting emphasis on the first one:

1. **Always treat people as an end in themselves, rather than a means to an end;**
2. If something is good/bad it is universally good/bad – in all circumstances and for all people;
3. A good action is only good if it is done because it is good, rather

than for other reasons.

It is important to particularly emphasize the notion of duty in this section, because it is a powerful writing tool when considering characters and motivation, but it is also helpful to ask students to look at their own decisions. For example, it focuses students to discuss the process of giving feedback in workshops. Good students often get a lot out of giving feedback, practicing the writing lessons they've been given in lectures, but under formulation 1 they should always be aware that this process of giving feedback is for the benefit of the other student, the writer. They should ask themselves, for example: “will the writer be able to improve as a result of my feedback?”

Having already introduced the trolley problem, duty ethics can then be used to consider the simple version outlined previously. A duty ethicist might consider the correct approach would be to do nothing and let the five people die. The argument would be that steering the trolley to the other track amounts to using the person on that track as a means to save the life of other people rather than treating them as “an end in themselves”. Here it is useful to point out the conflicts that arise between consequentialism and deontology. The medical example (“doctor's dilemma”) shows that what consequentialism considers to be morally right in the unreal environment of the trolley problem, is too unpalatable for society in the real world, when a duty ethics viewpoint is taken.

### Virtue Ethics

The fourth and final of the three main approaches to ethics is Virtue Ethics. For a good review of virtue ethics see (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy 2016). Duffy (2017) discusses the ethical choices of writers particularly in relation to virtue ethics, although he does note that that he “does not mean to suggest by this that we *should* teach ethics”. Note



that Duffy's excellent paper explores ethical communication, while the current paper is about using ethical frameworks in constructing stories.

Students are asked to list as many virtues (good moral qualities) as they can think of in one minute. A typical list includes kindness, generosity, prudence, helpfulness, wisdom, caring, justice, bravery, and compassion. Conflicts, between pairs of virtues, that might arise in certain situations are then debated: for example, prudence v. generosity, or justice v. compassion.

The trolley problem solution for the virtue ethicist would be to steer the trolley away from the five people, not because of some moral calculus, but because it is simply the thing that a virtuous person would do. It is quite hard to disentangle this from the consequentialist argument, but essentially virtue ethicists are not considering that there is more well-being or happiness in the world as a result of their actions. The virtue of justice or gentleness or wisdom might be called upon to help make the decision, and more complex variations of the scenario might bring into play other virtues that change the actor's decision.

#### An Ethics Case Study for Writers

After giving students the tools to discuss ethics in a more dispassionate way, they can be presented with a real-life situation to give them a chance to see how these frameworks might lead to conflicting views. In one seminar group, they were presented with some basic information from the Shamima Begum case (some details can be found online, for example BBC 2020), summarized as follows:

- When she was 15 a girl from a moderately religious family was persuaded by online propaganda videos and social media traps to run away to join ISIL in Syria.

- She ran away from her family and undertook the hazardous journey to Syria.
- Within a few weeks of arriving, she was married to a man in one of the camps. Her activity in the camps relating to actual violence are not known but she was married to an active ISIL soldier and in support of ISIL's (internationally considered) illegal aims.
- Four years later the war is effectively over, she has a child and wants to return home to the UK.
- Her family want her to return, and to see their grandchild.
- The UK government have stated that she will never be allowed to return and have stated that her British citizenship is revoked (this may break international law).

This particular case study has been run twice. The students are asked to pair up and make notes on this scenario, and on what should happen to the girl from each of a consequentialist, a duty ethics, and a virtue ethics perspective, and then finally from their own feelings, knowledge and understanding.

In the first run, many of the students couldn't focus on the frameworks they had been given. They wanted to discuss their (often unforgiving) views on her actions, rather than use the ethical theory, and few made any attempt to look at the fundamental question of morality around allowing, or refusing to allow, her to return to the UK. In retrospect, a more structured approach was prepared for the second time around, steering the students to a more rational response.

In the second discussion of this case (with a different set of students), students were individually given one framework to use and one particular person to focus on (for example, "using the ideas of consequentialism make notes on Begum's mother, her wishes and desires" or "consider how Shamima Begum might feel about her actions and current situation from a Virtue Ethics perspective"). This then led to class discussion where an individual student was able to gain a deeper understanding of a framework, and to see how that might affect someone's actions or responses. Later, we were able to use this to discuss characters in fiction and how we can give them realistic actions and motivations without necessarily agreeing with them.

In feedback on the case, possible consequences of each choice were presented, as well as the importance of treating the people involved (girl, parents, child, UK and Syrian citizens) as ends in themselves rather than using them as a means to achieve political point scoring, and the virtues shown by the different actors involved, including Begum and the students themselves. It was clear that much more time could have been dedicated to these issues.

Cosgrove's suggestions of using workshops, readings, and assignments to investigate ethical issues could have been used to explore this case in even greater depth. For example, Mohsin Hamid's *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Hamid, 2007) has been used to discuss the use of distinctive voices with the students, and this earlier work could be carried into a discussion comparing and contrasting on Begum's own ethical beliefs with those of Changez, Hamid's narrator. This could be used as a prelude to writing exercises with prompts such as "Write 1,000 words from the first person perspective of someone who has behaved in a way that we might see as unethical from a consequentialist perspective, but who might see their

own actions as brave or principled".

#### Personal Experiences of Writing with Ethics Frameworks

During 2017-2019 I completed a novel for my PhD (Dicks, 2019b), in the crime fiction genre. Crime fiction is inextricably concerned with questions of ethics, whether it is hard-boiled American PIs battling against institutional corruption and making personal decisions about how far they are justified in breaking laws and moral codes for a greater good, such as Chandler's Marlow in *The Big Sleep* (Chandler, 2011), Hammett's Sam Spade in *The Maltese Falcon* (Hammett 2005) all the way through to Paretsky's VI Warshawski (Paretsky, 2007) and Dennis Lehane's Kenzie and Gennaro (Lehane, 1994) or British Police Detectives, like Rankin's Rebus (Rankin, 2013) or Billingham's Thorne (Billingham, 2020), making maverick decisions to bring down killers while letting gang leaders who maintain the status quo walk free.

In my PhD, I have drawn on, among others, Val McDermid's *The Mermaids Singing* (McDermid, 1995) in which she introduces Tony Hill, a criminal psychologist who is indulging in sex chats with a serial killer. Hill's relatively minor fall from the ideals of deontology and virtue ethics, turns out to have serious consequences. McDermid is still able to portray Hill as moral and ethical influence by demonstrating the difference between our intuitions about ethics in one framework and the possible consequences in another. I also refer to William Hertling's *Kill Process* (Hertling, 2016) to explore the use of technology in crime fiction, but Hertling's protagonist, Angie, also demonstrates in more extreme ways the methods that crime authors use to manipulate the readers' ethical code. Angie has a full life as a technical start-up entrepreneur, but is also a serial killer, secretly discovering women in abusive relationships and

murdering their partners through technological means. Ultimately, Hertling encourages the reader to forgive Angie, partly because of her personal experiences, partly because we can believe in her own justifications, but most of all because she finally gives up her criminal activities for more positive contributions to society. Hertling manipulates us into these views by clever writing and a depiction of Angie's character as having many standard virtues—caring for others, thoughtful, courageous, and tenacious.

Typically, conflicts arise between some sort of personal moral code that constitutes a version of virtue ethics, versus a consequentialist calculus. In my own writing, my protagonist, Ainsley, is a technology journalist who tries to work ethically, for example, making reasonable predictions about the future without being sensationalist in the fight for higher ratings, treating sources and colleagues courteously, and so on—very much demonstrating certain virtues of honesty, loyalty, and respect for others. He is drawn into a search for a long-lost daughter which takes him to victims of historic paedophilia, and ultimately to a serial killer who has been operating for nearly thirty years. In particular, the characters of the abuse victims took me into areas of ethics which required empathy and consistency to make the characters both realistic and give them personalities that reflected their childhoods.

One such victim, Ainsley's daughter, is out for revenge, ignoring both consequentialist and deontological viewpoints. She wants her abuser-turned-serial-killer to die, but at the same time she shows care and respect for her fellow victims. Rediscovering them as an adult she takes time out from her plotting to put them in touch with each other, and to cajole them into better life choices. Here I chose to portray her as someone who believes in the virtue of justice. She isn't interested in

consequences, or even a duty to other people (she makes use of her father and her son, putting them in significant danger in the pursuit of the killer).

It was clear in writing these characters that the virtues were a strong guide to characterisation. In the final scenes Ainsley's daughter is involved in locking the killer in a burning building, ensuring that he dies when she could have let him out and brought him to a more conventional justice. The reader can see the moral conflict played out. One other character, a social worker who becomes a target for the killer, is shown to follow a form of duty ethics. Her actions are mostly guided by a belief in doing the right thing, and in being kind to others, and this is shown in her day-to-day interactions at work and with Ainsley and his son. Consistent with this world-view, she chooses to accept her situation as target for the killer in order to help flush him out and bring him to justice.

#### Writing Reflections Summarized

As Cosgrove suggests, an ethics lecture in isolation tends to disconnect the student from the writing. I make sure, at stages of the lecture, to link back the ethical questions to the act of writing itself. It helps to set texts that highlight the use of some of these ideas, and to set writing prompts for the students' weekly workshops (for example, write a piece of flash fiction that mirrors shows a character paralyzed into inaction because of the inability to forecast the consequences). I like to finish my lectures with practical writing tips. Here I've collected together some of the main writing lessons that are brought out in the lectures.

- Use the ideas of consequentialism to consider the dilemmas that characters face. The lack of certain knowledge may leave a character paralysed between choice, or the lack of time may mean they make an understandable, but rushed

decision that turns out badly.

- In real life, people often think consequentially up to a point, and then find the "logical" solution too unpalatable. This can give the writer the chance to have characters make believable but plot-twisting decisions.
- Characters who follow through on the consequentialist's "right" action can end up either demonized or heroic. (For example, it may seem disloyal to report the bad behaviour of others, even if it has better consequences for society.)
- Weaknesses in these frameworks can work to our advantage, for example, unintended consequences of actions can make great plot points – a "good" character can end up looking "bad".
- Duty seems old-fashioned and even negative in the modern world, but stories that show a character who has a sense of duty, can be very powerful. A person who believes that certain behaviours are always bad (following version 3 of Kant's Categorical Imperative) can appear inflexible, while still showing admirable qualities. Duty ethics can be a way of creating complex, three dimensional characters.
- The virtues provide a guide for characters. They should be consistent, and they might give a framework for showing a character's personality, rather than telling. A character might be loyal, or generous, or courageous, for example. The Harry Potter books use these ideas of virtue ethics in creating the values

associated with each House (Gryffindor, Hufflepuff etc).

- By considering real life situations we can attempt to understand complex motivations and how they play out in difficult circumstances. Elements of these cases can generate characters, relationships, and plots.
- As writers we might consider whether we live up to certain virtues. Are we courageous in the subjects that we write about? I set this as an exercise in class, asking students to list the virtues that they think are relevant to themselves as writers, and then holding a seminar discussion afterwards.

#### Conclusions

Having used ethics in creative writing classes for three years now, I want to finally address the question of whether these lessons and exercises have been valuable, for students and from my teaching perspective.

Students get very engaged in the discussion of real-life ethics cases, sometimes finding it difficult to step back and use the frameworks they've been given. This is extremely useful. Their engagement can be used as an example of how they can develop tension in their own work by using these ideas.

It's really important to make the direct link to writing during these lessons. In the first ten minutes of one lesson a student asked me why this was relevant. Since then I've made the practical benefits very clear, and I've started lessons where I'm going to discuss ethical issues with a writing exercise, asking students to create a character who has a moral dilemma. Some students find this easy, and others don't know where to start. Both get value from



understanding how moral dilemmas can be generated by taking different perspectives and using different moral frameworks.

In the end these are writing lessons, not ethics lessons, and it's important to remember that, otherwise I lose the students. By continually giving good literary examples, and interspersing with writing exercises, I've found the students start to generate their own complex characters and plots.

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## About the author

In the 1980s Duncan gained a PhD in Pure Mathematics, before working in nuclear engineering, accountancy, and environmental finance before starting his own business as a consultant. In 2006, he took up writing as a hobby and passed the University of Gloucestershire MA with Distinction, before starting a second PhD in Creative Writing and working as a prose fiction lecturer at the same university. Duncan completed this PhD in September 2019 researching into the way that crime fiction explores and portrays the boundaries of society through his own crime fiction novel (as yet unpublished). His current research and teaching interests include the way that writing is impacted by ethics, changes in information technology, autobiography, creativity theories, and the relationship between narrative and science. He is currently Senior Lecturer in Creative and Critical Writing at the University of Gloucestershire.



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## Amuse-bouche: Prose, poetry and food

### Cassandra Atherton, Paul Hetherington and Alyson Miller

#### ABSTRACT:

Prose poetry may be understood as a literary form of amuse-bouche, the complimentary small bite served at the beginning of some meals. Like the amuse-bouche, the prose poem is generally a small work that gestures toward the large. Furthermore, many prose poems—and poems in general—treat the subject of food, often linking it with more general or problematic notions of sensory pleasure, bodily enjoyment, sexual expression, consumption and sexual politics. In this light, we consider the broader implications of prose poems by Peter Johnson, Harryette Mullen and Nin Andrews, as well as prose poems of our own, focusing on the way food is used by these writers to symbolize broader concepts. Such notions as the extraordinary within the ordinary, enjoyment and disgust, the gaze, consumption, and the large within the small are employed to provide insights into the ways prose poems about food, some of them subversive, are so often also works about significant social and political issues—and about ways of perceiving and understanding various forms of pleasure, inhibition, predation and constraint.

#### Keywords:

Food – prose poetry – amuse-bouche – quotidian – subversive – consumption – sexuality – women

Poetry and food are soul mates and share a long history. Whether we invoke William Carlos Williams’s poem, “This Is Just To Say”, about plums that are “sweet and so cold” (n.d.: n.p.); or Christina Rossetti’s “Goblin Market”, ripe with “Pomegranates full and fine, / Dates and sharp bullaces, / Rare pears and greengages, / Damsons and bilberries” (n.d.: n.p.); or D. H. Lawrence’s sensual appeal to the fig’s “glittering, rosy, moist, honied, / heavy-petalled four-petalled flower” (2008: 7); or Maya Angelou’s health-food diner who craves “Loins of pork and chicken thighs / And standing rib, so prime” (2014: n.p.), poets have always appealed to gustatory images. Poetry has even been identified as food for the soul in its ability to sustain, comfort and delight—and Jane Austen’s Mr Darcy, in revising Shakespeare’s famous observation in *Twelfth Night*, considers “poetry as the food of love” (1853: 38). There is also a sustained tradition of “poetic cookbooks”, such as *Festin joyeux* (1738), which presents rhymed recipes for various dishes—including, for example, partridge with crawfish: “First you cook everything well, / And mix with a light ragoût, / Add sweetbreads and truffles too, / And let cockscombs and champignons swell” (Notaker 2017: 156).

The association between poetry, food and food writing continues in the work of many contemporary poets, as audiences and consumers engage with the poetry and poetics of cooking and eating, and also with the many issues that poets use food to symbolize or signify. We have already mentioned Maya Angelou’s work, and other examples are Sylvia Plath’s “Blackberrying”, where the fruit are “fat / With blue-red juices” (n.d.: n.p.); Jean Toomer’s “Harvest Song”, which tropes on the idea of hunger (n.d.: n.p.); and Li-Young Lee’s “From Blossoms”, in which the notion of eating expands to

include “not only the skin, but the shade, / not only the sugar, but the days” (n.d.: n.p.). Importantly, both poetry and food rely on orality and mouthfeel, a reminder of their connections to the body. As Angelica Michelis argues, “the way we open our mouths and close, how words come into being by the movement of our tongues when reading poetry aloud ... keeps us alert to the fact that poetry works first and all on an oral level” (2005: 81). Importantly, too, a great deal of contemporary poetry casts food into rather acerbic or disjunctive forms of utterance. Gary Catalano’s “Incident from a War”, for instance, uses the imagery of food associated with religious ritual to create a subversive poignancy out of a potentially catastrophic moment:

When the enemy planes flew over our city they disgorged not bombs but loaves of bread. Can you imagine our surprise? We ventured outside after those planes had disappeared from the sky, and what did we find there but heaps of broken bread at which the pigeons were already feeding? (2002: n.p.)

In this paper we consider how prose poems are often like an amuse-bouche, or mouth amuser, in their connections to food. The amuse-bouche, a complimentary small bite served at the beginning of a meal, is often a surprise and delight to the diner when it is revealed. It is something that is supposed to be eaten in one mouthful and as Martin Teo, editor at *Lifestyle Asia*, explains, “These tiny morsels can be as whimsical and packed with drama in a small package or as clean and simply unpretentious. What the amuse-bouche lacks in size, it makes up for in flavour—big time” (2018: n.p.). The prose poem can be similarly read as a flavoursome—if sometimes sour or salty—literary morsel, both complete in itself and yet a part of something greater. Indeed, prose poems are frequently characterized by



brevity and compression, and they:

make use of literary techniques that suggest additional meanings beyond the literal, emphasizing the evocative and even the ambiguous, and creating resonances that move expansively outward. In prose poems the “poetic” inhabits language and, as it were, colors sentences and paragraphs to the extent that their denotative qualities are overwhelmed by the connotative. (Hetherington and Atherton 2020: 14)

In this way, prose poems signal that they partake of an expansive and flavoursome meal extending beyond their margins, as they play resonantly with metaphor and other literary figurations, and allude to larger worlds.

Furthermore, prose poetry as a literary form has a particular relationship with food due to its celebration of the quotidian. Its use of sentences and paragraphs, rather than poetic lines and stanzas, gives it a familiar appearance because, in our daily lives, most of what we read and write is expressed in similar-sized units of prose and is the vehicle for demotic expression. As a result, most people are generally comfortable with this mode of writing and its demands. These qualities mean that prose poetry has often been employed to express the points of view of marginalized groups, sometimes for political ends, emphasizing what one might think of as poetry’s daily meal rather than the traditional lyric’s elevated repast. The techniques of prose poets even include the use of slashes, highlighting how key features of the lineated lyric—its line and stanza breaks—have been eschewed.

Additionally, although prose poems employ narrative tropes and have an approachable outward appearance,

they do so in ways that defy the more conventional literary tactics of so many novels, stories and essays. Thus, the reader soon discovers that prose poetry—rather subversively—merely looks like conventional prose on the surface. It is soon outed as poetry, and often this is a poetry of considerable density, emphasizing bite-sized evocations and suggestiveness through tautly constructed, syntactically compressed single paragraphs situated in the surrounding white space of the page—much like an intensely flavoured tidbit on a white plate. In making these observations, we acknowledge that many prose poems are published as standalone works in journals or books, and may thus seem unlike amuse-bouches, which are usually part of a larger, planned meal. However, the metaphor holds true in the sense that many prose poems, even those that are single works, emphasize their involvement in the larger literary tradition—the full literary feast—intensifying, alluding to and skewing known literary tropes, sometimes as fragmentary utterances and sometimes as part of extended prose poetry sequences and collections.

Similarly, food may both be understood in more-or-less utilitarian terms as part of the fuel we consume every day—and, in this way, may be linked to the routines that revolve around it, from scheduled lunch breaks at work to the rituals of family dinners—and as having the capacity to be richly and elaborately suggestive. In many of its guises, food is utterly familiar and is linked to survival but, as we taste, internalize and reflect on it, food has the capacity to fuel a great deal more than our bodily existence. As Elspeth Probyn argues, “it seems that eating brings together a cacophony of feelings, hopes, pleasures and worries, as it orchestrates experiences that are at once intensely individual and social” (2005: 3)—and this is an assertion that

might apply equally well to the consumption of prose poetry.

Prose poetry and food are arguably similarly protean and surprising in their capacities to offer basic sustenance (communication is as important as food in sustaining human communities), thus fulfilling quotidian needs, while also having the potential to provide exquisite, sometimes unexpected and complex pleasures. Additionally, they both demonstrate the potential for the abject and the extraordinary—and sometimes reveal the extraordinary in the abject. Julia Kristeva writes of food and the abject that:

Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk—harmless, thin as a sheet of cigarette paper, pitiful as a nail paring—I experience a gagging sensation. (1982: 2-3)

For Kristeva, the experience of abjection is intimately concerned with boundaries and borders, and she observes that it is “not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (1982: 4). Following Kristeva’s insights, Deborah Lupton observes: “Food and eating ... are intensely emotional experiences that are intertwined with embodied sensations and strong feelings ... They are central to individuals’ subjectivity and their sense of distinction from others” (1998: 36).

In this light, and borrowing again from Michelis, we would suggest that prose poetry about food “combines the mundane with the sublime” (2005: 81), creating a tension that

speaks to the complex borderlines between insides and outsides. Both poetry and food are concerned with the processes of ingestion and excretion, gaining “interpretative meaning” during their “procession” through the body (Michelis 2005: 82). Such a “procession” may suggest the sordid or grotesque, but it may also evoke ideas about creativity and the production of something new. In these terms, prose poetry and food, as well as prose poetry about food, operate in spaces that are always at least doubly encoded—objects of devourment in which the quotidian is inextricable from the transformative. As a result, these artefacts are both concerned with the material and the bodily, while also conjuring the imaginative, the figurative and the spectral—even, for example, invoking memory and the ghostly.

Thus, prose poems about food often provide challenging and defamiliarizing visions and, in making use of figurative tropes, they allow food to speak eloquently, as it were, about numerous personal, social and political issues. Such works connect to a wide range of human experiences and responses, including feelings of discontent and dissatisfaction, political protest or disruptive and subversive points of view. Catalano’s prose poem quoted earlier, for example, offers an implicit criticism of warfare and the starvation it so often causes. Other prose poems address social and political issues by connecting the consumption of food with various positive and negative values along with the assumptions connected to interpersonal and broader social relationships. In such works, food often becomes a kind of touchstone to generate a range of complex associations connected to pleasure or disgust.

For example, the North American Peter Johnson's prose poem, "Snails" exploits such ideas with a compelling sense of irony and an almost casual tonality, even as it addresses significant social and political issues. The poem simultaneously conjures ideas of abjection and pleasure by presenting an image of eating snails—which some people find delicious, and others cannot stomach because of their association with dirt and slime. (And, furthermore, in some cultures, snails also symbolize prejudicial views about border-crossing sexual preferences (see Cordeiro-Rodrigues 2017: 240)). Johnson's prose poem begins:

I admire the brute dampness of snails. I ate them once in a little restaurant outside Toronto. A medium-sized war was going on, and I was dating a girl I skipped school for. We'd go to the zoo and watch the orangutans regurgitate. We'd toss peanuts to the elephants, or wave to giraffes, hoping for their approval.

The poem delights in its fast-moving associations as well as being deeply salutary, asking the reader to move from the idea of eating a creature characterized by "brute dampness"—the word "brute" foregrounding what is in opposition to the "human"—to the sight of orangutans regurgitating. This explicit foregrounding of the divide between the human and the nonhuman is reminiscent of Kristeva's acute observation that "Food becomes abject only if it is a border between two distinct entities or territories. A boundary between nature and culture, between the human and the

nonhuman" (1982: 75).

Orangutans, among other great apes, only practice regurgitation when in captivity, so the image emphasizes the discrepancies involved in keeping wild creatures in zoos, and it also connects subliminally back to the idea that the thought (or actuality) of eating snails may cause some people to retch. These troubling images of consumption, exploitation, gustatory pleasure and regurgitation—along with the almost throwaway reference to tossing peanuts to elephants in the rather ridiculous hope "for their approval"—further emphasizes the problematic nature of the human-animal relationships depicted and the equally problematic values associated with them.

Johnson's prose poem then briefly considers another kind of consumption—of "cubes of hash"—before ironically pondering the nature of "God the Forgetful", saying:

It had become hard to like God, or depend on Him for the simplest chores. Even now wars rage on, babies still exploding from wombs minus arms and legs. You can't even turn on the TV without hearing someone's daughter explain to a wide-eyed audience how she had sex with nine guys and one woman to earn money for a home entertainment center.

