Not Fraying at the Edges

A project submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Design

Helen Marie Lucas
Advanced Certificate in Professional Writing and Editing, CAE.
Graduate Diploma in Librarianship, Melbourne College of Advanced Education.

School of Media and Communication
College of Design and Social Context
RMIT University

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Candidate Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the project is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Helen Marie Lucas 10 February 2018
Not fraying at the edges: women, ageing and creativity

Helen Lucas
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The consideration of writing ‘Acknowledgements’ necessitates a reflection. This project has taken five years, and has changed considerably over that time. It has been an interrupted journey – time off for various health and personal reasons, most significantly a heart attack, and more recently, the death of my father after a short illness. I’m sad that he will not be able to share this achievement with me. He would have been extremely proud and would have read this dissertation with genuine interest. He was generous in his responses to my questions about my mother, his wife, who passed away when I was in my early twenties. She is a significant influence in this project. Her legacy cannot be overstated.

I thank both my parents, Paul and Anne for my life.

I am forever grateful to my sister for her support of my creative life.

During the time of this project, I have become a grandmother twice over. My daughter Jessie gave birth to my first grandchild, a girl named Milla when I had time off from study. This event influenced the direction and content of my project. Her birth gave cause for me to contemplate the role of the older creative woman in a new context – that of the grandmother. I also considered my own role as mother and daughter. I acknowledge Jessie for being a wonderful daughter and mother to Milla and for her continuing support, astute questioning and input.

More recently my grandson Lucas was born to my son Jack - Lucas Guy Mitchell. He has my family name as his first. This name honours my father. Jack has been a wonderful sounding board for my occasionally ‘off the wall’ ideas. I thank him also for willingly engaging in discussions about feminism and for being a curious listener.

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PREFACE: RAW MATERIAL

CHAPTER ONE: THE SENESCENT POET
The Poet as Matriarch
The Poet as Feminist
‘Independent feminist seeks loving equal’
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CHAPTER TWO: THE PRACTISING POET
The Poet Joins the Academy
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REFERENCE LIST

BIBLIOGRAPHY
SUMMARY

‘Not Fraying at the Edges’ explores the concept of écriture féminine – Hélène Cixous’ term for women’s writing – for a more contemporary moment, with specific consideration of concepts of ageing, creativity, self-expression, and inheritance along the matrilineal line. Experimentation is inherent in the creative writing practice and the dissertation as a way to challenge and rupture phallocentric modes and structures of academic discourse, poetry and autobiography. These ideas and themes are explored and expressed through poetry and poetic prose. Selected poems are presented as artworks and will contribute to an installation. A poetry reading will form an element of this installation.
SELF-SAMPLER
Heirloom

I

My mother knitted and stitched
her self into history
her handwork a primary source
soft proof of a life
the silk nightie    French seamed
with an applique neckline
my infant bonnet    wedding dress
a fancy laced bib
for my daughter.

I count rows and stitches
knit and purl my way
into this modern history
a turquoise pixie hat
the tiniest pink cardigan in cashmere
and merino, a striped blanket
I click clack with inherited needles
a pair matched in size not colour
the rest dormant and disorderly
in their wooden box
with gold hinges and no lid.

A stray hair in the garment
it can stay    DNA
in the knit (K)1    purl (P) 1
K 2 together (tog).

II

The *artist performs her craft
and her benign activism attracts a crowd
she draws the thread from the ball
inside her vagina and resettles
into the rhythm of knitting.
She labours quietly for twenty-eight days
the work is demanding
her attachment to it confining
though at times
the pull of wool arousing.

Her menstrual cycle is
pinked in the textile
a feminine narrative unravelled
her bloodline woven into fabric
the slide of stitches slowed
by the moisture of the yarn.

The improbable scarf loops through
floating coathangers in the gallery.

Her performance is filmed
the video goes viral
the public is disgusted
in the knit (K)1 purl (P) 1
it can stay, DNA
K 2 together (tog)
a stray hair in the garment.

III

My grand maternity materialises
in the knit  pink
stitch after stitch slipped
as I cast off.

The seams are sewn
my lips dampen the thread
I press the end
between thumb and index
and pass it through
the eye of the needle.
This soft labour embodies me
creates my daughter and hers
reproduces my mother and hers
our bloodline in the garment
saliva on the yarn, mine
recalls the thread and the artist’s vagina
as she cast off her womb.

My stray hair in the knit (K) 1, purl (P) 1
produces a new heirloom
my DNA it can stay
this cardigan my doing and undoing,
me casting off.

*Casey Jenkins, *Casting off the womb*, performance piece first performed at the Darwin Visual Arts Association (DVAA) from October to November, 2013.
The sempstress

The green velvet
is folded in half
right sides together
on the lounge room floor.

The dark-haired
dark-eyed woman
inhales the silence
left by her family.

She kneels
holds the heavy coldness
of the scissors in her lap
and contemplates the cloth.

The tissue paper
pattern pieces
are fragile islands
on the marine green sea
of velveteen
their geography determined
by the woman
my mother.
Mother and daughter go to work

mother has her room she concentrated a sewing room at home she seated at ease she at her reliable singer cigarette in the ashtray out of the way smoke rising to the open window pins between her lips foot on the pedal the whirring pulse of the singer the stop start slow fast the machine sewing machine the fabric her she in motion her hands fabric passing through her she doesn't hear you me she is startled is that the time already

the threads

daughter has her room she concentrates me knows the room is important hers she writes alone at home she the scratching of pen on paper the tap on keyboard buttons she I unpicks the thread follows it the line untangles understands the workings the tacked thought imagines inscribes the finished thing this is the thing writes it words unravel pass through pinned she spins the thread the motion stitches it the material inked into lines in running stitch satin chain stitch embroiders the detail of her mother she her they together alone concentrated in her room
The writer and the bath

the writer has her bath – she uses a sugar scrub on her skin that her daughter has made for her – she imagines him sitting on the ottoman next to the bath regarding her – the sound of water as she moves – when they talk their eyes lock – her erotic thoughts are formed by photographs and letters on a computer screen – but she is a writer and imagining is what she does – she pens it in her mind – the scene – she naked in the bath – he says he will pamper her and she knows she could do with a pampering – she thinks all this in the bath and after drying and dressing she writes it
Redbox

The artist is sitting her exhibition
I have bought one of her works
hand stitched silk hearts
leaves floating like hot air balloons
or ideas
above a red and black rectangle

a chest perhaps

We get talking she tells me
she retired a year ago
from her well-paid government
position to work
on her art
she is not
getting any younger.

She lives in a forest and
loves the leaves of the Red Box
_Eucalyptus polyanthemus_

she intuits I appreciate the Latin name.

I tell her I am a poet
and have been writing about silk
and becoming a grandmother
I tell her I have spun silk and I
have heart-shaped leaves
in my forest too.

I read my _Heirloom_ poem to her
an unsurprising tear drops
onto her cheek
at the last line.
Red thread

I begin
insert the needle
the point blunt
a diagonal
line

dark red thread
is drawn
to start the letter
K

‘start from the middle
fold the fabric in four
to find the centre point’

K for Kathy
a K not a C
my sister
taken by the big C

L for Lucas
a c not a k
red threads sew our names

‘start from the heart’
Spinster

I

spinster: n. from the root *spinnan*, to spin, and the suffix, *estre*, giving spinner or one who spins. From the 14th century and through most of the Middle Ages, this was a female occupation. Later it took on the meaning, both in common speech and the law, to be an unmarried woman. It came to mean a woman past the usual marriageable age and carried negative connotations, unlike the male term ‘bachelor’.

