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Writing the Self: sense and sensibility

Abstract:

This paper makes an argument for the inclusion of emerging and local forms of DIY autobiographical writing in a life writing course, by placing some of the newer and less conventional examples of the genre in a meaningful relationship to older styles. It examines how life writing pedagogy can be expanded to engage with contemporary cultures of writing and publishing the self, such as zines and blogs, and the effect this has on opening up styles and notions of authorship. The work of a younger generation of Australian writers is suggested as a way of connecting with students' lives at the level of the quotidian and everyday.

Keywords:

Life Writing – Autobiography – Pedagogy – Zines – Blogs

Biographical note:

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When I found out I was co-teaching a subject called ‘Writing the Self’ last semester I felt a sense of relief and congruency, as I secretly suspected, no matter what the subject or genre, that I’d always been teaching a surreptitious version of it. It’s not that I simply ascribe to the ‘write what you know’ adage in a literal sense, or have a bias towards realist fiction with autobiographical overtones. Write what you know is my way of saying to students to infuse their writing, no matter what its genre, with something of their own sensibility. On some meta-level all narratives are written through the self and the self is also written through narrative. Selfhood is a complex intertextual web and our writing always contains, however inexorably, a personal *imprimatur*. It’s a philosophy that I extend to essay writing as well, preferring thoughtful aperçu from a reflexive author to the impossible guise of objective intellectual critique. I have, it seems, an inability to separate personality from insight and, possibly, style from substance.

‘Writing the Self’ (a combined English/creative writing subject at The University of Newcastle) focused on literary non-fiction and its conventional genres of autobiography and memoir, with a week or two on confessional poetry. From the outset the material struck a quite a sombre tone (the same can happen in fiction classes when late twentieth-century short stories suddenly seem to merge into a litany of suicide attempts and adultery). It felt entirely appropriate that a life writing course would delve into life’s nether regions – times when the intensity of living is thrown into sharp relief – but, I began to wonder if the problem had to do more with a limited sensibility in the course material than with its existential nature. There is a cultural ‘sameness’ which can emerge out of the kinds of lives that have made it into print, no matter how diverse the authors and their experiences (in our case Tobias Wolff, Martin Amis, Michael Ondaatje, Blake Morrison, Joan Didion, Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath, as well as two Australian authors and, incidentally, Newcastle University graduates: John Hughes – his book of personal essays *The Idea of Home* – and a first novel by David Kelly). As one student expressed it:

Today, I went to the lecture on Blake Morrison’s book *And When Did You Last See Your Father*. I sat and I listened and I raged ... ‘Morrison is an insensitive idiot. Doesn’t he know the difference between writing for an audience and writing in a diary? How dare he subject me, poor innocent me, to his filth. No one needs to know you jacked off after your father died. Think about your wife and your father’s family when you reveal that after your father’s funeral you had sex with some old flame. I will never write a story like this. I will not exploit tragedy. I will know boundaries and I will use them. I have decided that I am sick to death of death, men, people’s relationships with their fathers and all the other depressing crap that we have looked at thus far in my Writing the Self class’. (Hair)

This quote comes from Katherine’s final assignment. She then included a pen drawing of a coffin that she drew during class (in the tradition of Dave Eggers’ staple) (xiv) and goes on to say that she wants to know ‘what happened to women, to birth, life and love and other trivial things’ (Hair).

It’s true we didn’t set enough texts by women writers on this course. More broadly, however, I suspect that what Katherine is gesturing to may be better satisfied by other less formalised modes of ‘literary’ autobiography. Ideally, neither the masculine mid-life

crisis nor the equivalent strain in women's writing (perhaps typified by the kinds of books written in by middle-class feminists in Australia in the 1980s that I studied at university) should unduly dominate a course like this. In response, I have become increasingly interested in ways to access contemporary forms of life writing that are proliferating outside of conventional publishing paradigms, bringing with them a sense of generational change.

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For 'Writing the Self' my colleague and I had decided to set a reading list rather than compile a reader. Nice idea – but most of the texts we came up with were out of print and we had to make many compromises. All of the rhetoric I'd heard about short shelf lives, about publishers and distributors not keeping backlists, came home to roost. Our books were most likely landfill. Many titles, such as Indigenous writer Ruby Langford's *Don't Take Your Love To Town*, a work which would have broadened the range of cultural and gendered experiences on offer, couldn't be included as, at best, they were waiting on re-issue. Out of desperation, we ended up photocopying the whole of David Kelly's novel *Fantastic Street*, which tells the autobiographical story of a suburban Brisbane family with eleven children (adopted, fostered, step and blood) through the voice of the gay narrator, Alex. Suddenly a reader didn't seem like such a bad idea: it would have made it much easier to include critical essays, to sample from a more diverse selection of writing and styles, and to photocopy sections of out-of-print books that we had in our personal collections. Forever haunted, however, by a passage about the humble course reader in a critical article I'd read and remembered (and have reproduced below) I kept the faith regarding the importance of the contextual experience of reading 'actual' books.

