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Bits of Worth: collaborative remix as world building

Abstract:

What exists at the intersection of image and word? Where does the photographer end, the writer begin? Who owns the story? “Bits of *Worth*”, an artefact of *Worth*, attempts to address such questions. Combing iPhone photos taken by LJ Maher and 1000 word stories written by Daniel Baker, *Worth* is an evolving collaborative narrative that skirts the borders between author and reader. Herein, photos are curated by both creators and the constitutive elements of the greater narrative—characters, settings, plot, etc.—discussed. Part auto-writing, part fiction, part snapshot, part gallery, *Worth* blends lived experience and fictional reality, and, at its core, outlines a creative practice predicated on sampling, remixing, remediation, and authorised theft. Underpinned by the work of Lawrence Lessig and Henry Jenkins, *Worth* is positioned at a nexus of practice and theory, concerned with the historical image of the “original” artist and their relationship with economic, social, cultural factors. As such, questions of reader agency, collaborative vulnerabilities, artistic originality, and creative ownership naturally arise. Fundamentally, then, “Bits of *Worth*”, and its parent project part, constitutes something of a refrain, the unifying theme coded into a creative dialogue between its participants where each picture and each story is both conversation and consideration.

Biographical note:

Daniel Baker is a casual academic, holding a PhD in Literature from Deakin University. Focussing on the intersection of fantasy fiction, dystopian aesthetics, and formula fiction, he has published ‘History as fantasy: estranging the past in Jonathan Strange and Mr. Norrell’ in *Otherness* and ‘Why we need dragons: the progressive potential of fantasy’ in *JFA*, and presented at conferences from Geelong to Varanasi. He is a writer of science fiction and fantasy whose short stories have appeared in *Aurealis* (‘At the Crossroads’, ‘Where Colossi Sleep’, and ‘Refraction’), *Beneath Ceaseless Skies* (‘The Marvellous Inventions of Mr. Tock’) and *CSFG* anthologies (‘Stories in the Square’ and ‘Against the Current’).

Keywords:

Auto-writing – collaborative practice – creative ownership – image/text – authorised theft



You can hear rain against the pavement outside, even though the night is clear. It's easier to imagine Melbourne in the rain, easier to feel you're escaping, rugged up in black and grey, sitting in the back of the bar. A single hand skitters across the keys, picking out something you don't recognise. Should, though. The piano's out of tune, but in a good way, lending the wandering melody something melancholy or drunk or jaunty. Hard to tell. Whatever. It makes you think of black and white movies—a lone figure, back to the audience, umbrella walking stick, fading into the fog of fog and worn celluloid. The thought is shaped like Bogart's fedora.

'Using the chair, mate?'

The question doesn't belong. You look up and nod apologetically to the guy, hand on the chair opposite—waiting, empty. 'Yeah, sorry. Friend's coming.'

His smile is a cheery Carlton Draught. 'She's sweet, bro.'

You don't live in Melbourne, but say so when people ask. It's easier than explaining suburbs *beyond* the train line whose tracks staple down accessible reality. There isn't a beyond and if there is, if you really want to be like that, it's closer to Neptune than Smith Street.

You check your phone.

Nothing.

7:48pm.

All around, the night is happening. Small tables under warm, amber light, recessed LEDs reflected in wide, mirrored columns in nimbus constellations. Conversations are murmur hushed, end of the day drinks spilling slowly into date night, late night, early hours of tomorrow night. Slowly, you work your gaze through the room, at the other patrons, imagining the narratives that recede, extending out into the city.

There's a couple at the table next to you, his lips to her ear, whispering words. She caresses the stem of her Riesling. Condensation beads on the glass. You imagine them on a Moscow street, hurrying home, huddled in ursine furs, their breath trailing over their shoulders like cirrus. She nods. He laughs.

7:51pm.

Still nothing ...

At the bar, you watch a short line order, wait, dissolve. The bartender smiles wide and vacant,

making small talk while he waits for a Guinness to settle. Like you, he's waiting for someone. His mind isn't here. And you can see it; the line of this thoughts stretching like a yellow glow-stick out of his head, across the room, arcing out the doors towards the esplanade. He's in a basement strobed with neon yellow green red blue. A flicker throb of dubstep spliced with Jay-Z. Sweat flies. Bodies writhe. The creamy head thickens and the bartender tops up the pint.

