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Taking it up the arts: Textual montage, rhizomes, nomads and becoming in interstitial spaces.

Abstract:

This paper will explore textual montage as a writing practice that occupies interstitial spaces between reading and writing, and writing and the visual arts in the academy. Employing theories of deconstruction and intertextuality, it will discuss how textual montage facilitates embodied practices of reading/writing/thinking that confront the workings of language, illustrate the collaborative production of research texts and celebrate the materiality of the written word.
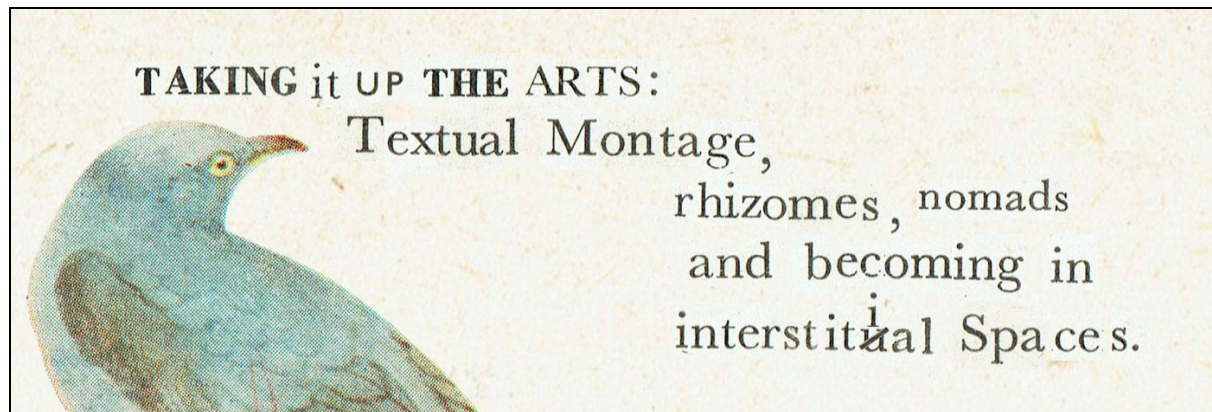
Using Deleuze and Guattari's concepts of the rhizome, nomad and becoming, this paper will discuss the pleasures and anxieties of occupying interstitial spaces as a PhD student whose research seeks to productively mind (and embody) the gaps between discrete disciplinary entities.
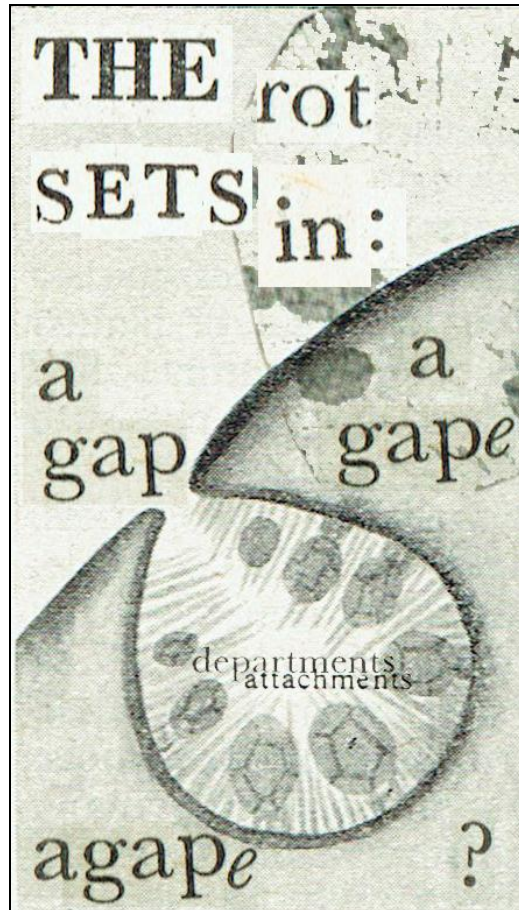
In doing so, this paper will engage with contemporary discussions about interdisciplinary research within the arts and humanities, promoting the value of non-hierarchical, egalitarian relationships between theory, practice, form and content in research endeavours.

Biographical Note

Nollie Nahrung is a Ph.D. student in the School of Arts and Social Sciences at Southern Cross University. Using anarchist, feminist and queer perspectives, her thesis investigates the prefigurative politics and utopian aspects of relationship anarchy using writing as a method of inquiry and textual montage techniques. Nollie was awarded the University Medal in 2012 and her research publications are available from: https://scu-au.academia.edu/NolJoy

TAKING it UP THE ARTS:
Textual Montage,
rhizomes, nomads
and becoming in
interstitial Spaces.

"[G]ap" … means chasm, and often relates to matters of space or surface. The English word derives its meaning from a hole in the wall – an old Norse *gape* (Salamon 2013, p. 148).