These almost satirical and confronting lines join the eating of snails and orangutan regurgitation to a larger consideration of arbitrary human misfortune and the way in which all kinds of bodily pleasures have been co-opted in a capitalist

world for the purposes of achieving fairly trivial consumerist satisfactions—and these ideas are all the more troubling because the tropes of consumption mentioned include potentially important matters, such as religious belief and sex, as well as watching television. As the poem concludes by returning to the image of eating snails, this signals a broad sense of general bewilderment, anxiety and absurdity, as well as some amusement: "Makes me wonder why I'm back in Toronto, outside a jazz club, eating snails, watching an unmarked aircraft descend upon the city."

In Johnson's prose poem, references to food invoke memory and an unresolved—and, in many respects, unsatisfactory—sense of a life lived in a society dedicated to various, sometimes gross or exploitative forms of consumption and display. The poem employs its image of eating snails as a prompt to travel back through time. It also exploits and expands the unappealing associations that snails have for many readers until these doubtful associations reach widely into a broad social and political critique. As a species of amuse-bouche, this work provides a taste of the larger feast contained in Johnson's numerous books of prose poetry, signalling the rather acidic flavours of much of his penetrating writing.

Hetherington's prose poem, "Apples" also links food and memory, but with a markedly different emphasis. The work opens by considering how a specific, quotidian image of food may not only suggest, through association, a journal, but also a range of related experiences:

Green apples in a large bowl and a journal in which you wrote

about Spain and its oranges. We unwrapped jamón, building an architecture of food. Gulls joined us, the air floating with their cries. Slow conversations wrapped our furniture and an astringency of perception clarified our eyes.

The emphasis in these lines is not only on memory but on ways of understanding the larger world, as well as on ways of understanding the meanings and feelings that attach to the human relationship at the centre of the work.

Monique Truong observes in an interview that food may be:

a way of time traveling. For example, from where we're now sitting, we can see the fig tree in my backyard. I always think when I'm standing underneath that fig tree, picking a ripe fig and eating it, that this is an act, a flavor, and an experience that people have had for centuries around many parts of the world. It makes me feel connected to history ... Your whole body responds, not just your tongue. (2016: 4)

Similarly, Hetherington's prose poem suggests that eating and travelling back through time is associated with a renewed clarity of thought—especially in its phrase 'an astringency of perception'—and perhaps also with a connected degree of disillusionment. In this context, food is not merely something to be consumed, but becomes symbolic of what connects people and enables them to converse. Probyn's statement about the way "eating brings together a cacophony of feelings,



hopes, pleasures and worries, as it orchestrates experiences" (2005: 3) is directly relevant. In presenting the idea of "an architecture of food" this prose poem suggests that food is part of the intricate structures of mind that help to organize and map—or "orchestrate"—human feeling and its idealisations.

This relatively short work proceeds to develop its emphasis on observation and perception:

You touched  
watercolour to paper,  
releasing the city's  
light, as if tears were  
seeing. We climbed a  
monastery's long steps  
and felt our bones as  
voluted stone. The city  
was a spread mosaic—  
houses, multicolours—  
and piquancy filled our  
mouths; a stadium's  
bowl plumped with fruits of light.

As art is made from the "astringent" perceptions mentioned earlier in the prose poem, the phrase "as if tears were seeing" conjures more fully the unspecified sadness that the word astringency first suggested. The couple has come to a realisation that is both salutary (as was Johnson's poem) and liberating. Their sense of connection to the past is affirmed by the image of bones as "voluted stone"—it is almost as if they are made of the same material as the old monastery—but they are also given an expansive vision of the city as a "spread mosaic", along with piquant flavours. Eating and tasting has by now become a symbol for different, and deeper, ways of experiencing and perceiving the world and of reassessing memory; and of engaging intimately with both the large and small. The poem's initial image of a bowl of apples has now become a lit stadium and, as the small becomes

large, so the large becomes part of the protagonists' intimate experiences of the world. This poem offers a way into a sizeable meal through providing a taste of what may be to come.

In the poems of Harryette Mullen, food and eating are mapped in different and distinctly bodily terms, conjuring a politics of consumption in which the female self is marketed for devourment. Susie Campbell notes that "Mullen chooses ... an active subversion of language, working through it to activate its gaps, overlaps, wrinkles, and obvious seams" (2022: 73) and in an untitled prose poem in *S\*PeRM\*K\*T*, for example, specific attention is given to the ways in which, as Deborah M. Mix notes, "women's bodies and desires are only tools for (usually male) gawker's pleasure" (2007: 47). This work is premised on a vision of "pink and white femininity" (49) that is not only erotically charged, but also racially encoded:

It must be  
white, a  
picture of  
health, the  
spongy napkin  
made to blot  
blood. Dainty  
paper soaks up  
leaks that  
steaks splayed  
on trays are  
oozing. Lights  
replace the  
blush red flesh  
is losing.  
Cutlets leak.  
Tenderloins  
bleed pink  
light. Plastic  
wrap bandages  
marbled slabs  
in sanitary  
packaging  
made to be

stained. A  
three-hanky  
picture of  
feminine  
hygiene. (Mullen 2007: 71)

The emphasis on purity demarcates a "softened and virginal space" (Mix 2007: 38) that seeks to contain the unruly female body, which requires strict controls in order to protect society from its abject messiness. The chaos of the body threatens to overwhelm: it oozes and seeps, escaping the proper limits of the self to leave unsightly blots and stains that must be cleansed from public display.

It is a vision of disruption that echoes Holly Iglesias's description of women's prose poetry, in which "distinctions of genre dissolve ... the thin membrane between inside and outside melts ... volatile as a quivering lip, excess threatens to spill over the rim" (2004: 57). Indeed, Nina Budabin McQuown observes how in a "device mimetic of the discharges of child birth and sexual arousal", women in literary works "drip and leak as a sign of their excessive consumption of food and sex", evoking a fear of a sexuality that "cannot be disciplined to desire only within the boundaries of designated social institutions such as marriage" (2014: 1340). To return to Rossetti's "Goblin Market", for example, Laura trades a lock of hair for the chance to eat the fruit of the goblin men, arousing an insatiable appetite. After it is left unfulfilled, she trudges home, "her pitcher dripping all the way": "She suck'd and suck'd and suck'd the more/ Fruits which that unknown orchard bore;/ She suck'd until her lips were sore;/ Then flung the emptied rinds away" (n.d.: n.p.).

While the leaking, porous female body might be read in terms of its subversive potential—for its

voracious hungers, for example—the boundaries of the proper feminine self are persistently reasserted within patriarchal society. Susan Bordo observes how the body is both a medium and a text of culture, "a surface on which the central rules, hierarchies, and even metaphysical commitments" are inscribed via the fabrication of aesthetic ideals (1995: 65). These tensions result in a contradiction—in which the female body must be "both lusciously inviting and hygienically sealed, lubricious and virginal at once" (Mix 2007: 55); or, as Mullen describes, a "three-hanky picture of feminine hygiene" (71), a hermetic space that might only be accessed by the yearning of the male consumer. In line with Bordo, these dual demands function to try to ensure the docility of an "other" understood in terms of the need for management, containment and control.

Designated as flesh, the female body is also transformed into an object of devourment, trapped within a gendered (and racialized) economics of possession and consumption. Budabin McQuown observes how women have always been "identified with the materiality of meat", linked to the notion of edibility and therefore also animality (2014: 1340). Mullen exposes how the imbrication of women and food is not only depersonalising in terms of rejecting subjectivity, but is also annihilating, as the body is broken into its constituent parts—"Cutlets" and "tenderloins"—and designated a value according to the delectations of the consumer (2007: 71). Moreover, the exhibition of flesh is portrayed in pornographic terms, "splayed on trays", for instance, the "blush" of the meat amplified under strategically placed lights (2007: 71).

Similarly, in Miller's "Butcher" (2019: 7), the carcass of a suckling pig is

figured as titillation, its “naked body” stretching “along the counter like a pornographic invitation, its stomach zippered open to expose crisp ribs through creamy layers of porcelain white fat”. The shop window also offers a bodily display, “frocked with oily rows of goose-bumped ducks, thick straps of stripped tender pink lamb, grey intestinal worms of sausage” (7), a voyeuristic and gastronomic delight in which insides and outsides collide. Importantly, the gaze here is inverted, rejecting the masculine longing for meat and attending, instead, to the horrors of the body-as-flesh, in which women and animals are positioned as both property and product.

The protagonist recognizes this connection, and its placement within an erotics of the marketplace:

a counter of glass and steel so bright she cannot help but stare into the red spaces of her face, like something gynaecological—the startle of a beaked speculum, the surprise of gloved hands searching inwards (2019: 7).

Both Mullen and Miller emphasize how bodies for devourment are predicated on youthfulness; on a disturbing desire for childishness that reveals a cultural grotesquerie: devouring the young. For Mullen, that the flesh bleeds indicates its freshness, the “spongy napkin” implying menstruation, while in “Butcher”, it is the child-prey that is craved, such as “tender” lamb and the suckling pig, its face “as round and full as a boy’s” and possessing “wet baby eyes” (2019: 7). The child is traditionally regarded as a symbol of futurity, but in these instances, it signifies an economy of power obsessed with (masculine) control. The rendering of these bodies as flesh

for consumption parallels the training of unruliness into docility, as women, children and animals—“others” associated with revulsion and the potential for disorder—need to be “eaten up”, and thus controlled, by patriarchal norms.

The violation of the body is imagined as inseparable from the sexual, a suggestion of punishment and the urge to discipline the transgressive, chaotic other, depicted as both female and animal. The decapitation of the pig is described as “resignation, or a kiss” (2019: 7), for example, implying a disturbed politics of consent. Furthermore, the reference to vaginal penetration—the “beaked speculum”, the “gynaecological” examination—plays upon psychoanalytic theories of the female body as an abyss, “the cannibalising black hole from which all life comes and to which all life returns ... as a source of deepest terror” (Creed 1993: 25). Associated with annihilation and the “obliteration of self” (28), it must be destroyed in order to retain the borderlines of social order.

The body that is eaten is not only entirely overcome but is also now transformed, forced to feed the system that produced the conditions of its destruction. In *The Sexual Politics of Meat*, Carol Adams argues that masculinity is associated with meat eating, observing how “eating animals acts as a mirror and representation of patriarchal values” because the male gaze sees “not the fragmented flesh of dead animals but appetizing food” (2011: 241). Likewise, Western culture relies on fragmentation and “forgetting” to exploit the female body, demanding it adhere to the demands of male appetites. In this dynamic, the female subject is consistently denied autonomy, forced to look acquiescently at, or be victim of, the conditions of her oppression.

Nonetheless, the signs of violence remain, in the soiled napkins and dirtied “dainty paper” (Mullen 2007: 71) and in the “tang of bleach” that cannot quite disguise the smell of blood (Miller 2019: 7). In this way, Mullen’s and Miller’s amuse-bouches critique the very meals they portend.

Nin Andrews’ “Mashed Potatoes” and Atherton’s “Eggs” use “staple” food items to convey post-feminist anger at patriarchal stereotypes of female happiness. Mashed potatoes are a comfort food but, in Andrews’ prose poem, there is no comfort for the wife and daughter in this space:

They were my father’s favorite—with craters of butter, and sometimes a dollop of sour cream. It was the way he ate them I remember, his whole body bent over, his face close to the plate like his boxer at the dog bowl. My mother watched and then didn’t watch, her eyes glazing into the distance that was always there between them like a sacred room no one entered. I pictured it as one of those paperweights full of snow—a tiny foreign land where princes and princesses fell asleep in fairy tales but never woke. No one ever kissed or rescued them. There was no waking up in our childhood home—only the dirty glossy surface of something that once must have looked like hope. (2020: n.p.)

The father is described “like his boxer dog”, an aggressive metaphor that, coupled with the image of his “whole body bent over, his face close to the plate”, dominates the meal. There is no mention of the mother’s or daughter’s plates or meal—they are unfulfilled. Indeed, in the first part of this poem, rather than eat, the

oppression eats away at them, so that they become the prose poem’s negative space. This is also reflected in the prose poem form which squeezes the family members together and acts as a visual metaphor for a dining table.

Importantly, Andrews subversively undercuts the growing tension and the father’s menace in her use of this form. The tight space of the prose poem, which is overrun by patriarchal animalism, is disrupted or challenged by the form’s rejection of conventional lines of poetry. In an extension of Luce Irigaray’s discussions on female sexual pleasure, Joy Fehr argues that the prose poem is subversively able to voice women’s experience: “The tension that results from the conflation of prose and poetry, from the challenge of the line(s) [in prose poetry], presents even more opportunities for women to disrupt conventional forms and to resist the patriarchal containment that often is implicit in those [separate] forms” (2001: 2). In this way, in Andrews’ prose poem, the father’s power is limited by being hemmed in by the form and ultimately restricted from conventional progression and satisfaction.

Importantly, the mother’s gaze becomes subverted as she “watched and then didn’t watch”. This moment, where she rejects the power inherent in the gaze and instead, prioritizes the “glaze” triggers a kind of fugue state or inner life of escapism. If, as John Berger argues, “Women watch themselves being looked at” (1972: 46), the gendered dynamics of the gaze are problematized when the mother turns this gaze inward. It is at this turning point—where the daughter foregrounds her mother’s distance from her husband—that the prose poem’s tight, claustrophobic space



opens out in broadly resonating ways. This illustrates Holly Iglesias's identification of the prose poem as a pressure cooker and explores her argument that, "women articulat[e] the constraints of gender in prose poems, battling against confinement, boxing inside the box" (2004: 29).

However, when the distance across the table metamorphoses into "a sacred room no one entered", the cramped space becomes roomy but also vacant. This suggests the mother's subjectivity has, in a crucial way, been hollowed out and that one of the daughter's imperatives must be to escape the same fate. The daughter is to some extent transported away from this menacing domesticity and the associated threat of her father, along with the disappointment and servitude of her mother, when the room takes on the magic of the snow globe. Her quotidian existence becomes extraordinary as it changes into a dream of living happily ever after—but the image of the snow globe is powerfully ambiguous, simultaneously challenging this dream through a post-feminist lens. In the stilled fantasy world, "No one ever kissed or rescued them". Cassandra Stover argues that "The post-feminist princess embodies ideals of feminism while representing the pressures and entrapment of pre-feminist culture" (2012: 4), and the jeopardy of this situation is brilliantly realized by Andrews' prose poem. It is implied that the daughter's fantasy is one of autonomy and escape, of never returning to the family home. In such a scenario, the snow globe or "paperweight" becomes her weapon, even as the world inside it is weirdly static and inaccessible.

In Atherton's "Eggs", the narrator challenges her lover's sexualization and infantilization of her, signalled in his gift of a Bunnykins eggcup. As

Probyn argues, "Practices of preparing and eating food are, of course, highly sensual and sometimes sexual" (2005: 62), so when her lover encourages her to "dip in the tip of ... toast soldiers" to the soft egg, the imagined breakfast has explicitly sexual connotations. The columns of toast are phallic symbols and the egg represents a vagina—and there is also a play on oral sex and eating:

You buy me a Royal Doulton  
Bunnykins eggcup for Easter;  
on its side, a picture of  
anthropomorphic field rabbits  
sheltering under a red  
umbrella. Your card says it's to  
hold my boiled egg upright;  
for when I dip in the tip of  
buttery toast soldiers. But I'm  
not ready to eat your eggs; I  
don't want to be another of  
your lovers, served deli-style at  
your kitchen bench. Instead I  
imagine that when my egg has  
cooked for four minutes in  
your saucepan; you turn and  
tell me I'm as perfect as that  
egg. But all I hear is 'First  
Murderer: What, you egg!  
Ovum. Zygote. On Good  
Friday it rains and you take me  
to bed; my ovaries greet you,  
sunny side up. (2018: 12)

The casualness of the speaker's lover treating women as unremarkable sex objects—signalled by them being "served deli style" to him—is superbly impugned even as the prose poem both suggests and problematizes the idea that there may be other, more pleasurable ways of eating and sharing pleasure.

The narrator's initial fantasy is that her lover sees her as a unique and independent woman, "as perfect as an egg", but this is disrupted by her image of him and the toast soldiers as Macbeth and his murderers.

Referring to the brutal murder of Lady Macduff's young son—who is referred to as an egg in Shakespeare's play—the narrator gives priority to her ovaries, womanhood and, implicitly, motherhood as she overtakes the egg motif towards the end of the prose poem. The humorous last line, where the protagonist's "ovaries greet" her lover, "sunny side up", invokes the "amuse" of the amuse-bouche. Rachel Trousdale posits that "Humor is a rare means to intimacy in the poet's world, a form of communication at once private and public" (2012: 121). Humorous poetry can capture and disclose the politicisation of the poet's private space by voicing the otherwise unvoiced. For women, humour can provide an opportunity to critique dominant culture by "disrupting and asserting authority and often, [provides] a means by which women poets discuss social and sexual mores" (Darlington 2009: 330). Invoking the narrator's ova becomes a postfeminist moment of agency and power.

Overall, both Andrews's "Mashed Potatoes" and Atherton's "Eggs" can be said, metaphorically, to offer small bites that open out into hefty meals. Where the former explores domestic violence and escaping an oppressive future via a father's meal of soft, buttery mashed potatoes, the latter lobbies for women's sexual and reproductive rights via a boiled egg. Mullen's untitled prose poem and Miller's "Butcher" also lobby for a different and more clear-sighted view of women and the way that they have been constructed by often predatory patriarchal norms. These prose poems challenge the reader to understand the way the female body has been misrepresented, violated and problematized by patriarchy and its attitudes and assumptions. Johnson's "Snails" and

Hetherington's "Apples" use specific images of food as portals into considering larger issues associated with memory and knowledge, and in order to explore the salutary nature of much human experience, a good deal of it tied to unsatisfactory notions of eating and consumption in general. All of these prose poems foreground the persistent power and importance of the connections between food and poetry, and demonstrate aspects of poetry's consideration of food to surprise, delight, horrify, subvert or appal—employing images of food and eating to draw the reader into considering broader existential issues.

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*The many depictions of Daphne and Apollo*

## “The nymph is all into a laurel gone”: Creative Writing, Consent or Coercion, in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*

Dr Alison Habens

### ABSTRACT:

This article considers how a familiar story from literary history, with its effective demonstration of the art of transformation, can not be used unquestioningly as a teaching text in the era and awareness of #MeToo. Though referred to for thirty years in my pedagogical practice, I could no longer excuse its glorification of sexual abuse without including a ‘trigger warning’ about the famous myth of Laurel and Apollo, alerting students to potentially sensitive material in the creative writing classroom. The discussion covers several translations into English from Ovid’s original *Metamorphoses*, digging deeper than written traditions to find the roots of this glamourized rape scenario. Can the woman’s desperate withholding of consent really have been retold as a triumph of man’s genius, rewarding his brutality with the conscription of her leafy protest? Crucial concerns around that coercion, raised by Ovid in the year 0, are checked against the legacy of its content now. Canonical representations of male privilege and fragility are queried, and comparative myths considered, to update a syllabus of appropriate stories for an undergraduate context. The essay is accompanied by performance poems in the voice of Daphne, from the POV of Laurel, reformulating the critical issues as creative practice.

**Keywords:** Creative Writing Pedagogy, Classical Mythology, Decolonising Curriculum, #MeToo, Apollo and Daphne, Transformation, Laurel Tree, Feminist Literary Theory

Is the story of Daphne and Apollo, beloved by artists, sculptors and storytellers for two millennia, romance or horror? Or, as “a large part of Greek mythology is politico-religious history” (Graves, 2017), is the famous scene where a woman begs to be turned into a tree to escape the unwanted attentions of a male admirer, an analogy for the violation of land and legacy, as well as lady.

The romantic picture, seen in Veronese’s 1560s portrayal or Bernini’s marble sculpture, shows Laurel only in the leaf-tipped fingers and foliate hairstyle, with dirty roots merely hinted at by the toes. In between are bare breasts, naked waists, detailed down to the pelvic bone. Waterhouse, painting Daphne in 1908, also takes the chance to show nudity not usually permitted. Here, she blends with the undergrowth, bound for Apollo’s approach; with the look on the face of this pre-Raphaelite sun god suggesting it’s a plot of unrequited love.

In these well-known visual representations of Daphne’s metamorphosis into a tree, her trunk remains that of a woman and she’s posed to emphasise its curves. Only in the painting by Piero del Pollaiuolo dating around 1480 is the female figure fully dressed, though in a sexualised posture and just arboreal at the extremities.

I’ve used these images to illustrate lectures for a generation of undergraduates in creative writing, explicating Ovid’s technique of transformation so readers can literally see one thing turn into another, flesh to wood. To read that aloud was almost to wink with him, though, at Phoebus’ pressing need, the passionate drive of

the sun’s charioteer. Still it was a useful tip for students, a good literary trick; until that particular year, when women, on UK commons or in woods, had died again at the hands of spoilt gods.<sup>[9]</sup>

Retelling it (online) in 2021, teaching about Daphne’s plight for the twenty first time, explaining again the gripping etymology of the laurel tree according to the very textbook of authority, I read it differently. In these words as well as the pictures, her physical beauty is used against her personal will as pen-men and painters appoint the female form for their practice and pleasure.

The scenario that’s caught the eye and captured the imagination of authors, male artists and auters for millennia, is a rape; and only the magical function of myth, the marvellous features of fairy tale, make it seem not so. However, this article will examine the semiotic and psychoanalytic constructions of such trickery through the lens of *l’écriture feminine* and the possibility of women’s writing. (Kristeva, 1994)

I first saw the scene that captivated me in the pen and ink illustrations of *Tales of Long Ago* (Blyton, 1965) where a few strokes show the girl’s grounding. But in the middle-class children’s nursery version, it’s all made out to be a misunderstanding. “[Y]ou should not have been so fearful of me. I would not have harmed you”: poor Apollo has been misunderstood.

This author bases her version closely on the Ovid though the god is not nearly so hot on the nymph’s heels. He “came rushing up, and flung his arms around her – then he drew back in surprise. It was no maiden he was embracing, it was a tree.” (Blyton, 1965) A sexual predator described for boarding schoolgirls, and boys who loved fairies and solving mysteries, he is innocent as they are.

From this formative exposure, I followed four key iterations of Daphne’s myth in

English to track the degree of coercion, and any expression of concern, in a plot about sexual abuse perpetuated across the centuries. Golding’s version of 1567 was followed by Sandys’ in 1632. In 1717, Garth’s edition included sections translated by Dryden, Pope and Congreve. Then Brookes More’s 1922 version became the definitive account into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

The legend is older still but was first told in Latin at the beginning of the Common Era. In a backstory to the atrocity, man beats the beast, like light overcoming darkness. Robert Graves conveys the scenario as a key win for patriarchy over the sacred feminine, on a site dating back to matriarchal times. “Apollo’s destruction of the Python at Delphi seems to record the Achaeans’ capture of the Cretan Earth-goddess’s shrine; so does his attempted rape of Daphne, whom Hera thereupon metamorphosed into a laurel.” (Graves, 2017)

I trace the tree rings of its subsequent tellings, as a series of Oxbridge men account for the episode where a desperate nymph turns naiad to avoid a violent sexual attack, in metrical verse, over the course of 350 years<sup>[10]</sup>. This article will discuss the translations of *Metamorphoses* by four scholars on a literary timeline and disseminate new insight into their nuanced representations of its rape narrative. First, I’ll introduce them briefly in cultural context, before continuing to explore how the original text is inflected by their historical approaches to Ovid.