Spinster in these stories is also a storyteller, a spinner of tales. In the twenty-first century context, she may or may not have children and lives a single life.

II

I’m seated, performing the act of spinning, right foot forward on an invisible treadle, moving to an inner rhythm, a rhythm not regulated by the soft persuasion of the pedal - a body memory of greasy wool on my lap, my fingers thinning it, preparing a thinness for spinning, a potential thread. I draw it out, and in that moment, simultaneously, I am a young hippy and the artist knitting from her vagina.

III

The cousins rediscover the panoply of mementos in the pink chest. She is remembered vaguely, only by the eldest of the girls. She had silver hair, and kept silkworms all her life. There was always a mulberry tree somewhere.
They open a cardboard shoe box, and carefully lift out a tissue paper parcel. They look at each other in quiet anticipation. The skinny tall girl, the Eldest, unwraps the tissue paper revealing a skein of raw, unspun silk. Whilst being exotic, it is familiar and familial, and they all stroke and admire it. They imagine the worms. The spinning. The thread.

In another tissue paper package is a length of her hair, a ponytail tied with a cream ribbon with lace edges. They stroke that too and imagine the hair growing on her head.

The Eldest and her little sister remember collecting mulberry leaves to feed the voracious appetites of the silkworms. They tell of cardboard boxes and cocoons, of worms spinning.

They rewrap the silk and the hair in their tissue paper and put them back in the chest. The told stories have become real memories for the others. The lid is gently closed.

IV

I’m seated, performing the act of writing, right hand guiding the black felt pen, left hand supporting my thoughts. My hands, fingers, pen, invisibly spin filaments of me onto the page. Diffuse strands of words entwine and become threads and storylines. I draw them out, spin and weave them, and in this exquisite process I am warp and weft, writer and woman.
V

*Bombyx mori* (silkworm).

They eat, eat, eat countless leaves of the Chinese white mulberry, the *Morus alba*. After thirty days and nights of feasting, the silkworms have increased their weight ten thousand times. They grow and swell and grow and outgrow their skin every five or six days. They are tumescent, their old skin dry and discarded, the new skin fragile and translucent.

VI

She does not see any advantage in marrying, besides, no man she has met has been worthy of her dedicated attention, and none had wanted to know her, not really. So she writes, she has her room.

This is not to say she does not have sexual desires, nor does it mean that they are unfulfilled, but her lovers do not fill her heart or mind, they are dalliances who are gone before breakfast. However, she is a poet. And sometimes her fantasies of love and passion, the raw product, spin in her head and unravel on the page. ‘Gather me up, unroll me’ she writes, ‘unfold me’.

VII

*Bombyx mori* (silkworm).

For three days they spin, spin, spin, cocooning themselves in silken filament. Round and round in a figure-eight, the silkworm produces a single thread, two thousand feet long. They spin until they have vanished into a lustrous womb of their own making and await metamorphosis.

VIII

I’m standing, performing the act of poet, at the microphone, feet apart, left hand on my hip, an older woman. I am reading a poem about knitting and becoming a grandmother. The men in the audience flick through pages in their notebooks or stare into their drinks.
Their ears prick up and they wonder what they have missed when they hear the word ‘vagina’. They are drawn in now, as I knew they would be.

‘What! She is knitting from her vagina! Call that art?###.’ The men go home after the poetry reading and Google the Youtube video and add their revulsion to the conversation threads on Twitter.

IX

*Bombyx mori* (silkworm).

The silken envelopes that are home now to moths are ready for harvest. The moths produce a solvent that destroys the single silken thread upon their emergence from the cocoon. To preserve this continuous thread, the moths must be killed. This is done by contact with heat – strong sunlight for about six hours or in an oven at two hundred degrees for twenty minutes. Some moths are reserved to produce eggs for the next crop.

X

The cousins live in different cities and catch up on the telephone and see each other from time to time. They are grandmothers and both have lost their mother and sister. The Eldest is sixty-five and is the Keeper and Chronicler of the Family History. The Younger is fifty-six and is a Poet, full of questions. In a carved wooden chest in her room, in a tapestry bag, she keeps a skein of silk.
Heart attack

so a tightness in the chest that wouldn't go I'd had it before once it was a tightness it went it would go but this didn't go no no an unfamiliar sensational pain in my arms an hour I try to get comfortable try to expel the pain a bath immerse myself in water my cure all doesn't cure I need help here I call nurse on call she calls an ambulance I call my daughter she calls her brother my son I can breathe it's okay I call

brightly coloured plastic spaghetti tinkles as they connect my body to a machine they monitor me read numbers print graphs two tall paramedics broad shouldered men enormous in my bedroom questions explanations daughter arrives two more paramedics a woman we are crowded in my room medical intimacy history of heart disease in the family yes my mother 46 heart attack attack fatal she didn't die not fatal not then never fully recovered hers was much worse much worse than this smoker yes how many I say a number

my daughter in the corner observing I imagine her thoughts you smoke you know I hate you doing it don't you care your mother died when I was two do you want that for Milla never to remember you

she reassures her brother on the phone we will meet at the hospital
Migraine

she says to her brother we've seen her in worse pain and distress than this
she's thinking of migraines she knows them has grown up with them knows it's not
a glorified name for headache an exaggerated response to pain a cry for attention
let me tell you nAusea vomiting diarrhoea dry reaCHing bile delirium
PAIN trying to crack my head hot cold hot cold hot clothes on off on off ON ALL
FOURS on the bathroom floor calling for my long
dead mother in my adolescence she called them bilious
attacks

Jess is three, she strokes my forehead shh shh don't turn the light on!!! I
hoped the farewell of the monthly blood in menopause
would sympathetically send the migraine on its way but not so but not so
often

now it's my heart I had a heart attack what? you had a heart attack?
Knowhow

I

she knows how she has knowhow knowhow to pose for a photograph the daughter of a photographer now she poses for her husband she the beautiful wife and mother she standing on the sand on the sand on the beach in a black and white checked bikini of her own making her knowhow she knows how knows how to sow to show she knows now has the knowhow I know now

I suppose my sister and I are there somewhere on the sand on the beach witnessing the shot

this photo of mum in a wooden frame next to my father's bed atop an old chest that is his bedside table she is there on the beach in her bikini with lamp clock radio loose coins medications

we open it this chest inside we can find more know more of her of him of we us and them and they but right now right now me dad at the chest me kneeling on the floor bent him sitting on the bed pointing explaining educating me going through the family archives he wants me to know how much he loved

she is an absence between us present now this absence the presence of absence we share this our presence hers in our hearts our memories she is there in the chest in the photos in our hearts in our chests we know her we know how it is he tells me he often wakes groaning at the loss of her

II

he too will pass and does not long after this our discovery they are mine the photos papers the stuff of them from inside the chest I must have the knowhow now to deal knowwhat to do know how to use this grief this being the last one left to write leave something I fill suitcases and organise a removalist for the empty chest

this framed photograph at my house now I knowwhere to place it I walk past it she knows how to wear a bikini on the beach model herself for the pose make herself for the snap you can see the beach has a breeze loose strands of hair she is a smiler with a cracked tooth as I walk by she made that bikini knew the shape of her body her breasts in the pose ready for me she smiles as I walk past
III

Envelope photograph collection nudes (13) 2½ inches x 4½ inches  circa 1960  found 2016

curled photos in a torn envelope from ‘Saunders’, George St, Sydney  ‘Mrs. P. A. Lucas’
typed on the front found in the smallest of the three carved wooden boxes
in the chest we discover them together dad and I  domestic nude shots
of my mother his wife I recognise immediately the fabric the couch at Ashfield
I think at once the photographer is my father the cameraman
we are smiling she is smiling she is beautiful they did this we love her
remembering he is