As a discipline within the academy, while creative writing may be understood as ' … simultaneously an art form and a part of the humanities', it has been seen to lack a neat fit with the dominant research ambitions and approaches of either the humanities or other modes of creative arts (Webb & Brien 2010, p. 186). It has been argued that this is partly because performative, embodied, tactile and/or material arts practices are not directly translatable to ' … the more ephemeral, less tangible mode of creative practice that is writing' (Webb & Brien 2010, p. 193). A similar belief is advanced by Papastergiadis (2004 p. 162), who argues that writing is '… grounded in the materiality of thought rather than in the materials of art'.

Yet these understandings of creative writing seem to position some existent writing modes outside its sphere. This range may include textual montage, which can be understood as an alternative writing practice (Emberley 2002) that foregrounds materiality and embodiment in writing, and embraces written language within the visual field.

While having different meanings and origins, the terms "montage" and "collage" are frequently used interchangeably in contemporary contexts to describe works of assemblage produced within or across a range of mediums including sound, film, image and written text. The process of montage/collage commences with the fragmentation of an existent text (or a duplicate of it) followed by an exploration of these fragments through tactile practices (such as cutting and positioning). After an experimental process of juxtaposition and combination, a particular composition is chosen, enacting a "new" text that may be subject to naming and framing practices (Boon 2010). My practice of textual montage is digital, and facilitated by the human-computer interface. After scanning and saving pages from a printed source text, I isolate words, letters, images and graphemes from these files to build montage writings as layered works in Photoshop. This enables the application of effects (e.g. image filters and transparency overlays) beyond the scope of non-digital textual montage.

While apparent within contemporary arts practices, collage/montage/assemblage also functions as an informing principle within contemporary critical theory (Boon 2010). Historically and in the present day, montage/collage approaches and techniques can be located within, across and between a diverse range of creative practices, intellectual and artistic movements and schools of thought. Within this field, authors including William S Burroughs, Dodie Bellamy and Graham Rawle have produced writings using montage/collage approaches with existent written texts (Fallows & Genzmer 2012; Helberg 2014; Leong 2012).

My use of textual montage as a writing practice is informed by an engagement with the visual form of the written word and relationships between written text and image. Hence, I situate my inquiry within an interdisciplinary gap, or "hole in the wall", between creative writing and the visual arts as discrete disciplinary entitles within the academy.
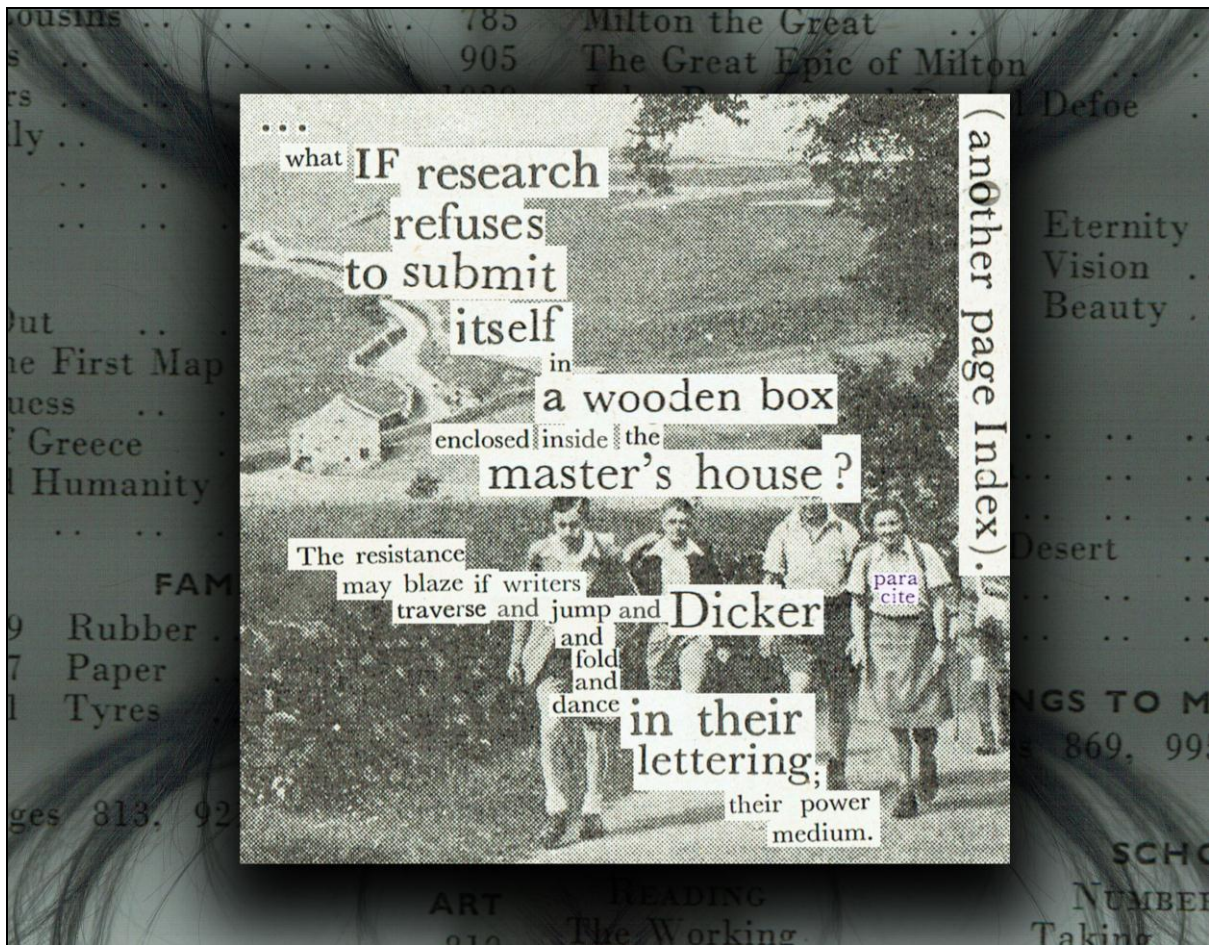
Interdisciplinary research may seek to integrate different knowledge modes within disciplines, cross their boundaries, or move between them to integrate different knowledge forms (Hornscheidt & Baer 2011). A further understanding sees interdisciplinarity ' … not as a patchwork of different disciplines and methodologies but as a loss, a shift, or a rupture where in absence, new courses of action un/fold' (Springgay et al 2005, p. 898).