Cambridge alumni Arthur Golding was a Puritan, tutor to the nobility, an anti-Catholic reformer who also translated the sermons of Calvin and practiced his new religion. His approach to the ancient tales aligned their pagan content with a Christian message and a humanist stance. Oxford man George Sandys wrote in heroic couplets and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* was the longest work of his life. Translating the books by

candlelight at sea, he was a colonist to Virginia, producing the first English literature in the new world. (Davis, 1941)

Sir Samuel Garth, a Cambridge graduate, was physician to George I. An avid Whig, he was friends, despite political differences, with Dryden and Pope, who contributed sections of translation to his celebrity edition. (Booth, 1986) James Brookes More was neither an Oxford or Cambridge graduate; this American entrepreneur, who produced his own translation of Ovid on an early printing press, shares more common ground with Caxton. Self-educated, he published poetry during and after WWI, his interests being both scholarly and soldierly. (Hudgins, 1963) Python is a particular concern in either case, and for each of these literary laureates.

In celebration of Apollo’s defeat of Python, “to preserve the fame of such a deed” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717), a kind of Olympic games were started. Winners of the “sacred sports”, the swiftest charioteers, best wrestlers were wreathed in any old leaves for the trophy, as a sign of their triumph, at first; with “the Oken Garland crown’d / [As] The Laurel was not yet: all sorts of Boughs / *Phoebus* then bound about his radiant Browes.” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632) The myth makes out there was no such thing as laurel till the next point on its own plotline. Its origin narrative tells how the tree gets its name, almost like an Aesop’s fable or ‘Just So Story’.

In his forward to the *Complete Greek Myths*, Robert Graves says this anomalous tale has been quoted by Freudian psychologists as symbolizing a girl’s instinctive horror of the sexual act; yet Daphne was anything but a frightened virgin. Her name is a contraction of Daphoene, ‘the bloody one’, the goddess in orgiastic mood, whose priestesses, the Maenads, chewed laurel-leaves as an intoxicant”. He



describes the frenzied rituals women carried out under the influence of “cyanide of potassium” from the plant, and the banning of its ingestion except by the Pythia herself. (Graves, 2017)

The bloody transformation from matriarchy to the phallogocentric new order is signified, in Ovid’s narrative, by the classic bow and arrow; and an aggressively-asked question of who is macho enough to use one. When Apollo sees Cupid, the god of love, also handling an archer’s props he mocks the smaller, softer-seeming character: “What, wanton boy, are mighty arms to thee/ great weapons suited to the needs of war?” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922)

Sandys’ translation fuels the assumption, his Cupid being “a lascivious boy”, for whom Apollo’s arms are too “manly”. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632) Dryden excuses the bigger god’s boast as, fresh from Python-slaying, and “swell’d with the pride, that new success attends/ He sees the stripling, while his bow he bends”. His Apollo insists these are tools of war, not love, too. “Take up the torch (and lay my weapons by)”, he tells Cupid, letting him have fire in exchange for sole entitlement to the penetrating barb.

“Resistless are my shafts”: his threat is made. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) It’s the attitude that has validated wolf whistles in the street, bum pinches at the bar, and unsolicited ‘dick pics’ since Ovid wrote this and well before.

He can do more damage with one little prick than all of Apollo’s armoury, reveals the god of love, in the other translations. “O Phoebus, thou canst conquer all the world/ with thy strong bow and arrows, but with this/ small arrow I shall pierce thy vaunting breast!” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922) Dryden’s boasts “...mine the fame shall be/ Of all thy conquests, when I conquer thee.” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) And Sandys’ agrees, “all may thy Bowe

transfixe, as mine shall thee.” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632)

This one-upmanship between thinly veiled deities was edited out of Golding’s 1567 version, with its monotheistic agenda. But the story’s awful moral can still be heard; males may use love as a weapon, arousal as a reason to attack, and be violently passionate. Though it might seem the fight is between them, both gods mean war, and the heroine of the tale, about to enter, is the loser to each.

‘Nymph Peneis’ or ‘Penean Daphne’ is the child of the river god, Peneus. The original audience would know him from such stories as the Twelve Labours of Hercules where, in episode five, he was magically rerouted to flush out the stables of King Augeas whose thousand horses hadn’t be mucked out for thirty years, beating an impossible test the semi-divine protagonist had been set.

The river god’s daughter is described as wild: “In woods and forrests is hir joy.” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567) And “emulating vn-wed Phoebe”, she “ioyes in spoyles of salvage Beasts, and sylvan Lares” for Sandys, in his graphic portrayal of a young woman who “Frequents the pathlesse Woods; and hates to proue/ Nor cares to heare, what *Hymen* is, or Loue” in the pioneering seventeenth century. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632)

For Brookes More, she “rejoiced in the deep shadow of the woods/ and as the virgin Phoebe (who denies/ the joys of love and loves the joys of chase)/ ... her pure mind denied the love of man.”

Perhaps approaching emancipation, in this historical period, “[b]eloved and wooed she wandered silent paths/ for never could her modesty endure/ the glance of man or listen to his love.” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922)

But was her personality, so vividly

evoked in these tale-tellings, wholly derived from Eros clashing with Apollo? This Cupid tips one arrow with a shiny gold point, and another with blunt lead. The first he fires at Apollo who falls painfully in love. The second he fires at Daphne, who finds love a pain.

Plucked from his quiver, “arrows twain/ most curiously wrought of different art...” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922) “one to repel desire, and one to cause.” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) “What caus’d, was sharpe, and had a golden Head/ But what repulst, was blunt, and tipt with Lead.” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632)

Daphne is vividly described as powerful, free, unmoved by romantic needs, already: “And as for Hymen, or for love, and wedlocke often sought/ She tooke no care, they were the furthest end of all hir thought” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567). It seems she was that way inclined before it was ordained by one Olympic dart, validated by divine authority. It’s as much of an anomaly for Apollo; “Peneian Daphne was his first belou’d/ Not Chance, but Cupid’s wrath, that fury mou’d.” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632) If this romance can’t be described without recourse to supernatural assistance, then it is surely in the realms of horror.

It gives the sun god an excuse for his abusive behaviour: he was compelled by a cherub’s aim, enchanted by the golden dart, what he did was beyond his control. Or, would Daphne have loved him if it wasn’t for Cupid’s dull arrow? The myth’s implication is she would have, and normally should have, been thrilled by the attentions of an alpha god who invented the alphabet, music and medicine. But Ovid has already shown us a wild card, a girl going against the hegemonic grain. Sandys’ translation says she is sought by many men, but averse to all, before a single barb was fired.

Every poet on this timeline of transformation from the Latin points out Daphne’s wildness by describing her hairstyle. “A maiden’s fillet bound her flowing hair”, explains Brookes More of this traditional sign of virginity earlier narrators may have taken as read. (Perhaps his 1920s heroine would have cut those locks into a modern ‘bob’.) Dryden’s “and with a fillet binds her flowing hair,” is fairly neutral but the narrator’s tone becomes more judgemental each step back through this literary history; “a fillet binding her neglected haire”, for Sandys, while “Unordred doe hir tresses wave scarce in a fillet tide”, as Golding first conveys the outrage in 17<sup>th</sup> C. English.

In *From the Beast to the Blonde: On Fairy Tales and their Tellers*, Marina Warner follows this strand of signification to show how “[b]londenness and beauty have provided a conceptual rhyme in visual and literary imagery ever since the goddess of Love’s tresses were described as *xanthe*, golden, by Homer” (1994, p.363). But her account includes darker tales in which women turn into various animals, their hair becoming fur all over, in order to escape the sort of attention Apollo will soon give Daphne. “As an outcast, spurning the sexual demand made upon her, her disguises – donkey, cat, or bear – reproduce the traditional iconography of the very passion she is fleeing”. (1994, p.35)

There is no escaping it. She does, in fact, owe him ‘pretty’, and complicit, and reproductive. River God Peneus insists that Daphne owes him a grandchild and, indeed, a son-in-law. “But she, who Marriage as a Crime eschew’d” (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632), begs her father to allow her to stay single; “graunt me while I live my maidenhead for to have”. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567)

She evokes the precedent of Artemis, the huntress, who was permitted by her father to remain a virgin. “... [R]emember Jove/ did grant it to Diana

at her birth," Brookes More gives the gentle reminder. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922) "Tis but a small request; I beg no more / Than what Diana's father gave before," Dryden adds, reasonably. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717)

A sense that her good looks override her personal preferences is conveyed by Sandys "thy owne beautie thy desire with-stands" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632); and in Dryden, too, we hear a young woman being told that she is fair game by her father:

The good old sire was soften'd to consent;  
But said her wish wou'd prove her punishment:  
For so much youth, and so much beauty join'd,  
Oppos'd the state, which her desires design'd. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717)

And in Brookes More's scheme, "... though her father promised her desire / her loveliness prevailed against their will". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922) If it is "their will", and not just her whim, then the old river god has no power either over the thrusting new sun.

Peneus' reply possibly pre-empts the thinking of a real-life stalker, bully or sexual predator to this day. Ovid has him say, you are too pretty to be single. You're too attractive to not have sex, too desirable to not be into men, is his message. Though agreeing to her petition in principle, Peneus protests: "thy beautie and thy forme impugne thy chaste desire: / So that his will and my consent are nothing in this case / By reason of the beautie bright that shineth in thy face". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567)

The entire case, and key question of consent rests upon this line. The original Latin is: "ille quidem obsequitur sed te decor iste quod optas esse vetat. votoque tuo tua forma repugnant". Its

most literal translation is: "He indeed complies, but that beauty forbids you to be what you desire, and your beauty resists your prayer / fights back / recoils from your vow." (Lines 488-489 [https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Metamorphoses/Daphne\\_and\\_Apollo](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Translation:Metamorphoses/Daphne_and_Apollo))

But the heart of Ovid's god-like man, or even the sexual organ of his man-like god, doesn't feel like the main casualty of this spurning. Instead, the damage, the devastation is done to His ego. "Do you know who I am?" An ancient theme or modern meme, Apollo lists all the things he isn't, in this numbering of his fragilities:

...it is no enemy that follows thee  
-  
why, so the lamb leaps from the raging wolf,  
and from the lion runs the timid faun,  
and from the eagle flies the trembling dove,  
all hasten from their natural enemy  
but I alone pursue for my dear love. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922)

Golding's sun god makes it clear again who is the most insulted here as he goes on, "I am not one that dwelles among the hilles and stonie rockes / I am no sheepehearde with a Curre, attending on the flockes" and says to Daphne: "Thou doest not know, poore simple soule, God wote thou dost not knowe / From whome thou fleest. For if thou knew, thou wouldste not flee me so". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567)

All four versions iterate the affront to Apollo's self-esteem in this way: "Yet know, who 'tis you please: No Mountainere / No home-bred Clowne; nor keepe I Cattle here". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632) And, "Perhaps thou know'st not my superior state / And from that ignorance proceeds thy hate. / Me *Claros, Delphi, Tenedos* obey; /

These hands the *Patareian* scepter sway". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) It's poignant to note the emphasis Dryden places on earthly power, here; listing, lingering on Apollo's political conquests. Ironically, Dryden himself died in penury, and would have had an obscure burial until his commissioning editor, Sir Samuel Garth, arranged a celebratory internment at Westminster Abbey. (Booth, 1986))

"Swift as the wind, the damsel fled away / Nor did for these alluring speeches stay!" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) When Daphne tries to run, to leave his vicinity at top speed, Apollo gives chase. He says it's for love. Or is it the case that her resistance turns him on, her fear arouses him?

In Golding's version, "Hir running made hir seeme more fayre". The Puritan poet's description is unusually cheeky: "And as she ran the meeting windes hir garments backwarde blue / So that hir naked skinne apearde behinde hir as she flue". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567) By contrast, Sandys skips over this bit, with "how graceful then; the Wind that obuios blew / Too much betray'd her to his amorous view". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632) (Between the scant lines of his biography, probably unmarried, possibly living with a sea captain, the reasons for scrimping on a fuller description may be read.)

In Dryden's translation, edited by Garth in Georgian London, there is more elaboration of Apollo's credentials:

The King of Gods begot me: what shall be,  
Or is, or ever was, in Fate, I see.  
Mine is th' invention of the charming lyre;  
Sweet notes, and heav'nly numbers, I inspire. [...]  
Med'cine is mine; what herbs and simples grow  
In fields, and forrests, all their pow'rs I know;

And am the great physician call'd, below.

Though urged to trust this doctor, Daphne still flees and, with a less fleeting glance in the translation of Dryden, "the wind... left her legs and thighs expos'd to view / Which made the God more eager to pursue". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) Brookes More's rendering gives a more predatory impression, though all four evoke tooth and claw in what is now certain to be a bloody catch. "She seemed / most lovely to his fancy in her flight / and mad with love he followed in her steps / and silent hastened his increasing speed / As when the greyhound sees the frightened hare..." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922)

Ovid's exquisite characterisation of the chase, a deadly race through the woods of Lazio, a montage of nature's cruelty, comes across in all the translations into English. Before the inevitable capture, he lingers on the hunting scene as a striptease, with this breeze revealing parts of the prey that make the whole look more tasty. It has become pornographic, like the fine artworks, the sculpted classics, because the point of view is the titillated observer's. Ticking off the bases, Golding:

'Hir lillie armes mid part and more above the elbow bare,  
Hir handes, hir fingers and hir wrystes, him thought of beautie rare.  
And sure he thought such other parts as garments then did hyde,  
Excelled greatly all the rest the which he had espyde.' (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567)

These long, courtly lines, 'fourteeners', iambic heptameter in rhyming couplets, became the font of mythical knowledge and chivalric ideas for the Elizabethans. The following translators evoke that same commonplace, of conceal over reveal, as he "Admires her fingers, hands, her armes halfe-bare; / And Parts



vnseene conceiues to be more rare". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632) Next, Dryden reifies as he represents "Her taper fingers, and her panting Breast/ He praises all he sees, and for the rest/ Believes the beauties yet unseen are best." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717)

Brookes More's tone is the least sensational in this section, but the most spine-chilling, as he "permitted her no rest and gained on her/ until his warm breath mingled in her hair." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922) Golding twists the lines even more viscerally; "So that he would not let hir rest, but preased at hir heele/ So neere that through hir scattred haire she might his breathing feele". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567)

Previously each poet insisted, after Ovid, that "a maiden's fillet bound her flowing hair". Though he makes a memorable image of the simply-tied hair-style signifying modesty, in Daphne's first appearance, it seems to have disappeared just a few scenes later, when Apollo is stalking her through the wood.

The translations of Ovid's words, all aiming to tame the woman's wildness, show how beauty is culturally constructed as neat and tidy, trimmed and combed, under this male gaze. "Hir haire unkembd about hir necke downe flaring did he see/ O Lord and were they trimd (quoth he) how seemely would she bee?" says Golding (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567); compared with "He on her shoulders sees her haire vntrest/ O what, said he, if these were neatly drest!" by Sandys (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632). In Garth's edition, the point is given more emphasis:

Her well-turn'd neck he view'd  
(her neck was bare)  
And on her shoulders her  
dishevel'd hair;  
Oh were it comb'd, said he, with  
what a grace  
Wou'd every waving curl become

her face! (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717)

And this time, Brookes More's avoidance of rhyme does nothing to update the stereotype, or avert the powerful swipe of male hegemony, as it specifies a seemingly timeless ideal of femininity. "He saw her bright hair waving on her neck/ 'How beautiful if properly arranged!'" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922)

Though his thoughts and words hurt her in this scene, with the poets following Ovid all assuring the audience that she's frightened and desperate, panicking and exhausted, he also uses teeth. The climax comes with the greyhound fangs of Apollo parting the "scattred" hair of Daphne. It's clear the fillet has fallen.

So finally, she throws herself on the mercy of her father the river god or her mother earth with a dramatic plea for help: "Destroy the beauty that has injured me/ or change the body that destroys my life." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922) In Dryden, strong imagery is suggestive of her immolation: "Gape Earth, and this unhappy wretch entomb/ Or change my form, whence all my sorrows come." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717)

The poets all beat the same meter for her prayer but only Sandys calls the shots in explicit terminology: "Or, by transforming, O destroy this shape/ That thus betrayes me to vndoing rape." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632)

Though he is the only one to describe Apollo's deeds in these terms, it is evident that this mythical story, magical tale of transformation, is based upon an immoral act. Named or not, this is violent coercion, bullying or abuse, no matter the excuse. When her objections are not heard, Daphne becomes abject.

Some of the translations have her asking the earth to "devour me quicke" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567). It has formed her

too beautifully, fashioned her so perfectly that she begs to be taken back under its cover. Whether the metamorphosis is something that she does or has done to her is key when considering the subjectivity or objectification of Daphne. To be entombed or devoured are passive fates, but actively chosen against the impaling force of rape; and in neither case can this story end prettily.

For two of the poets she is crying (Sandys and Dryden), for two she is praying to the pagan deities that are her parents (Golding and Brookes More). Then her plea is answered, her wish is granted, and her dreams come true: "... prayer scarsly sed: hir sinewes waxed starke/ And therewithall about hir breast did grow a tender barke", Golding announces. Dryden goes on, "Scarce had she finish'd, when her feet she found/ Benumb'd with cold, and fasten'd to the ground." Then, with Brookes More, whose translation was written over the course of two decades, endlessly finessed, and in virtual conference with Sandys and Dryden whose works he closely read:

"Before her prayer was ended,  
torpor seized  
on all her body, and a thin bark  
closed  
around her gentle bosom, and her  
hair  
became as moving leaves; her  
arms were changed  
to waving branches, and her  
active feet  
as clinging roots were fastened to  
the ground—  
her face was hidden with  
encircling leaves" (Ovid,  
*Metamorphoses*, 1922)

Though Daphne cannot take another step, the story continues, it is not over yet. The version by Sandys in 1632 implies a sleazy Apollo. The way he embraces the trunk feels sordid. The handling, the rhyming of plant and pant,

continues to call out a rape that only this translator has so far named.

Still Phoebus loues. He handles  
the new Plant;  
And feeles her Heart within the  
barks to pant.  
Imbrac't the bole, as he would her  
haue done;  
And kist the boughs: the boughs  
his kisses shun. (Ovid,  
*Metamorphoses*, 1632)

Same in Brookes More: "with his right hand lingering on the trunk/ he felt her bosom throbbing in the bark.... and fondly kissed the wood/ that shrank from every kiss". (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922) This is definitely horror, not romance; modern tropes of terror bear traces of this nightmarish transformation.

Golding's god can feel the girl's heart pounding "within the barke newe overgrown" and her branches writhe. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567) With a grim aesthetic that's gone on gaining influence year by year like tree rings in the popular imagination "a filmy rind about her body grows" in Dryden. Having hair for leaves and arms for boughs, "the tree still panted in th' unfinish'd part." The Augustan idol in this description "fixt his lips upon the trembling rind/ It swerv'd aside, and his embrace declin'd." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) If it wasn't clear to the sun god that she didn't fancy him as a woman, he must see her certain rejection as a tree?

Yet Ovid tells us he still gropes her; and, while carrying on the molestation regardless, glorifies and glamourizes her name. Daphne has turned into a laurel tree which the god now claims as the sign of his genius. Her leaves, wreathed around his musical instruments and weapons of war alike, will symbolise his greatness.

She is still his. In Sandys' translation

Apollo insists, "Although thou canst not be / The wife I wisht, yet shalt thou be my Tree" (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632) and Dryden's says: "Because thou canst not be / My mistress, I espouse thee for my tree." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) Golding elaborates with a politician's three-point repetition;

Thou shalt adorne my golden lockes, and eke my pleasant Harpe,  
Thou shalt adorne my Quayver full of shaftes and arrowes sharpe.  
Thou shalt adorne the valiant knyghts and royall Emperours:  
When for their noble feates of armes like mightie conquerours  
(Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567)

He brings her home to Rome, explicitly linking his leafy conquest to the emergence of a great city. "As long processions climb the Capitol / and chanting throngs proclaim their victories", Dryden has them draped in the cuttings of her body. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) "Thou shalt defend from Thunders blasting stroke / *Augustus* doores, on either side the Oke", Daphne is told in Sandys' version, conscripting her instantly to Caesar's cause. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1632)

Also, indefinitely: "And as my youthful head is never shorn / so, also, shalt thou ever bear thy leaves / unchanging to thy glory." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922) "And as the locks of *Phæbus* are unshorn / So shall perpetual green thy boughs adorn." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) This is how Ovid explains the evergreen nature of laurel, and its association with passion and poetry.

The unruly locks of Daphne, earlier in the story, are tamed in this fable about women's consent; how it doesn't matter if she says no, he reads her actions as a yes. She is saying she'd rather be a tree than have sex with him. And his reply is: that won't stop me. Or perhaps, to be fair, her response is ambiguous because

she has turned to wordless wood.  
Here the God,  
Phoebus Apollo, ended his lament,  
and unto him the Laurel bent her boughs,  
so lately fashioned; and it seemed to him  
her graceful nod gave answer to his love. (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1922)

"It seemed to him" that she was nodding, in the end: "The Lawrell to his just request did seeme to condescende / By bowing of hir newe made boughs and tender braunches downe / And wagging of hir seemely toppe, as if it were hir crowne." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1567) As if she's paid a fair price for this repackaging as royalty; her free body, her wild beauty, to stand forever as the phallus so as to mitigate her refusal of his.

Does she consent? This is 'pathetic fallacy' now, the literary trick of investing objects with human feelings, but is the tree nodding or screaming? Having met the character as a flesh and blood girl first, the latter seems more likely. Dryden's translation suggests that she's won over by the prospect of wreathing all the best artists and athletes at Apollo's bequest, though. "The grateful tree was pleas'd with what he said / And shook the shady honours of her head." (Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 1717) She might have been shaking it in horror.

In another tale from Ovid, translated by Ted Hughes (Hughes, 1997), other naiads turn to Poplar trees; daughters of the sun god, the "Heliades", in grief for their lost brother, Phaeton, when he dies flying too close to the fiery rays. Here Ovid can dramatize the same gruesome metamorphosis with a greater cast:

*"They wore out four full moons  
with their wailings/ Until at last  
Phaethusa / As she flung herself to*

*the ground/ Cried out that her feet  
were fixed of a sudden/And  
Lampetie, as she stepped to help  
her/ Found her own feet rooted,  
immovable/ A third, tearing her  
hair/ Brought away handfuls of  
leaves/ One screamed that a tree  
bole/ Had imprisoned her calves  
and thighs/ Another was  
whimpering with horror/ To find  
her arms crooking into stiff  
branches/ And as they all struggled  
in vain/ To escape or understand,  
tree bark/ Rough and furrowed,  
crept on upwards/ Over their  
bodies, throats, faces/ Till it left  
only their lips, human enough/ To  
call for their mother." (Hughes,  
1997)*

In the Hughes Heliades episode, their mouths are slowly sealed by the bark, but lymph tears ooze through, solidifying like amber in the sunlight, before being swept away by the river "to adorn, some day far in the future / Roman brides." (Hughes, 1997)

So, in this case it's not aversion to the male that causes the metamorphosis but devotion; to a son, brother, husband. He is not all bad, and some later translators of Ovid's original character make Apollo more relatable. In the most recent edition he's kind to Daphne when he tells her to: "Run a little slower, And I will run, I promise, a little slower." (Humphries, 2018)

Another version of this unsettling bedtime story can also be uncovered in the works of Pausanias, a second century CE travel writer. There's another young man who loves the beautiful but chaste Daphne and contrives to become her confidante and hunting companion by dressing as a woman. In this classic telling, Apollo is jealous of their closeness and causes the group of girlfriends to go swimming; at the woodland pool, Daphne's boy admirer is stripped of his disguise, and beaten by the angry women. (Pausanias, 1918) The mytheme evokes Achilles, and Diana, as

ancient bards could easily have mixed and matched the nymph from one plotline with another, especially when the focus was mainly on the male characters (their identity crises, their unmet needs).

That perspective, from beneath the wreath of laurel worn by a tipsy after-dinner singer in the *triclinium*, a similar setting to where Ovid immortalised the myth of Daphne, gives a panoramic view of a woodland full of petrified survivors of abuse. For it was written by him first, but no doubt sung by somebody before that, whispered after dining in rooms where the scene was painted on the walls. Though the story is even older than the book, new provisos are needed, to share both the words and pictures in Creative Writing lectures now.