Your phone vibrates. Excitement spikes ... it's only Candy Crush Saga™ notifying you, that all your lives are back. Three weeks on level 92 has made you jaded, bitter, instant gratification stalled, the little fruity jubes stewing in their stagnant kaleidoscope. Swipe to clear, click back to black.

You shake your head.

The rain's heavier now, its tattoo insistent, drowning. The pianist changes eras, tinkles into a sedate *New York State of Mind*. You can't see a next stop for her. No, it's like she's here, always, on that stool, filling this moment, her 'and thens' hostage to rent and morning coffee and food. And so you try and trace the past, rewinding her days into mosaicked moments of was.

In her studio apartment, her back to you, fingers sleeping on electronic keyboard across her knees. A silver MacBook half-closed on a simple futon, three white cables snaking across the room—one to the outlet, one to her keyboard, the other to a laser printer. It's busy on sheets of composition. There's a jar of instant coffee in the corner. A stack of noodle boxes in another. A4 music covers the floor like autumn leaves. The sun is barely rising.

In a café on Brunswick Street, her back to you, table by the window to watch the passing parade. She's been mainlining seasons of *Seinfeld* and recently heard that Tolstoy would sit in the square to draw inspiration from the faces. Maybe it really is a show about nothing, because she's been here for three cups of lukewarm latte and the only inspiration she's discovered is a pressing need to pee.

In an empty high-school auditorium, her back to you, alone on the stage with the house lights down and a baby grand. She sits down, cracks her knuckles, all the music before her, and starts playing ... and now she's here in Annie Hall white collars, upright piano slapped with stickers. Her back to you.

8:05pm.

Nope.

Last, you alight on a woman with red hair. Really red. Like red straight out of a William Gibson novel. Not the cyberpunk either, the thrillers with their three-page chapters crammed with erudite discussions of augmented reality, brand allergies, Russian oligarchs, and Japanese denim. On a hair-dye box it'd be called Cool Hunter Red.

Cold air from the open door. A slash of gold through the amber glow, a brighter, other light slashing through a wall of tinted glass. It's a threshold of sorts, the potential bridge that takes your night into the night, a cluster of his, her, and their nights into an unlikely urban orbit. The couple at the table next to you make to leave. One of their chairs is quickly taken. The barman scratches the tribal banding inked around his bicep. Billy Joel is a final note lingering in the air. The woman with red hair checks her messages and leaves. You don't live in

Melbourne, but you recognise it. Not in the décor, the smell of hot wedges from the kitchen, not even from the yes/no rain—it's in the people and how they fill the space. That's how you know where you are.

Your phone vibrates again.

Picture. MMS not received 5:14pm 13/05/15.

You turn on cellular data, scroll to the message, and thumb download.

You read the message and smile.

You type a reply.

Sent.

There is a place called Melbourne we carry in our heads. There is the Melbourne grand beneath the clocks or darkly mazed through caffeinated laneways, a Melbourne crowned by Crown and hollowed out all spectral and grey, beneath the Dockland's waiting towers. There are as many Melbournes as there are iPhone cameras and heads behind them.

The previous story was the prototype for what "Worth" might become. Unknown to me at the time, the women in the photo, were LJ's friends. Not only that, the faint sketches I had attributed to them were startlingly close to actuality. At the same time, many of the narrator's sentiments were explicitly my own. Effectively, I had auto-written my life onto another's; she had opened windows into her world for me to read, and in reading, write.

The model here is one of participation. Our collaborative practice started as simple exchange (stories for photos), then developed into a world-building project where characters and their trajectories were and are formulated. Simultaneously, this project's general shape was easily transposed onto other genres, other collaborations with other aesthetic goals. In this, we see the beginnings of a creative network, Lawrence Lessig might label community (2008: 77-80). Rather than the read-only production/consumption binary, "Worth" (and the projects it may pre-empt) argues for a community (even if it is a community of two) of producers that write and rewrite their own lives, which are the lives they share.

In other words, the words are mine, the pictures are not. Both are stored in a folder called "Worth: Snapshots of the Magical Mundane". This folder sits on the desktop of a black laptop that replaced a silver laptop when a glass of soft drink was spilled on its keyboard. This is immaterial. This is a snapshot of my life and I put it to words.