Within this space, my research uses textual montage to help challenge traditional hierarchies between word and image. This seeks to interrupt notions of writing following after practices of art making, where writing is relegated to a "servant's role" of explicating or explaining the creative act (Papastergiadis 2004 p. 161). It also facilitates relationships between word and image that counter ideas of image as secondary to, or merely illustrative of, written text (Meskimmon 2003).

As seen in the use of "imperfect" letters to construct 'rot' in the opening montage of this paper, textual montage celebrates the materiality of the written word while understanding the physical form of written language as playing an important role in the construction of meaning. Such techniques can foreground writing as an active and generative process where thought is materialised, or brought into being, through the physical labour of making the written word (Meskimmon 2003). This may help to reconnect writing with the visual imagination, a relationship that has historically been eroded through the impact of standardised print production technologies upon reading practices (ibid). Within this arena, typographic conventions normatively work to make written text cohesive in visual appearance, effectively constructing ' … transparent 'crystal goblets' around a seemingly independent, neutral body of 'content'' (Lupton & Miller 1999, p. 15).

Such a divorce between form and content may be promoted within the academy by institutional or organisational demands for writing's compliance with standardised text formatting and/or modes of page layout. While potentially discouraging typographical exploration and/or non-linear approaches to scholarly writing, such requirements may also visually communicate notions of cohesion and conformity, rather than diversity, within bodies of written thought (Meskimmon 2003). Historically, when the visual form of the written word is refused consideration or rendered obsolete, dissenting or alternative textual voices, including those of women, have been marginalised or silenced within written knowledge realms (ibid).
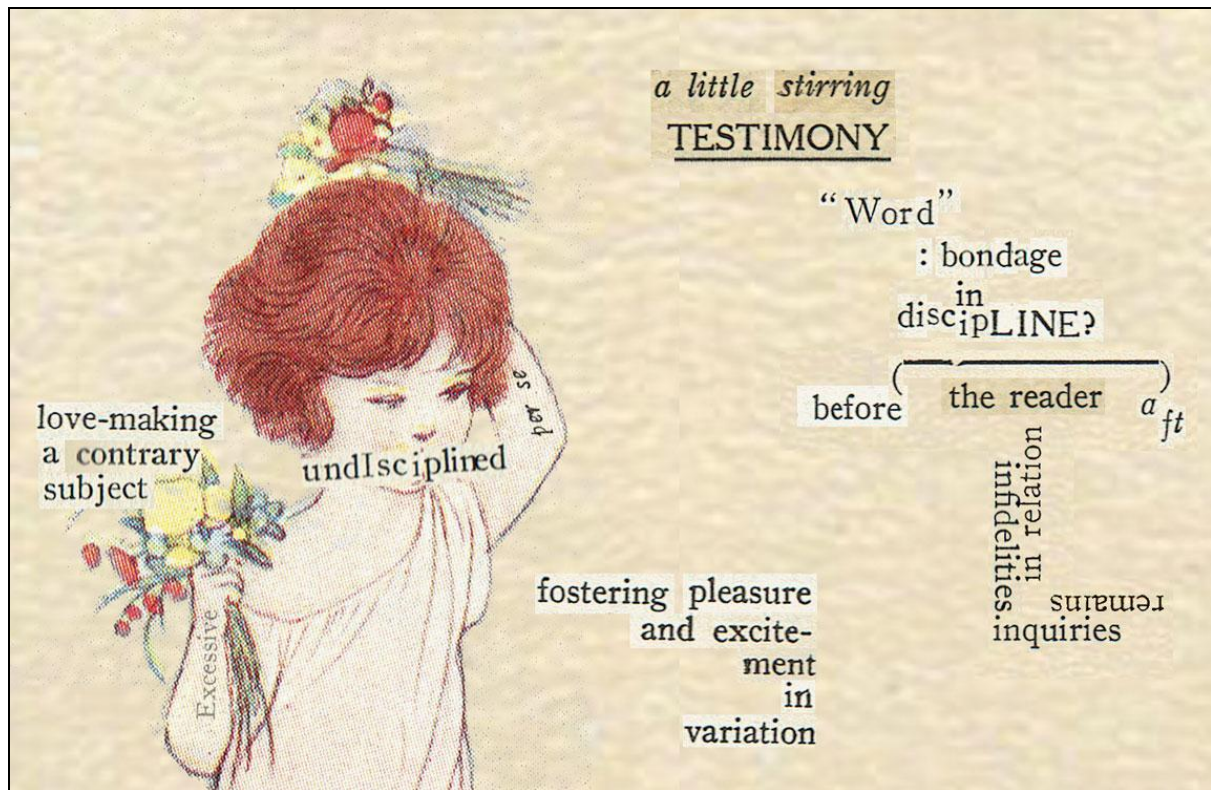
By reasserting writing's ' … corporeal genealogies and processes of production', the logic that separates text and flesh in the production of knowledge (Grosz in Meskimmon 2003, p. 152) may be confronted and overturned through textual montage. This enacts a performative subjectivity articulated at the interface between discourse and body that is sensual and embodied, facilitating a ' … reconfiguration of corporeality beyond the subject-object divide' (Meskimmon 2003, p. 94). Within my practice of textual montage, as fragments of the source text are selected, positioned and adjusted through translations of my hand movements from computer mouse to screen, the importance of touch, alongside sight, is reasserted within and through my writing. This process may be understood to enact an artist/medium subjectivity, where source text and body merge within the digital realm (Amerika 2011).