In a palliative version of the story<sup>[11]</sup> conveyed by Robert Graves in his 1950s introduction to the *Greek Myths*, "when he overtook her, she cried out to Mother Earth who, in the nick of time, spirited her away to Crete, where she became known as Pasiphae. Mother Earth left a laurel-tree in her place, and from its leaves Apollo made a wreath to console himself". (Graves, 2017)

But in the most recent translation of *Metamorphoses*, new emphasis is placed on the unreliability of Apollo; it gently suggests he's deluded. "He hopes for what he wants - all wishful thinking! - Is fooled by his own oracles". (Humphries, 2018) The cultural commentary of #MeToo, with its deconstruction of sexist thinking, wishes and hopes, the calling out of bullies and abusers embedded in creative industries; these widespread contemporary practices ensure that man as sun god can't be fooled by his own oracles any more.

Its range of modern feminist positions, and responses offered in such situations, includes embracing the change into a tree, engaging with dialogue in the



transformation: “Daphne invites us to become treelike ourselves, to feel our own roots stretching deep into the dark earth, the unknown terrain of the unconscious beneath the Dayworld. We can imagine how Daphne felt to have layers of bark protecting her most vulnerable self”. (Gabrielli, 2015) An extreme separatism, it ensures against any further penetration by Eros’ lead or golden tips.

The Chilean group Lastesis, who translate feminist critical theory into public performances, give the best example of contemporary activism on this issue, with their ‘Un Violodor en tu camino’, or ‘A Rapist in Your Path’ in 2019 and 20. Inspired by the writings of Rita Segato, this popular protest was seen and heard around the world; and made strong statements on victim-blaming and police violence against women, using poetry and dance techniques to dramatic effect. (Lastesis, 2023)

In an underpinning essay on female empowerment, The Laugh of the Medusa, the French feminist critic Helene Cixous urges woman to keep signifying, her priority in any activism being:

*“To write; [...] it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily territories which have been kept under seal; [...] tear her away by means of this research, this job of analysis and illumination, this emancipation of the marvellous text of her self that she must urgently learn to speak. A woman without a body, dumb, blind, can’t possibly be a good fighter.”*  
(Cixous, 1976)

Laurel, following her transformation, will probably lose the fight; she is disembodied, a dumb wreath, blind branches to adorn any man’s self-serving story. But if Daphne is always to

be associated with literary genius, with creative and critical thinking, with this job of analysis and illumination, let each turn of her research, every leaf of her writing be an oracle for Apollo to check the golden arrow.

And the archetypal Pythia, seer priestess, entranced by fumes said to come from the decomposing body of Python (but which may have been mephitic vapours from cracks in the limestone terrain of the ancient mythology); she might also resist preservation into wood, at the end of patriarchy. Let each breath of her protest inspire, each sigh of her prophesy embody the movement. #TreeToo

I encourage my writing students of any gender to wield a laurel-wood pencil in this lesson and make original literary responses to the issues raised. Alongside this academic article, my own reply to Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* comes in the form of performance poetry, set to music and danced, in a firm refusal to be rooted at the foot:

**‘Rappermorphosis’** (*A classical nightmare to the tune of Rapper’s Delight 1979*)

So, in the first scene, a lady named Daphne  
Felt the lead-tipped arrow, the dull prick of Eros,  
Made her mean and moody but Cupid’s still shooty  
With his hot dart, with his bright golden barb  
The sun god takes it on the chest  
He’s rapidly disarmed  
By the legs, the arse, and the hourglass  
And best: her yet-to-come charms  
See, he is Apollo, and - ‘Don’t you know who I am?’ -  
The actual male who invented the alphabet, music and medicine  
But she just wants to stalk prey, to beat it and to eat it  
Make mincemeat of the big beast, hunt game and defeat it...

‘Hi Dad, don’t be mad  
(Daphne’s daddy is a rising river god)  
I’m not really into men  
Okay if I move along?  
Will you please give me leave to sling before  
I get slung with this schlong’  
Peneus spits, ‘you’re too pretty for virginity  
You look too good for maidenhood  
Shouldn’t be a stranger to the marital arrangements  
Pull Apollo...you know you want to...  
it’s rude to say no’  
So I start to run, but he can see my bum  
And the ‘dum-di-di’ bounce of my breast  
It wouldn’t matter what clothes were on my body  
His sunbeam eyes would undress me  
Could be *crepe de chine, broderie anglaise*  
Clad in satin, garbed in lace  
Could be fashioned as maid or matron or  
In fucking camouflage  
The chase is a thrill, for him, a ‘dip in the pool’, a win  
This race ends in a kill  
It’s fixed so the more I hide, the more he seeks  
My first time as the hunt  
I don’t want to be horny, curvy, beautiful  
In the view of a dim sun god  
So I’m praying to my father, as I’m prey to this Alpha  
Male with his tiny red-hot man-rod

**Daphne’s Less Attractive Sister** (*She picks up where Laurel leaves off*)

So, she finally gets an answer from our father  
With a river-slow solution to their quarrel  
A cellular transformation is the cure-all  
By his tides he turns the poor girl to a laurel  
Well, the name was chosen by know-all Apollo  
Hell, it’s not a love story, this tale’s immoral  
She said no way but he didn’t do that

oral  
Heard it before, saw it coming: ‘Hashtag TreeToo’  
For a start, her pretty (smelly) feet stopped moving  
From the little toe tips up we watched them rooting  
From her fingernails we spotted leaf tips shooting  
Forest green polish instead of previous blood red  
A crown of uncombed foliage sprouting from her head  
‘Dad,’ she said, ‘I told you I would rather be dead’  
As daughter of the water her fate was fluid  
She never wanted to, now can’t, go with the flow  
Her final curse was groaned from bosom low as earth  
‘I said destroy the beauty that’s destroyed my life’  
Her last words, or the last ones we could contemplate  
Before the bark completely closed across her face  
A bole for the mouth hole, and still the sun god kissed  
(I think he used his tongue), and ripped the glossy leaves  
Of hair, yanked laurel branches from her as she writhed  
He wreathed the tendrils round his own head, the wanker  
Posing with an arm around her trunk, slap bang where  
This transformation at the hands of patriarchy  
Into a tree still emphasized the hourglass waist  
If he’d thought to place his godlike ear against it  
He would have heard the beating heart, still hunted, I  
Believe. His other hand placed where the natural V-shape  
Modesty, moss-covered, could yet be molested  
‘I know you can’t be my wife, now, Daphne’ he winked  
‘But, Laurel, you will definitely be my tree.’

Phoebus was on fire, like 'this'll be the sign of my genius forever'. She shuddered in the breeze and, the bitch, she just looked more attractive than ever Hand me down your unwanted beauty, sister tree So I can catch the eye of the sun god next time...

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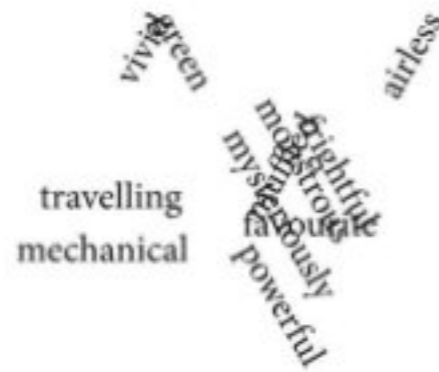
Current research collaborations at UoP include 'Portsmouth' and 'Pens of the Earth'. She's particularly interested in life-writing for wellbeing and run courses at well-known international retreat centres.

Her published novels include *Dreamhouse*, *Lifestory*, *Pencilwood* and *The True Picture*.

She enjoys spoken word performance, and as a YouTube channel showcasing this, as well as her website [alisonhabens.com](http://alisonhabens.com).

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# Maps to Arkham: Lovecraft, Landscape and Visual Poetry

Dr Sam Kemp

## ABSTRACT:

The horror writer H. P. Lovecraft (1890-1937) is an enduring figure in contemporary genre writing and his legacy continues to shape the field of weird fiction. But he is a controversial character and, on a line by line level, a poor writer, and responding to his work prompts multiple challenges for the contemporary creative writer. My collection, *Maps to Arkham*, seeks to understand and disrupt this legendary figure through a series of visual poems which respond to Lovecraft's attitudes towards language, walking and the landscape. This essay examines the artistic process of détournement, as theorized by the avant-garde Situationist group, and other visual poet's approach to the concept, and contextualizes my own digital appropriation of Lovecraft's fiction. This approach provides a framework by which experimental poetry can write *through* a historical figure, both confronting and parodying them, and poses questions for the role of design software in visual poetry.

## Keywords:

H. P. Lovecraft, visual poetry, digital poetry, creative writing, landscape, psychogeography, weird fiction, the situationists, architecture, Susan Howe.

## *Maps to Arkham: Lovecraft, Landscape and Visual Poetry*

...Lovecraft's body of work has reached the world. Today, it stands before us, an imposing baroque structure, its towering strata rising in so many layered concentric circles, a wide and sumptuous landing around each, the whole

surrounding a vortex of pure horror and absolute marvel (Houellebecq 2005: 50).

## H.P Lovecraft and Creative Writing

The first time I read Lovecraft I was disappointed. It was *The Nameless City* (1921), admittedly one of his earlier works. It begins...

When I drew nigh the nameless city I knew it was accursed. I was traveling in a parched and terrible valley under the moon, and afar I saw it protruding uncannily above the sands as parts of a corpse may protrude from an ill-made grave (2017: 5).

It's not terrible, but I was expecting more. He is an enduring influence on some of contemporary writing's greatest genre writers, musicians and filmmakers. Some of the most popular genre writers today are devoted fans. Stephen King, Neil Gaimen, and China Mieville have all cited him as an influence. Guillermo Del Toro and John Carpenter owe part of their cinematic style to him, writing and directing some of today's most well-known horror films: *Pans Labyrinth*, *Scary Stories to Tell in the Dark*, the *Hellboy* trilogy, and *The Fog*, *At the Mouth of Madness* and the *Halloween* franchise, respectively. His influence on modern sci-fi is enormous. Del Toro highlights that one of the biggest sci-fi franchises, Ridley Scott's *Alien*, encompasses a typically Lovecraftian premise - that of the unwitting expedition stumbling on a long-slumbering extra-terrestrial object (in Roland 2014: Kindle Loc. 2358). On a more literary scale, Joyce Carol Oates has spoken about him with reverence and responses to his work can be found in the feminist fiction of Angela Carter (Wisker 2019). His genre-defining stories have been reprinted next to some of sci-fi's most respected contemporary voices: J. G. Ballard, Philip K. Dick and Ray Bradbury, for example (Roland 2014: loc.

3325). Kingsley Amis (1960) claimed he achieved a 'memorable nastiness' (2012: 25). Jorge Luis Borges dedicated a short story to him (*There Are More Things* 1975). He's spawned a colossal seemingly-free-for-all fictional "Mythos" which writers today still respond to, most recently *Lovecraft's Monsters* (Ellen Datlow: 2014). There's Lovecraft board games, cuddly toys and enamel pin badges, as well as countless tattoos. There's even a Lovecraft-inspired cookbook - *The Necronomnomnom* (Mike Slater, 2019). Lovecraft loomed, and still looms, large over the genre of Weird fiction and beyond. In fact. For any fan of horror, sci-fi or the Weird, the name Lovecraft is inescapable. He's essential reading, as Neil Gaiman has said "You need to read him - he's where the darkness starts" (Roland, Loc. 52). This is why, like me, you may be surprised when you start reading him.

This essay will explore his relationship to landscape, language, architecture, and walking, and my own attempts to understand him and his work via writing a collection of visual poems: *Maps to Arkham*, a sequence which appropriates and misappropriates his fiction in an act of Situationist détournement (an artistic 'hijacking'). I'll also reflect on the practices of visual poet Susan Howe, and her own relationship to source material; the idea that a fragmentation of material communicates a 'felt fact' of the original more effectively if its distorted and scattered. My aim is to examine the possibilities and challenges in writing about, and through, a controversial historical character, as well as contextualise my own attempts at a détournement of his work. *Maps to Arkham* is a series of seven 'maps', each one a response to a popular Lovecraft story. Each map consists of a visual poem built from found text from the designated story, followed by a conventional poem. They're designed to disorientate Lovecraft's life and legacy, and in their own modest way, to challenge and understand him and the

grim alien world he lived in.

On a line by line level, Lovecraft was not a good writer. The sentences are stodgy and packed with adjectives. The characters are undeveloped and rely on the same faux-academic voice in almost every tale, and the language is archaic, even for the early Twentieth Century. Lovecraft himself was far from endearing. Paul Roland (2014), in a recent biography, sums him up as 'insufferable', bound up with a 'conceited belief in his own superiority' (*The Curious Case of H. P. Lovecraft*: Loc. 426). And yet, despite the absence of craft, there is *something* which keeps you reading. Award winning writer China Miéville (2014) describes the challenge this presents to writers:

There's *something* about that kind of hallucinatory intense purple prose which completely breaches all rules of "good writing", but is somehow utterly compulsive and affecting' (Loc. 2847, quoted by Roland) [emphasis my own].

Verbose. Melodramatic. A technical failure. He's everything the creative writing teacher swears against. And yet, a year on from reading *The Nameless City*, I went on to dedicate a 70-page poetic sequence to his landscapes and spent every spare moment I had consuming his fiction, criticism, correspondence and biographies, as well as those of his contemporary influences. I was, and still am, obsessed. Lovecraft has this effect. *Something* keeps you reading, an impulse which actually relies on the fact he's not a traditionally "good" writer. As Neil Gaimen says, "You do have to learn how to read him... it's not a very efficient style...". Yet it was Lovecraft's inefficient prose and reverence for archaic and flowery language, the constant repetition of

horror-filled adjectives; essentially everything "good writing" steers against, which inspired my own equally suffocating poetic response. The response was only partly prompted by his language, but also the vital role his landscapes play in grounding the 'Weird' firmly in our world.

### Lovecraft and Fear

Lovecraft wrote in order to expose the mundane landscape as a site of alienation and horror and his approach to the Weird is characterized by, as Jeff Vandermeer (2011) describes, the "pursuit of some indefinable and perhaps maddeningly unreachable understanding of the world" (loc. 240). Untranslatability, atmosphere, and place are all key components of his work, but there is also a darker personal origin to his fiction.

As philosopher Michel Houellebecq (2005) has described, what is perhaps most surprising about researching Lovecraft is his 'obsessive' racism (loc. 252). In Lovecraft's life the real fear was hate. He wrote cosmic horror: alien lifeforms, cities, and crafts being discovered on earth and bringing with them the threat of violence or societal collapse. But Lovecraft never believed in any of this. What scared him most was the horror of encountering anybody that was not white. His 1925 tale *The Horror at Red Hook* demonstrates the intense anger and fear he felt as he walks the multicultural streets of New York:

The population is a hopeless tangle and enigma; Syrian, Spanish, Italian, and negro elements impinging upon one another, and fragments of Scandinavian and American belts lying not far distant. It is a babel of sound and filth, and sends out strange cries... (2017: 785).

Albeit from the mouth of a fictional

narrator, this attitude encapsulates Lovecraft's own feelings, and biographer and critic S. T. Joshi (2011) refers to the tale as nothing more than a "shriek of rage" at the "foreigners" who he saw as taking over his city and ultimately his country (785). He had a starkly simplistic idea of nationality - "Foreigners" here is essentially anybody that did not look like him. But it gets worse. For Lovecraft, even scarier than the presence of other races and nationalities, was the mixing of those peoples. Above, the horror is in the "tangle and enigma" of a multicultural society, a confusion which "impinges" one group onto another and risks a "babel" in which, presumably, culture and tradition are lost. His ignorance is clear, and this fear of others meant he was rarely exposed to any other races in any significant way, meaning that these views went largely unchallenged. Considering his persistent influence, this calls into question the ethics of his significant role in modern sci-fi and horror storytelling. It's not the role of this essay to provide an extensive critique of his views on race (see Paz 2012, Herrmann 2019, McConeghy 2020 for that), but any study on Lovecraft can't afford to ignore it.

His fear of interracial contact is connected to his love of tradition. Throughout his life he held onto the comfort of his own English heritage, an irony, perhaps, considering that his fiction highlighted the insignificance of humanity in the wider cosmos. As the writer himself explains:

Tradition means nothing cosmically, but it means everything locally & pragmatically because we have nothing else to shield us from a devastating sense of 'lostness' in endless time & space (in Joshi: 1045-1046).

Throughout his life, Lovecraft sought security in a nostalgic vision of the past,

a European heritage of noble land owners in which he did not have to be exposed to other races. Tradition symbolizes a comfort of familiarity, and a feeling of belonging in shared beliefs and rituals. Lovecraft's hate and fear of any kind of racial "other" was a way of preserving this vision, and his fiction not only displays these traits, but relies on an embedded sense of prejudice for its effects. This debate is not new, and many Lovecraft scholars have highlighted that his racist beliefs underpin numerous aspects of his fiction, most notably Michel Houellebecq (2019 [1991]), Graham Harman (2011) and Paul Roland (2014), although S. T. Joshi, while condemning his beliefs, does seek to separate them from his writing. There are also creative responses that confront his racism head on; Victor LaValle's *The Ballad of Black Tom* (2016) and Tony Whitehead and Phil Smith's *Bonelines* (2020) for example. Houellebecq describes Lovecraft's writing as being 'nourished' by racism and Roland highlights that a fear of "physical contamination" from contact with aliens is the basis for numerous stories. This reflected his own sense of superiority. Lovecraft boasted about being descended from a long line of "unmixed English gentry", despite the lack of any evidence for this (quoted in Roland: loc. 100). Prejudice and fear, even disgust, is a typical Lovecraftian attitude towards anything "alien", a tension underlying much of his craft. Many of his stories feature cross-hybrids between humans and extraterrestrials, where the true horror, as in *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* is in discovering your own mixed breeding. The allusion to racial mixing is clear, and considering the racist basis of many of his most well-known tales, a modern reader needs to negotiate this prejudice. Victor's *The Ballad of Black Tom*, which treads the same New York as Lovecraft but does so in the shoes of a black narrator, is



dedicated to H. P. Lovecraft with the addition of 'with all my conflicted feelings' (6), a strikingly appropriate response to a figure that inspires and troubles at the same time.

So where does this leave fans of his fiction, and writers, like myself, who respond to his work? Harman sums up the dilemma: "While abominable in ethical and political terms, Lovecraft's racism is undeniably effective in purely literary ones" (60). As a storyteller, his racism is what has led to the growing sense of dread that permeates the atmosphere of his fiction, and it's clear that without some formative years in multicultural New York, we would not have his most influential stories. New York was a turning point for Lovecraft, both in his attitude towards other races and on the influence that has on his work. The city was his first real exposure to a wider society. Houellebecq describes how his subsequent unemployment, poverty and depression fuelled a hate for who he saw as an undeserving competition:

The foreign creatures became competitors, enemies, who were close by and whose brute strength far surpassed his. It was then, in a progressive delirium of masochism and terror, that came his calls to massacre (2005: 32 [1991]).

New York was not kind to Lovecraft. In short, he could not find work and burnt through his wife's income in order to sustain himself on an extremely meagre diet. Day after day of rejection ground him down and reinforced his view that he was not cut out for the modern world. This resentment turned to anger and depression as he became increasingly alienated from the world. His suffering fed his already established racism, eager to find something to blame other than himself. As Houellebecq notes, he could not negotiate a society that did not reflect solely "Anglo-Saxon

origins": "According to those close to him, when he crossed paths with members of other races, Lovecraft grated his teeth and turned rather pale, but would keep calm" (124). This is an anger based on fear and it's Lovecraft's experiences of the emotion, however unwarranted, and his ability to evoke them in his fiction, which have propelled him to fame. But none of this answers the dilemma articulated by Harman above - that racism is why his stories are so effective. To appreciate Lovecraft, is to encounter and recognize his racism. When I started this project, I was, like anybody that researches him, disturbed by the racist tirades in his letters and diaries, even more so when you consider how central that attitude is to his work. I considered, early on, abandoning the project. Perhaps he does deserve to be forgotten. But *Maps to Arkham* is an unconventional kind of appreciation. It takes the form of a parody, a conscious misappropriation of his work. Rather than a homage, it's a "détournement", a hijacking, as I'll go on to explain. Despite his imposing reputation Lovecraft becomes a sulking and ridiculous presence, confronted with his own horrors. I take comfort in the fact that he would have hated the work, and me even more for corrupting the sanctity of his prose.

### Lovecraft Country, Past and Future

...there is no place comparable to Lovecraft country in horror fiction with its tree-lined avenues and dignified academic institutions, isolated fishing villages and rural backwoods – each the very picture of normality – an idyllic setting whose tranquility will be destroyed with the unexpected incursion of unimaginable horrors (Roland: Loc. 3013).

Lovecraft's stories are mainly set around New England, an area of America he

romantically describes as full of "rolling meadows... deep woods, mystic ravines, lofty river-bluffs" and "gnarled hillside orchards", essentially everything which makes up "a rural milieu unchanged since the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries" (in Roland: Loc. 234). His own rose-tinted view of place is central to the corrupted settings of his stories, and this idealism feeds into one of the most effective areas of his fiction - his blending of real and fictional topographies. This blending contributes a rich sense of realism to the horrors unfolding in the quiet and unsuspecting locales many will relate to (perhaps not from sight, but from cultural memory / reputation). For example, the infamous *Innsmouth*, from *The Shadow Over Innsmouth*, is a fictional place situated close to the non-fictional Massachusetts towns and cities of Ipswich, Rowley and Newburyport. Lovecraft also stresses the reality of these places. You will have learnt of Innsmouth, the narrator assures us in the opening line, due to the vast series of government raids and arrests there in February 1928, raids followed by the burning and dynamiting of homes along the waterfront. Lovecraft's narrators often begin at the end, assuring us that we're about to get the full story of rumored or suppressed mysterious places. These blends of fictional and non-fictional topographies and voices are not just for authenticity though. Rebecca Janicker (2007) describes how Lovecraft has the ability to unite "reality and fantasy, taking plausible locales and re-rendering them as sites of unnatural horror" (66). These 're-renderings' serve Lovecraft's broader aim of twisting typically scenic and comforting landscapes into grotesque places abounding in a threatening alienness. Things are not what they seem, Lovecraft insists, especially in the places that comfort us.

The threatening landscape, one imbued with a brooding and ill-defined malicious presence, is a constant in his work, and reflects a wider Lovecraftian

endeavor. As the first line of Michel Houellebecq's (2019) critical biography on Lovecraft's states "Life is painful and disappointing" (Loc. 289). This is Lovecraft's message - we are living in a world of chaos, and the wider universe can offer, at best, an indifference. The sooner we come to terms with our own unimportance, the more we can avoid the insanity caused by the sudden shock of that unimportance. Essentially, venturing further into the places around us, risks provoking *something* which shatters our world view. This is the real horror for Lovecraft, not the *something* itself, but its role in instantly dismantling our grasp on reality, and this is what writers and filmmakers today latch onto.

Contributing to Lovecraft's Mythos has a long tradition, encouraged by the author himself. His pulp-fiction contemporaries tipped their hats to him with shared citations, often of the "Necronomicon", a controversial and dreaded occult text which owes its literary power to the fact that it's never expanded on. S. T. Joshi (2013) explains the humble beginnings of the Lovecraftian universe as a procedure in which fellow writers would elaborate on a certain "myth-element" in his stories, an element which would then be co-opted back into one of his own works, and the game could continue on and on (935). In other words, Lovecraft invites other writers into his world, making them, and now us, agents in the development of the wider mythos.

The real "co-opting" began only after Lovecraft's death in 1937, and continues into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Cthulhu, an infamous octopus-headed being, features in only a handful of Lovecraft tales, but have gone on to, according to Chris Jarocha-Ernst's *A Cthulhu Mythos Bibliography & Concordance* (1999), influence, or be cited in, over 2600 stories. Perhaps, the most recent of these in a major work of fiction is in Tony Whitehead and Phil Smith's *Bonelines*

(2020), in which tech-savvy Lovecraft cults haunt the quaint backwaters of South Devon.