I the writer archivist examine the detail of each image write a description number
them name them he doesn’t frame the shot well lacks the
knowhow he doesn’t note doesn’t see the edges of the
frame the corner doesn’t notice the legs of the carved
box the height of the white vase he sees her only

my young mother a woman these photos are mine now I turn my writer’s mind
to them now my daughter’s mind to make them I have an artist’s mind to make them into mine

she reclines in various positions on the
couch on their bed sits on the floor on a rug on a cushion by the fireplace and in the kitchen by the
fridge the images are staged and strange mostly she doesn’t look at the camera she is posing she smiles in some but mostly she is looking away from the camera the camera man perhaps he is telling her how to be look down look up hand on hip perhaps this is why they are strange she does not appear to be self conscious about her body these are bold these images for their existence they are relaxed but she is not her self
my daughter takes photographs of herself selfies knows how to pose brings the camera to herself looks herself in the eye she has a good eye frames a shot well I have a good eye thinks about the shot writes a blog creates a family chronicle posts images on Instagram I experiment with selfies don’t like what I see in the frame not photogenic mum would enjoy taking selfies look herself in the shot strike a pose angle her head smile back at herself

I show myself present myself in print write poetry represent I a creative know how to write and a photographer I have a good eye a steady gaze I can compose a shot I am a good writer I can compose a poem a story snapshots cameos choose the best words all this all this here I am the older elder woman happy scared vulnerable sexy confident knowwhere knowwhy knowhow to write sit down to write not always knowing how trusting I have the knowhow to sew the threads into something I wear well

these images the photographs in the small envelope in the carved wooden box in the chest my heart is new material I show them to my children who knew her not some friends remember her others meet her this way I am proud of my mother pleased I have these images glad she had the knowhow to show her body her self some are surprised at my ease in showing her off how to do this as creative expression I know how knowhow she has shown me

I make a miniature paper skirt using the nude photos – name it ‘Ashfield’ scatter them in a sort of random way from a distance the borders of the frames the white lines form a striking design a stylish skirt circa 1960 black and white with hand colouring I use a water colour pencil she used to do this task for her father in his studio blush cheeks sparkle eyes rouge lips I pink her limbs flower the bedspread stripe the couch light the fire I stitch and gather the thread I know how to be careful here the best needle for paper the thickness of the thread an underskirt to fill it out make it sit do I know now have this knowhow to grieve to write it out now play it out
In the ambulance

the sound of the siren is me

wee oo wee oo wee oo heart attack heart attack coming through wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo heart attack heart

coming through coming thr

oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo wee oo

the siren is me

in the ambulance

the siren is me can you hear me

In the hospital

naked under the hospital gown a pretty nurse shaves my pubic hair

right side so intimate

I consent sign a form

a tiny tube inserted through my groin there's a

camera in there they will see inside what is going

on see what is going on with in my heart
Sit still

*Black and white photograph – Anne, Kathy and Helen, Ashfield, circa 1960*

smiling mum regarding the camera enthusiastic mother for the shot look at
daddy a distinctive checked fabric furnishing the couch buttons
distorting the lines dates the photograph captures the time my
sister and I matching fringes straight her calm for the
photo me distracted sit still look up smile sit still encircled in her
Sporting poets

I am early how uncool always early
read my poems buy a house red rehearsal and timed the
poems I am early confident
ten minutes neat set of poems for my Masters
I will end provocatively
leave them wanting more…
my supervisor hasn't seen me read I want her to
be impressed I am confident

I've got friends they're cool fit right in sitting with me
we meet another poet tall her fat friend
the poet a young woman PhD credits and publications
academia literature feminism editing, etc.
her friend says what feminist theorists are you looking at?
I feel inadequate short
sighted don’t need glasses to read but I
need them to see the audience I
start with them on I take
them off now featureless faces bodies in a
long room in front of me

I could give her a list im not prepared for that let me do poetry today

a tall man with a long face a camera ‘Do you mind if I take some pics while you’re reading?’ I recognise him I'd had a date with him once in Yarraville I’ve got a good memory for faces he’d had a breakdown he said it didn’t surprise me
I am confident but quickly a quiver in my voice my leg shaking to an odd beat
I cough I near the word in my poem the word vagina in my poem

but don’t miss/ a / beat /when I read / cunt /or fucking.
I see later he posts photos of me I see them on Facebook comments about
my new haircut wooo groovy gorgeous looking good love the fringe
I’m impressed your hair looks brushed
nice hair helen nice hair helen nice hair helen nice hair helen nice hair helen nice hair helen nice hair helen nice hair helen nice hair helen nice hair helen nice hair nice hair
my hairdresser writes you look like a famous poet
Invisible walking

words are cheap I hear up the street near the market among the discordant singsong of dollar dollar dollar I think of Wordsworth he walked as I walk not through inner city streets but we find inspiration where we find it the words in the built and natural places I am thinking of writing I like the rhythm of my steps the pacing how the words will write after this walk this word and line work exercise writing practice Wordsworth walked I think

shabby families wait with bags outside the housing service the closed sign on the door unapologetic I wait for the green light at the intersection the fidgety junkies can’t wait dog walkers pause to discuss the disposition of whippets parents with disrupted careers and double strollers own the footpath compare the price of real estate and child care wedding guests at the Greek Orthodox church have taken all the parking spots

but I’m working observing walking no dog no kids a poet with blue eyes blonde hair an older woman with a red string bag and glasses walking they don’t know don’t notice my spying I’m invisible making mental notes remembered in steps the words I walk the lines of words the constructed line of thought the rhythm the interior poem words walk words work into thought lines into poems into stories

I free range through the streets cross diagonally rebellious the most direct line study gardens take surreptitious cuttings try to miss the cracks break your mother’s back

I walk the walk talk the talk remember words on the return trip walk home think maybe I need technology a Dictaphone but incline toward incognito blond hair blue eyes red string bag glasses walking words back home
Silk stockings

I

The packet reveals
through a transparent heart
a pair of silk stockings
all the way from Milan.

Above the heart, the brand
'Un amour de soie'
love of silk
a play on Rousseau's
'Un amour de soi'
love of self
this gift for my fiftieth from a friend
who followed her art
and now lives in Florence.

II

The stockings lay languid on my bed
stretched out, waiting
to seduce me,
a silent whispering
in the room
'love yourself, let me help
feel my soft silkiness
slide up your legs.'

‘Gather me up, unroll me’
they breathe, 'see Spun Gold
colour, lustre your limbs
unfold me, circle me up
caress me up, press me up
toward your thighs’.

III

Such eroticism
for a woman my age
turned on by the act of
writing on the page.