The pictures are LJ's. The people are her people, her friends, her contiguous moments crystallised in the amber of our age and chipped out as frames, a digitalised fossil record that says not that I was here, but this was/is/will be me. They are immaterial, little more than a quintessence of bytes. They are precious because she sends them to me.

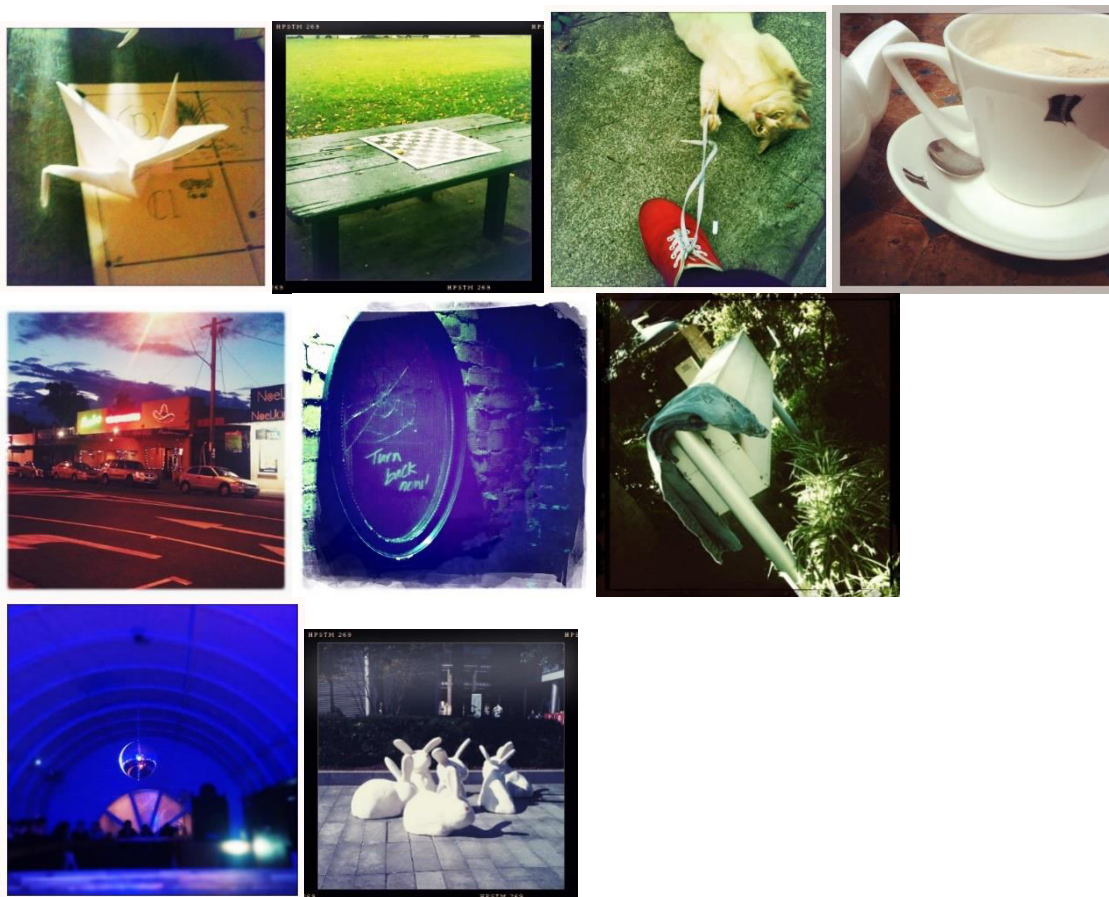
A thesis statement: Take an iPhone photo of something mundane and turn it into something magical with one thousand words: a life, a day, a memory, a reality. Written. Read. Incorporated, which is to say: rewritten.

LJ is an academic. She works at Monash and Deakin. I am an academic. I work. Sometimes.

"Worth" is what happened when academic interest collides with academic boredom whose

academic anxiety was a result of the not-so-academic casualisation of the academic workforce. Translation: One day I wrote an email about walking to Belgrave in order to catch a movie. I can't find the email but I think of it like a seed. It grew into a project, into a collaboration, into a friendship. It grows.

The pictures materialised like a pile of polaroids spread across a table.



A research question: Who owns the stories?