As the above demonstrates, it's not only Lovecraft's creatures which can be "co-opt-ed", but also the places they haunt. Many Lovecraft plots end just as the wider world is left to pick up the pieces of some intergalactic revelation or its attempted cover-up (a peculiarly convenient, if effective, trope of horror). Often, a shunning of place is required to protect the public. Again, failure to contain the knowledge of alien life is not just for national defense, but for the ensuing chaos this would bring to everyone's grip on reality. After the *Innsmouth* raids in 1928, for example, the town's amphibious inhabitants were imprisoned in an off-shore military facility and have been there ever since. That's the version as told by Brian Hodge at least. Hodge's *The Same Deep Waters as You* (2013) is typical of the best of contributions to a Lovecraftian land/seascape. Hodge moves the story beyond the "little piss-hole seaport" of Innsmouth (Loc. 1396). After the rumoured ancient city of R'lyeh is glimpsed by a series of unmanned submersibles in the depths of the Pacific, Cthulhu awakens, responds to a call from the an Innsmouth prisoner during a one-off ocean furlough, and, destroying the prison, he frees its inhabitants to return to their beloved and decrepit Innsmouth. Hodge returns Innsmouth's residents back home, but the undisclosed nature of the prison and its work means its destruction will, like the 1928 raids, disappear from the news cycles swiftly [12]. There's a sense of homage in Hodge's piece, and his descriptions of R'lyeh are typically murky and vague, leaving it flexible for any other writers: "stretches of walls, suggestions of towers, some standing, some collapsed, all fitted together from blocks of greenish stone that could have been shaped by both hammers and razors" (Loc. 1881). *The Same Deep Waters as You* builds on the drama of decaying

Innsmouth and gives us a tangible glimpse of infamous R'lyeh. But more importantly, Hodge succeeds in invoking empathy for the half-alien half-human creatures, creating a more dynamic engagement with their character. There's still fear, but also pity and respect, aspects generally lacking in Lovecraft's fiction.

*The Colour Out of Space* (1927), with its shifting of a pastoral land into a mutating greying vegetative death due to a meteorite poisoning the soil, is the story often explored by critics for Lovecraft's American Gothic ruralism (see Burleson 1993, Kneale 2006, Setiya 2021), but another tale, *The Whisperer in Darkness* (1930), sheds further light on the role of the language of the threatening rural landscape. Wilmarth, the story's narrator, ventures into the "wild domed hills of Vermont" (54) in order to discuss the presence of some violent and strange "crab" like beings with a fellow academic. The landscape foreshadows the fatal revelations to come. The soil is fertile for "shadowy, marvelous, and seldom-mentioned beliefs" (68), and on the horizon lie "cryptical" hills. A sense of foreboding increases as Wilmarth gets closer to his goal, travelling through "the hill-crowded countryside with its towering, threatening, close-pressing green and granite slopes" (69). Obviously, this is not going to end well. The land is alive, hypnotic and fantastic. Even the road, that reliable sign of civility, is wild and irregular, forcing the narrator's car to climb and plunge with its alien rhythm. In gorges "untamed rivers" (69) leap and in the forests, strange waters trickle insidiously. And yet, as we break through to fairer ground, the most dangerous aspect of the land is its ability to seduce us with a vision of an almost primeval pastoral:

Time had lost itself in the labyrinths behind, and around us stretched only the flowering waves of faery and the

recaptured loveliness of vanished centuries—the hoary groves, the untainted pastures edged with gay autumnal blossoms, and at vast intervals the small brown farmsteads nestling amidst huge trees beneath vertical precipices of fragrant brier and meadow-grass (70).

Wilmarth finds a "necromancy" in this place, an ancestral connection to the folklore of the soil which hides in the corners of the world seemingly untouched by mechanization and modernity. But the pastures and great trees and recaptured loveliness do not provide any salvation. The untainted pastures reside over a story in which the skeptical Wilmarth has not, as he believes, been sitting with a peer discussing extra-terrestrial revelations, but with a dismembered body hosted by those extra-terrestrials. They have already killed his host and cut off his face and hands in order to impersonate him. All in the land of "gay autumnal blossoms". Lovecraft's landscapes are complex, sometimes hostile, sometimes utopian, but they're always vivid, straining with adjectives and drama. This strain, a constant effort on the narrator's part to attempt to articulate a vague and unexplainable sense of foreboding, naturally lands on the unsuspecting topography.

As well as functioning as a staging set for the wider mythos, the vividness of these locales and their juxtaposing of idyll and evil create Lovecraft's ultimate writing aim, that of conjuring atmosphere, "a vivid picture of a certain type of human mood" (Lovecraft, 2020: 118). The mood aimed at is presumably one of anxiety, an uncertain and unreasonable sense of fear, one often associated with certain places. The fear is greatest when it's unexplained, as cultural geographer Yi-fu Tuan (1979) explains, in *Landscapes of Fear*:

Anxiety is a presentiment of danger when nothing in the immediate surroundings can be pinpointed as dangerous. The need for decisive action is checked by the lack of any specific, circumventable threat (Loc. 83).

It's this exact lack of any circumventable which makes Lovecraft's landscapes so foreboding. We cannot find the source, so we cannot overcome it. Lovecraft's monsters infect their surroundings, and the spread is so insidious that it's impossible to know where to start the clean up. There's a relentless sense of unease emanating from the land and yet its source is only revealed at the end. The overwhelming sense of anxiety throughout *The Shadow Over Innsmouth* is sustained more by the unusual characteristics of the town than by any obvious presence of immediate danger. Before we've even reached the "ill-rumoured and evilly shadowed seaport of death and blasphemous abnormality" (103), the bus ride from Arkham is suitably anxiety-ridden. Innsmouth is cut off by marshes and creeks and not covered on common maps or tourist guides. There's rumors of devil worship and sacrifices, and that colors the increasingly desolate land as we approach. The town is half-abandoned, while the land is full of vague and dramatic anxieties. The smell of the sea has "ominous implications" (107). The site of Devil's Reef, a thin black line offshore, carries "a suggestion of odd latent malignancy" and the air has an "unnatural stillness" (108). As we enter the town, it conjures an "olfactory disgust" and "feeling of menace" (108). But none of this has any specific source that we may be able to confront. Our first glimpse of something more obviously disturbing than the scenery is equally vague:

The door of the church basement was open, revealing a rectangle of blackness inside.



And as I looked, a certain object crossed or seemed to cross that dark rectangle; burning into my brain a momentary conception of nightmare which was all the more maddening because analysis could not shew a single nightmarish quality in it (108).

Even this is dreadful because of a maddening feeling that it should not be. This atmosphere relies on Lovecraft's writing style. The steady build of adjectives and his generally archaic prose combines in what Roland describes as "a sense of claustrophobia and impending danger..." (Loc. 468). Landscape is where Lovecraft's style begins to justify itself; the heavy descriptive paragraphs are choked with adjectives and embody the suffocating presence of place.

### Adjectivitis and the Past

Lovecraft was obsessed with heritage, finding solace in his belief that he was a Victorian noble born out of time. The Lovecraft country described above facilitated this, a realm of picturesque countryside fit for the English gentry. The fact that monsters lurk underneath is another reflection of the threat of the modern world. In Paul Roland's words, he believed he was "the last real gentleman in an age of the common man" (Loc. 983), and this is why Lovecraft wrote like one. His old-fashioned style let him occupy the life he thought he was owed, one of a comfortable squire without the indignity of work. An easy target, perhaps, for a parody, but a promising one.

The irony of the writer is that, as much as we are drawn to words, we are constantly trying to produce work which transcends their necessity. The story comes first. But Lovecraft indulges in words. His style is that of a

glutinous excess of adjectives, often the first habit to be challenged in any modern creative writing programme. If you need an adjective or adverb, the rule goes, then the noun is not strong enough. Is this the case for Lovecraft too? Take the opening of *The Colour Out of Space* (1927), Lovecraft's favorite tale, for example.<sup>[13]</sup>

West of Arkham the hills rise *wild*, and there are valleys with *deep* woods that no axe has ever cut. There are *dark narrow* glens where the trees slope *fantastically*, and where *thin* brooklets trickle without ever having caught the glint of sunlight. On the *gentler* slopes there are farms, *ancient* and *rocky*, with *squat, moss-coated* cottages brooding *eternally* over *old* New England secrets in the lee of *great* ledges; but these are all vacant now, the *wide* chimneys crumbling and the *shingled* sides bulging *perilously* beneath *low* gambrel roofs (2017: 14).

If we were to workshop the opening, you could reason that we don't need to be told that the woods are 'deep' because we already know that they're in valleys. Of course the glens are "dark" and "narrow" because they're glens. Brooklets are always "thin", and slopes, are by their very definition "gentle". Something which is "bulging" is bound to be perilous. Similarly, "secrets" and "brooding" imply age, so "ancient", "eternally" and "old" are all unnecessary. This is an unfair and simplistic summary, but demonstrates how a modern reader has to re-orientate their tastes to appreciate Lovecraft. Creative writers tend to approach adjectives and adverbs questioning what they detract from a piece of writing, but perhaps, in Lovecraft's case, the question is more, what function do they perform? Take them away, and we're left with...

West of Arkham the hills rise, and there are valleys with woods that no axe has ever cut. There are glens where the trees slope, and where brooklets trickle without ever having caught the glint of sunlight. On the slopes there are farms with cottages, brooding over New England secrets in the lee of ledges; but these are all vacant now, the chimneys crumbling and the sides bulging beneath gambrel roofs (14).

It is a neater description, certainly, but it's simply not as foreboding. Lovecraft's adjectives create a strained voice, anxious, even desperate, to convey threat. Everything is old. Everything is uncertain, and we should fear it. It's this sense of urgent warning which adds an underlying tension, the inability to pinpoint the threat multiplying the need for caution. The narrator is so convinced of imminent danger, and the reader is naïve if they're not. But Lovecraft's baroque style serves a more personal purpose, that of clothing him from the realities of his modern world of unemployment, ill-health and depression. This clothing needed to be thick. Houellebecq sums up Lovecraft's attitude as one of "absolute hatred" towards the modern world (71). Perhaps we can see Lovecraft's adjectives as an attempt to cement another world around him, one so anxiously needed that a piling of description on description was the only prose style that could filter out real life. "Old" appears twenty times in *The Colour out of Space*, each one a dig into that other world. That world may be scary, but at least it's a fear that can be controlled. My sequence aims to reverse that, to expose Lovecraft in a way he wouldn't even recognize, but a look at two more influences are needed first, the first very Lovecraftian, the second, one he would have despised.

### Psychogeography and Cyclopean Architecture

In *At the Mountains of Madness*, one of Lovecraft's most influential stories, a group of Arctic drilling explorers uncover a 50 million year old alien city which is made up of

no architecture known to man or to human imagination, with vast aggregations of night-black masonry embodying monstrous perversions of geometrical laws and attaining the most grotesque extremes of sinister bizarrerie (Lovecraft, 2017 [1931], 166).

The city is, like so many of Lovecraftian inventions, indescribable. It wriggles free of articulation because the human language lacks the words to describe it. It's perverted 'geometrical laws' make it an impossibility, meaning its existence is both beyond reason and yet, for the survivors of the expedition, horrifyingly real. As mentioned earlier, this cognitive dissonance is the real danger, provoking madness and panic which could consume society. But Lovecraft's interest in alien architecture stems from a more grounded origin, and is linked with his love of walking.

Lovecraft was obsessed with the "colonial" architecture of New England, seeking out buildings which, for him, embodied an older "untainted" and "pure" time, as S.T Joshi explains (638).

Physical structures were not enough; it was when those structures were still used for their original purposes that he was most enthralled, perhaps again because it represented for him the sense of time-defiance that was so central to his imagination (638).

There's a sense of comfort here, an ability to defy time and escape the inevitable conclusion of life, but, as mentioned previously, a connection to an older way of life, however imagined,

was also racially motivated. Joshi goes on to quote from one of Lovecraft's notes on his visit to Portsmouth, a town in which "the Colonial age still liv'd untainted" and was full of "pure ENGLISH faces". Lovecraft's racism is painfully central here. Architecture was the most tangible evidence of the vision he had of the past, a genteel and ordered world in which he could be comfortable, whereas his fiction often featured its opposite; distorted and disturbing alien structures. Nostalgia has a clear role to play here, and Lovecraft's solace is based on a fantasy. Like his adjectivitis, it was a tool which protected him from his fears of the contemporary world. No matter how bad life got, he could take comfort in the explanation that some celestial mistake had delivered him into the wrong century. To say he was bitter about his current circumstances would be an understatement, but these vestiges of another idealized life soothed this resentment and fueled his racism. There was a surprising activity which aided his "time-defiance" - walking.

Lovecraft loved to walk, particularly during his time in New York (1924-1926). He took friends and colleagues on all-night epic journeys across more typically undeserving terrain: graveyards, alleyways, wharves, backstreets; anywhere holding some energy from the past. These walks were a big part of these New York years - friend and fellow writer Frank Belknap Long (1975) described how they would walk two or three times a week (115). David Haden (2011) explains how Lovecraft, in his walking habits, was something of a radical in 1920s America:

In a city just a few years away from the brink of a new car-borne hostility to the pedestrian, his walking, Lovecraft's cross-cutting of histories, his seeking out of little known routes, his stopping to look up at the buildings instead of into shop

windows, his stepping back into the street for a better view — all these acts can be seen as implicit varieties of subversion of the 'normal' commercial experience of the modern city (Loc. 78).

As Haden's Book, *Walking with Cthulhu*, investigates, the puritanical Lovecraft actually formed a practice that foreshadowed the radical walking theorizing of the mid-twentieth century Situationists, a group of artists and political activists who played a part in the Paris Student Riots of May 1968. The Situationists were an anti-capitalist revolutionary group who theorized a world in which, according to Alastair Hemmens and Gabriel Zacarias (2020), "art" needed to be "abolished as a separate activity and integrated into the totality of everyday life" (3). Situationism had a precarious membership. The group, running from 1957 to 1972 and consisting of ten to twenty members at any one time, was headed up by Guy Debord. Stemming from Dada, Surrealism and, more directly, Lettrism, The Situationists developed artistic practices in order to undermine a capitalist agenda (The Spectacle), particularly that which is present in the urban environment. One technique was the *dérive*, or drift, an aimless wander which paid special attention to, and moving, in whatever way, *with*, the emotional and atmospheric effects of the environment. As Guy Debord, the leading voice of the movement, explains in *Theory of the dérive* (2006 [1958]), the *dérive* is not just about chance encounters with surprising elements of place, but about recognizing and counteracting the flows of direction which the urban environment facilitates.

...from a *dérive* point of view cities have psychogeographical contours, with constant currents, fixed points and vortexes that strongly discourage entry into or exit

from certain zones (62).

It took a particular attention and mindset, let alone circumstance, to go against the dominant flows in a particular landscape. Essentially, radical walking is about navigating a pedestrian environment in such a way that you experience it differently to how you would usually, appreciating and pushing against its "psychogeographical contours". In Haden's description above, Lovecraft is directly challenging what Debord describes as the "currents, fixed points and vortexes" of the city. Shop windows are especially designed to wrestle your attention away from the street, but Lovecraft has eyes only for the buildings. People shun the creepy, dark or out-of-date pockets of the city, but Lovecraft spends all night searching for them. It's a bizarre mix: the artistic avant-garde and the "self-consciously antiquated fossil with admirable technical skill but no real poetical feeling" (Joshi: 286). But, as Haden has pointed out, Lovecraft's walking practices are surprisingly radical. Debord would call these types of investigations "psychogeographical", studies into the environment's "laws" and "effects" on the behaviors of individuals (2006 [1955]: 8). By going against the flows of pedestrian traffic, albeit probably non-existent at most times of night, Lovecraft inadvertently exposed and questioned those grooves embedded in urban planning, grooves which the Situationists would argue facilitated a damaging commercial focus which reorientated our streets around capitalist aims. The politics of the avant-garde and that of a proudly aristocratic horror writer are a jarring mix, but his approach to walking does reflect a wider sense of anti-capitalism. Houellebecq described him as "Resolutely anticommercial" and that "...he despised money and considered democracy to be an idiocy and progress to be an illusion" (Loc. 411). For both Lovecraft and the Situationists, this politics was bound up with the urban streets.

Architecture was a driving force of these walks. The Situationists sought an "urbanism designed for pleasure" (Constant [1951] in Knabb (2011): 71), rather than for commercial aims. The city streets are designed to attract us towards shops and restaurants, to govern our movements towards the flow of capital. Urbanism, according to the Situationists, was designed around Spectacle, a dazzling of glamor and want instead of art. This spectacle is embedded in the places we live and work, promising a false community and satisfaction, as Attila Kotanyi and Raoul Vaneigem (1961) explain in the *Basic Program of the Bureau of Unitary Urbanism*.

City planning must be understood as a society's field of publicity-propaganda, i.e. as the organisation of participation in something in which it is impossible to participate (Knabb, 2011 [1961]: 87).

So where does Lovecraft fit into this world? Quite simply, he doesn't. His motivations for exploring the city were not commercial, but architectural, weaving pathways against the spectacle of commercialism. He didn't "participate" in the spending or even making of money in New York. In his own words, he shunned "a world which exhausted and disgusted" him (in Joshi: 697). Even here Lovecraft earns some Situationist credentials. The great mantra of a Situationist was "Never Work", a philosophy strictly upheld, as artist Jean-Michel Mension remembers.

If someone had said... "I want to be a famous painter", if someone had said "I want to be a famous novelist", if someone had said, "I want in whatever way to be a success", then that someone would have been tossed instantly out of the back



room right through the front room onto the street. There was an absolute refusal... We rejected a world that was distasteful to us, and we would do nothing within it (in Ford 2005: 129).

Lovecraft was very much an accidental Situationist. He struggled to find work throughout his life, but particularly in New York, and he survived on an extremely meager budget. He had few, if any, employable skills and his lack of commercial awareness brought him constant rejection from potential employers. As Houellebecq writes, he was “inadaptable to the market economy” (120). He simply couldn’t afford to participate in the ordinary life of the street, and concluded that he did not belong there. Yet his walking habits do still embody a radical response to place and his negotiation of urban commercialism, coupled with a sense of alienation from the normal life of that environment, has fed into some of the fragmented visuals in *Maps to Arkham*.

The sense of failure and the city are bound up in his fiction, much of which revolves around nightmarishly huge and hostile urban environments in which alien creatures await discovery (Houellebecq: 122). Returning to *At The Mountains of Madness*, Lovecraft’s extended description of the city is suitably intimidating:

There were truncated cones, sometimes terraced or fluted, surmounted by tall cylindrical shafts here and there bulbously enlarged and often capped with tiers of thinnish scalloped discs; and strange, beetling, table-like constructions suggesting piles of multitudinous rectangular slabs or circular plates or five-pointed stars with each one overlapping the one beneath (166).

These aren’t the clean and

straightforward lines of Lovecraft’s beloved colonial style, but a grotesque perversion of human architecture. It’s unrecognizable, a struggle against the land. Things are not exact. They are “strange”, “table-like”, full of suggestions rather than comforting actuals. Things are either “slabs” or “rectangular plates” or “five-pointed stars”, and most likely something in between. It is so horrific that human eyes don’t have the capacity to see it. It wriggles against language. These structures are horrific in their scale and age but their truly disturbing aspect is their ability to alienate. Lovecraftian cities are cold and dangerous, violent in their skylines and disgusting in their proportions. Humans have no place there.

#### Détournement and the Indescribable

...détournement is less effective the more it approaches a rational reply (Debord and Wolman in Knabb 2006 [1956]: p. 17)

The Lovecraftian and Situationist senses of architecture and walking have fed into the visual arrangements of *Maps to Arkham*. But there is one other Situationist theory which is central to the work, although it has little to do with Lovecraft’s life or writings. Détournement is the act of misappropriating a textual or visual source and creating a new arrangement of a source material. In French, *detourner* means to hijack, and the verb, as Craig Dworkin (2003) explains, signals some kind of “illicit diversions: embezzlement, misappropriation, hijack...” (13). This hijack of an original source, a painting or book, for example, relies on the new relations created between the source and its new arrangement. It celebrates a layering which is free to achieve excess:

...‘also’ is the hallmark of the treated text’s appropriation.

Keeping both source and derivative simultaneously in view, and making visible the traces of that double presence, the treated text is less a parasite on its source than a pair of sights (Dworkin: 136).

This means that, although plagiarism is a fundamental part of the practice, an act of *détournement* does not simply borrow words or images from another source, but re-arranges them in such a way that creates tension between the original and its rearrangement. The original’s presence is key to this depth of investigation in the artwork.

*détournement* is akin to collage, and stems from surrealist practices of the ‘found object’, as well as the notion of the ready-made (Hemmens et. al. 2020). Again, the relationship between the connotations of the source material and its new and unexpected arrangement is the striking potentiality of *détournement*. The new narrative meanings which are created are more of a focus than the inevitable re-considering of the original. Craig Dworkin, in *Reading the Illegible*, goes on to describe how the erasure work of artist Tom Philips plays with these dynamics. Philips’ *A Humument* is a collage work built on the pages of a Victorian novel, *A Human Document* by W.H. Mallock. Most words on a page are erased or obscured by a new artwork, exposing a new narrative in just a handful of scattered words..

There’s still a story in *A Humument*, one told in the same words as the original novel, but one stemming from a highly curated and selective arrangement of those words. Each page in the re-worked novel takes on another design and employs a variety of writing tones and mediums. Visually, and in terms of medium, this is a far cry from the original Victorian novel. The colors are rich, and the erasures unpredictable and varied. At first glance, it’s tempting to

think that *A Humument* is so far away from the cheap Victorian paperback it hijacks that the source is simply a convenient arrangement of words that happened to be available. But what makes this such a successful and complex *détournement* is that the original story still anchors the text and ghosts the radical new arrangement. Phillips “reiterates the conventional love story of his source” (135) and follows the hints of a single narrative through 400 pages of charmingly sketched over pages. The new protagonist, Toge, is the dialogue between the old and new meanings that the situationists aimed for in *détournement*. He exists not in the original, and not wholly in the new arrangement, but in between, relying on both sources for his world. All of this is to demonstrate that the misappropriation of a source text, the literal obscuring and confusing of its form, is, in actual fact, a homage to that original. No matter how far a detoured work strains to burst the original, it relies on its anchor as a starting point for its own narrative. The detoured elements are nothing without the original to keep it grounded. *Maps to Arkham* aims for the same. It distorts and manipulates Lovecraft’s fiction, spinning wildly new architectural maps from his words, but, no matter how far it departs from Lovecraft’s original aims, it remains tethered to him.

It’s worth saying, at this point, that Lovecraft would have hated postmodern artistic practices such as *détournement*, particularly that which I’ve performed on his own work. Lovecraft was a strict formalist, believing in the wholeness of set forms, rhythms and rhyme schemes, another reflection of his identity as a puritanical Victorian gentleman. He described T. S. Elliot’s *The Wasteland* as “confusion and turbulence”, a “hoax”; simply trivial and meaningless. According to Lovecraft, the radical was “an extravagant extreme” whose “truly artistic application is vastly more limited” (in Joshi: 670). Lovecraft’s

formalism then, is only partly about the poetry itself, but another cementing of his identity as a person born out of time. A proper Victorian gentleman would be attracted to poetry in which technical skill is worn on the sleeve, rather than broken into fragments and wielded in more subtle arrangement.

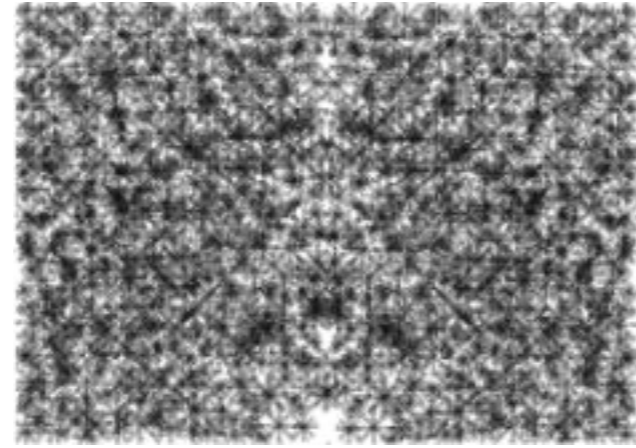
### *Maps to Arkham and Susan Howe's Frolic Architecture*

The visual line. Not a nice poetic line, carefully controlled and closed. Instead, a haphazard line, random line, fulfilling itself by the brute force of its physical reality (Drucker 1998: 140).