Textual montage may also open an interstitial space between reading and writing that can be understood as rhizomatic. The rhizome is a dynamic process of movement that emerges in the middle as ' … alliance, uniquely alliance'; an assemblage that facilitates connectivity between multiple perspectives with plural points of entry and exit (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, p. 25). Rather than operating as a space from which one travels backwards and forwards, the rhizome is ' … a perpendicular direction, a transversal movement that sweeps one *and* the other way, a stream without beginning or end' (ibid). Through variation and diverse flows of

intensity, the rhizome opens spaces in between where understandings and meanings are available for examination and potential rupture.

By cutting into a knowledge body, textual montage disrupts dominant ways of knowing and seeing, enabling the structure and workings of language to be exposed, confronted and reassembled (Emberley 2002). While facilitating modes of "compostproduction" (Amerika 2011) that fragment and reassemble an existent text without reference to its original structure or content, textual montage also enables modes of critical engagement through the occupation of a source text's form, structure and/or content. Such approaches may be linked to deconstruction, which is a way of reading rather than something "done" to a text from the outside. Within a text, marked and unmarked, presence and absence comprise part of a chain of binary hierarchies where ' … those on the wrong side of the binary can be brutalised for their difference' (St Pierre 2011, p. 617). Hence, as an ethical reading practice, deconstruction firstly enacts a reversal rather than a neutralisation of such binaries. Following this, in the "affirmative move" of deconstruction, ' … the winning term is displaced to make room for a new concept' which cannot stand within the prior structure and thus facilitates ' … entirely new thinking' (St Pierre 2011, p. 617).

In occupying the form and ideas of the text it critiques, such deconstructive practice can subversively appropriate a text's structural resources and strategies, ' … as a cuckoo infiltrates and takes over the nests of other birds' (Phiddian 1997, p. 677). Through material engagement with written source texts, textual montage may enact this process in ways exceeding other representational modes. In tearing open the textile of language, textual montage simultaneously opens difference within the text while retaining the frayed edges that mark this event (Emberley 2002). Materially and metaphorically, this enables notions of absence and loss to reside within techniques of textual renewal, referencing the entwined relationship between destruction and creation. Within textual montage, such frays and gaps are understood as integral to constructions of meaning and may also encourage practices of open reading, as suggestions of finality or closure are rejected within the form and appearance of the writing itself (Salamon 2013).