IV

I masturbate
to bring myself together
to throw myself apart
Isn't this like writing?*

*from ‘Writing is Masturbation’ by Sandon McLeod in You, me, us...nuts, Flat Chat Press, Melbourne.
Office talk

MY THIRTY-SOMETHING SUPERVISOR for my Masters — dDoctor prefacing her name younger than my daughter (same name) smart and funny when we met the first time I was in awe so young so smart serious and fun seriously funny I mean seriously fun!

younger than my daughter (same name) smart and funny when we met the first time I was in awe so young so smart serious and fun seriously funny I mean seriously fun!

they’ve met daughter and supervisor jess and jess at a poetry gig where I was performing they work at the same university they’ve heard about each other of course I need to differentiate them in conversation My Supervisor Jess Dr Jess My Daughter Jess My Jess my daughter in the office we laugh Dr Jess and I word play lewdly (play words lewdly?) extend metaphors we see sex in the same things we talk about language we enjoy it we indulge it (in it) create crazy and clever scenarios of what I might write her office is a safe place okay to feel in adequate sometimes tearful I speak with a shaky voice I talk through it this weakness in my voice I need to find my writer’s voice keep writing she says

we laugh I am supervised under supervision overseen she said today she would crack the whip something my parents would say in a disciplinary way to motivate my sister and I now right now I think of dominant subversive I mean submissive sexual relationships cat ‘o nine tails pain and pleasure hairy chests big breasts high heels and masks

always she says she says write about it write about it write it out I you could do something sexy here about being under supervision doing what you’re told discipline she is supervising me this petite young Doctor she keeping her eye on me my process progression my poetry ensuring deadlines are met standards kept monitoring my mental health making adjustments I can tell her how it is keep writing she’s experienced in supervision shesexperienced sexperienced I tell her this is a descriptor in online dating there are others of course but not for now

I embrace poetry and struggle with the scholarly keep writing she wise cracks the whip you could do something sexy here you could do something sexy here make my exegesis sexy sexy? Sexegesis? this academic pursuit fulfils my subversive wish to stick it up the patriarchy write a funny sexy poetic anti-establishment dissertation
Sexegesis could be the latest new word in academic writing. Opportunities for use as a marketing tool—a strategy to seduce students into higher degrees—the academy could do with an innovative marketing look into the offices of lecturers in media and communication. They have creative writing students with skills and ambitions. Clever and sassy sapiosexual—yes sapiosexual—another online dating descriptor—tap into the sapiosexual market sapien from the Latin meaning wise or intelligent sexualis related to the sexes I do my research.

Smart is a turn on apparently. Reading poetry aloud is foreplay. Glasses are sexy and intelligent which I have always known. Glasses are to be taken off part of the striptease. Women can be smart now and it's sexy. I consider this will consider this does this assume that we can use our intelligence to seduce. Demonstrate how smart quote drop names.

Strings of capital letters attached to name published works public lectures study tours sabbaticals in the office we women talk smart and dirty funny and

We can get carried away discuss the marketing campaign the images the video the poster bookmark t-shirt bumper sticker but then it’s milestones word count dates for submission she cracks the whip I write there is pain and pleasure.
Hipster spinster rap

I want to write hip-hop
I like the descriptor of myself
as a hipster spinster
it rhymes with sister trickster quipster fixer
and he kissed her

in the midst a
feminista
I got a lista other rhyming words
yes I’ve got a list of words
to define redefine not confine to straight lines
I make refinements polish illuminate make the words shine
I like to blur lines
cross them

yes I’ve got a list
a feminist agenda
a fifty-six-year-old perspective
not a string of invective
a feminine voice not boisterous
nor cloistered
collected thoughts and words
arranged for rhyming
the timing important and here it is
my time

I continue with uncertainty
which is a place I like to be
using words
dangerously

as you might see
my age isn’t stopping me
a hiphop rant
is inside and out of me
we will see what this form
can storm forth, flood from me
cos hiphop is a new construction
a re-form-a-tion
a hip replacement
of poetry
'I grow old, I grow old
shall I wear my trousers rolled?

can I be so bold to
transpose Tom’s quoted and misquoted lines
time-travel them to a new millennium
cross-gender and
render them feminine?

‘do I dare eat a peach?’
let the juice slurp
down my front
insert a fig inside my cunt?

so here I define myself
as a hipster spinster
I see no reason not
to dare to use the ‘c’ word
you see it rhymes with front
I want us to confront this word
this dirty curse word
this everyman go-to vulgarity
this fucking word
reserved
for our worst profanity

in another world it refers to a
sacred place a sublime space
a place of birth
pleasure and exquisite pain
not an expression of hatred
and shame
I don’t want to linger here
cause a fuss or commotion
just want to trigger some notions
point out the paradox
cos in life in private this place is adored
but in language in public it’s spat out
in anger and abuse it’s abhorred
Talk of blood

Poet M menstruates she is in her late thirties she has depression and doesn’t want children she is smart and funny and has a loud voice and dresses in bright colours but she is not so loud that she doesn’t hear me

I want to use blood on my tissue paper poems make polka dotted skirts a bloody pattern perhaps use a quill to write with red ink it is obvious to us we think we congratulate ourselves each other great idea it should be menstrual blood we agree each month her blood in a moon cup she can decant give it me would you do that I ask I’m not sure it would be a gift we are used to blood not queasy or disgusted by the thought the imagery menstrual blood now a memory a shame of stained sheets pants underwear red on white
Needles

I flick pages in the clinic in the acupuncture clinic it must have been woman's day or weekly or monthly woman's own annual 'woman's own manual'
I might write that book

I read an article about Melbourne writer Maxine Beneba Clarke who suffered badly from CARPAL TUNNEL couldn't write couldn't type on a keyboard

I know that pain CARPAL TUNNEL needle treatment to ease the pain it hurts to write

palm up my left hand rests comfortably on two small Thai silk cushions Derek the acupuncturist he inserts and twists needle after twisted needle into my upturned hand look it looks like a pin cushion my pincushion hand upon a silk cushion tiny floral design thai silk blue and purple and pink and green how pretty will I be able to write without this pain
This is online dating

**do you want to dominate me I’ll be your submissive lol**

I used to think that LOL meant lots of love and thought how forward but now I know it’s Laugh Out Loud. Was that funny? It has come to signify that the writer can’t think of anything else to say…

**your [sic] gorgeous**

**no string [sic] attached fun**

my friend and I read this together for a laugh for research

**heyy sexy wanna book up**

a ha ha ha

research

we still find it hilarious

Search: I want a man who can spell and knows how to use grammar correctly most of the time

a man who reads fiction not true life stories not biographies no the Sunday paper isn’t enough not reading for work but for pleasure

I’m a writer a teacher a reader read my profile at least

Love my spelling and my grammar Go commas!!

**heyy pretty want some company?**

**Hey there gorgeous. Want to fuck a younger man?**

**I’m hard for you blue LOL**

my username is bluestocking an intellectual or literary woman

private test in my quest testing for feminism

fail fail xxx fail fail xxx fail fail xxx fail fail xxx fail fail xxx fail fail xxx fail fail xxx fail fail xxx

**Oh babewill you take them off for me? They match your eyes wow you’re sexy where do you live?**

**Oh darling you’re sooooo a MILF how about a BJ? My cock is so hard. I have stamina…lol**

this is online dating

**hi how r u hey there hi how r u hey there hi how r u hey there hi how r u hey there hi how r u hey there hi how r u hey there hi how r u hey there hi how r u hey there hi how r u hey**
Grandma

grandma I want her to say \textit{gr a nd / m} a name me \textit{gr a nd / m} a I say slowly enunciate \textit{gr a nd / m} a she nods enthusiastically and points to me grandma I want her to say \textit{gr a nd / m} a name me \textit{gr a nd / m} a I say slowly enunciate \textit{gr a nd / m} a she nods enthusiastically and points to me grandma I want

my friend tells me she didn’t realise her grandparents had names until she was twelve \textit{this is Grandma and Grandpa and this is Nanna and Pop}

Helen \textit{H e l / l e n} Helen \textit{H e l / l e n} she says it \textit{Henen} she points \textit{Henen}

I am Helen Grandma Helen I am Helen Grandma Helen I am Helen Grandma Helen I am Helen she points and names \textit{clock door rubbish Alpy doll arm nose mouth shoes sit book keys apple Henen}

pretends to pick a green tomato and shakes her head \textit{no} picks a red one with chubby fingers pulls the tiny stalk off and deposits it in the garden and places the tomato in the basket and moves on

grandma I want her to say \textit{gr a nd / m} a name me \textit{gr a nd / m} a I say slowly enunciate \textit{gr a nd / m} a she nods enthusiastically and points to me grandma I want her to say \textit{gr a nd / m} a name me \textit{gr a nd / m} a I say slowly enunciate \textit{gr a nd / m} a she nods enthusiastically and points to me . . . .

