

## **Space and place: writing encounters self**

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## Space and place: writing encounters self

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'The author and the text write each other' (St Pierre 2002: 65)

In this edition writing encounters *self*. How do we write ourselves in (and out) of our writing and performance practice? The articles by Rea Dennis, Alissa Clarke, Emma Cocker, Emily Orley, Cathy Turner and Fiona Graham present different approaches to the writing and performance of self. Collectively these articles explore the ways that self (and its obverse *other*) is fashioned into being in text and in performance. In this edition authors share with us the diverse ways that text can become a means to construct different understandings of subjectivity (Richardson and St Pierre 2005: 961).

As stated above self assumes the existence of other. Authors may actively construct a range of identities but they are also constructed by their writing contexts: geographically, historically, politically, socially and culturally. The qualitative researchers Fine and Weiss (2002) have written extensively on their roles as researchers in relation to those they research. Their work is relevant to the articles included in this edition. They argue that it is impossible to construct a concept of self without doing so in relation to certain constructions of other. In the interests of reflexivity Fine and Weiss urge us to consider the nature of the gap between self and other. They refer to the hyphen between self:other and they discuss the implications

of ‘working the hyphen’ (Fine and Weiss 2002: 270) whilst making sure that we recognize that self and other are knottily entangled. In their view ‘our obligation is to come clean “at the hyphen”’ (Fine and Weiss 2002: 284).

The nexus of self and other is presented in Fiona Graham’s case study where she sets out an argument for understanding the role of dramaturge as midwife. In this article Graham presents a construction of self that appears to be simultaneously pivotal and incidental. The metaphor of midwife encapsulates the tensions in the role of dramaturge. Graham’s point is that once the baby is born the midwife is forgotten. Within this metaphor the dramaturge’s identity may become invisible at the end of the creative process. In Graham’s words the dramaturge’s ‘contribution can be contested or invisibilized. Like the role of the midwife it is a humble position, which may carry little status’. In this article the author charts the moves from centrality and control to peripheral invisibility. The reader must decide the extent to which the metaphor of midwife helps us understand the role of the dramaturge. Graham is keen not to other the community groups she works with but her work raises important issues about the extent to which the dramaturge can work with communities other than their own. bell hook’s work is relevant here. hooks challenges those who aim to ‘give voice’ to disadvantaged communities. She argues that the idea of giving voice to others represents a very powerful view of self (hooks 1990). In a scathing critique of white researchers colonizing the voices of black communities she writes:

No need to heed your voice when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice. Only tell me about your pain. I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become my own. Rewriting you I rewrite myself anew. [...] I am still coloniser, the speaking subject, and you are now the centre of my tale. (hooks 1990: 345)

One of the key tenets of the national Writing PAD project is that writing is meaning-making and exploratory – as in the oft quoted and variously attributed saying: ‘How do I know what I think until I see what I say?’ Richardson (1994, 2002) theorizes this conceptualization of writing. Richardson creates the term ‘textwork’ to describe writing as a method of enquiry. In

Richardson's words: 'I write because I want to find out something in order to learn something that I didn't know before I wrote it' (Richardson 1994: 517).

This way of understanding writing foregrounds its possibilities for use as a methodological tool. All the articles in this edition address issues of methodology. For example, Emma Cocker's article 'Pay Attention to the Footnotes' explores the critical shift in writing from what she describes as 'a mode of writing about to one of writing in dialogue with or alongside performance' and offers the reader a 'close encounter' with practice. For Cocker the writing itself is 'performed' and she highlights this by responding to the collaborative project Open City led by artists Andrew Brown and Katie Doubleday. Cocker introduces us to the idea that art writing as a concept is a question of how to write practice through the enactment of performative writing and 'ethical responsibility'. Cocker parallels the spatial territories of performance with that of the page and by doing so she draws our attention to the act of reading. Cocker's interest in the 'performances that happened at the level of the page' highlight the ideas of Michel de Certeau's expressed in *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). Cocker maps the idea of 'wandering' in relation to page and place and the 'deployment of rhythm and spacing, pauses and hesitations, omissions and notations'. Cocker explains that footnotes interrupt the text in a way that constructs particular readings. This evokes the work of Lather who calls for texts that 'interrupt themselves and foreground their own constructedness' (Lather 1991: 123).