This deconstructive reading-writing illustrates textual montage as embodied praxis, where a writer inhabits ' … other writer's bodies (of work)' by subversively mimicking a writing style and/or re-performing the content of the source text to disruptively critique it (Amerika

2011, p. 109). This approach may be linked to the writings of Cixous and Irigaray, who subvert and twist dominant language in supple and fluid ways to write the feminine in variously playful and explosive modes. For Cixous (playing on the dual meaning of *voler*; to steal, to fly), the strategic seizure and redeployment of language enables performative acts of disruptively mobile flight that open points of exit within the dominant language system without trapping women within its logic (Stephens 2001).

Yet, within capitalist societies, acts of "literal letteral" THEFT ;-) may be problematic in relation to systems of copyright and intellectual property ownership that advance and protect the rights of copyright holders and authors (Meese in Meskimmon 2003, p. 91). Within this sphere, works that reappropriate elements of existent texts are frequently regarded as the "bastard offspring" of "original" works and rendered culturally illegitimate (Derecho 2008). Here, notions of illegitimacy may be particularly linked to gendered authorship and the spectre of monstrous, or excessive, femininity (Tushnet 2011).

Importantly, as notions of ownership and originality in authorship are culturally specific, writing practices that use existent texts in their construction may be understood as problematic in Western societies partly because they challenge the traditional separation of producer and consumer roles that support commercial exchange economies. Yet, the ability to respond to cultural knowledge forms in diverse and dissenting ways is an important feature of democratic societies (Smiers 2010). This is of particular concern to feminist visual arts

practice, where alternative modes of artistic production, alongside the construction of alternative imagery and ways of seeing and interpreting visual culture, are considered important in changing the social, cultural and political frameworks which structure women's lives (Buikema & Zarzycka 2011).

Within the academy, textual montage may usefully highlight knowledge production as collaborative in modes that exceed conventional citation practices, disavowing the idea of singular authorship to materially and philosophically engage with theories of inter- and intra-textuality. Here, textual montage may also challenge conventional assumptions about academic knowledge production through use of "playgiarism" in scholarly writing, enacting research that writes *with* rather than solely *about* something (Amerika 2011). This may help call attention to how economies of writing within institutional locations discipline texts and bodies, establishing boundaries of their proper forms and subsequent definitions of rationality, utility and excess (Emberley 2002). Such modes of scrutiny and control seem evident in contemporary educational institutions, where managerial and government bodies increasingly demand demonstrable, measurable and reportable research outcomes (Webb & Brien 2010).
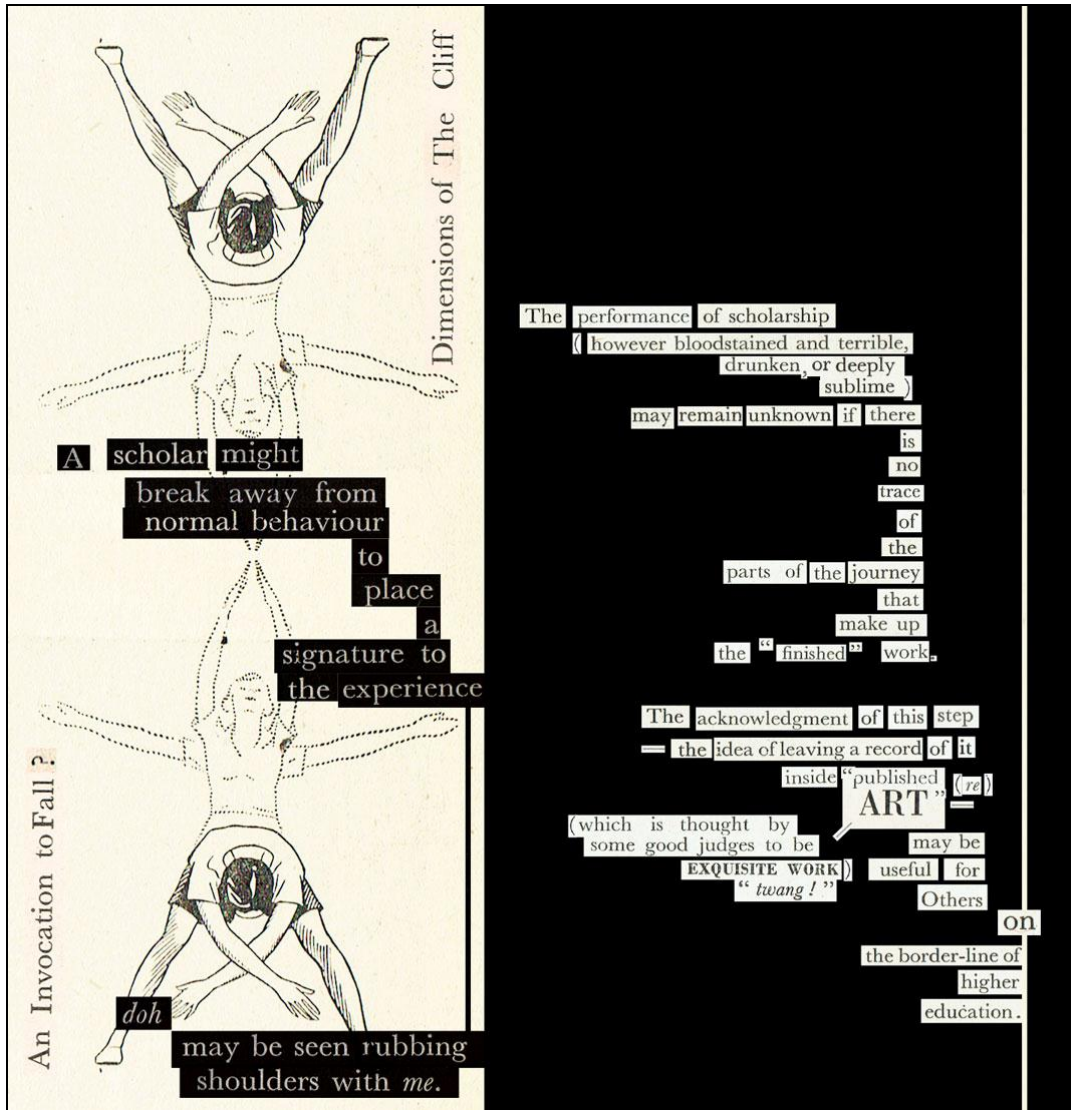
As textual montage traditionally places more value upon the process of construction rather than the end result (McHenry 2005), it may be seen to oppose the ends-means rationality of research writing arguably encouraged by this educational climate. Yet, rather than disavowing the importance of outcomes, this may provide an opportunity to reassert the importance of both means and ends in research writing, particularly within higher degrees research. This may be facilitated through modes of writing that illustrate 'becoming' in research, where research processes and relationships are represented as unstable, dynamic, unfolding and temporal.