This isn't an idle question. Not only does it address the underlying dynamic informing collaborative practice (speaking, in its articulation, to an overarching copyright culture), but to an emergent cultural pivot embedded in Lessig's Read/Write concept (2008: 28). Similarly concerned, Henry Jenkins suggests in *Convergence Culture* that "storytellers are developing a more collaborative model of authorship, co-creating content with artists with different visions and experiences at a time when few artists are equally at home in all media" (2006: 2063 of 8270). Simply stated, then, the question, complicated by the diversification of creative digital methods, penetrates a legal/cultural/creative membrane. While Lessig outlines, what he terms, a contemporary "copyright war" in the US, where industrialised film and music act as primary theatres, he is equally quick to suggest that "[a]s well as enabling an extraordinary opportunity to remix our culture, digital technologies have enabled an extraordinary opportunity to 'share' our culture" (2004: 966). And while there are deeper, more problematic questions surrounding the ethics of such "sharing", and what constitutes "our", the general shift away from passive consumption, towards active participation disrupts the monolithic narratives historically surrounding cultural production.

Specifically, "Worth", as a collaborative model is already expanding its remit. Another writer

has begun work on other pictures, in another textual universe. Furthermore, there are tentative plans to take what has, so far, developed over email, instant messaging, and conversation, into the wider potentialities provided by the internet, directing burgeoning collaborative worlds towards vast, online communities of networked universes.

As such, while in one universe you watch the passing parade of Melbourne's night life, in another a young girl walks into a second-hand bookstore, searching for a story ...



Eleanor has come to love to the smell of words already read. Her dad once told her that when you opened a book you were opening a portal to another world. He'd said this the night he'd opened *The Fellowship of the Ring* and started reading it to her, putting on different voices for the characters, leaning close enough she could smell his dying aftershave. And now, as Eleanor roams between long shelves of books, it only seems like half the equation.

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, mid-October, with the sun not shining and a look of hard fat rain descending on the clearness of the foothills.

Stacks of books, dustjackets and buckram hard and crackly in the July cold of a second-hand bookstore. Her mum and dad are in the bakery next door. Eleanor has fifteen minutes. She's already shuffled softly over six (and twelve seconds). They're off to visit her cousins who live the Dandenongs, and because it's cold and wet and you've got to spend time with family and you're too young to be wandering in the forest by yourself, she really needs a book.

'Can I help you, there?' The woman behind the counter stares pointedly at Eleanor, at the label 'Modern Literature' beside Eleanor's elbow. She has hair like old wire that's been left in the sun and rain. She's wearing uranium green glasses.

Eleanor smiles. She's thirteen (and four sixths), but knows how to disarm this trap. 'Just browsing, thanks.'

Carefully, she rests her fingertips on the upraised spines and walks on, embossed letters in gold or silver pressing against her skin. It's like braille. It whispers. The shop smells of dust and old glue and eucalyptus from the gums across the road. Small flags waver from the ceiling. Ssssclp ssssclp are her fingers over the books and she can feel the worlds large

between the covers—monsters and their makers, lovers and their woes, failed revolutions, marriage proposals contracted over scones. She has four minutes left. Sssscplp sssscplp go those worlds between words.

I was wearing my powder-blue suit, with dark blue shirt, tie and display handkerchief, black brogues, black wool socks with dark blue clocks on them.

But she's not searching for all that.

Not today.

Today she's interested in the other half of the equation—if books were portals into other worlds, then readers were explorers. Looking at cover art and blurbs and praise from the New York Times is like looking at a half-drawn map. And that's why Eleanor's searching for signs of previous expeditions whose trailblazers have added their own coordinates, their own bathymetries, and 'Here be dragons'.

I was neat, clean, shaved, and sober and I didn't care who knew it.

The floorboards creak. Now her fingers hunt for the cracks and creases, those little lines of white beneath the paint where the spine's been hyperextended to keep the pages open. The door opens and closes. A puff of chill. Voices carry library soft around the shelves. She scans for foxing, and fraying, furry pages. The shelves go one forever. They stretch. They maze. Her hands are dusty. The floor's a chaotic mandala of previous footprints. Nothing stands out.

Time trickles. She can see her dad brushing the crumbs from his sausage roll off his jeans. Mum's at the counter talking to the baker's son, buying six Hungarian dinner rolls. She can see the car ride into the mountains, the rain streaked across her window in beaded Morse code. There are too many choices. There aren't enough minutes.