Her name is Milla \textit{dear one} in Macedonian I’m told

Her name is Milla \textit{dear one} my name is Grandma
Homage à Hélène

red
red
red
velvet
a red
river
blue
a blue
blue
moon
once
in a
blue
red
river
moon
sea

river to
red be
red
red

black
ink white
milk
on
the
page
these
pink
river
words
seek
the

— 42 —
Anaphora

she says, my new supervisor, she says that’s a great example of an aphora in that piece. You use it quite a bit in your writing

she says an aphora what’s an aphora? no anaphora sounds like an aphora I say anaphora oh anaphora yes anaphora yeh I get it I get it yeh I understand

sounds like double barrel girl’s name Anna-Fora flora a force the female form sounds like a malaise medical condition a disease infection psychiatric condition

Usage: she’s had another attack of anaphora, poor girl

sounds like a garden pest related to aphids sounds like the botanical name for an elegant small deciduous tree with violet flowers in summer sounds like a tricky piano technique

anaphora [uh-naf-er-uh uh] noun Rhetoric. repetition of a word or words at the beginning of two or more successive verses, clauses, or sentences

I record the meetings I have in the academic office with my supervisors I record as I need to remember my memory’s not so good these days tell me again say it again so I remember so I listen over I hear my voice I talk interrupt with my ideas my worries my concerns I say I am nervous too often I say I’m nervous too often too often too nervous often too too nervous she speaks of my anxiety am I that nervous is this anxiety am I anxious is this anxiety is this anaphora a symptom of anxiety is that the clinical name anaphora sounds like the name of a syndrome

one time I listen to the recording I am talking they are listening and making sounds of agreement that sounds like the cooing of pigeons

I listen back it helps me remember not to forget over I listen again yes I like repeated sounds in my poems maybe you can repeat that throughout my supervisors suggests talking about knowhow I know how yes I will do it I know how
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I procrastinate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pull some weeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>punctuate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>massage my neck</td>
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<td>first verse</td>
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<tr>
<td>read aloud</td>
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<tr>
<td>read and smoke</td>
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<tr>
<td>I procrastinate</td>
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<tr>
<td>count words</td>
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<td>sweep the floor</td>
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<td>stare out</td>
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<td>chin in hands</td>
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<td>make a coffee</td>
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<td>hear a line</td>
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<td>read aloud</td>
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<tr>
<td>felt pen notes</td>
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<td>words with friends</td>
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<td>count words</td>
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<td>write more</td>
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<td>make a phone call</td>
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<td>chin in hands</td>
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<td>re read re read</td>
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<td>check zucchinis</td>
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<td>felt pen notes</td>
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<tr>
<td>keyboard strokes</td>
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<tr>
<td>straighten my back</td>
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<tr>
<td>re read</td>
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<tr>
<td>re read</td>
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<tr>
<td>move a phrase</td>
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<tr>
<td>drink and smoke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keyboard strokes</td>
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<tr>
<td>press print</td>
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<tr>
<td>hard copy</td>
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<tr>
<td>write more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stare out</td>
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<tr>
<td>resist a cigarette</td>
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<tr>
<td>move a phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>punctuate</td>
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<tr>
<td>prune the lemon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wash the dishes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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SELF-SAMPLER
Blind date

tomorrow a date with a much younger man I think never
know until they show up I’m nervous he’ll think me too old once we meet is he nervous
I think him too young?

youth is prized desirable

he’s too young too young for what
am I too old too old for what I am

young men online think that older women know it all self aware assured self possessed
know what they like comfortable in their bodies financially secure own real
estate know what they want

desire he thinks his youth his stamina is enough she wants sex that
lasts libido older women are desirable age is just a number

older women are sexperienced know what they like want to pass on their sexual tricks
don’t want to marry take any young tom dick or harry
I'm a student

on the tram I know the unfamiliar faces
pin them in adjectives tack a history
in seconds design a future

my age on this trip privileges
an offer of a seat
from a young woman in shorts
purple hair an art folio
against her knees
a European accent and long legs

she’s a student on exchange
‘No no no thank you’
I am a student
I have a student card
I am on my way to a Masters degree
I can stand
even though I twisted me knee
last week it hurts though locked
myself in the bathroom
and had to jump
out the window a clumsy landing
luckily no one saw me
but then they would have
opened the door
end of story
no story actually
Lines

this opening line
open line hello see lines everywhere of course they are lines everywhere we see them we use them in our speak our spin we follow follow lines stand in them make them common sense common sense common thread through lines in narratives follow through lines I write lines type transcribe

it is noisy outside interrupting this line of thought cackle of lorikeets in the fig tree having a drunken time a roof being replaced next door my neighbour playing Bob Dylan too loud

I want to draw the line with my neighbour and his music and I like Dylan

living alone isn’t enough to write it seems I need quiet yes I know I’m becoming hyper sensitive to noise is it my age I know it interrupts my line of thought can you turn that down

I need to write line after line in a page a book or a computer a blank page to be filled with an idea that is followed a neat line a thread see my book my lines are messy see them in my book lines through lines crossed out not good lines to be kept like these ones
Traces

I am a search party of one
combing the terrain of my place
I trace and retrace my steps
zig-zag and criss-cross
follow dotted tangents
of thoughts and notions

from bedroom to bathroom kitchen shelves desk

I am handicapped by the fact
that I search for my glasses without them
I could laugh at the irony but I don't
I cannot see clearly cannot recall
where I have been what I was doing where I have been
I need to be methodical
it is not my way
and I need to see
My inbox

your name in my
   in
   box
turns me
on my in
   box
   on
my lap
top on
   my
lap
brings
me
closer
to you
news
from
you makes
me
wet
an
inside
tingle
sends me
send me
word word of
you
words
from you
more of
your
words
A new punctuation

I

so I am trying a new punctuation in poetry it’s all about lines and spaces presences and absences the said and unsaid as with many other things music for instance my story embroidery short narratives spaces you will see no commas here if you want commas move on – I start using dashes like Emily – a succession of dashes becomes a neat row of stitching - - - - - but I prefer the cleanness of the space a

v o i d to be filled or not it is not up to me please persevere with the lack of full stops I assume an audience that is happy to engage with experimentation you woman this is écriture féminine this is for us to play with what is this poetry prose posy poesy prosody prix pricks pins pencil pines needles threads I just follow _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _ _

lines and the lack of them show the passing of time spaces also

wrinkles fissures cracks deliberate or accidental

wrinkles sprinkles twinkle little star in time wrinkles appear

distances views geography length time line space

II

a wrinkle in time *** a twinkle in my eye *** it must have been when I was about eleven I read it I loved her name the author Madeleine L’Engle I like French names a wrinkle in time significant to me and I can’t remember why now well now I know I did my research

Madeleine wrote a strong female character (Meg) as the main protagonist with a scientist for a mother and three supernatural women Whatsit Who and Which there are men and boys of course, but the females are the leads I will reread it with an old woman twinkle in my eye reading
III

my poetry does not look like my poetry anymore. I give up punctuation for a while. lines of no standard form or stanzas or commas or capitals at the beginning of lines no full stops

IV

writing typing my poems directly onto the computer has compelled this new punctuation no black felt pen and visual diary this new way of writing for me my fingers dance I am musical on the keyboard I can repeat cut and paste tab tab indent caps play percussive pieces as I space bar and shift key dash space - - - - - - - - - - - - - - oh look it's a line of stitching see Emily?