Becoming enacts the idea of continuous transformation, where the ' … power to affect and be affected' is inscribed through a continually productive process (Masney 2012, p. 116). As this suggests, becoming is generative, where different and new ways of being are provoked by moments of contact and encounter with a range of influences. Acknowledging such relationships within research writing can foreground the collaborative aspects of research while simultaneously showing the researching self as illustrative of ' … the becoming that is

apparent in the degrees and intensities that connect and multiply in relation to others' (Wyatt et al 2010, p. 732).

An example of this is seen in a journal article by Hannah Guttorm (2012), PhD student and ethnographer, who illustrates the becoming of a conference paper through a three-part text comprised of the paper she read at the conference, and writings from before and after this event. Through reflexive first-person writing and poetic works that converse with theoretical and critical writings by others, Guttorm simultaneously demonstrates and deconstructs the entwined relationship between reading and writing that facilitated the 'becoming' of her conference paper. Critically responding to Guttorm, Badley (2014) offered suggestions, cautions and extensions of the approach and understandings she presented. This indicates how becoming in research may be further enacted through engagements within an extended academic community, offering feedback and critical guidance beyond the supervisor/student relationship.

As a PhD student, I found Guttorm's commitment to writing across clear genre and disciplinary boundaries, and her acknowledgement of the multiple, messy starting points and rewritings of research, both encouraging and constructive. By demystifying the paper-writing process, Guttorm's article potentially facilitates peer learning, which suggests the particular value of situated student perspectives within writings about research. Guttorm also wrote about her feelings of anxiety in choosing to deviate from methodologies and methods frequently advanced in research handbooks, illustrating how alternative modes of inquiry may be particularly challenging for novice researchers. Inspired by Guttorm, I have decided to include my confirmation document as an appendix within my thesis, to similarly share part of the "becoming" of my research and acknowledge a milestone within the PhD process not usually included in the final research output. In doing so, I hope to promote the value of reconnecting and respecting both means and ends within my research.

Dimensions of The Cliff

An Invocation to Fall ?

A scholar might
break away from
normal behaviour
to
place
a
signature to
the experience

doh

may be seen rubbing
shoulders with *me.*

The performance of scholarship
(however bloodstained and terrible,
drunken, or deeply
sublime)
may remain unknown if there
is
no
trace
of
the
parts of the journey
that
make up
the " finished " work.