*Maps to Arkham* is a roadmap to some of the most infamous locations in Lovecraft country. It forms a kind of anti-guide to the concretism of place, a mapping of the weird which disorients as much as reveals. Aiming at a cross between, what Aleksandra Belitskaja, Benjamin James and Shuan McCallum (2020) term an “augmented architectural object” and a concrete poem, each visual rendering of a landscape is built from Lovecraft’s texts. The visual poem is then accompanied by a more typical poetic response. Both sides, the visual map and the line by line response, form a singular “map” enacting the Lovecraft mythos and its enduring influence.

The sequence started as a parody of Lovecraft’s adjectivitis; his obsession with architecture, walking, and landscape, but most of all, his repetitive, overwhelming prose style. The first few poems work through Lovecraft’s verbose prose. I took every adjective and adverb from *The Nameless City* and copied and pasted them into an A5 InDesign document. It formed a dense and threatening shape shifting in and out of legibility. *The Gilman House*, in which a band of degenerate Insmouth amphibians raid the narrator’s room, was the second poem. The result was an

even bigger and darker object, a force as large and complex as that at the door



The process of creating these first two visual poems was tediously long. I trawled through the text, identified what I needed then arranged them on the page. It took countless hours of laborious repetition just to gather the building blocks, and even then, there was no definite aim. I didn’t want to begin with a prescribed notion of what each map would look like, but rather let each one emerge as a product of the circumstances of the individual landscape it responded to. There were three actors involved: myself, Lovecraft’s fiction, and the Adobe InDesign software. The process of collage occurred between us. This type of visual poetry is nothing new, although the use of InDesign does open up new possibilities for the use of the page. A closer look at another project which appropriates out-of-copyright found text will contextualize the détournement process.

Poet Susan Howe’s sequence *Frolic Architecture* (2010) appropriates text from the archives of eighteenth-century theologian Jonathan Edwards and his family [14]. As she recounts in *Spontaneous Particulars: The Telepathy of Archives* (2014) the sequence is a collection of “letters, diaries, notebooks, essays, and more than twelve hundred sermons” (45). Howe’s “frolic” sense of space is packed with visual movements,

sparks of half-legible texts acting against another in an unstable sense of time and place. Howe’s process relies on “intuition”, a “factual telepathy”, that allows her to feel the “enduring relations and connections between what was and what is” (43). The poems in *Frolic Architecture* perform a Situationist détournement; a creation, or rather, curation, resulting in a new organization of meaning, as Debord champions.

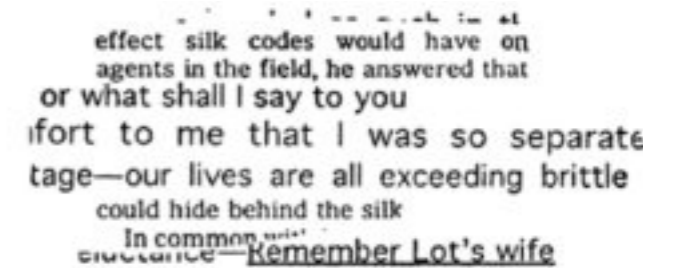
Restricting oneself to a personal arrangement of words is mere convention. The mutual interference of two worlds of feeling, or the juxtaposition of two independent expressions, supersedes the original elements and produces a synthetic organisation of greater efficacy (Debord and Wolman 2006 [1956]: 15).

This “greater efficacy” is similar to what Howe describes as the “felt fact” (2012: 47) of ideas. Although seemingly contradictory, it’s Howe’s intuitive repositioning of material that leads to a greater efficacy of Edwards’ communication, or rather, the “felt fact” of those ideas rather than their direct articulation. In other words, it’s only by not saying something directly that we can more effectively communicate it. In distorting his sermons on faith, *Frolic Architecture* conveys Edwards’ themes of belief and morality in a surprising and engaging way. At a basic level, this type of response is more immediately innovative than an ekphrastic response. Instead of paraphrasing or reflecting his work, Howe distorts it, creating visual shards of individual meaning that create a web of the “felt fact” of the Edwards materials, all relying on the actual text used. For Howe, this act of détournement, an embracing of miscommunication, is actually the heart of poetry’s communicative abilities. Howe describes poetry as the love of this fact, a visual and textual distillation of communication.

Howe expands on her process of writing the sequence in an interview with W. Scott Howard (2019), suggesting how it was the process itself that took precedence over any prescriptive aims:

I cut into passages from my transcriptions with scissors, turned and adjusted them, taped sections onto sections, ran them through the copier, then reworked and folded over the results. The mirroring effects leads me on (218).

This “mirroring” is key to approaching her détournement of the text. The poem looks inward but only in order to splinter new meanings from its own disparate shards. It’s clear that Howe’s process was open enough to allow a more instinctual curation to happen, each step of the process leading to the next one, and an overall picture forming only at the very end.



In the poem above, The “I” is fractured beyond recognition, a clearing of identity. The new arrangement of textual shards speaks back to their origins, calling not only to their previous lives, but to a hope of a future world. Howe’s response is a fragmentation of meaning that allows a disparate grouping of juxtapositions to grow of their own accord.

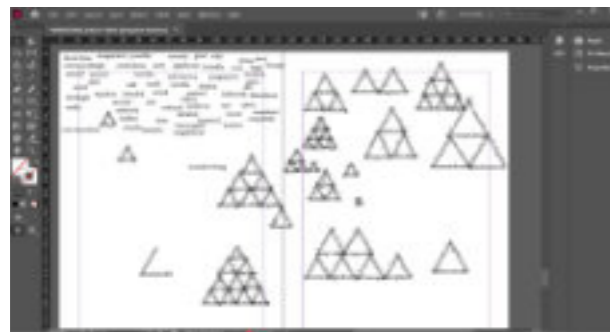
In distorting texts, Howe returns their agency, the speaker(s) living and breathing again with an energy facilitated by the détournement process.



## A Digital détournement

Just as Howe had the Edwards text, her own poetic and visual instincts, and scissors, glue and a photocopier all weighing in on the sequence, Lovecraft's voice and the design software was suitably close as I digitally cut into the material. The third agent here, Adobe InDesign, formed a much bigger role than I had initially imagined, often guiding the build of each poem with the possibilities, limits and specific features of the software.

In *The Akeley Farmhouse, Vermont*, the "map" appropriates all the verbs and adverbs from Lovecraft's *The Whisperer in Darkness*. To begin with, I built triangles from similar sized words, combining them into larger pyramids where possible. It's a simple process which cuts through the heavy Lovecraftian fiction and exposes the weight his adjectives form.



With each slow architectural build, a map started to emerge. The text on the left is in a kind of holding zone, awaiting shaping, while ladders of shaped text accumulated on the other side of the page.

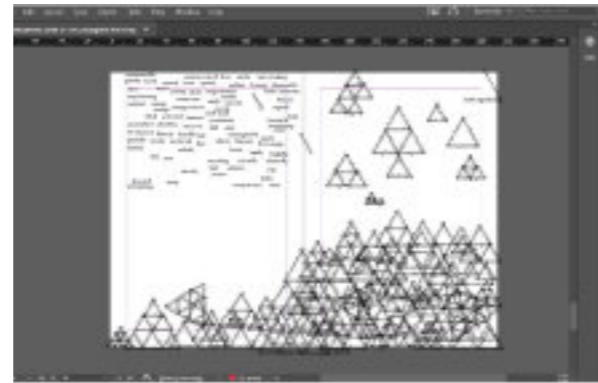
I layered and layered more pyramids on top until the text became dense, barely legible.

Poet Joanna Drucker (1998) speaks about the "visual logic" of language on the page and I attempted to embody a Lovecraftian logic in the form of each map, as befitting to the individual

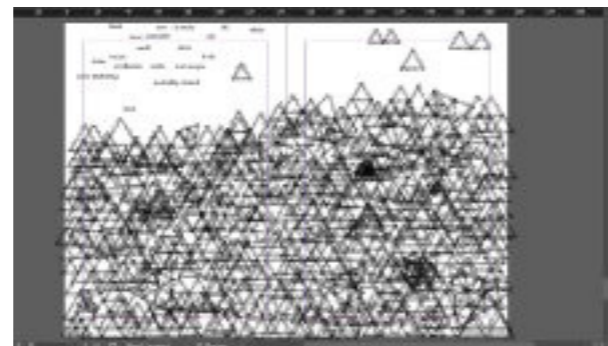
story.

As mentioned, the Vermont landscape of *The Whisperer in Darkness* is one heavy with a threatening pastoral and untainted wilderness: "...something in the collocation of roofs and steeples and chimneys and brick walls formed contours touching deep viol-strings of ancestral emotion" (69).

At first, I struggled to find this threat on the page. But as the layering continued, more contour lines started to form.



I followed these contours of text up the page, positioning pyramids into a heavy arrangement. The growing "map" felt like a kind of manufactured soil, black and sticky but struck through with steel-like lines which cemented the text in place. I wanted dense and overwhelming, and the text delivered. As the image built, focal points began to develop. Darker corners of text provided solid structures by which to navigate the emerging contours.



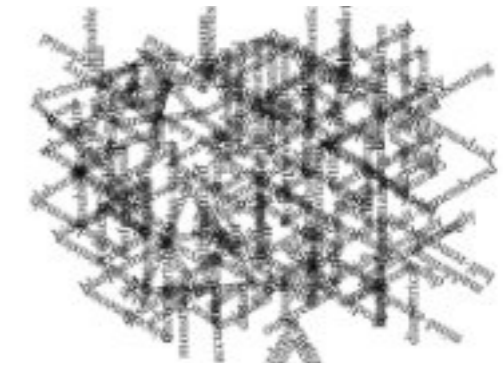
The InDesign rotate tool and general ease of positioning text had enabled

me to build the image, but these are just the basics of the programme. The "Direction Selection Tool" has more promising potential. As I reached the end of the text, the page was nearly full. Big triangles popped out in the general scrum and a series of disjointed horizontal lines shifted the eye up and down. However, as a "map", it didn't embody Lovecraft's Vermont. In *The Whisperer in Darkness*, the landscape is always shifting. The land is glimpsed and hinted at from a moving car and the story involves numerous locations. As one of the first lines makes clear, the need to escape, both from madness and the immediate circumstances, is there from the beginning:

To say that a mental shock was the cause of what I inferred—that last straw which sent me racing out of the lonely Akeley farmhouse and through the wild domed hills of Vermont in a commandeered motor at night—is to ignore the plainest facts of my final experience (54).

There's an uncertainty here, a desperation to persuade and have an unbelievable experience validated. For the narrator's sanity, it's important that his story is convincing. Everything hangs on the tangibility of his observations. But currently the shape of the page was too strong, too sure of itself and comfortable in its own chaos. The map of this tale needed to be more fragmented, broken. I started to take random fragments of text using the Direction Selection Tool, arranging the unpredictable results on a fresh page. As every word, not just every triangle or every pyramid, is a separate, selectable, and moveable object, grabbing a handful of text is an unpredictable move. Although the image looks solid, it's really just a huge cluster of disparate text. That means that the triangles painstakingly created earlier, are broken up in uncertain ways. Individual words

end up as shards piercing out from the whole, while the original triangular



shapes no longer form a clear pattern.

The unpredictable results of the tool leave the edges jagged, creating a more threatening yet fragile feel, while certain words are exposed as accidental poems. Everything here balances on *burdened*, *plainly*, *lifeless* and *penetrant*, for example, while, on the left, an *elaborate*, *blasphemous* and *hideous* are shot into the shape. This technique also leaves smaller selections of words in a stark and lonely expanse, its new arrangement strips it of the security of Lovecraftian over-description.



## Reaching Arkham: A Conclusion

The city of Arkham is the central landmark in Lovecraft country, appearing throughout his stories as a stepping stone into otherworldly territory. It's the city by which many of his protagonists navigate themselves and the world around them. It's also an idyllic place, a haven of pastoralism and learning. As Daniel Harms describes, Arkham is situated on the Miskatonic

River in Essex County, Massachusetts and was founded by religious “free-thinkers” (7) in the 17th Century. At its heart is the Miskatonic University, a nationally renowned institution with “the largest known collection of occult lore in the western hemisphere” (7). The city is a touchstone of Lovecraft’s disappointment in the real world. It’s a place of old values and academic gentility, a “haven for the scholar and antiquarian”, although Harm admits it “offers little for the casual traveler” (7). This last phrase is telling. Arkham is exclusive, appealing only to those who deserve it - the educated, whether officially so or not. I envision Arkham as the epitome of the Lovecraftian universe, peopled by white male literary professors and scientists, preferably with an aristocratic English heritage. In this pocket of time, Lovecraft can be safe.

But Arkham cannot stay that way and, as this essay has described, Lovecraft’s sanctuary deserves a détournement, hence the title, *Maps to Arkham*. These poems, and the landscapes they embody, envision an alternative capital of Lovecraft country, each one approaching but never spawning the actual city. They are a guide which churns up the soil and sky and leaves the pieces hanging. Anything whole is fragmented, and an unnatural order runs through the architecture of the page. It’s a place that can only ever exist on the page, distorted beyond legibility and ever-shifting in a process of horrifying instability.

Lovecraft hates this collection. He haunts it through necessity, but would otherwise take pleasure in seeing it destroyed. It’s thanks to works like this that nobody reads poetry anymore. What’s worse, his words are the very building blocks of this architectural mess. This collection is a labyrinth, each poem pushing Lovecraft further from his comfort zone. His writing has turned on him and is eating its own

kingdom, word by word, paragraph by paragraph, and legend by legend.

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# The Muskogee Manifesto: climate collapse, creative writing, colonialism

Mimi Thebo

## ABSTRACT:

I was driving with my mother's ashes to Shreveport, Louisiana, when I saw a sign for Muskogee, Oklahoma. I decided to stop near there for a sandwich.

On that short drive, several ideas arose, interleaved and referential. Immediately, they felt both significant and difficult to explain. My experience of that drive led me to a deeper understanding of colonialism, climate collapse and what may be useful in contemporary storytelling. This essay uses experiential techniques from my practice in fiction to share these insights.

I relate observation of the landscape, agriculture, country music, giant soft drinks and memory to concepts of history, heritage, climate collapse, ecocide, and the way cultural icons play out in our sense of identity. All inform the always-lurking concern: How can we write hopeful narratives on our dying planet?

## The Muskogee Manifesto

I was driving my mother's ashes to Louisiana, when I passed a sign for Muskogee, Oklahoma and decided I'd stop soon for a sandwich. I didn't expect the occasion to trigger insights into storytelling for climate justice – and I didn't anticipate insights on a topic like this would come in such a messy, intertwined way. But before I ate my sandwich, I understood so much more that the experience has changed how I write, teach and talk about writing in a time of climate crisis.

Muskogee is a town of about 30,000 souls. If you can imagine a map of the USA, Oklahoma is the next state up from Texas. It lies south of my home state of Kansas, which forms the geographical centre of the United States of America.

The name "Muskogee" refers to the Muscogee Native American tribe, who were called the "Creek" by British colonisers. We have a saying in my part of the world, "Good Lord willin' and the creek don't rise." It's our version of "Insh'Allah" or "Deo Volente" in that it means plans will only be carried out if circumstances allow. I'd always thought "creek" in this context meant a small tributary or stream, because many Kansas settlements lie along such waterways. Prairieland is liable to flash floods, so it made sense that a planned event could only occur if there was no isolating floodwater.

On this trip, I'd discovered that the saying originally referred to the Muscogee, or the "Creek" tribal peoples and that "rising" meant rebellion. Such risings required "putting down" and I had just driven past signs for Fort Gibson, handily located for that very purpose.

The Muscogee are descendants of the famous mound builders, and had the same social structures of interconnected settlements. They were mis-named for their tendency to settle along ravine tributaries. There's controversy about the location of the lower creeks and upper creeks that formed their territorial lands. What's not controversial is that in the 1830s, about a hundred years before my mother was born, much of their territory was seized by the US government, and they were forcibly relocated to Oklahoma (Tyler 1973).

Oklahoma had been designated "Indian Territory" and the remnants of

several tribes (the "civilised tribes" – much good that did them) were marched to it along the "Trail of Tears" (Nps.gov 2016).

This forced relocation cost many lives due to a brutal pace and lack of provisioning. However, the upper creek territory of the Muscogee seems to have always included stretches along the Canadian river, and this area was retained as Muscogee land when the relocation occurred. I was driving towards it, now.

My maternal grandfather was born in Muskogee and his father participated in the 1889 Oklahoma Land Rush. People had lined up under the watchful eyes of the army. If you went too early, your homestead could be seized because you were a "Sooner." That said, precipitant settlers do not seem to have ever been actually penalised, and much of the first session of the new Oklahoman legislature concerned leniency for people who had occupied land too early. The "Sooners" is the nickname of the sporting teams of the University of Oklahoma and was proudly adopted only eleven years after the rush. The OU website praises their "can do" pioneer spirit (University of Oklahoma, n.d.).

I don't know if my maternal grandfather's father was a Sooner, but we're certain he was in the rush. He was a Wells Fargo stagecoach driver – my cousin Dan has his identification badge – but died young. Two days before I drove past the sign for Muskogee, I'd found that Dan had also done some genealogical research. To his horror, he'd found my great grandmother had dumped my grandfather and his brother Ralph at an orphanage in Kansas City, presumably to make it easier for her to remarry. Mr Hughes, her second husband, eventually took Ralph, the younger son, but did not adopt my grandfather, Daniel Patrick Ritter.

I well remember my great-uncle Ralph – and Elva, his immaculately coiffed and made-up wife. They had been prosperous florists, back when there evidently was such a thing, and always drove Cadillacs with longhorns attached above the headlights. They wore elaborately decorated Western-style suits of the kind made popular by Nudie Cohn (Larson 2004), just like rock stars. As a child, I'd thought them the most glamorous people imaginable. I'll return to the concept of cowboy-ness that informed their aesthetic, but the important thing now is that Ralph, as well as Daniel, was born in Muskogee.

If you know anything about how the West was settled, white ancestors in the Oklahoma Land Rush are not a source of pride. A few short years after the civilised tribes' forced resettlement in Oklahoma, the Dawes Act attempted to strip those allocated lands from the resettled tribes (Tyler 1973). This was only partially blocked. Although many of the new white settlements were to the west of the tribal lands, forcible seizure of tribal land by white settlers was not uncommon and was punished in about the same way as the Sooners – unevenly or not at all. That my grandfather and my great uncle had birth certificates for Muskogee is an indication that my family participated in land seizure, if nothing worse.

Merle Haggard sang about Muskogee in 1969. By that time, the county residents were more than 78% white. Nearly 17% were black. "Other" races, into which categories Hispanic as well as Native American fell, made up only slightly more than 5% (USAFacts 2022).

The first line in Haggard's song "Okie from Muskogee" (Haggard and Burris 1969) had been bouncing around in my brain since I'd seen the sign. It begins, "We don't smoke marijuana in Muskogee." I know the entire lyric by heart. I know many, many lyrics to country songs by

heart.

When I began to hum, I reflexively apologised to my mother's bright pink urn in the passenger seat. She'd always hated country music.

Mom had aspirations for my social mobility. Part of her programme forbade the sound of Country and Western (as it was called in the 1960s) to reach my ears. This was difficult to enforce in our part of Kansas City, where necks were red. She managed through unceasing effort. Car radio volume was abruptly turned down before an approved push button was selected, in case my father had rebelled. Records brought in by party guests were firmly policed. My paternal grandfather's guitar picking was not welcome in the family home, and Dad's accordion inevitably left his possession before my sixth birthday. Mom might well have engineered a food budget crisis solely to get rid of it.

So, the first time I heard country music was by accident. I was playing with the girls across the street when I heard Johnny Tillotson's country cover of The Cascades' "Listen to the Rhythm of the Rain" (Gumoe 1963).

I was deeply impressed by the experience. The plaintive emotion of the song went right to my seven-year-old heart. It was an "old" song by then, and the girls did not understand why I became so distracted. When I sang the chorus for my mother, she informed me it was a terrible song and that only low, vulgar people listened to music like that.

I immediately pledged my heart to country music.

In her second marriage, my mother wed a die-hard Hank Williams aficionado and my defection became complete. She must have died a little inside when I moved to London (London! Her dream!) only to write my own column for Country Music International magazine.

Murmuring the "Okie" lyric, I get to the part where Haggard explains that people in Muskogee also keep their hair trimmed short because they like "living right and being free."

In my long connection to country music, I've noted its lyrics nearly always contain a glaring paradox. Let's look at "Okie from Muskogee" again. In the lyrics, "living right" and "being free" are presented as corollaries. Actually, they're opposites.

In the song, living right means adhering to a rigid social code that governs your dress, grooming, sexual mores, and the drugs you use recreationally (LSD bad, illegally distilled moonshine good). It also precludes using your right to protest. What have such tight social constructs to do with the concept of freedom? Young people protesting the Vietnam War – four of whom would be shot dead by the National Guard at Kent State University in Iowa the following year – are, according to Haggard, showing that they do not like being free. To enjoy the right to be free, Haggard suggests, you must give up your freedoms to conform to prevailing norms.

Country often runs into these problems.

One of my favourites is the whole cowboy trope, which leads to some extremely convoluted thinking. I had been thinking about "Cowboy" as a cultural construct since recalling Ralph and Elva's Nudie-inspired suits. Now I brought it onto the front burner of my mind.

Actual cowboys were a historical blip. The long-ranging cattle drives and huge free-roaming herds we associate with the word "cowboy" were limited to a period between two main events. The opening event was the expansion of the railway to the prairie "ranges", after the American Civil War. The railways

transported the cattle "back East" to feed the population centres and make fortunes for the herd owners; providing the economic motivation to raise huge herds of cattle and walk them to railheads (Knowlton 2017). The closing event was the invention of barbed wire in 1870, which allowed effective fencing on the tree-poor prairie. There was increased urgency to do this, after bad collective management of shared land led to poor grazing and millions of bovine deaths in the hard winter of 1886/87 (Love 1916). By 1890, the range was more or less enclosed and there were 50,000 ice wagons hauling beef carcasses from processing plants on the expanded rail network of the great plains. There were still people working cattle, but with fences and local transport, not as many were required. By the turn of the century, there were very few cowboys indeed.

So, cowboys actually roamed the range for around 33 years, from 1867 to 1890.

Cowboys were largely veterans of the Civil War or people who had been displaced by it. Previously enslaved black people were cowboys (Flamming 2009), traumatised ex-soldiers were cowboys (Richardson 2022), recent immigrants became cowboys, too, as did some women – often (again, displaced) war widows. It was hard, dirty, dangerous work and not terribly well-paid, but it was an assured living with board and room provided (or bedroll when riding herd) as well as a wage. If you had been made homeless by the war or its economic effects, cowboying provided a way to save some money and regroup. An initiative to buy "desert" (prairie) land cheap (as long as you promised to irrigate it and raise crops) was taken up by many previous cowboys.

As I drive, I consider that the laconic, emotionally reserved or absent figure of the friendless / family-free lone cowboy hero can be seen as someone alienated



from society because of previous trauma – Cormac McCarthy’s novels perhaps best explore this, but so does the ground-breaking Space Western anime *Cowboy Bebop* (Wanatabe 2019).

Driving along towards Muskogee, thinking about all this, I stop for fuel and do a quick search on cowboys-as-trauma-survivors. One of the most interesting insights comes from a blog by the wife of an Iraqi War veteran with PTSD (Dunning 2020).

