University of Canberra

Navid Sabet

Between machines: Encountering writing through assemblage, becoming, and affect

Abstract:

Several scholars in the humanities and social sciences have attempted to account for the forces that dictate creative practices, practitioners, and spaces, and with much more difficulty, the seemingly bewildering processes and logics that unite them (Bourdieu, 1996; Deinhard, 1984; Golka, 2013; Singerman, 1999; Wright, 2010; Zolberg, 1990). This paper is an attempt to diverge from structuralist interpretations of creative practices (and particularly their links to the academy and education), by mapping some of the experiences of a recent writing graduate. In the context of this paper, 'becoming a writer' is considered an activity that is always becoming, in the middle, and consisting of a diverse range of interactive processes that are productive beyond the page and the body that orientates it, beyond the habitus that orientates the body, and beyond the literary or academic fields. This exploration will be undertaken using three concepts from Deleuze and Guattari: 'assemblage', which suggests that complexities consist of heterogeneous components that interact and synthesise emergent properties (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 508); 'becoming', whereby virtual potential realises the incorporeal nature of the body (Massumi, 2002, p. 5); and 'affect' which refers to the drives and components of change (Deleuze, 1988, p. 49).

Biographical Note:

Navid Sabet is a writer of fiction, poetry, and essays. He is a sessional academic and Ph.D. candidate at the University of Canberra, where his research is focused on youth arts and cultural policy studies.

Keywords: Assemblage, Becoming, Affect, Materiality

Several scholars in the humanities and social sciences have attempted to account for the forces that dictate creative practices, practitioners, and spaces, and with much more difficulty, the seemingly bewildering processes and logics that unite them (Bourdieu 1996; Deinhard 1984; Golka 2013; Singerman 1999; Wright 2010; Zolberg 1990). Recurring among sociological and anthropological analyses are the insights of Pierre Bourdieu, particularly vis-à-vis the problematic micro-macro dichotomy of classical sociology, as well as issues relating to agency, reflexivity, and taste (Bourdieu 1984, 1986, 1990, 1996). However, Bourdieu's concepts (like many others, in both 'classical' and 'reflexive' sociology) are also somewhat problematic, particularly because they take as their object different versions of 'the social', where so-called 'real' motives are exposed. 'The social', that supposedly underlies the 'literary field', for example, sidesteps the heterogeneous layering of writing practices, interactions, and events. In other words, all encounters with the 'literary field' (and all overlapping fields and subfields) become socially-anchored and inevitably competitive, as agents are oriented towards particular ends based on their relational conditioning via 'the social'. To some extent, concepts such as habitus and field, as well as cultural, symbolic, and social capital offer useful frameworks for understanding how creative practices are socioeconomically organised – they make these processes thinkable and erase any mystical residue of creative genius. Furthermore, as any field is divisible into smaller subfields, individual creativity (the way one's creativity articulates in various milieus) might be understood through the logic of personal economies, dispositions, and the interactions between fields at different scales. Thus, no matter the measure in question, while the prior primary space is 'the social', the generative capacity of habitus and field remain intact.

However, if we can brave the messiness, the explanatory reach of analyses relating to art and education might be expanded by breaking another dualism; the distinct division between 'the social' and the material practices and exchanges they suggest, are powerful and meaningful. The centrality of immaterial cultural knowledge in the focusing of embodied human life, while not 'humanist' in the traditional sense, still affords an ontological and perhaps an ethical advantage to inter-human relations. Furthermore, when materials are understood fundamentally as cultural assets—as the indicators and pathways of social and symbolic power—then there is little generative capacity for materiality outside representation. This is perhaps particularly problematic when discussing something like writing, which doesn't seem to articulate in any social or inter-human way that isn't simultaneously material, virtual, and non-human. Analysing writing practices through field

theory, for example, might seem like a graspable chunk of an infinitely more complex phenomenon, but at the same time, it runs the risk of glazing over the productive potency that springs from the heterogeneity of writing encounters. In other words, perhaps the coherence of structuralism and 'the social', the logic that is so appealing for exploring writing in relation to a neoliberal marketplace where capital is so significant, is the very attractor that constricts our thinking of what writing can or might do. Perhaps writing can be (and sometimes must be) political, social, material, and virtual simultaneously.