V

hand needle hand black felt pen thread paper fabric tissue material maternal hand needle sew sow grow propagate impregnate paper fabric tissue ink it can stay DNA maternal material

*L'Engle, M 1962, A wrinkle in time, Square Fish, New York.*
Shrinking

I

the doctor sews me stitches me up nurse
applies waterproof dressing protect it she says support
your leg

the shrink lets me unravel unpicks me
the stuff of me stuffed out of the stuffing eased out of me

I’m fragile since my heart attack the psyche is altered after a heart attack an attack on the heart I cry easily the psyche is altered I am changed

I sit in an oversized green armchair with high arms my right leg stretched out on a matching square ottoman on wheels my psychologist has rolled it over from a forgotten corner a soft silk cushion supports my leg

benign cancerous thingo cut from my shin stitches sutured skin myself held together with four [in situ stitches] sutures benign benign benign

tears

unravel me unravel me unravel me unravel me unravel me

in the comfortable room

breathe she says breathe

II

I see the bird my mother breathing through a plastic mask making a patient of her she needs oxygen her chin tight lips eyes closed relaxed discomfort her face a plastic place the rhythm of it mechanical clinical

breathe in breathe out breathe
**Thick skin**

my self adapts to the online dating world I grow a thick skin and become cautious observe from the high ground, take shelter in arrogance

the skin is mostly impervious, but vulnerability appears in patches of thin-skin-become-delicate

at the abuse of keystroked words I am sensitive

my thick skin makes me ugly so I cover up wear make up play make believe perform sometimes I shed it easily carelessly carefree revel in regeneration

the inevitable regrowth fed by words that can’t be believed words of no value meaningless

in my poetry tower words are invaluable the feminist view from here takes in the disrespect hidden in the landscape glimpses compliments scurrying into holes falsehoods growing

anger lingers in my soft sensitive spots not sure what to do with it where to go with it how to express it punch a bag write it out write it out get it out disappear it

I take up yoga am reminded what brought me to the mat this day the texture of the mat like thick skin

I write and am reminded what brought me to the keyboard

I write myself I write myself I write myself I write myself I write myself I write myself I write myself I write myself soft skinned be careful when you touch
How to make a paper poetry skirt

You will need
❖ a well-structured well-researched well-written poem appropriate for publication
❖ dressmaker’s tissue paper
❖ scissors glue ruler pen pencil paper clips embroidery thread a sharp-pointed needle
❖ computer and printer
❖ a playful attitude patience whimsy fortitude irreverence a sharp mind a good eye

I tissue my words for exhibition display – pretty poems printed on dressmaker’s tissue it’s not an easy process sometimes the ink smudges and sometimes I use the imperfect copy as flaws spot the back story

I sew gather the thread pleat and concertina screw it up the paper into a tight ball toss it into the corner for recycling undoing discover its shape in my delicate

how strange (sinful sacrilegious, delightful) how strange (sinful sacrilegious, delightful)

to be screwing up this text I’m perfectly happy with it

REPEAT

the tissue poem becomes soft fabric spread it out like fabric a textile my hands fingers screw it up the paper into a tight ball unwrap a new shape in my delicate undoing screw it up into a tight ball screw it up now a soft paper it can hold its form screw it up the paper into a tight ball unwrap petticoat layers of frilling lift the skirt and see what’s underneath

I rule faint lines to stitch through, mark centimetres, count lines and years I try all the techniques my natural inclination is to want it done rush wish it was easier for it to be easier than it is less fiddly I persevere take my time

handmade handmaid maiden name sake for heaven’s sake she would say she says take your time this is perfect honour it take your time no rush this is perfect for heaven’s sake
Variations

❖ you can use your creativity to make a whole wardrobe of poetry skirts. Colour them, draw on them, print, layer, glue, embroider, tear strips splatter them with blood.
❖ you can source poems or quotes from your favourite poets or writers. A fun feminist focus could include quotes from Germaine Greer, Virginia Woolf, Helene Cixous, Emily Dickinson – the choices are endless!
Handiwork

she stitches a white
on bloody black
grey history
in silken thread
sewing together
her family line
on furniture from
colonial times

the women inside
embroider
whilst outside
their men enact
genocide

ey they display
their handiwork
and smile
The procurement of blood

I have had blood taken at the pathology clinic and am now sitting in the procedures room at my local doctor’s. I ask Monica the nurse about getting blood from the pathology place for my own use. ‘just ask Simon’ (the doctor) she asks what do you want it for? I am a writer doing a Masters it’s about the matrilineal line I am making tissue skirts with poems on them and I want to bloodstain the skirts.

matrilineal line my mum my daughter granddaughter pain pleasure poetry pathology pitch

‘how much do you want?’ he asks

I have three vials of my blood in the freezer now what a gorgeous thick liquid I angle the vial and see blood’s movement the tiny bubbles I show my friends when they visit tell the story of the procurement

Poet M is relieved not to collect menstrual blood but she enjoyed thinking about it she said

I don’t rush into my use of blood wait for the time when it feels right (vague intangible process?) when I do open the vial not as easy as I’d hoped nearly dropped how to get some out eye dropper I think I have one bathroom first place I looked good but where will I drop it? dear Helen dear Helen but where I search level surfaces for the perfect receptacle in the eyeglass dear Helen dear Helen my grandfather’s eyewash glass how it looks like a mooncup
Over doing it doing it over

I’ve had a heart attack I mustn’t overdo it take it easy rest up don’t overdo it have a nanna nap

in the moonlit bedroom I lay gaze upward imagine the sky temper my breath my heart beats we fumble in the light dark pat each other on the leg acknowledging a job well done we’re still breathing

my lover is nervous I’ll take my last ecstatic breath in breathless sex he will call the police my children I will be naked at least she went doing something she loved over doing it
The écri-couture skirts, were not intended for the page. They were designed to be made into skirts. The four Poet-in-Residence poems were written when I was in my residency at The Hatch Arts Space. They are included in the exhibition at the Urban Writing House.
Figure 1.1  Is she real? – front view
Figure 1.2  Is she real? – side view
Figure 1.3  Is she real? – detail text

Figure 1.4  Is she real? – detail coffee rings
Figure 2.1  I am a poet-in-residence

Figure 2.2  I am a poet-in-residence – detail
Figure 3.1  I own it – front view
Figure 3.2  I own it – rear view
Figure 3.3 I own it – detail
Figure 4.1 Fucking black felt pen – front view
Figure 4.2 Fucking black felt pen – detail
Figure 4.3  Fucking black felt pen – side view
Figure 5.1  The sempstress – front view
Figure 5.2  The sempstress – rear view
Figure 6.1  Four skirts – front view
Figure 6.2 Four skirts – rear view
Figure 7.1  Ashfield skirt

Figure 7.2  Ashfield skirt – detail
Figure 8.1  Pink skirt

Figure 8.2  Pink skirt – detail
Figure 9.1  I bleed skirt
Figure 9.1  I bleed skirt – detail
On July 1, 2014, my daughter Jessie had her first baby, a girl; she is Milla: the first grandchild in the family.

My daughter is a mother. I am a grandmother. I have a grandchild. I can choose a new name. Grandma, Nanna, Granny, Nanny, Grandma, Nanna, Granny, Nanny, Grandma, Nanna, Granny. . .?

Who am I now? How am I a grandmother? How do I become grandmother?

I am a mother. I have had two babies. I know about nappies and breastfeeding and sleep deprivation. My daughter has the internet. She researches. My knowledge and advice is outdated. I'm tired. Cloth nappies in the twenty-first century are very different now, not as I remember them.