The acknowledgment of this step
— the idea of leaving a record of it
inside "published
(*re*)
ART" =
(which is thought by
some good judges to be
EXQUISITE WORK) may be
" *twang !* " useful for
Others
on
the border-line of
higher
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While thus far I have focused on the interdisciplinary gap between creative writing and the visual arts that my research occupies, my PhD also inhabits the field of cultural studies, which may be variously understood as either an interdiscipline or ' … a political act against the institutionalizing processes of becoming disciplined' (Nadler 2014). Yet, promotions of disciplines as static entities with stable boundaries may elide the diversity and movement that can be apparent within them. In addition to advancing simplistic stereotypes of disciplinary-based research, such constructions may create an unproductive binary between disciplinary and interdisciplinary research, or render other approaches, such as trans- and multi-disciplinary research, invisible (Liinason 2011).
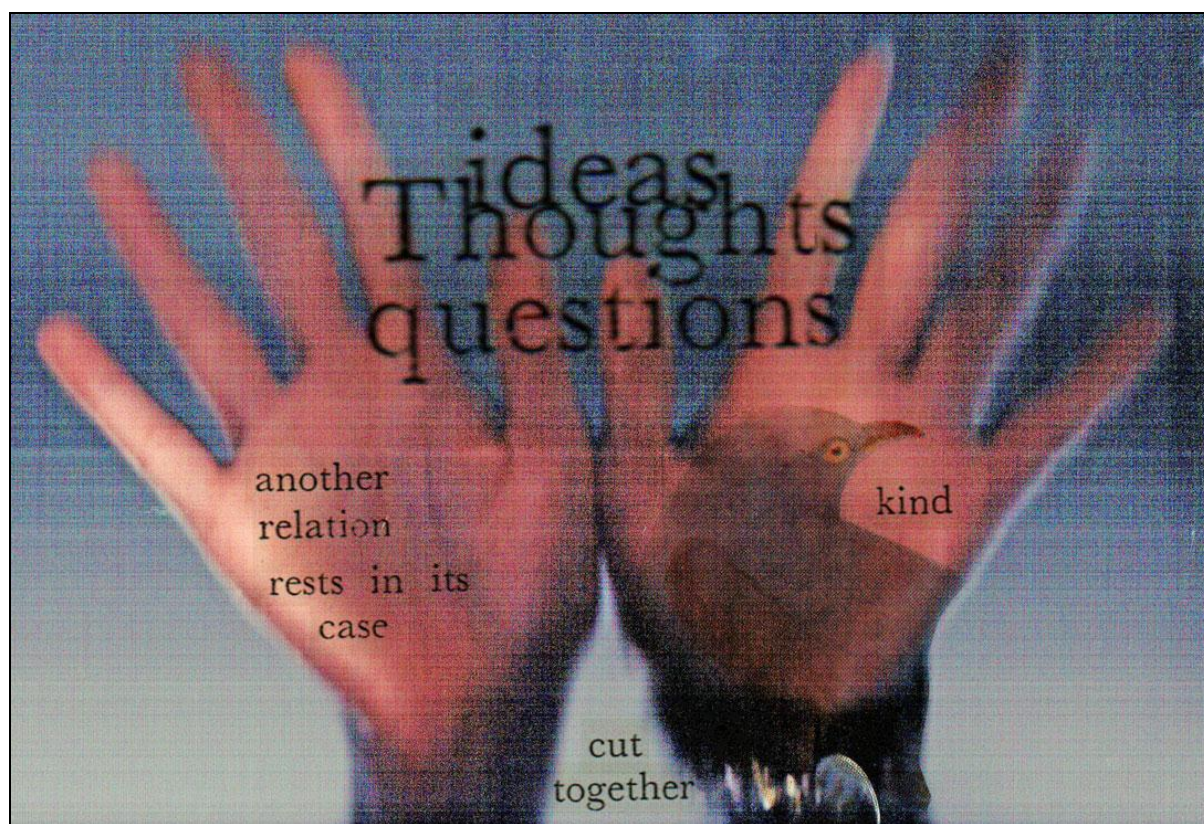
As a field of study, cultural studies can promote understandings of theory and method as a call to practice, while understanding practice as never final or closed (Nadler 2014). In my PhD, this facilitates a hinging of my research topic and methodology that endeavours to explicate the topic under examination within the approach of the research and through its writing. My PhD topic is relationship anarchy (RA), a non-hierarchical mode of interpersonal relating that questions the wisdom of following pre-conceived relationship models. Instead of believing that relationships should conform to particular types or structures, RA advances the value of customised and particular bonds that develop through negotiation (Nordgren 2012). In investigating this topic, my thesis includes creative works that consider utopian aspects of

RA alongside autoethnographic perspectives and critical writings that link RA to feminist, anarchist and queer theory frameworks. Additionally, my project undertakes textual and discourse analyses to comparatively address connections between RA and polyamory, a mode of non-monogamous relationship practice that is the subject of considerable existent research.