This paper is thus an experiment, as well as an attempt to diverge from structuralist interpretations of creative practices (and particularly their links to the academy and education), by mapping some of the experiences of a recent writing graduate. In the context of this paper, 'becoming a writer' is considered an activity that is always becoming, in the middle, and consisting of a diverse range of interactive processes that are productive beyond the page and the body that orientates it, beyond the habitus that orientates the body, and beyond the literary or academic fields. This exploration will be undertaken using three concepts from Deleuze and Guattari: 'assemblage', which suggests that complexities consist of heterogeneous components that interact and synthesise emergent properties (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 508), 'becoming', whereby virtual potential realises the incorporeal nature of the body (Massumi 2002, 5), and 'affect' which refers to the drives and components of change (Deleuze 1988, 49).

Rachael is a twenty-five year-old recent graduate of a University writing program. In a semi-structured interview setting, we discussed some of the materials, bodies, spaces, and discourses that might relate to her encounters with creative writing. Our discussions, rather than being conclusive, offered indications of where the capacity for action might have been augmented in some way. Rachael was offered anonymity, and the option of withdrawing her participation at any time. Upon review of the interview transcript, we had further chats online to develop and broaden the topics covered. Notably, the interview itself, the voices and images involved, my interpretations and readings, as well as their manifestation here, together constitute an assemblage that unfolds with, and is inseparable from, the knowledge, affects, and relations it seeks to illuminate. The mapping that takes place here is not intended to evoke identitarian and transcendental notions of creativity, or even empirical approaches *on* creative practices, but rather this essay is an experiment between

pre-personal intensities and actualised encounters, the heterogeneous *stuff* of writing and becoming.

For Rachael, artistic practices have been performed in a variety of networks that draw on relational force. For example, during childhood, writing was materially and expressively enforced in an assemblage of private folders that held her short stories. These formed relationships with parental record-keeping, not through the repetition of their actions, but through a disruption of codes alongside them. As Deleuze notes, 'even the simplest imitation involves a difference between inside and outside' (Deleuze 1994, 22). In this way, Rachael's mobilisation of her stories across space and time is not simply imitative but creative. Likewise, college education involved compulsory art journals that extended the ties of students and teachers, opening up a flux of co-living bodies, objects, and affects that pluralised an experience that had previously been solitary. Rachael remembers, 'all of this elevated art to a skill and no longer an overlooked entertainment' (Rachael, personal communication, August 27 2014). In the case of her creative writing studies at University, subjectification emerged in the interplay of former experiences, habits and materials that performed 'writing' and 'art', and more recent institutional arrangements.

Rachael notes that creative writing classes at University unlocked an unexpected excitement:

> It was like a new moment, or like discovering something about myself, I just didn't know that writing could be… talked about in that sort of way (Rachael, personal communication, August 27 2014).

Rachael considers her first creative writing teacher's contribution to her writing to be among the most valuable. Interestingly, it was during this time that Rachael was exposed to what Webb (2005) describes as teaching 'students to read as writers', where students are required to 'recognize relevant features and structures of story so that they may identity, diagnose, and practice them' (180). Rachael reminisces:

> She was talking about writing practices and… the structure of short stories, having writing journals and writing every day… and just really kind of pushing… it was something that I found really imaginative… It wasn't like

high school English classes that are all about comprehension… it was really
about *creating* something (Rachael, personal communication, August 27 2014).