I mothered in the olden days. I knitted, I sewed; my mother showed me how.

My mother died when Jessie was two years old. She has no memory of her.

Mum was known by her middle name, Anne; her first name was Una, which she never liked. My father called her Alice. She trained as a dressmaker and taught sewing. In the early years of her marriage, she had a haberdashery shop, 'Raggedy Anne', in the front room of the family home. In the rear was my grandfather’s photographic studio.

As a mother in the 1950s, she knitted and sewed, knitted and sewed.

There we are, my sister and I, in the photographs, dressed in clothes she made. Here is one of Jessie, in that blue jumper with the cable down the centre front. Milla wore it last winter.

I still have some of her handmade clothes and a few sewing samplers that Mum made for her textile training course. I have privileged them the status of heirlooms.
I am a grandmother. I am older, the Elder. How will I contribute to the matrilineal line? I wonder what I can pass on.

I am a writer, a poet. I am older, an Elder. I am a Masters student, an older woman on campus. How will I contribute to the academy? To the line of feminist writers before me and around me? How to make my mark in my literary lineage? I want to be intentional about this.

I knit. I write. I read.

I have added to Mum’s collection of knitting needles over the years. They lie unpaired and unruly in the box, like pick up sticks: a crazy mix of widths, of coloured plastic, metal and faux tortoiseshell. I wonder if the box was designed for knitting needles. Perhaps not, Mum was resourceful and may have seen the box somewhere and known its usefulness immediately.

I fossick, mining for a pair, size eight – find them.

I cast on, feel the slide of wool on my fingers, read the pattern, put on and take off my glasses.

And knit myself into a grandmother.

I am connected, threads and lines and rows.

I see stray strands of my blonde hair are caught up in the knitting. Do I leave them there or disentangle them?

I leave them; my hair, my blond grandma hair woven into a new fabric. I realise also, that there may be traces of my matrilineal ancestors left in the clothes they made for their families.

I write a poem called ‘Heirloom’.

Ideas and questions about inheritance and legacy emerge from the activity of knitting. If I can create myself a grandmother through this practice, can I create and enact myself as poet through the intentional act of writing? What will I contribute to the literary line, to écriture féminine? What is the influence of the feminist writers before me and around me?
Heirloom

My mother knitted and stitched
her self into history
her handwork a primary source
soft proof of a life
the silk nightie French seamed
with an appliqué neckline
my infant bonnet wedding dress
a fancy laced bib
for my daughter.

I count stitches and rows
knit and purl my way
into this modern history
a turquoise pixie hat
the tiniest pink cardigan in cashmere
and merino, a striped blanket.

I click clack with inherited needles
a pair matched in size not colour
the rest dormant and disorderly
in their wooden box
with gold hinges and no lid.

A stray hair in the garment
it can stay DNA
in the knit (K) 1 purl (P) 1
Knit (K) 2 together (tog).

My grand maternity materialises
in the knit pink
stitch after stitch slipped
as I cast off.

The seams are sewn
my lips dampen the thread
I press the end
between thumb and index
and pass it through
the eye of the needle.
This soft labour embodies me
creates my daughter and hers
reproduces my mother and hers
saliva on the yarn, mine
our bloodline in the garment.

My stray hair in the knit (K) 1 purl (P) 1
produces a new heirloom
my DNA it can stay
this cardigan my doing and undoing
me casting off.

Stitching

Not Fraying at the Edges is an experimental memoir that considers the complexity of identity, specifically that of the ageing creative woman. It is a practice-led project that is non-linear and not restricted to one creative medium. I marry the visual aspect of my creative texts with the handcrafting techniques and skills I learnt from my mother and make textual artworks. They form an exhibition that invites viewers to see and read poetry in an environment and context that is new and inspires curiosity.

The poem ‘Heirloom’ was the beginning of an exploration into my identity: who am I as a grandmother? How is this new role integrated into the other facets of my womanhood, my sexuality, my single life, my place in the family, my friendships and my creative work?

My mother never knew I became a writer, or a grandmother, or that her life and mine are explored through my creative work. This project acknowledges and honours the matrilineal line. It also acknowledges the influence of feminist and experimental writers before me, and offers a multi-disciplinary approach to memoir.

This project is influenced by the concept of écriture féminine – Hélène Cixous’ term for women’s writing – within a more contemporary moment and in the context of an older woman’s voice and experience. Experimentation is inherent in my creative writing practice as a way to challenge and rupture phallocentric modes and structures of academic discourse, poetry and autobiography.
THE SENESCENT POET

The Poet as Matriarch

Fifty-six years old, I enter academia as a student. A Masters in Creative Writing. I become a grandmother; I revisit Turkey; I have a couple of heart attacks; I move house. 'Approaching sixty, then seventy', says Artist M, my childless/childfree, oldest, best friend; she sees ageing as a depressing, debilitating decline into loneliness, decrepitude and death. As we approach sixty, years accelerate towards us and old age looms. We are both single. We both live alone. Many, or not so many, happy returns.

I do not share my friend’s concerns about ageing to such an extent. I wonder why. Is this because I have children? She is an artist and does not have children. Her work is how she will be remembered: her art is recorded in books, some of it has become iconic; she has urgent issues to discuss and share, she is an educator, an activist, an artist. She has Dr before her name.

I am a mother and a writer. For most of my adult life, my creative writing and ambitions have been secondary to my mothering. Perhaps the desire to be remembered through my writing has been diluted because of my continuing place in the matrilineal line. I have a new place now, that of a grandmother, another name – Grandma.

Now that my children are independent adults, I have a dedicated room for writing. I can pursue my creativity by playing with language, and in the garden, now that my offspring are ‘off my hands’. I have created a writing archive: published works, journals, press cuttings, promotional material – a photograph of me smiling in my red coat next to the poster for my play outside the theatre – proof of a creative life.

Alongside my writing repository, the contents of plastic boxes labelled ARCHIVE tell something of my mother’s life: photographs, fabrics, stylish dresses, handknits and some embroidery and dressmaking samples she made for her textile course in the 1950s. I framed one of these – a miniature half-jacket, lined, with pockets and buttons, as if it is in profile. In an antique glass cabinet with a mirror at the back, special things are displayed – an
embroidery sampler, an unusual smoky blue and green jug, a plate with an oriental design, and a set of carved ebony elephants, ranging in size. These objects were in the many houses we lived in during my childhood: the homes my mother made. They stabilised the family somehow, instilling in me a reverence for these items – we shared a kinship. The children’s jumpers and garments that I have evoke her presence; I see her threading cotton through a needle, remember standing on the table getting a hem marked – her wooden L-shaped ruler, the fat dressmaker’s chalk – her tools of trade.

There are many photographs of my mother and her family, because her father was a photographer. I have no memory of him (he died when I was two years old), but my cousins, sister and I were able to enter his world up the stairs and into the sunroom at the back of my aunty’s house. It smelt of photographic chemicals and dust. My mother and aunty would sit in the kitchen, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee while we explored.

Here, his life was revealed through objects crammed into floor-to-ceiling glass-doored cabinets that lined the room. There may have been some order to this collection but our interest and discoveries were random and distracted. In boxes, small curled photographs from World War I: the desert, army tents in Egypt, some with place and date in his handwriting on the back, groups of brave-faced men in uniform and scenic shots of open fields of France. My favourite – him in a relaxed pose, semi-seated against a high stool, in a makeshift medical lab in Wimereux, France. His dark-eyed, piercing gaze is aimed directly at the camera. You can see the same steady gaze and relaxed demeanour in photos of my mother.