Extending the parallel with Lather's research Cocker's article echoes Lather's comment that she is 'paradoxically attracted to wandering and getting lost as methodological stances' (Lather 1997: 64). Like Lather, Cocker proposes that 'physical and textual wanderings' are methodological tools. Wandering becomes a means to produce a particular construction of subjectivity. Exploring the relation 'between page and place' Cocker's essay draws us into the city and the possibilities of the footnote as an 'intellectual journey'.

From footnotes to feet, Rea Dennis's article 'Structure and Improvisation in Writing for Performance' explores another form of losing one's self through wandering. Dennis writes about the ways she has used walking as a means to develop awareness of self. For Dennis, walking is an approach to 'loosen the sediment from my material body' to experience self. Dennis walks to locate 'places within which I experience myself'. The author draws parallels between losing one's self and the art of improvisation. Offering a 'autobiographical landscape' Dennis renders her body into text, in her words 'my body writes my lived experience into texts'. Her approach reminds us that 'all research is in one way or another

autobiographical or else the avoidance of autobiography' (Reay 1998: 2). Within the text Dennis explores the 'spaces in between' the dualisms of self and other; self and object; self and space. Dennis's key point is that writing emerges from the spaces between.

Cocker argues that 'texts can bridge time-zones' thus layering past, present and future. Sunil Manghani's article 'Confessions of a Virtual Scholar, Or, Writing as Worldly Performance' is an example of just such a text. Manghani offers what Richardson (2002: 39) would refer to as a 'pleated text'. For Richardson a 'pleated text' is one that displaces the boundaries between academic writing, creative writing and autobiography. Manghani experiments with the textual form by constructing a patchwork of speakers and identities. The author asks us to consider if there is a difference between 'writing' and 'performing writing'. Taking the reader through significant key thinkers – Benjamin, Barthes, Derrida, Cixous and more – this work offers a clear and philosophical virtual performance, moving us through meaning, language and writing through a process of weaving. In this article Manghani explores blogging in contemporary culture by placing it within a rich historical context. In his words: 'We should not simply see blogging in opposition to contemporary mass media, but instead to consider it with respect to a much longer history of communication.' The territory of the blog is alluringly and playfully mapped through critical analysis. We discover through this essay that the blog writer is performing writing through the act of dissemination even if no one is reading, the virtual world offers a performative writing space which offers 'fame'. Manghani also introduce us to examples of "“blogging”, before blogging began' and whilst taking the reader through the very latest on the blogosphere he 'measures' centuries of writing against this latest phenomenon. This article underlines Sharples's view that the 'the writer's dialogue with the world is shaped by other people's past utterances and actions and it results in a text that forms part of the continuing dialogue' (Sharples 1999: 161).

In 'Advance by Error' Alissa Clarke presents an alternative methodology for writing within performance. Clarke argues that making mistakes and failure should be viewed as an enabling methodology that can be used and applied to documentation. This echoes Samuel Beckett's words 'Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try Again. Fail again. Fail better' (Beckett 1983).

Like Cocker and Dennis, Clarke proposes that travelling 'error by error' is akin to wandering and can be used as a means to heighten reflexivity. As Clarke usefully observes, when you wander you become your own signpost. Clarke invites us to consider the role of

writing within body-based performance practice and highlights the pedagogical context of training within higher education. What is writing within the ‘psychophysical training space’ and how is it reflected? Clarke explores these questions in specific relation to a discourse of ‘mistakes and failure’ in relation to the working practices of Sandra Reeve and Phillip Zarrilli. Through participant experiences, and a threading of the work of Cixous and Irigaray, she brings to the forefront concerns of phallogentric language and a notion of the ‘end-oriented’ student who, in the process of making performance, can sometimes have a desire to get it ‘right’, which of course effects the dynamics of process. This article enables us to think through an alternative discourse; that of learning through ‘trial and error’, that suggests a simultaneity between ‘witness and actor’.