Many of us don't only buy and read books, we carve them up. We take our favourite essay, the most stimulating chapter, and we invent pulp-backed, poorly bound things we make our students buy from the university bookshop. And we do not stop there. Filled with dark melancholy or celebratory pastiche we call these new life forms the course reader. These readers are usually unpleasant to hold; their past evokes nothing more than the print shop. They foretell a fragmented ride through an area of knowledge that reinvents what it is in the process. For these collections simultaneously refer back to the book they have been taken from while being pedagogically attached to the subject or course that they are contingently connected to. Their form is classically dis-canonical. We teach our students that the ordinary form is hybridity.

We never launch our readers. Their lives are always that of mice in laboratories. Why next semester grow another ear upon its tail, transpose a nose to its paw? The reader once lay between a book and photocopied article on reserve, but as hybrids do it has powerfully undone both those origins. (Schlunke 2003: 79)

So set texts it was. This was something of an experiment, as in my previous experience at

UTS course readers were *de rigueur*. But now, working in an English Department, I was open to returning to the days when students would fork out good money to purchase the seven titles we ended up setting as readings.

Yet, this bias towards the book wasn't the ultimate answer, either, as the need for supplementary examples soon became clear. There are, of course, a myriad other forms in which the self is narrated in contemporary culture. Many students are already keeping personal blogs, making and distributing zines, posting home-made videos on youtube, narrativising photographs on flickr, through to obsessively listing a blow by blow account of what they are doing in twitter. A 'rabid' culture of self-publishing the self exists across DIY (or amateur media), which presents as much of a zeitgeist for university writing departments as it does for other creative media departments. These are 'everyday' autobiographical narratives that refigure cultures of authorship, readership, publishing and community.

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Towards the end of 'Writing the Self' in the week when we discussed Joan Didion's *The Year of Magical Thinking*, Katherine was going to counselling after the shock suicide of a friend. Her final personal essay did end up being about her friend's death and dealing self-reflexively with her conflicting impulses around writing about the tragedy. Reading Katherine's final assignment also helped reconcile some conflicting elements of the course for me. There was a definite debt to Didion there in terms of grief narratives, a fear of complicity with Morrison without being holier than thou, and a nod to style of Dave Eggers' preface to *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*. This handout, at the time, provided just the kind of pressure-valve release the class needed. Katherine moved beyond her frustrations with the status quo, only by negotiating it, and perhaps the most important effect of this class was ultimately to facilitate for students an active, creative relationship to the material, even if this involved strong revisionary impulses or ironies. For the creative writing students, the role of the set readings and lectures was to spur them on to use their imagination as a point of mediation between the outside world and their own memories and experiences, thus becoming makers of what the course was otherwise about. As in Katherine's case, this also equally related to the 'life' side of the life writing equation.

Via Eggers, and other handouts to supplement the set texts – such as the short fiction of Melbourne writer Tom Cho (his blog url <http://www.tomcho.com> was posted on the on-line site for the course) – students were also encouraged to deconstruct what writing the self means across genre in a more playful manner. I first read Cho's work in the Australasian issue of *Meanjin* when, prior to his transition, he was publishing as Natasha Cho. Her piece 'The Exorcist' is more of a micro-fiction than a conventional short story and tells the surreal 'schlocky horror' tale of the narrator's Aunty Wei, who purchases an apron with fake plastic breasts and undergoes a demonic possession. While wearing the

apron Aunty Wei starts:

talking in different voices: a guttural-sounding swearing voice, a childlike pleading voice, a deep and booming voice talking in biblical language, a businesslike voice quoting from arts funding applications that I have written. Just as Aunty Wei is saying ‘As indicated by the project timeline (see Timing section below), by the time the proposed funded period would commence, work on the project will be more advanced and I would then be in a position to benefit more significantly from Australia Council funding’, I run into the study and get a crucifix from the bottom desk drawer. I run back into the lounge room, yell at my aunty ‘I banish you forever, you devil!’ and hold the crucifix up to her. But Aunty Wei only grabs the crucifix from me and begins masturbating with it ... (Cho 2004: 86)