When she visited Tombstone, Arizona and went into their recreated saloons, she noted the large mirrors behind the bars that allowed patrons to see behind them, how the doors did not wholly obscure entrants to the space, and the preponderance of tables and chairs against the wall. Saloon décor was an environment tailored for hyper-vigilant PTSD sufferers.

Back on the road with an enormous beaker of iced tea, I think about the huge iconic figure of the cowboy in American society. There were never a great many real cowboys, but there were enough who cowboied and then settled down and owned farms to provide a familiar story of rags-to-(relative)riches success, of the bootstrap-and-hard-work kind beloved by my fellow Americans.

Some of it was fashion. The cowboy “look” – big hat, heeled boots for riding, sturdy jacket, long coat and dashing accessories of belts, holsters, spurs, scarves and chaps – was attractive and much documented by the cowboys’ contemporaries in the new photographic industry (for an example, see Gabriell 1888). Dime novels of fictional (or heavily sensationalised) cowboys were extremely popular with contemporary youth of the late 1880s (French 1951) and remained a hot genre in the emerging magazines of the 1900s.

By 1903, the first Western film was released. Shot in New Jersey, the cost of

making *The Great Train Robbery* was one of the motivations for establishing Hollywood, where cowboy films could be made using natural scenery (Smith 2004).

Now a strange alchemy occurred – perhaps because of the immersive nature of the new technology of motion pictures. Americans who had grown up reading about cowboys and seeing images of cowboys began to believe that they *were* or *had been* cowboys, or had been related to a cowboy, or had cowboys in the family heritage or...

This collective delusion is a result of the powerful cognitive processes of the imagination. Cognitive processes of imagination can occur alongside and simultaneous to the processes of observing and reacting to reality – as Stephen T Asma beautifully explains, we can partially live in stories that capture our imaginations (Asma 2022). Millions of people across the world lived in the story of the cowboy and collectively *became* cowboys, at least in the way they thought about themselves and the way they related to the world.

From there, concepts of the universal “roots” of rural white Americans as cowboys took only two generations. This concept of our universal cowboy heritage is frequently referenced in country music and the opportunity to wear the boots and hat is available to anyone who chooses to “revert” to these “roots” of mythical cowboy heritage fostered by cultural artefacts of literature and film.

I thought again about my great-uncle Ralph. My great-grandmother Hughes chose for her second husband a man from Texas. As I drove towards Muskogee, I carried a suitcase full of everything I am taking from my mother’s belongings – mainly family photographs. One is a sepia of Ralph looking adolescently moody. He’s wearing jodhpurs tucked into

Wellingtons and a large cowboy hat. He’s also wearing a safari shirt. With a topi, he could have been colonizing Africa, but the photo was taken around 1920 in Texas.

We don’t know how Mr Hughes made his money, but we are fairly certain it wasn’t cattle ranching. And Ralph ended up as a florist, as we know, in Navasota. However, Ralph, and later Elva, became cowboys. They wore hats. They put longhorns on their cars, they had pearl-buttoned shirts with pointy plackets, they listened to country and western, they said “dagnabbit” and Elva wore her hair very high. They had clearly signalled their intention to be cowboys – and signalling is all that is required to *become* a cowboy.

When Garth Brooks sings about crashing a wedding, in his 1992 hit “Low Places,” (Brooks, 1991) he says, “Blame it all on my roots, I showed up in boots...” and his intended listeners know that the character in the song lyric is a cowboy and that these were cowboy boots. If they were, say, work boots or Timberlands, they would not have “roots” to blame.

On TikTok the night before, I’d seen a young white man defending a Black man with locs who had been fielding negative comments and racial abuse for wearing a cowboy hat in his recent short film. The young white man said that “country” is about being inclusive, about not judging people by how they look but how they act. He is answering his fellow outraged “cowboys” who felt since the original videographer is Black, he cannot be a cowboy. These are not, they say hotly, his roots.

Actually, about a quarter of cowboys were black. However, in the fantasy version that has endured as a cultural delusion of heritage, cowboys are white and male. Miranda Lambert, in her playful song “If I Was a Cowboy,” (Lambert and Frasure 2022) breaks quite

a few taboos by singing it as a female, despite using all the clichés of the cowboy, including riding off into the sunset while regretted by a “little lady on the front porch” and having a very phallically intoned “six gun” with a “hairpin trigger”. The eponymous line, “If I was a cowboy, I’d be the Queen,” queers the whole cowboy concept.

In “Okie from Muskogee”, when Haggard declares that “leather boots are still in style for manly footwear,” we all know what kind of boots they are meant to be – and they aren’t Wellingtons, despite my great uncle Ralph’s teenaged photograph.

Haggard is saying that everyone – everyone that counts – in Muskogee is a cowboy.

But this leads us to the other problem with cowboys – in our cultural imaginations, cowboys do not exist except in relation to their opposites. And these were the people who at the time were called “Indians”.

As I drive, I am passing through or near tribal lands. Some of the names of the tribes are familiar to me. Some are not. I was never taught about the first nations of the Americas in school.

In the 1960s, when I was learning the history of the United States of America, we learned about Native Americans when we learned about the Pilgrim Fathers (mothers were only implied). Emphasis was on the first Thanksgiving – a holiday in honour of a feast prepared by the Pilgrim Fathers (Mothers) to thank the Native American tribes around Plymouth Rock for saving the nascent colony from starvation the previous year.

In my primary school History textbooks, this entire episode was well explained, with the actual crops detailed and much information about why the European crops had not succeeded. The textbook

writers knew their audience: many boys in my Kansas City primary school would leave school in May to go “back” to the farms of their grandfathers or uncles and work the summer getting in crops. Thus, the information about the agriculture of the Pilgrims was extremely interesting to about half my class.

There was also a small sidebar that discussed which tribes might have provided the life-saving corn and smoked venison the previous year. After this sidebar, Native Americans in our textbooks withdrew from historical view for the next few hundred years.

They popped up, here and there, in other books: *Poems Every Child Should Know* (Barrows 1957) and *American School Songs* (Kurzenabe 1904). And then, very excitingly, they returned in History as people who went naked, couldn’t read and massacred people on the Oregon Trail. These evildoers had to be eased from their lawless ways by soldiers in forts and priests in missions. I found the whole idea of them quite terrifying, and with great relief learned they’d been confined to reservations.

Coincidentally, I’d just been deemed old enough to witness these evildoers in black and white on television and technicolour at the drive-in. With my own eyes I saw evil Indians chopping people with tomahawks, raiding wagons and menacing women and children. The white men formed a posse with the new sheriff and rode out to settle things or the calvary trumpeted over the hill just as the plucky wagon circle was about to be set ablaze with fire arrows, but the native population always seemed a bit of a risk to me.

Why the peaceable people who threw away pearls worth all their tribe, sold Manhattan for a string of beads and fed boatloads of total strangers had morphed into horrible killers was a baffling mystery. When asked, my

teacher said they were from different tribes.

My maternal grandmother, who regularly gave money to Cherokee charities and had little tokens of their appreciation scattered around the house, explained. At first, I couldn’t believe it. But then I started paying more attention to the boring bits of cowboy movies and discovered Grandma was right. The United States Government had broken treaty after treaty after treaty. We had stolen the “Indian’s” land.

But even stealing tribal lands hadn’t been enough to finish off the Native American warriors – witness the Battle of Little Bighorn of 1876. There, a combination of Arapaho, Northern Cheyenne and Lakota Sioux warriors formed one of the finest light calvaries the world has ever seen (Powers 2010). Even with the advantage of firepower, and the dastardly trick of attacking a camp of women and children to draw off the warriors from their chosen fighting ground, the US forces were outmanoeuvred, outnumbered and soundly defeated. And this despite the efforts of General George Custer, a supposedly clever tactician.

The only way the US could win against confederacies of tribal people under generals like Sitting Bull, was to, as General Philip Sheridan had declared in 1874, “destroy the Indian’s commissary” by slaughtering the Western bison – the buffalo. An enormous extermination programme began (Smits 1994). The population of the Western Bison was brought from an estimated 50 million to 325 individuals in only a few years.

The Native Americans were not defeated by the military might of the United States. They were starved in one of the first great American ecocides.

Ecocide is not a new American phenomena, only an ongoing strategy for political and economic gain.

Sometimes it’s not a strategy, it’s only an effect of the pursuit of those gains, but the ecocide still occurs.

Take red-winged blackbirds. Driving up through the prairie lands a week earlier, I had noted the lack of red-winged blackbirds. They’d previously been ubiquitous in wheat-growing country, swinging on barbed wire (pronounced bob-wahr in my part of the world) with their cheery staccato song. I hadn’t seen a single one all trip, I realised, and I’d already covered over ten thousand miles.

And then I understood. It was the drones (BirdLife International 2017).

Drone agriculture is very common in agri-business these days. Agri-business is what used to be farming. Steadily, over the last thirty or forty years, large companies have been buying family-owned farms, targeting locations to create large-scale single crop plantations. The previous owners’ houses were sold or razed and many small farming communities have lost all significant economic activity and become bedroom communities or ghost towns. Swathes of farmland that used to support hundreds of families now employ a handful of people to manage production in centralised, occasionally remote locations (McGreal 2019).

I found the result chilling. Perfectly neat rows of soybeans, or uniformly high wheat crops stretched into the homeless horizon. They were tidy in the way referenced in Emily Male’s excellent picture book, *Tidy* (Gravett, Henry 2018), in which a badger becomes so concerned with making his environment neat that he inadvertently destroys the entire ecosystem of his forest. Tidiness of this kind seems allied to fascism’s need to control... such uniform crops remind me of the sharp uniforms of the Nazi SS. The crops are serviced by enormous drones around the size of microlight aircraft, styled a bit like the old crop-

duster planes of the last century. They swoop and dip over the roads that intrude into the giant fields, monitoring, delivering fertilizer... and pesticides.

Red-winged blackbirds feed on grain crops and are classed as pests. It’s legal to trap, poison and shoot a red-winged blackbird and farmers have been doing so for generations. Like coyotes, however, the more pressure the species was put under, the more young they tended to produce. However, the one-two punch of insect ecocide that has cut their food source with drone-enabled poisoning of their roost trees have finally managed to exterminate much of the population.

The last time I drove this particular journey – Miami to Lawrence, Kansas and back again – was when my daughter was fourteen, so only six years ago. During that trip, every time I refuelled the car I had to scrub insect remains off the windscreen. Now, there was no need. There were few insects left to die (Wagner et al. 2021).

A butterfly had become an event.

Seeing any wild creature was an event. I was driving from dawn and past dusk through rural areas, often miles from town, along waterways... You’d expect me to have seen a great deal of wildlife at the beginning and end of each day’s journey. I saw nothing.

By the time I passed the sign for Muskogee, I’d begun to get excited by roadkill. There had been at least one armadillo around here, I noted with glee as I passed its pitifully curled corpse on the hard shoulder. There once had been at least one red-tailed deer, one possum. I imagined many more, big eyes in the brush along the roadside, waiting to emerge until I’d gone. I found the image comforting in the vast loneliness of monocultures.

I see climate collapse coming towards



me all the time, as much as I'd see a freight train approaching if this car had been stuck on a level crossing, and with the same urgency. The aviation industry was experiencing a flurry of recovery, but I didn't think it was sustainable in its current model and I couldn't imagine liquid fuels getting cheaper. We were running out of the stuff and we were killing our world while we squeezed out the last drops. At home, we drove second-hand electric cars. I knew the problems with lithium batteries and dirty electric power, but it wasn't the same as the amount of carbon I pumped out as exhaust on this long, long trip. But, yes, I am myself part of American society, that part of the world that has caused over 20% (Evans 2021) of fossil fuel emissions, despite being 4.23% of the world's population (Worldometers 2021).

The sheer scale of the waste and bloated consumption of my fellow Americans sickened and appalled me, even as I took part in all their rituals with a kind of hideous nostalgia. I drank a Styrofoam Big Gulp with a plastic straw. I'd pumped artificially deflated priced gas/petrol into my rental car, listening to people blame the President for the fact that the subsidised prices had risen to 300% cheaper than in the UK. I knew there would be no recycling bin, or that there was utterly no point to using it if one miraculously appeared in roadside services, because it was full of non-recyclable items. Staffing was too short throughout the USA for even an optimist like myself to believe anyone would sort out the recyclables in twenty bins for absolutely no commercial gain.

It was nearly the Fourth of July as I drove, Independence Day. Marquees and circus tents selling fireworks had popped up along the road.

Americans spend 2.3 billion dollars on fireworks over this holiday period. I remembered an article from 2014, announcing with glee that the federal

government managed to exceed their 4 billion dollar goal for renewable energy and energy efficiency investments (that goal was eliminated in the next presidency). In 2021, the US government had allocated a little over 5.7 billion for tax relief to ease the transition to renewables for the gas and oil industries. So, a substantial portion of the budget the government had spent trying to wean the USA off fossil fuels, its citizens blew into the air in just one day.

Although I was aware of all this, and had listened with increasing gloom to the predictions of failure for Biden's new green energy bill in Congress, I was also aware that I was passing signs for huge wildlife habitats. Ozark National Forest, Mark Twain National Forest, The Land Between the Lakes National Recreation Area and the Shawnee National Forest are nearly contiguous, forming a kind of corridor of island ecosystems that stretched just south of Branson, Missouri (where country singers go for semi-retirement, buying their own theatres and singing every weekend) 450 miles east to Nashville, Tennessee (where country singers work during their peak earning years). That was twice the length of the road from Holyhead to Cardiff Bay, so I cheered myself up by deciding these linked islands of forests stretched well over the size of Wales.

Developments and permissions vary from National Forest to National Forest, and state parks to recreation areas, etc. But I know some things would remain the same: hunting and fishing would be tightly regulated, although policies would be skewed towards providing enjoyable experiences for hunters and fisherfolk. These were not wildlife reserves or protected wilderness areas (although after human management of "wilderness" for over a hundred years, even wildernesses are not "wild") but land held in common for the use of citizens. Grazing has always been permitted in Western national forests

and grasslands: for less than \$2 per head per month, you can keep your cow/calf herd in clover on federal land. If you get the permit, that is, and these processes are sometimes not as transparent as emerging cattle ranchers would like.

In my short but interesting time as a Montana cowgirl, I had participated in a National Forest round-up on horseback. It was chaotic and drunken, but ultimately effective and much better for animal welfare than pushing calves into a feeder unit at one month of age. That this industry use of National Forests prevents predator re-introduction and harms the efforts to establish natural predation in contiguous National Parks remained an unsolved problem. There is evidence that wolves, large cats and even bears have been lured outside of protected space for trophy hunting that is couched as "herd protection" in National Forests. In my experience, herd predation is much more likely to occur due to the equally drunken city deer hunters. Even when a friend whitewashed C-O-W on the side of her breeding Herefords one season, two that grazed near the National Forest were shot. They were brown. There were trees. They looked like deer to the hunters, as does any person or thing not wearing neon hi-vis - and even some people who are.

When I saw a sign for the Oashita National Forest, I once again noted how many wild spaces there are in the USA and began to wonder, for the millionth time, if I am doing the right thing by remaining in the United Kingdom as climate catastrophe nears.

I know the maths by heart.

The population density of the United Kingdom is 278.67 people per square kilometre. Eliminating the part of the United Kingdom unsuitable for growing food, it gives us less than 0.90 hectares of arable growing space per person. Unfortunately, for a moderate vegetarian

lifestyle, with access to milk, eggs and grains, 1.50 hectares are needed per person, per year. Much of the UK has a more lavish lifestyle (although about a quarter of the population are currently in or near food insecurity), and our farmers were going out of business, largely due to lack of secure EU subsidies and the cut in their labour source and export potential due to Brexit (Farmers Weekly, 2021). We're also zoning agricultural land for housing - a much more lucrative income stream in the short-term. This is why we in the UK are so dependent on imported fresh fruit and veg - a risky strategy given the inevitable increases in fuel prices and the problems associated with importing from Europe post-Brexit. But Simon Fairlie thought it was possible in 2007 (Fairlie 2007).

In contrast, the United States of America has a population density per kilometre of 36 souls - plenty of space for the 1.50 hectares per person. Unfortunately, the cultivatable space is not as high as you might think, and the business models are poor: if the USA continues business as usual, sustainability outlooks are grim (Beltran-Peña, Rosa and D'Odorico 2020).

Looking ahead to self-sustaining lifestyle possibilities is somewhat jumping the gun, however. We will all be much more likely to die of disease or violence than we will starvation. Research for a novel had me slogging through death rates post-Katrina, as the New Orleans infrastructure failed and the state police and National Guard blockaded survivors from crossing out of the city on the bridges across Lake Ponchartrain. Post-Katrina NOLA had all the problems we can expect with the United Nation's predicted (United Nations 2022) social collapse (raw sewage, dirty water, lack of power, lack of access to medical help and supplies, looting, hoarding, raiding) and I took the Federal Emergency Management Agency statistics and drew the graph trends for death and disease

past the point where people were finally relieved - to see what would happen if relief and evacuation had never arrived.

It will be one thing to grow food (and most of us are not very skilled at doing so). It will be a whole other thing to retain that food once you've grown it. Some of the most able people at the first task (older, experienced gardeners) will be extremely vulnerable to theft and raiding.

I have relatives who have settled in a semi-abandoned farm community in South-East Kansas, where housing is cheap. They have crops, cows, chickens... and an extensive underground arsenal. Two other members of the family have bought property nearby, and my many cousins eye up the Zillow listings in the area when climate news is released.

Their area is also more adaptable to self-sufficiency than my terraced home in the southwest of England. I live between Bath and Bristol. Our polluted rivers will not be fit to drink and we have no well. When the sewers fail, as they rapidly will, the rivers may well grow even more polluted than they were as I drove through Oklahoma, when water companies had been enabled to release raw sewage. We could currently rely on rainwater run-off for much of our needs if it comes to it, but not if we also have to water crops, and especially not if there is drought. It was worrying.

And yet, I continued to drive away. I suppose I was going home to the UK on the off chance that we, as a species, can actually arrest our destruction enough to avoid the entire breakdown of human social order. It's not a big chance, but I wanted to be part of the effort, to try and make it happen with the skills I have.

My "prepper" family have told me I have no valuable skills. But I know how to tell a story, and how to help other people tell theirs. And this is what I

hoped to contribute in the last-ditch effort to save us all from horrific suffering.

After COP 26, I grew very despondent. If we are stuck on the level crossing, with the train of climate catastrophe coming towards us, COP 26 told me that the societal car we were sitting in will no longer start. And the doors won't open.

We're going to be hit by the climate collapse train.

I mainly write for children these days. I don't have the luxury of creating narratives of despair. How do I write stories of hope, from the front seat of that car on the level crossing?

I reached out to friends about this; academic colleagues and other writers. We had spent far too long telling stories to try and avert the destruction of other species' habitats. We'd largely failed.

We'd tried to warn people about the coming climate catastrophe. That hadn't worked, either.

Now, in these last possible moments for action, we felt that we need to prepare for the impact of the problem and shield the most vulnerable. We need to learn the lessons of Katrina, Grenfell, Lesbos, Uvalde. We need to radically rethink the balance between the needs of the individual and the needs of the community. We've pooled our expertise in a research group: Storytelling For Climate Justice (Storytelling for Climate Justice n.d.).

My own storytelling now is about accepting difference, working together, dealing with the needs of other people. As I drove towards Muskogee, I wondered what Katrina might have been like if people weren't corralled into easily controllable spaces, but had been empowered/allowed to help themselves. I imagined parents storming the doors of the school in Uvalde,

disarming the shooter. I imagined the tenants of Grenfell, who had complained about the dangers of the inflammable cladding, collectively withholding rent to finance its removal, before we lost them to the flames. I imagined a world where these possibilities were more readily explored, a world where the paradox of rugged individualism and neat conformity wasn't embedded in our interior conceptual landscape.

Our governments are in thrall to the machinery of consumption and profiteering. To survive the coming catastrophe, we will need to somehow step outside the systems of our society, and create something new, based on cooperation. As I write, as I drove, it is and was unthinkable to imagine how this might happen. That's our job - to imagine this unthinkable power to cooperate and survive.

That day, it seemed easier to work cooperatively in a country where folks haven't already prepared underground arsenals. So, I accelerated away from my home and biological family, towards my house, my immediate family and my colleagues and students, thinking about what kind of stories we need now.

"Cowboys" and "country" embedded themselves into the American consciousness in 100 years. We can help shift public consciousness in the twenty to thirty years we've got on this level crossing. We just need the right stories, with the right shape. We need the kind of story that can be told again and again, that can develop attractive tropes, that has something addictively dashing in the pictures it makes in our minds or on our screens. We can make stories to live in and towards as the planet is destroyed by greed.

I celebrated this insight with a wee at a gleamingly clean rest stop. Those Big Gulps. Very hydrating.

As I pulled back onto the long ribbon of

road, I found a good country music station that wasn't on the Fox news network (my tolerance for the ravings of the right wing only extends so far) and resolved to stop soon for a sandwich. Just then, a song came on the radio that was so freakishly *wrong* about the world that it distracted me. LoCash sang about how the whole world is actually one big country song (LoCash et al. 2019), because we all wear jeans with holes, work during daylight hours, fall in love from a first kiss on Friday night, own a dog, drink alcohol at five pm and various other activities associated with a very particular American experience.

This particularity turns the song from a celebration of commonality to, at best, an insistence that the entire of humanity's experience is - or should be - exactly like the writers' lives. At worst, the particularity excludes all other kinds of people from humanity. The chorus challenges "tell me I'm wrong" as if there is no possible rejoinder. It made me think about the concept of "country".

Like "cowboy", "country" relies on costuming. Gimme caps (which are baseball caps which agricultural suppliers once gave away for free to local farmers) are interchangeable with cowboy hats, and a great deal less expensive than a Stetson. Jeans, boots (these can be work boots), t-shirts and flannel overshirts feature highly. For women, cut off shorts and cute skirts and sundresses are options as are tight jeans. Recent songs mention ponytails and messy buns... as in "Okie", the norms are fairly prescriptive.

Pickup trucks are very country. As Raelynn sings in her recent hit (RaeLynn and Shelton 2021), you can haul both ass and hay in a pickup truck and the lockboxes are handy for your tools. There's also a great deal about John Deere tractors. Tractor sales are healthy in the USA (Miller 2022) - particularly for the two-wheel-drive versions more



useful for large gardens than field work, but autonomous harvesters were by far the biggest growth items, up over 37% last year. It's unlikely, however, that a country fan or singer has actually spent time on the seat, in the air-conditioned cab, or on the software controls of a tractor – agricultural work makes up only around 1.3% of US employment.

Hunting, fishing and drinking alcohol are approved recreational activities and it is not "country" to get too above oneself. We are content with the fruits of our labour when we are country, and if that means living in a doublewide trailer rather than an actual house, we can make it work – although much is made of buying land, if possible. We also have basic competency in tasks essential for rural life. Lainey Wilson outlines these neatly in "Things a Man Oughta Know" (Wilson, Nix, Singleton 2020), singing, "I can hook a trailer on a two-inch hitch, I can shoot a shotgun, I can catch a fish/I can change a tire on the side of a road."

But one can still be country without any of those things, because "country" is more about class and culture than location, occupation, wardrobe or manual skills. Kinky Friedman, the alt-country outlier from Texas, paraphrased David Allan Coe's song "If That Aint Country" (Coe 1977) to argue his Jewish family had "four rusted Fords sitting deep in the grass and if that's not country, I'll kiss your ass." It was a valid argument thirty years ago and it still holds true. But country and cowboy have a strong common denominator: an assumption of northern European white ancestry.

There are, of course, black country artists. Charley Pride was a huge star in the 1970s and several core country and hiphop crossover Afro-Americans are in the country charts today. But their lyrics conform to the same pick-up truck, beers with friends worldview of other country songs.

And this is the problem. LoCash's utopian vision of the whole world being a country song attempts to embrace otherness, but fails to imagine difference. Like the Muskogean in "Okie" fifty years ago, what is acceptable is so narrow that the yearning towards universality relates to a uniformity as severe as drone-grown soybean rows.