But then ...

Eleanor finds a dog-eared Chandler. *The Big Sleep and Other Novels* glows silver above a black and white photo—three men in hats, two covering their faces—and a little penguin on an orange oval. Dozens of corners are folded down, each one marking a moment, a joy, a joke, a need for a bookmark because it wasn't bought from Book Depository. There's a coffee ring on the back cover.

It's magical!

She picks it up and flicks through the pages. They're cool and smooth, thin paper dense with a fine, serif typeface probably inked by the certain hand of some ancient scribbler. It's heavy in a good way, a pregnant way, three tales stacked one atop the other, words arranged like eighty thousand puzzle pieces into a seamless whole. In the margins, here, there, notes are scrawled in a faint HB pencil. Phrases are underlined, passages marked with a constellation of tiny asterisks. It's almost like this other reader is here, in the book, still reading it, reading it forever. Like she's left the tracks of her reading for Eleanor to follow. Like the stories belong to her, that they were part of her now, who she was, what she is—but she didn't need the words anymore. Eleanor flicks back to the title page. A name too faded to make out.

It's perfect!

Eleanor walks to the counter, clutching the Chandler to her chest, then hands the book to the

woman.

‘This one? You’re sure?’ The woman frowns at the cover and her hand bobs up and down like she’s weighing it. She stares at Eleanor though her green plastic glasses like she’s weighing her. ‘Wouldn’t you rather a nice *Harry Potter* or one of those vampire books?’

Eleanor bites her lip. Would I? she wonders ... but not for very long.

She smiles. ‘Nope.’

Those books are not this book. This book’s been read and reread, hunched over at the bus stop while the rain splashed down. It’s been lent to a mate because she loves this kind of shit, and baked in the sun after a heavy Christmas lunch. It’s meant something to someone. It mattered.

Her mum, nose flattened white against the window, taps on the glass and beckons. It’s time to go.

I was everything the well-dressed private detective ought to be.

Eleanor shrugs, pays for the book, and takes it. What effect will it have on her?

List of works cited

Jenkins, Henry 2006 *Convergence Culture: Where old and new media collide*, New York: New York University Press, Kindle eBook

Lessig, Lawrence 2004 ‘Free(ing) Culture for Remix’ *Utah Law Review* 961:4, 961-975

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Research Statement

Research background

Lawrence Lessig and Henry Jenkins navigate discourses that regulate creativity, while corporations, artists and readers grapple with the changing reach of copyright and intellectual property laws surrounding remix culture or what Jenkins terms the "ability to pool knowledge with others in a collaborative enterprise" (2006: 3927 of 8270). Their works sit within a constellation of scholarship which suggests that commercial and share economies need reciprocal validation before a hybrid creative economy thrives, and that readers' needs will conflict with the interests of established industries. This debate focuses on the protection of "original" artists, rather than collaborative artists whose creations are understood through the language of remixing, of theft.

Research contribution

Worth is a collection of stories by Daniel Baker, driven by photographs taken by LJ Maher. It explores relational creativity through images and fantastical auto-fiction. Their self-narratives manifest through remediation: experience is photographed, that photograph is written, and the two are helixed, existing one because of the other. This partnership both appropriates and creates developing, as Jenkins suggests, "a more collaborative model of authorship, co-creating content with artists with different visions and experiences" (2006: 2063 of 8270). It interrogates creativity that consciously arises from conversation, consideration, and immersion in art and culture.

Research significance

Significantly, *Worth* renegotiates the relationship between practice and theory. Of particular interest are the ways in which discourses surrounding property, sovereignty and originality purport to regulate creatively manifested subjectivities. Where readers are positioned to respond through creative and critical engagement, it is necessary to consider how they might ethically do so if (and when) that behaviour is at odds with regulatory frameworks. Rather than problematic, oppositional creative relationships, can a hybrid or remix culture be extended beyond creative collaboration into a wider social context? That is, does Lessig's argument that "[s]ome hybrids build community spaces, some hybrids build collaborations, and some hybrids build communities" (2004: 186) ring true?

List of works cited

Jenkins, Henry 2006 *Convergence Culture: Where old and new media collide*, New York: New York University Press, Kindle eBook

Lessig, Lawrence 2008 *Remix: Making Art and Commerce Thrive in the Hybrid Economy*, London: Bloomsbury