Cho is currently writing a series of short fantastical fictions about identity and popular culture, or as he’s come to know it, ‘a book about me’. Perhaps fiction allows Cho a paradoxical freedom from the onus of having to define himself at all. In an interview in *Cordite* in 2002, Natasha Cho says that her original idea was to write ‘an autobiographical book similar to *Wild Swans* that explored the lives of my grandmother, mother and myself, with a focus on the difficulties of my relatives’ lives in China’, however, citing the reticence of her family to disclose their stories and how she’s ‘more likely to find someone like Aaron Spelling more influential than say, Amy Tan’ Cho states that: ‘In retrospect, I can see that that autobiographical book was not the book I should have been writing. But a book about Asian and western pop culture—Godzilla, Walker Texas Ranger, The Karate Kid, Elvis, Tony Danza, etc, etc ... now that’s a book I was born to write’ (<http://www.cordite.org.au/?p=1112>). Australian multiculturalism is so often built around an aesthetics of realism and Cho’s representation of both Asian Australian and gender identity resists such direct authenticity, by politicising the ways identity is performed and received. In Cho’s work there are always ‘in-jokes’ for Asians and for others: ‘Actually, there are in-jokes/special messages in my manuscript for various people – the queers, the kinksters, the nerds, the 80s pop culture lovers, the arts industry folk, and also some special individuals in my life. And me—there’s also a whole lot of in-jokes/special messages for myself’ (<http://www.tomcho.com/?p=85#more-85>). Cho provides an example of a writer foregrounding the importance of style and sensibility over disclosure and truth. Although fictional, these stories are very much a form of writing the self. As Cho says on his blog: ‘Maybe fiction-writing is some kind of “parallel process” that allows me to better articulate “the heart of me”’ (<http://www.tomcho.com/?p=80#more-80>).

I hope it was reading Cho’s stories that encouraged one of the students in ‘Writing the Self’ to write about her Chinese grandmother who married a rooster (the groom was unavailable and the rooster stood in symbolically at the time of the arranged marriage). What became interesting in this course, and what I’ve often found, is the way that students are able to bounce off the course readings, re-iterating, re-performing and making them over in their own voices. There was a link, however tangential, between John Hughes’ highly literate essays in *The Idea of Home*, and a student’s assignment built

out of photographs of every house she's ever lived in with a pithy narration underneath.

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Ideally, there need not be an apartheid between students' extra-curricular writing practices and the 'literary' in a life writing course, where extra-literary practices are considered to be necessarily immature, uncritical, popular, or lacking requisite gravitas. Nor, in this context, need traditional literature be devalued, its reading practices and structures outmoded (however difficult it may be to find books for the reading list). Students synthesise the many influences that they are exposed to in the university context as we assist them to contextualise and reflect on their writing practice. We shouldn't assume that our students are not readers either, although many seem more likely to read about lives unfolding almost in real time on their friends' blogs, rather than published autobiographies. Bucking this trend, for example, a friend and one of the leading lights of the Australian zine community, finished reading all seven volumes of Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* over her last holidays. Indeed, putting together the reading material for a course is still one of my favourite pedagogical duties, trying to find the perfect 'heteroglossia' to inspire students to read beyond their known literacies. For me, textual and cultural analysis are equally important; techniques of writing the self can be examined alongside cultures of writing and publishing the self (recognising that extra-literary mediums also, of course, produce valid contemporary texts, as much as cultural phenomena). Whether writing conventional autobiography, memoir, zines, comics or blogs, life writing is not a discrete genre but crosses a spectrum.

In a chapter titled 'The Ontology of Autobiography', James Olney redefines 'life' as a 'vital impulse' that exceeds simple autobiographical narrative conventions of 'individual history'. Life writing, he argues, emerges as much from the 'unique medium of the individual and individual's special, peculiar psychic configuration' where 'Life...does not stretch back across time but extends down to the roots of individual being; it is atemporal, committed to a vertical thrust from consciousness down into unconsciousness rather than a horizontal thrust from present into past' (1980: 239).

Anna Poletti (Australia's first Dr of zines) in her article 'Life Writing in Zines: Memory, Public Spaces and Intimacy' draws on Olney's re-imagining of life as particularly pertinent to contemporary cultures of life writing in zines, which 'unlike longer more traditional modes of autobiography, do not adhere to a horizontal (chronological) mode of organisation, and instead form brief explosions of narrative/s which contain multiple styles, modes of narrative and representation in one package' (<http://www.newcastle.edu.au/group/poetics/issue-03/poletti.htm>). As she argues:

Olney's definition of 'life' is also in sympathy with DIY publishing impulses which place value in the individual's potential for unique cultural production and contribution, regardless of their position on a (horizontal) time line of expertise, experience or privilege.

The act of DIY publishing, while an individual pursuit, is a collective and public act where individuals place their resistance to cultural elitism, the commercialisation of experience, and limited representations within commercial media, together to form a movement.