Here, the productive force of writing springs from its networked relations with English and other subjects, as well as encounters with creative practices during childhood and college. At first glance, Rachael seems to place English on the prescriptive, tedious side, and creative writing on the other, as a kind of liberating exercise, despite being drawn to aspects of the latter that are also (to some extent) 'about comprehension'. She even notes being 'completely thrilled' about being introduced to 'the rules' of creative writing. However, what is repeated 'every day' is not the educator's ideal writing form, but the difference that exceeds it. The 'rules' (and their repetition) constitute variation and pathways to novelty because their actualisation *in writing* cannot be fully determined by the structuring force of the teacher's instruction, or the structure of the social field. University education delivers normative discourses regarding how to write for an audience, how to avoid clichés, and so on, but the becoming-writer is *deterritorialised*, with a revitalised sense of what it means to write at all. Writing is not being or being limited, it is *pushing* using mixtures of tools; it is going beyond in order to generate.

When I asked Rachael how she used to think about creative writing, before coming to University, she explained:

> I think I was used to thinking about writing in a far less creative way. [The rules] gave me more of a structure… and just… an actual way of coming at writing. I'd always been writing lots of stories… but I didn't actually have a clue beyond intuition about how to approach them or how to make them good. Or like… what goes into a story. Or the actual creative process. So those rules… they kind of filled me (Rachael, personal communication, August 27 2014).

Perhaps Rachael is able to experience these exchanges as lines of flight from the hierarchies and patterns of previous pedagogical assemblages, where the absence of discussion and activities relating to creative writing implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) delegitimised her

practice. However, Deleuze and Guattari remind us that relative *deterritorialistion* is accompanied by *reterritorialisation*, a return to another mode of molar organisation (1987, 63). Rachael's line of flight is trapped, not by the 'structure' that formal writing methods and approaches might prescribe, but by the over coding of the writing degree as a pathway to something economically justifiable. Meanwhile, various performances around 'writing' and 'writer' in the classroom are unable to solve the problems they present. Drawing on Deleuze, Drohan argues that all pedagogy might be thought of as a combination of virtual potencies and actualised encounters, insofar as pedagogical technologies rely on 'insignificant signs' and concrete transactions that synthesise new images of thought (Drohan 2013, 122). Regarding her teachers, Rachael notes:

> …most of my teachers… had quite a lot of work behind them to kind of back up what they were saying, which you don't always have to have, but I guess I was impressed… particularly because I couldn't even imagine getting to that place myself. I mean it wasn't incredibly helpful because I didn't know how on earth they'd achieved those things (Rachael, personal communication, August 27 2014).

Rather than mere representations of symbolic power that correspond to the teacher's position in a social field, publications and activities that generate new images of thought might be considered the work of assemblages - the unfolding of systems that rely on material and virtual exchanges *in* pedagogy, at certain tiers, and between pedagogical technologies and other materials, markers, and spaces, at others. Perhaps they are processes between networks consisting of moving bodies, memories, libraries, desires, bookshops, cyberspaces, classrooms, and so on. In other words, rather than the benign texture of the prior social field, they might be thought of as an active material and immaterial network, the deposits and sediments from which social and organic habits are made durable, but also where unexpected encounters take off. At the level of the institution, the bodies of the teacher and student are positioned, striated, and interiorised according to particular values and hierarchies. However, in the multidirectional unfolding of events, the becoming-writer-teacher and becoming-writer-student perform confused and unstable overlays, foregrounding countless processes that are already in motion. While the circulation of immaterial or 'symbolic' power might be one of these processes, force itself is inseparable

from its relational and material grounding, from the hand that grazes the publication in the library, to the vital energies of the page. The rhythms of the teacher and student are thus neither inherently strategic nor simply led by habitus, precisely because the encounter consists of more than human bodies, embodied knowledge, and the social field. Learning 'writing' or 'how to be a writer', whether or not this is explicitly the aim of a course, presents a problem because the concepts, bodies, and spaces involved are always already multiple, relational, and in motion. Thus, in pedagogical encounters, it is the ruptures between various configurations of writing—as practicing, as learning, as capitalising, as moving—that are made significant. Where the *I* of 'I am a writer' or 'I will be a writer' is the unit by which the stratum is both reinforced and undermined. Rachael recalls:

> I couldn't see the link between talking about novels and writing short stories to how I would… have some sort of career path or be an editor. They were really kind of far apart for me (Rachael, personal communication, August 27 2014).