The article ‘Getting at and into Place: Writing as Practice as Research’ by Emily Orley invites us to consider how we encounter practice and theory with the idea that ‘places remember events’. The work draws on five writing models that she offers for collaborative use by practice-based scholars. Orley proposes that documentation in all its varying forms ‘guarantee[s] that we are not fixing that place, but rather helping to remember in the most “unfixed” and “multiple” of ways’. We are drawn into ‘places’ as a site of pedestrian explorations and psycho-geographies and at the same time we are invited to consider the art writing and the visual languages viewers use to describe encounters. What is in question is how we see. Orley draws on Geertz, Benjamin, Bal and Rendell to talk through the possibilities of writing becoming practice by looking at the changing forms of writing from the ‘essay to text-based installation’. Orley seeks to ‘write the art’. In doing so she rejects other models that refer to writing in art, writing about art and writing through art. This brings to our attention the interpretation of place through its recording and Orley’s own ‘physical encounter’ with the analysis of experience. Orley applies Geertz’s methodology of ‘thick description’ to the practice of performance. Like Geertz she seeks to immerse herself in the spaces and places that she seeks to explore. She puts her own subjectivity at the centre of her research as a direct counter to objectivist constructions of the researcher. For Orley, self imbues practice; in her words ‘we bring our own contexts’. Orley seeks to ‘produce a narrative of the self through writing’. Exploring ‘the site between practice and theory’, Orley proposes that this ‘in-betweenness’ offers a means to encounter a ‘self-reflexive awareness’.

This journal edition refers frequently to encounters between writing and performance. Cathy Turner in her article entitled ‘Something to Glance Off: Writing Space’ implies that the term ‘encounter’ is benign and she proposes that the expression ‘glancing off’ offers a

grittier metaphor that usefully connotes friction and collision. In the words of one performer in her study, 'I need to find a thing to glance off'. This offers the possibility of a collision between the score and the performance. The self glances off other offering new creative possibilities. Turner's key point is that this 'glancing off' fosters creativity. Echoing Cocker's use of footnotes as a means to interrupt linearity Turner deploys glancing off as interruption. In this article Turner speculates about the diverse relationships between 'texts, writers and performances'. She suggests that 'curating dialogues' between artists and writers offer a means to explore the preconditions for experimentation and engagement. Turner and her co-performers struggle with issues of writer identity. These are writers who 'did not primarily identify as such'. Her collaborators see themselves as performers – not 'proper' writers. For Turner, 'proper writers' were othered; proper writers were other people.

Turner unpacks the relational element of the hyphen (see reference to Fine and Weiss above). When something glances off something else – both the 'glanced off' the 'glancer' are changed. Glancing off offers a way to 'to create something both indebted to the other and very much one's own'. This article challenges a singular view of the author and replaces it with a model of collaborative writing cultures.

In the discussion article entitled 'On the Value of Situational Fiction for an Artist's Writing' Mary Anne Francis raises issues that are pertinent to the title of this journal. This journal is called *Writing in Creative Practice*. Francis's article explores the issues and assumptions writ large (small?) in the word 'in' located in this title. She challenges the hegemonic view that writing should explain art. Francis hopes that we will not ask, 'What does it mean?' when an artwork is encountered. She hopes that we will ask instead, 'Does it work?' Rejecting the view of text as explanatory she proposes an alternative paradigm – situational fiction that views writing as another art form.

The authors in this edition recognize that 'no textual staging is ever innocent' (Richardson and St Pierre 2005: 960) and they propose a range of reflexive and creative process methodologies with which to write and tell self, place and space (and the betwixt spaces).

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## **Biography**

Professor Susan Orr has a Chair in Pedagogy in Creative Practice at York St John University. Susan is the Deputy Dean in the Faculty of Art. Susan's research focuses the assessment of creative practice; her doctoral thesis examined fine art assessment practices in higher education. Susan is on the editorial advisory board for the *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* and the *Journal of Art, Design and Communication in Higher Education*. Susan is one of the coordinators of the national Writing PAD (Writing Purposely in Art and Design) project. She has a particular interest in exploring and contesting the theory/practice binary in art and design education. Susan has presented papers at a number of conferences in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States. She has authored a range of articles, papers and chapters on pedagogies in creative practice.

Claire Hind is a Senior Lecturer in Performance at York St John University where she specializes in performance writing and conceptual performance practice. Her research investigates the playful, ironic and psychoanalytical processes of making live and mediated performance within enclosed, intimate spaces and works through the attitudes, encounters, repetitions and 'drives' of rehearsal. Claire has directed performance workshops in St Petersburg, Russia; developed projects on improvisation for the Sibiu International Theatre Festival in Transylvania; has worked frequently in the United States as a performer and lecturer; and most recently co-curated with Claire MacDonald the international Writing Encounters symposium at York St John University. Claire is currently directing a series of creative international writing projects entitled York/NEW YORK, one of which recently curated ten short writing commissions for audio technologies and was a commissioning project in collaboration with Claire MacDonald and Lenora Champagne.