Personal zines are just beginning to be anthologised by small presses in Australia and this year two zine anthologies were released: Vanessa Berry's *Strawberry Hills Forever* and Luke You's *You*. While something is lost in terms of materiality once zines become mass produced objects and are given a colour cover and a spine, it does make them available for wider distribution and both these titles can now be included on next year's 'Writing the Self' reading list. I suspect that these are exactly the kind of narratives that Katherine was looking for in her desire for more resonant everyday experience in the reading list. Luke You's *You* anthology contains photocopied handwritten pages from the weekly 'Dear You' letters he has distributed since 2001 and both the zine project, and the anthology, are a contemporary form of epistolary autobiography. I've randomly chosen the beginning of a letter from 17 August 2002 as an example of his style of writing

Dear You,

Last night I watched the Linda McCartney tele-movie 'The Linda McCartney Story' on T.V. It was the greatest piece of television I have seen since 'The Jacksons' in the mid 90's. The best part was John Lennon who was played by this four foot tall eighty year old man with a German accent. Even when the Beatles were singing she loves you yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah this John Lennon's face looked older than Lou Reed's does these days. There was this one bit when John Lennon pulled up outside Paul's mansion in his white Rolls Royce, jumped out of the car and went over the gate and threw a rock through Paul's front door while yelling German obscenities. Brilliant. (You 2007)

Similarly, Vanessa Berry's *Strawberry Hills Forever* contains selections from her five and a half year zine project, 'Laughter and the Sound of Teacups' (1997-2002), in which she chronicled in intricate detail everything she did on the 23rd of each month. I hope both anthologies will provide alternative models for students and stimulate similar projects for assessment.

I'm always conscious teaching at The University of Newcastle that Newcastle is also the hometown for the National Young Writers Festival (NYWF), part of the annual This Is Not Art (TINA) festival. For the last 9 years the NYWF has run panels on blogs, held a successful zine fair and linked up a community of emerging writers. Their panels are not uncritical, as the spiel for this year's blog panel, 'Much ado about blogging', states:

Every day 175,000 new blogs appear. Blogs are still the future, right? But the future of what—citizen journalism, navel-gazing, political campaigning or stupid cat pictures? Join us for an open debate about the future of the blog, and maybe you'll even consider starting/retiring one of your own. (n.d. 32)

Interestingly, I met a UTS PhD student at TINA this year, Ben Ho, who is researching personal blogs written in war-zones. As an antidote to glib remarks about phenomena

such as 'lolcats' (images of cats with humorous captions), he told me about the blog Baghdadgirl, which has the by-line: 'Iraq for ever, cats for ever and Baghdadgirl for ever'. Baghdadgirl is written by a 16 year old Iraqi, Raghda Zaid, who intersperses commentary on her experiences in war torn Iraq with pictures of cute kittens, a reminder of the importance of the quotidian to all our lives:

'I wish there is some thing I can do'. This sentence I have been repeating a lot these days. Every time I ask about the situation in Iraq I become angry and sad because there is nothing I can do. I wish some one can tell me what can I do to save what is left in Iraq.

I have left my house, my room and my cats that I know nothing about any more. When we left we didn't take every thing in the house with us because it is impossible, that house and every thing in it is a treasure, It was built 35 years ago, and now It is going to be looted just because it is empty and there is no one to protect it.
(<http://www.baghdadgirl.blogspot.com>)

A few months ago I started a secret blog. It is primarily a space for me to sustain a writing practice, and keep a de facto notebook, rather than for others to read about my life or thinking. The Blogger interface quickly felt more 'alive' than Microsoft Word. What I was writing was not a document to be saved, but a post to be published, to be *set adrift on memory's bliss*, fractured and lyrical. I'm glad I've got this little archive building and some of the writing and ideas may stimulate longer real world projects eventually. Many of them, however, seem perfectly contained and realised as micro-fictions, suited to the medium. They are ghost ships I've floated out there, so perhaps it's fitting that the first post is all about the Pasha Bulker.

I've carried the sensibility of my blog with me into this paper, in the sense of writing it as an exploratory piece, a style I like to infuse most of my writing, and indeed my life. In this way, writing is an extension of life and each justifies and feeds the other. As the zine writer Ianto Ware writes in response to the following interview question on the ABC website, The Program:

You're participating in a workshop at TINA about young autobiographies. Do you think you can be too young to start writing the story of your life? Are you working on yours right now?

Pretty much every zine I've written could be described as the story of my life. They're all autobiographical, and some of them are probably a better representation of what I'm thinking about than I'm likely to express in normal conversation. If you want a full out linear narrative story of someone's life, probably better to wait till they're near death. But otherwise, hell, if someone wants to write about themselves, I don't see any reason not to give it a burl. Personally I've found writing about my life an excellent way to get the damn thing in order and figure out what on earth is going on.
(<http://www.theprogram.net.au/creativeIndustrySub.asp?id=952>)

This encapsulates the idea of sense and sensibility for me. It's not a simple generational

divide, modernist/postmodernist schism, or battle between laureate authors and provincial writers that is important, but the act of life writing as a somewhat heuristic practice of becoming.

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