As the source for textual montage writings within this project, I am using *The Children's Encyclopedia*, which has an important historical role in education and pedagogy within Australia (Rodwell 1997). Using this text, I will write creatively and critically about RA, simultaneously seeking to overturn the original work's hierarchies and inequalities while honouring its ethos of crossing clear boundaries between education and leisure within reading. Here, I will explore the relationship between work and play in research, which has provoked the decision to publish extracts from my thesis as a series of zines.

While playfulness within academic writing may seem to problematically illustrate a lack of rigor, St Pierre (2011, p. 620) understands rigor as 'the demanding task of freeing oneself from existing structures'. Additionally, as writing in less formal or traditionally "academic" modes may help research travel more readily beyond the academy and thus achieve broader social and political goals (Denzin 2003), the production of zines from my research illustrates an experimental engagement with this potentiality. In considering the value of such alternative forms and voices, Nigianni and Storr (2009, p. 8), argue that:

> 'Very often experimentation requires the 'sacrifice' of established (epistemological) values like 'coherence', as well as the occasional adoption of a more playful writing, which should not be seen as signifying the lack of seriousness in argumentation. Besides, what could be more serious than taking the risk to experiment and expose the self outside the established lines?'

In considering flight from established lines, the interdisciplinary locations I inhabit enables a nomadic research inquiry that makes use of different "points" within and between disciplinary fields of knowledge, including creative writing, sociology, history and the visual arts. Thus, disciplines can be seen to play an important role in developing "customary paths" within my nomadic inquiry (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). Here, the nomad has particular connections to anarchism within my research, as nomadic wanderers populate anarchist literature, challenging state forms that control movement through rigid geographic,

intellectual and/or emotional borders (Jeppensen 2011). As Braidotti (1993) cautions, while nomadism may potentially facilitate individualistic escapist modes of flight, it can also evidence attempts to build new modes of creative alliance, association and connectivity as modes of resistance against state forms. Within my project, the figure of the nomad also acknowledges that I am conducting my inquiry as a polyamorous practitioner investigating RA. Referencing the expansiveness of this inquiry, my thesis is A3 in format, double the usual A4 paper size. Further, the paper orientation communicates the inquiry as occurring within a landscape, rather than offering a portrait of the topic. This links the physical form of the thesis to its content while rejecting ideas of closure or mastery within the finished work.

While acknowledging the risks involved in this undertaking, especially as a novice researcher, using plural modes of approach, investigation, analysis and writing to seek egalitarian relationships between theory, practice, form and content within my work is simultaneously challenging and deeply engaging. As a student, the small size and regional location of my university provides an environment in which I am able to engage with academic staff from a range of disciplines within the humanities and beyond, which both supports my nomadic inquiry and facilitates modes of becoming through interaction with experienced researchers.

While receiving support and encouragement within this environment, my thesis is sometimes framed as potentially problematic in terms of its examination. This may evidence some parallels to doctorates within the creative arts, where ' … finding practitioners in the same medium and with the theoretical knowledge to examine a doctorate' is often considered difficult (Webb et al 2012, p. 12). For my thesis, it is considered that finding examiners who will have both the requisite knowledge of my topic and the ability to critique the multi-layered research approach I am taking may be difficult. This is partly because research about non-monogamies has predominantly been undertaken from sociological perspectives using survey and interview methods. Yet, conducting my research in this way is an important component in making an original contrition to the field, as there has been a call for increased theoretical and methodological diversity within non-monogamies research (Barker & Langdridge 2010).

During times when the spectre of examination is a particular source of uncertainty or anxiety, I wonder if I should have chosen a more familiar or known research path, which may offer

fewer inherent risks for both the conduct of the research and assessment of the finished work. Yet, St Pierre (2011, p. 623) argues that the "audit and accountability culture" of contemporary universities is stifling innovation, and promoting increasingly centred and normative approaches to qualitative research, particularly for higher degree research students. To challenge this, she calls for philosophically informed modes of inquiry that struggle to think differently, and again, about the possibilities of qualitative research. Here, St Pierre (2011, p. 623) argues that research should ' … be provocative, risky, stunning, astounding. It should take our breath away with its daring. It should challenge our foundational assumptions and transform the world'.

While not believing that my PhD thesis is likely to achieve such heights, St Pierre's passion usefully reminds me that the research pathway I have chosen is possible because of others who have historically struggled to enlarge the scope of what is made to count as research thorough building, connecting and challenging disciplinary knowledge. Through such cycles of change and renewal, and within the productive gaps of textual montage, I am usefully reminded that 'the passion for destruction is a creative passion too' (Bakunin 1842 in Dolgoff 1971).

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