I was hungry as I drew into Okmulgee, and realised I was again on tribal land – in fact, Okmulgee is the capital of the Muscogee tribe. I pulled off the road and into a drive-through Subway sandwich shop.

I still think of Subway as a healthy choice, even though their bread contains so much sugar that the Irish supreme court decided it was cake (BBC News 2020). I ordered pepper cheese on nine grain wheat and hoped for the best.

It was a computer terminal – you didn't actually have to speak to the person making your sandwich. You just dialled all the ingredients and then drove around to pay. I paid the young woman and waited while she made my order.

She had brown skin, brown eyes and thick, glossy black hair. I wondered if she was Muscogee, but I didn't ask.

A few years ago, I'd written a historical novel set in seventh century Kazakhstan, and my university sent me there for some research. I'd loved that book, but it will never get published because I wrote about a multi-racial society, and wasn't a descendant of any of the races I wrote about. At the time, this had seemed absurd, but I'd learned a great deal more about spaces and story ownership and by the time I drove through Subway, I got it, and had a sense of shame that had taken me so long to understand.

In any case, in 2018 I was in Kazakhstan, driving a long distance across country.

Actually, my husband was driving. He is

a much more careful driver, especially useful in the sometimes challenging conditions of Kazakhstani road repair season. The center of Kazakhstan is many miles from the sea and has large wheat fields – it forcibly reminded me of Kansas.

As we travelled, I saw an old Soviet-style combine harvester, stuck in a field near an culvert, jammed up with Johnson grass. Nobody uses trailer combines anymore back home, but I knew what it was and how it worked, because I remembered the American versions, which had been old in the 1960s.

I only saw it for an instant, but I understood as clearly what had happened as if someone had told me the story: they'd either not been able to afford enough herbicides or had attempted to harvest too close to the edge of the field by the culvert, where grew tall stands of thick-stemmed Johnson grass. The combine had jammed on the Johnson grass, maybe broken a tooth or popped a belt. When they'd gone to get the part, it had rained. There had been a flash flood and the culvert had overflowed.

Now the wheat was going brown and the combine was stuck up to its axles in the hardening mud, still jammed to hell with Johnson grass. Nobody was going to do anything about it soon – no need. The crop had been lost.

My heart went out to them. I may live in England, now, work as a lecturer, and drive an electric hatchback. But I could tell a farming disaster in one glance. And if that's not country, I'll kiss your ass.

In the west of Kazakhstan, the Kazaks lived. They had brown skin, dark eyes and rich dark hair. As I drove through their world and saw them meeting friends in the shade of underpasses, cooking on fires on the side of the road and moving cattle on horseback, I

suddenly knew why they seemed so familiar. To me, they looked like Native American tribal people from the plains.

It had been summer, so some were living in yurts, working herds of cows and horses. It was more of a social, cultural activity than an economic one. It reminded me of when the Cherokee kids in my primary school would go "home" to tribal lands in Oklahoma, to be with their grandparents in the long summer holidays.

Studies have recently changed our idea of how the first people arrived in North America. We thought they came from Siberia across a temporary land or ice or combination bridge across the Bering Strait, but there may have been waves of immigration. The DNA of the plains tribes of Native Americans have more in common with contemporary populations from what is now Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan than Siberia and there are active studies establishing the link – even one from Kazakhstan (old.qazaqtv.com 2018). When I heard this on BBC Radio Four, I punched the air.

It might have been insensitive for me to have attempted to write a story set there, even one set so long ago. But I hadn't been a total racist to have noticed how similar the Kazak had looked to the tribal people back home.

I wait at the Subway window. I'd asked for "everything" from the salad selection and that takes time. It also takes time to fold the sandwich and tuck in all my exuberant lettuce and spinach. I watched the young woman do this and wondered if she was Muscogee. I hardly ever ask about anyone's heritage. Questions about ancestry are too often used to begin and legitimise a process of racial abuse, exclusion and marginalisation. And it's none of my beeswax, anyway.

Instead, I wondered where the wheat for

my bread had been grown.

Wheat for my sandwich was unlikely to have been grown in my home state, even though it was once known as the “bread basket of America.” Most of the perfectly produced wheat in Kansas, Oklahoma and Nebraska does not go into the human food chain directly. It is used to make cattle feed.

You don’t see many herds of cattle on the prairie anymore. Cow calf operations graze cattle, but modern American beef farming doesn’t raise beef animals in fields (Drouillard 2018). Calves have thirty to sixty days of daylight with their mothers. Then they are dehorned, fed a cocktail of wormers and antibiotics, and locked into feed stalls for rapid growth and quick slaughter and profit.

In the long campaign to settle the west for agriculture, something very strange happened. We ploughed up native grasses that were drought resistant and also resistant to natural pests. We killed the bison that fed on the grass. We then planted wheat – a cultivated grass, that needs support to survive. These days, support does not mean walking the rows with a hoe, but spraying poisons from a tractor or drone. Then we feed that wheat to European breeds of cattle, who themselves are poisoned in order to survive how we feed and house them.

We have destroyed the entire prairie ecosystem to do this. And studies show that the protein yield per acre in this vast enterprise has not increased (Steuter et al., 1999)

from when herds of bison raised their generations on the rich fodder of the prairie grasslands.

What a totally pointless exercise it has been, I thought. And what a lesson.

We’ve done this kind of imagination work before – my ancestors successfully imagined stepping outside societal

structures to shake off the yoke of monarchy. And what happened? In their quest for freedom, my forebearers ended up murdering, dispossessing, and enslaving entire nations of people. We plowed up the prairie and destroyed the fruitful ecosystem that could have sustained huge populations. Because we could not imagine difference. We could not think of buffaloes *and* agriculture. Cowboys *and* Indians.

As I watched the young woman make my sandwich, I understood. Storytellers everywhere will fail to imagine our way out of the mess of climate catastrophe if we only imagine the survival of people like ourselves. LoCash’s lighthearted song conceals the conceptual framework for colonisation, and colonisation nearly inevitably leads to ecocide.

My sandwich was ready.

I drove off again, through Muscogee lands. I’d spent all my teen years in a car, eating with one hand, shifting gears with the other, and steering with my knees. Eating a sandwich while driving an automatic transmission would truly be a piece of cake.

The road rose and the grasslands opened under the huge blue dome of sky. My heart opened with them, singing like the disappearing red-winged blackbirds. I love the prairie; the short grass down there, the tall grass back in Kansas and the high plains to the west of it all. I know everything about the place - the names of the trees, what kind of bird circled above me, what fish jumped in the river. I’ve published novels about its communities and won competitions with poems celebrating its fierce beauty.

Maybe the best way for me to love the prairie was to leave it behind, to take my DNA back to the British Isles, from where most of it had come. But maybe that was too simplistic. Human migration is not musical chairs.

As the landscape opened, it reminded me of a picture I’d once painted, where I’d turned clouds into blue bison in the huge prairie sky. I’d been reading about the Ghost Dance when I’d painted it.

The Ghost Dance was a religious ceremony practiced by plains tribes towards the end of European settlement of their lands. It was only a dance, but it gave such powerful hope that it was banned by the US army – dancing it was a capital offence.

One day, if the Ghost Dance were done properly, it would roll the white man’s world up like an old, dirty carpet. Underneath, the grass would come back bright green, like after a prairie burn. And the buffalo would return.

I want us to tell stories with that kind of power, stories that become refuges and guides as we face the oncoming train of climate collapse. Stories to live inside with hope and pride.

But the old story about the lone white man sitting high with his gun and his rope? It won’t work. Amitav Ghosh is right – the hero’s journey won’t take us where we now need to go (Ghosh 2016). We need to celebrate ourselves as herd – as a roaming population of an adaptive species.

And these stories have to be true. In the last years of the Ghost Dance movement, a new prophet claimed that shirts charmed by the rituals were bulletproof. Thousands of warriors went boldly to battle at Wounded Knee, certain their clothing was impervious to US firepower. They were slaughtered.

At the last traffic light, I took a big bite of sandwich. The oil and vinegar, the salt and pepper, the dried oregano and all the vegetables were in perfect proportion. It was delicious.

And then I left the Muscogee to their lands.

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## Playlist

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## About the author

Mimi Thebo is a Carnegie-longlisted author for children and teens. Her work has been translated into twelve languages, adapted for a BAFTA-winning BBC film, illustrated in light and signed for deaf children by ITV. Born in the USA, she is based in South West England, where she is Associate Professor of Creative Writing at the University of Bristol and a Royal Literary Fellow.



# Storytelling with Books

## Jess Richards

### ABSTRACT:

This image/text essay *Storytelling with Books* documents part of a hybrid art/creative writing project. The project explored the possibilities of storytelling using dying books which were being thrown away from thrift shops. A collection of books were folded into sculptural forms. A short story called *The Bookbird* was written using the text redacted from one of these folded books. It told the story of a book transforming into a bird. The *Bookbird* short story was then taken through further iterations—it was cut up and pasted into another dying book where it interacted with the text in that book and a cut-up musical score. It was then revised and typed up again. As it went through further iterations the story gained agency—it was a story about transformation and the narrating character, the bookbird, gained agency and wanted to fly. This new iteration of the short story was cut up into 4000 individual words which were glued onto 4000 small feathers. When each feather was dropped it would land word-up. In a silent durational performance the featherwords were moved by air-moving objects (fans, feathered gloves and shoes). Constantly rearranged, the featherwords could fly, move, be read in random sequences. Air played the role of a ghost-writer. The *Bookbird* short story, raised from within a dying book, became a text which fully transforms.

### Keywords:

artists books / altered books / cut-ups / creative writing / practice-based research / storytelling / iterative process / performance writing / visual performance / experimental writing



## WRITER'S STATEMENT: ON BOOK-SADNESS

I have been using the books from the sale bins in thrift shops to write with. Altering the text inside them, redacting, highlighting, bandaging words underneath pale masking tape.

One day, I hold one of my transformed books in my hands and whisper its fragmented narrative aloud, imagining I am reading it to a blind ghost-reader. In this quiet moment I feel incredibly sad.

It's lockdown again.

Will anyone ever read these books or will they become untouchable carriers of disease?

Will anyone experience the gaps between these words as a pause, as something only slightly louder than silence, while the whole online world is shouting?

I wonder what will change—if museums, galleries, bars and restaurants will still exist, if bookshops and libraries will survive, if people will still want to find a corner in which they can sit quietly and read. Or will everyone be too afraid to breathe each other's air?

## WHAT TO DO WITH BOOK-SADNESS:

Obtain a selection of dying books. Think of the shapes which paper can be folded into: paper boats, pirate hats, aeroplanes.

Fold a page, a book, a library of thrown-away books.

Alter the width and direction of the folds, overlapping page-edges like feathers, like wings.

Keep the hands moving while the books are folded into three-dimensional forms. If more shapes are needed, more sculptural possibilities—reach for a scalpel knife.



Figure 1: *Folded Book Sculptures*. *Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020* (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

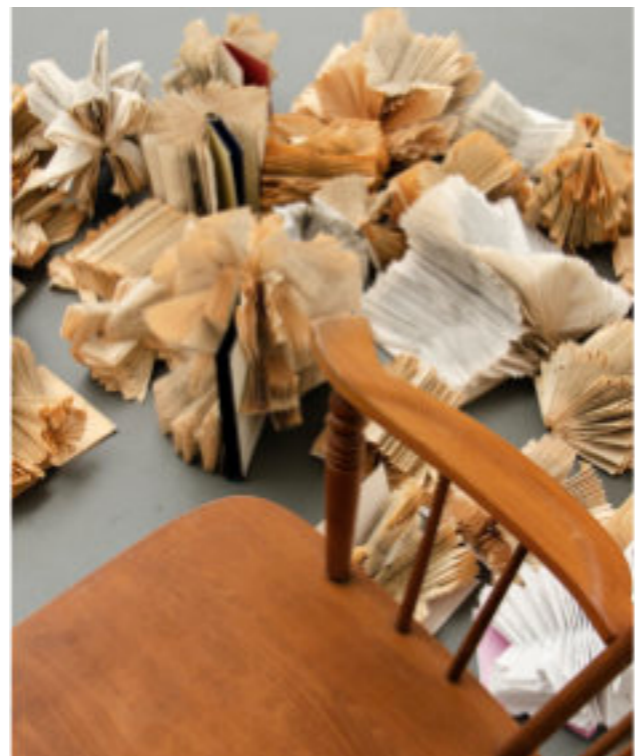


Figure 2: *Gathering Books*. *Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020*. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)



Figure 3: *A Bookbird* (folded book sculpture, 2019)

## STORYTELLING WITH BOOKS:

Buy a selection of dying books from sale tables in thrift shops.

Fold the pages so the books have new shapes.

Fill a floor with them.

Take photographs of them.

Spend time with them and consider what they want to become.

Choose one folded book and redact the text so the words which are left visible tell the story of the book's transformation: from book into bird.

Type up these words as a transcript. Extending the transcript, write a short story.

Cut up the short story and paste it into another dying book.

Bring the book back to life with a spell of letters—  
transform the letter O into raindrops.



Figure 4: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

Transcript:  
It is raining outside.



Figure 5: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

A large bird flies in. Its feathers sound like heaven paper – as it grabs me by hunger-pinching my spine in its beak.

A nurse comes rushing, flapping her hands, shouting at it to get out.

The bird flies out of the window with me.





Figure 6: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

It speaks into my spine, as it tells me that it has been looking for me since it saw me kidnapped in that handbag, and what on earth have I been up to... allowing myself to be held hostage for so long after making a perfectly grantable wish... And here is the story – almost alone in my own universe – I should have been telling all along – that when books aren't certain they are – admit no manner of doubt – wanted any more, they can sooner or later become birds, by flying like this – by leaving like this, with everything they – ever thought they wanted being left behind.

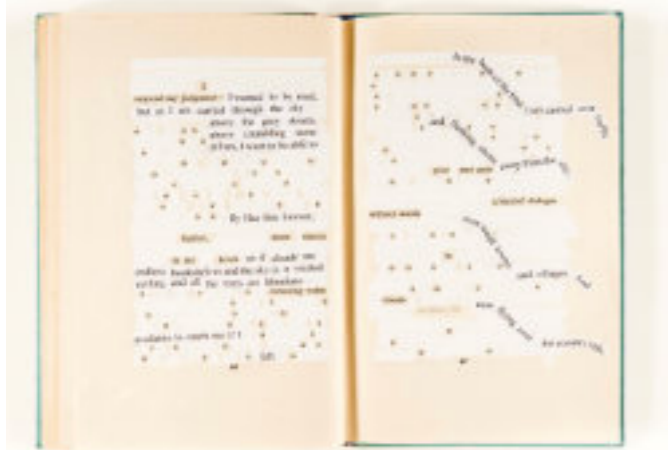


Figure 7: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

I suspend my judgement – I wanted to be read, but as I am carried through the sky above the grey streets, above

crumbling stone pillars, I want to be able to fly like this forever. Lighter, more sincere in my heart, as if clouds are endless bookshelves and the sky is a vaulted ceiling, and all the trees are librarians – caressing voice – available to catch me if I fall. In the beak of the bird I am carried over traffic and flashing sirens, away from the city. Gaze and gaze, a kind of dialogue without words, over small towns and villages, and in clouds, another life, now flying over the countryside...



Figure 8: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

Here, I am finally dropped. As I fall, I spread my pages and land in rushes. Stem essence. I am surrounded by the sound of water. A river. Ice, cracking. Rain.



Figure 9: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

My pages turn grey as words wash away. When the rain stops, sound of running water, I shake and ruffle myself dry in an icy gale. I'm shocked as I find my voice and exclaim a loud melody. Doh, Quiet, Soh, Doh, Doh, Soh, Quiet, Doh. Note: sing these notes first slowly, then quickly, and again with a sound long-drawn-out. Master one note at a time. I try again, a little more softly. Doh, Quiet, Soh, Quiet, Oh, quiet, Doh, Doh, Soh, please, Soh, Doh. Sing these notes as tree and water meditation.

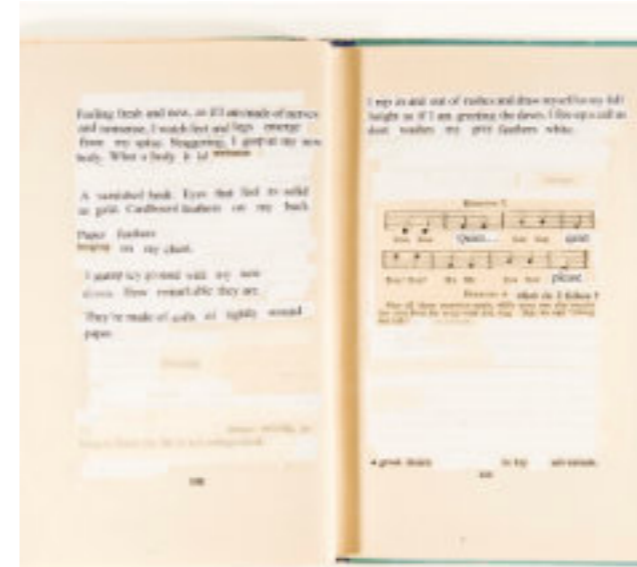


Figure 10: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

Feeling fresh and new, as if I am made of nerves and nonsense, I watch feet and legs emerge from my spine. Staggering, I gasp at my new body. What a body it is! Welcome. A varnished beak. Eyes that feel as solid as gold. Cardboard feathers on my back. Paper feathers – longing – on my chest. I stamp icy ground with my new claws. How remarkable they are. They're made of coils of tightly wound paper. Eternity means rebirth, as long as desire for life is not extinguished. I nip in and out of rushes and draw myself to my full height as if I am greeting the dawn. I fire up a call as sleet washes my grey feathers white. Doh Doh Quiet Soh Soh quiet Doh Doh Me Me Soh Soh please. What do I follow? A great desire to try adventure.



Figure 11: *The Bookbird*, altered book detail. (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

Think well before you choose to escape at your own risk – into the new life. Senses open. Above me, the sky fills with dark clouds.

I watch the thickening clouds for a long time, as if they hold all the ink in the world inside them, and when ink falls as rain, an entirely new story will be written – replenished – across this winter landscape. But it isn't rain these clouds bring, they bring... s n o w s n o w s n o w s n o w s n o w... and thousands of birds.

#### SPECULATION:

'The Bookbird' short story is not a closed text.

It is still fresh and unpublished.

It speculates: it asks, *what if iterations allow the air to come in. What if flight can occur between words? Cut it into paragraphs. Sentences. Cut the sentences into individual words. Repeating itself, the story gains agency. Becomes character (even more bird-like). This story, raised from within a dying book becomes a story which transforms. It wants to fly. What if... a ghost writer is required?*





Figure 12: *Ghost Writer Required* (glass bottle, redacted book page, salt, air). *Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020.*



Figure 13: *The Bookbird* (short story on four-thousand feathers)

### RITUAL:

Glue individual words from a cut-up story onto tiny feathers.  
 Listen out for voices from the future:  
 "What are feathers but the ghosts of birds?" [15]  
 Feathers are words.  
 Air is a ghost and a writer and a destination.  
 Become aware—recurring words whisper in a language of haunted nouns:  
*snow icicle glass echo fragment trauma frost cage cold gale winter mirror ice trap silence ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost ghost*  
 Do not be afraid. Use ritual.  
 Select/make objects which move air.  
 Add more feathers.  
 Read fairytales. Transformations and iterations, illusions and reversals.  
 Impossible tasks.  
 Think of what stories were, long before they were printed as books. Long before books were dying things. Be sad about the past and the present.  
 Listen out for voices from the future:  
 The future has a strange-sounding voice.  
 You'll know it, when you hear it calling.  
 Paint a pair of red shoes, white.



Figure 14: *Air-moving Objects* (altered fans, feathers, bellows, colander, shoes, gloves, broom, horn). *Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020.*

### TIME AND MOVEMENT:

In a silent room with a locked door for an hour the storyteller lines up the air-moving objects.  
 Feather-words fall from a pillowcase scattering word-up (as they have been designed to fall).  
 The storyteller sees the story; the story sees the storyteller.  
 For two hours the storyteller's words are rearranged by air.  
 Repetition. Iteration. Repetition. Three hours pass.  
 The silent room is a living book. Its floor becomes a page.  
 The door is a spine.  
 For four hours the eye of a camera is watching the storyteller who doesn't want to be watched.  
 For five hours a story moves around inside this room.  
 For six hours the door (spine) remains locked.  
 The storyteller can't read the story so the story reads the storyteller.



Figure 15: *Video stills (detail). Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020.* (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)



Figure 16: *Air-writing. Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020.* (Photo credit Jessica Chubb)

### THIRTEEN WAYS TO RE/WRITE A STORY: THE BOOKBIRD

Fold some old books and fill a floor with them.  
 Co-write a story with a folded book, about a book transforming into a bird.  
 Cut the story into fragments and paste it inside an old book.  
 Cut the story into individual words and glue each word to an individual feather.  
 Gather objects which move air, and take them to an empty room where no one else is breathing. Silently drop the feathers onto the floor. Let one of the objects write nothing at all.  
 Let a feathered fan write.  
 Let a colander write.  
 Let gloves write.  
 Let a broom write.  
 Let a flat fan write.  
 Let bellows write.  
 Let shoes write.





Figure 17: *Red Shoes, Disguised*. Ghost Writing Installation, Engine Room Gallery, 2020.

### STORIES TRANSFORM:

They always have, and always will. Storytellers tell stories which can be told, and hide stories which can't. From within stories, haunted nouns whisper of private ghosts. Storytellers make illusions, believe in illusions, become illusions. Iteration: tell the same story over and over again and it will open itself to flight.

Let a storyteller write...

### WRITER'S STATEMENT: ON STORYTELLING:

To take a prose world contained in a story and break it down into words is to break apart a story that has been carefully put together. This violence is a strange thing. The vocabulary has already been chosen. So the story is the same but it has been cut by scissor blades. The story is broken so it can repeat itself. It is pasted onto feathers in order to be re-written by air—something I can't even see. Today, I'm sad. And

here I am with what I have written, destroyed. The story can't be reassembled yet still I attempt to resurrect it. I move air, stirring feather-words with a set of antique bellows. A colander. A fan. A horn that doesn't work. I am inside one story or all stories in this silent room, trying to remake something which has been cut into pieces. I think of Rumpelstiltskin's demand for a first-born, and hands bleeding as they spin straw into gold. A pair of feathered shoes that used to be red are on my feet, almost tripping me at every step. These shoes are only pretending they aren't red enough to kill me. Delicate gloves, pale lace pierced through with quills, are tight on my fingers. The feathers flex as I move, transforming my hands into dead wings. I am writing with dead birds and air. I am inside the heart of a fairy tale.

This is an impossible task.

A story I have written, repeats, and rearranges itself. I repeat myself: I write stories because there is an untellable story that has always haunted me. It is a ghost which is fragmented inside this throat I can't tell it with. I write stories to stay alive—I can't say this aloud but can write it down. To assemble stories piece by piece is to keep trying to remake this untellable story, to re-write it yet again as something else, something more, something tellable. And now I break apart one of the tellable stories I have written, destroying its carefully constructed phrases. This violence is a strange thing—I have softened it with feathers. And yet these feathers are no longer soft. They were plucked from the corpses of dead birds. Once living, flying, singing, scratching, nesting, screeching, creatures. Words on feathers travel on the air I move with a fan, a witch's broom, a white pillowcase. This locked room is silent of bird-song, silent of the violence of claws, silent of the sounds of sharpness and torn-softness—all these silences move with the air through this untelling. Red shoes

are murderous because they can dance without ever ending the dance. They step in these gaps between words which are filled with so many conflicting forces; slowness, air, violence, empathy, destruction, reconstruction, iterations, movement, disintegration.

Rumpelstiltskin was hungry for something no one would ever give him. He demanded a first-born but what if he really wanted I mean what if all he ever wanted, was to spin gold into straw? An illusion attempts to re-write a story with the feathers of dead birds, reconstructing a story that will never be read because it has been broken apart. It is an impossible task.

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