Turning to Bourdieu, it is tempting to look at the cultural investment that took place during Rachael's childhood. Cultural investment, he suggests, affects one's ability to convert a qualification into economic opportunities (Bourdieu 1986, 241). Equally, it is tempting to assume that the evolution of an artist's practice, professional trajectory and 'feel' for the field is fundamentally a social experience, and dependent on their ability to develop a relevant habitus (Gonsalves & Chan 2008). However, an overemphasis on Bourdieu's conceptions of habitus and field, may limit our understanding of what artistic practices can do, rather than how they are socially and economically organised, and fundamentally dependent on the ability of agents to habitually decode 'the link'. In a final vignette, I will offer an example that hopefully evokes this idea.

Rachael lived in Youth With A Mission (YWAM) residencies until she was 13 years old, and attended Christian schools until she reached college. Rachael feels that her exposure to Christianity through school and church had a repressive impact on her creativity. She explains: 'I felt guilty for being into fashion, makeup, painting, writing and interior design. I felt they were *shallow'* (Rachael, personal communication, September 29 2014). However, even though there was little room for creativity in her Christian school's

curriculum, Rachael remembers a childhood experience with writing that occurred in the midst of regulatory forces:

> I was in Norway with my parents and they were doing some sort of missionary thing… I just found this electric typewriter that was just like… in this basement situation where the other kids, who had been collected up and dragged by their parents, to this part of Norway, to be taught things by some vague teacher... I just found this typewriter and I wrote this really kind of bizarre… kind of horror story… and I really love that I did that, it's just something that's stuck with me as defining (Rachael, personal communication, August 27 2014).

Ian Hunter follows the genealogy of ethical self-cultivation to Christian pedagogy, where an atmosphere of moral subjectification prompted appropriate social action, reflexivity, and responsibility in popular schools (Hunter 1994, 158). This is an example of where the historical reassembling of various tools, practices, and spaces provided the grounding for new kinds of interiorisation and folding. While YWAM does not reflect the secularised moral background of the popular school, neither is it lingering in pre-modern modes of theological socialisation. Rather, subjectification is substantiated in the overlap of modern pedagogical technologies, organisational practices at a variety of scales (through networks that are simultaneously global and local), and the codes of evangelical Christianity. Here, Rachael is 'collected up and dragged' into a space ('this part of Norway', 'this basement situation') that engenders bodies with particular habits and routines, where creativity is positioned in relation to less 'shallow' pursuits. However, the space is also limited by its own heterogeneity and relationality. The point of force lies in the overlap of multiple spaces – Rachael's body is meshed into (and meshed around) the basement and YWAM. Rachael and the typewriter capture each other, creating a new space between the body in striated space and the body that writes and becomes different. Deleuze links this kind of disjuncture to Foucault's heterotopia 'where the informal diagram is swallowed or becomes embodied instead in two different directions that are necessarily divergent and irreducible' (Deleuze & Hand 1988, 38).

The unpredicted introduction of a material, non-human object into Rachael's vicinity not only offers her an opportunity to write, but it offers a line of flight from the socialisation of

another network – the assemblage that manifests in the basement is ruptured *from the inside*. In other words, instead of an expression of embodied cultural skills that manifest in writing or typewriting, it was the asymmetrical *intensive* qualities of the overlapping assemblages that gave way to rupture and the capacity for nomadic and counter-signifying thought. Writing in this environment is not a vehicle for representational force; a 'horror story' is not simply mirroring the unwelcome encounter with religious education, nor is it a harsh critique of familial obligation. Rather, writing is a point of intensity in itself; the flow of desire is unblocked in becoming. Writing and becoming are made possible not by social positionality, but by an assemblage of desiring-machines – the muscles in Rachael's forearms, tendons, phalanges in the hand, the spools, levers, and keys of the typewriter, the mouth and vocal cords of the 'vague teacher' whose directions are exceeded by what happens *in writing*. The form of expression is one of production and seizure, taking up abstract pieces of intersecting heterogonous assemblages to make something new.

In conclusion, whether creative writing articulates as a broadly useful skillset or a viable career option has generally been unclear for Rachael. In some ways, this emphasises the necessity for the Art education sector to move away from propelling the value of the Arts, towards managing the expectations of those in the field (Brook 2012). At the same time, advocating for a better understanding of field logic through writing institutions and networks could lead to a scenario where everyone pursues the most field-sensible options, as defined by the dominant discourses that constitute 'the field' as such. While some would argue that more local dispositions inevitably result in differences in how practitioners would be able to mobilise the logic of the 'literary field' (regardless of whether the value of symbolic and cultural capital are made more transparent to different publics) this line of thinking still prioritises the structuring force of inter-human relations at a fundamentally social level. Is it not possible that misrecognition leads to symbolic violence *because* its surface is always 'the social'? Perhaps creative lines of flight are born out of stratification and struggle, out of contingency and affect through heterogenous encounters, rather than through the organisation of dispositions and the logic of practice. In this sense, paying attention to the material and virtual characteristics of writing encounters, on multiple levels, might be useful in exploring departures from multiple striated spaces. Furthermore, perhaps the social logic that constitutes 'the writer' is in need of new kinds of scrambling and meshing. This may allow for a useful break from structuralist, anthropocentric, or cripplingly power-orientated accounts of creative practices, and help us think of writing and

the writer as a complex mixture of material, social, and cultural things that inevitably exceed their given set of tools.

Works cited:

Bourdieu, Pierre 1984 *Distinction: a social critique of the judgement of taste*. Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.

Bourdieu, Pierre 1986 'The Forms of Capital', J. Richardson (ed), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*. Greenwood Press, New York, pp 241-258.

Bourdieu, Pierre 1990 *The logic of practice.* Polity Press in association with Blackwell, Cambridge, U.K.

Bourdieu, Pierre 1996 *The rules of art: genesis and structure of the literary field.* Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.

Brook, Scott 2012 'Creative Writing, Cultural Capital and the Labour Market'*, Australian Humanities Review*, 53.

Deinhard, Hanna 1984 *Meaning and Expression: Toward a Sociology of Art.* Praeger, New York.

Deleuze, Gilles 1988 *Spinoza, practical philosophy*. City Lights Books, San Francisco.

Deleuze, Gilles 1994 *Difference and repetition.* Columbia University Press, New York.

Deleuze, Gilles & Felix Guattari 1987 *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.

Deleuze, Gilles & Hand, S. 1988 *Foucault*. Athlone, London.

Drohan, Christopher M. 2013 'Deleuze and the Virtual Classroom', in D. M. Inna Semetsky (ed), *Deleuze and Education*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh. pp 112-134.

Golka, Marian 2013 *The Sociology of the Artist in the Postmodern Era: Pride and Uncertainty*. LIT Verlag, Münster.

Gonsalves, Roanna & Janet Chan 2008 'Creating fiction: Bourdieu's theory and writing practice', in *Text*, 12(1).

Hunter, Ian 1994 *Rethinking the school: subjectivity, bureaucracy, criticism*. Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, N.S.W.

Massumi, Brian 2002 *Parables for the virtual: movement, affect, sensation*. Duke University Press, Durham N.C.

Singerman, Howard 1999 *Art Subjects: Making Artists in the American University*. University of California Press, Berkeley, CA.

Webb, Amy Sage 2005 'How To Avoid Workshop Dilemmas: The Use of Myth To Teach Writerly Concepts', A. Leahy (ed), *Power and Identity in the Creative Writing Classroom: The Authority Project*. Multilingual Matters, Clevedon, pp 180-191.

Wright, Ruth 2010 *Sociology and music education*. Farnham, Surrey, England; Burlington, VT: Ashgate.

Zolberg, Vera. L. 1990 *Constructing a sociology of the arts*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, New York.