We handled his photographic equipment, careful with the cameras, played with light meters and zoomed lenses in and out. We wide-opened folios that contained images of Europe – churches, farmhouses – some printed on metal. Large glass negatives of Connie, my grandmother, an opera singer, were unwrapped and held up to the light. We read and laughed at the family caricatures etched on metal and paper – invitations to parties and news of events. There were multiple copies of family photos, Mum as a child in costumes – studio shots – as a pirate, as a baby princess.

This was my mother’s and her sisters’ history, my history, packed into this room – lives packed away in boxes and rooms.

Fifty-eight years old, and my father passes away. He had moved house five months previously and the memorabilia of his life was in a large chest – his university qualifications, photos of his graduation and a moody photo of a youthful man in a large coat. A family reunion booklet, an article about his great grandfather who had been a convict in Tasmania. A certificate and medal showing his life membership of the Labor Party. The chest contains more of my mother’s early life too, as well as remnants of their shared life together – birth certificates, her
school reports (she was a diligent student, enjoyed reading), an invitation to their wedding. Hand-painted, touched-up photos of them on their wedding day, a hand-sewn envelope with my name and a date in Mum’s handwriting; inside, a blond curl of my two-year-old hair.

Also in the chest, her repurposed, hard-covered sketchbook with the back half used as a photo album. The book was originally used for her textile course, showing the makings and understanding of coat design and creation. Glued onto the verso of several pages at the front are tissue paper mock-ups of tiny fashionable coats. Opposite, the precise lines of the individual pattern pieces, and an illustration of a woman modelling the coat, in the style you would see on the packaging of dressmaking patterns.

Surprisingly, in the smallest of three carved wooden boxes, a series of nude photographs of my mother, taken in our house in Ashfield – posing on the couch, next to the fridge, kneeling in front of the fireplace – domestic, intimate cameos of my parents’ private life. She was experienced in the pose. There are less artefacts or heirlooms of my father’s life, although these nude photos of Mum tell me a little more about him and their early relationship.

Do I suppose that because I have children, they will care for me and ensure the memory of my existence is preserved and celebrated through family stories, artefacts, photos and memories? I suppose I do. I cannot assume that the artefacts of my mother’s life will be precious to my children – they have no memory of her. She has always had a presence in our homes; her portrait draws your attention. It was painted when she was fourteen years old, by an artist friend of her father’s. She has a confident look, as if challenging the artist to depict her. Perhaps she looks this way because she knew the artist, and was used to posing. There is a trace of a smile, revealing the gap between her two front teeth.

I have moved house several times in the last ten years, and have many artworks to decorate the walls. The hanging of her portrait always feels significant. It’s like she’s moved with me and has to be settled in also. When I asked my son Jack for his feelings about the painting, he said that he saw the hanging of it as an act of claiming the space as my own. He says he noticed its absence before it was placed on the wall. The presence of her portrait seems to have a stabilising influence on us. My daughter said it makes her grandmother visible in our lives.

Since the birth of Milla, the topic of family resemblances occurs more often – photographs are examined and comparisons made. It has always been asserted, in Mum’s side of the family, that the shape of our faces is similar, and our profiles almost match. I can see this within my family. Even though our faces change as we age, the profiles maintain their outline.
Artist M painted a portrait of Jessie at the same age. The creation of this painting adds to the family narrative, and Artist M has a role to play in it. Milla will likely inherit it, and perhaps speak of her mother and Grandma’s friend, Artist M, who didn’t have children of her own.

I can see the similarity in the shape of Mum’s and Jessie’s faces, their chins have a defining triangular line. Their eyebrows follow the same lines, one slightly higher than the other. Jessie’s look is confident also, but more pensive.

I see no obvious physical resemblance between my mother and I, other than our profiles – Mum’s hair is black – mine blond – her skin olive – mine fair.

Mum told me that she would get annoyed and tired of people peering into the pram at baby Helen, blond and fair-skinned, and saying, ‘So your husband’s fair then?’ She told me how she wanted to say, ‘No the milkman is’. Maybe she did say it. I’ve inherited her sense of humour, I think; witty, observational humour that surprises people by its sudden mischief and sharp perception. We share a quiet rebelliousness and a sense of fun.

I am older than she ever was; my adult life has been without her. I am reminded of a long poem I wrote on the occasion of my fiftieth birthday. It’s a potted history, but also a reflection on how we use time, spend time, make time for things. My necessity to write, at times an urgency to get words down, is connected to the premature death of my mother. I want to make the most out of my time. The following is an excerpt from that poem, ‘The coins jingle’ from my self-published chapbook, *Slip of season*:

…But not so long after this  
I’ve kissed my mother for the last time  
such a short time  
can’t begin to tell you how she’s missed

I’ve had fifty years of life and  
Mum was short changed  
at fifty-one her time was done  
my big girl relationship with her had just begun.  
We were both Mums  
she was gone before our time… (Lucas 2010, p. 31)
A new baby, even the expectation of its birth, prompts memories and the telling of family stories, and creates an opportunity to rediscover and recycle heirlooms and artefacts. As memories fade and stories disappear, they have become significant over time because of their materiality. I consider the things I have of my mother’s and wonder about their significance in the future. Will they continue to be significant? What is an heirloom?

Heirlooms may be items that are passed down through generations with the intention that they will continue to be passed on, such things as engagement and wedding rings, family portraits and medals; or they are objects that take on an historical, cultural and familial significance merely because they belonged to an ancestor – my mother’s knitting needles, for instance, several stylish aprons that she made, the silk nightie she hand-stitched. And they may become heirlooms in the future. Milla wears the smallest of the aprons, pale blue and white-checked gingham, with a bib. I like the turquoise reversible rough linen one with the contrasting tan triangular pocket. My mother’s individuality and creativity are apparent in these aprons. I also think that Mum may have been making a comment on her role as housewife – she may be stuck in the kitchen, but she will bring some style and personality to the domestic.

The artefacts evoke memories, recall moments; her at the sewing machine, her modelling a new dress she has made, adjusting the collar on a shirt – expressing her creativity through the domestic. The aprons re-imagine the activity in the kitchen – the wiping of wet hands, the flour dusting the weave of the linen. I see the deft movement of her hands at work, in the kitchen, but most clearly, using her hands to make garments. I see her threading needles, moistening the thread, flattening it, closing one eye to sharpen her aim, making a knot. I see how this creative activity is a defining attribute of her identity, her self-expression. Her handwork is a contribution to the maternal line and binds it to future generations.

I see how my writing activity is a defining attribute of my identity, my self-expression. My handwork is a contribution to the literary line and binds it to each generation; poems and stories will be passed down.

Grandma was a writer. I remember reading books at her house. She had a whole bookshelf of children’s books from when Mum was little.
She was really independent – travelled alone, lived alone. There were always papers and books on the kitchen table, and in her study. She did cryptic crosswords. She was a passionate gardener too. I’ve still got some jumpers that she knitted me, and a colourful striped blanket.
She wrote a play about online dating based on her experiences. When it was first performed, I was too young to appreciate it. I’ve been thinking that maybe I will make a new production of it.
I’ve got her books. Would you like to read her poetry? She could be really out there.
The Poet as Feminist

In *The Change: women, aging and menopause* (1991), Germaine Greer writes of her friend Sandra, who shares a similar pessimism about ageing as my friend, Artist M. Sandra expresses fear about the future. For her, there is a diminution of herself – a sense of desperation and humiliation, of increasing isolation, and a life without romantic love or sexual fulfilment:

‘Now what do I do?’ Sandra asked. ‘Am I supposed to haunt the singles bars and try to pick up younger men? Am I supposed to descend lower and lower into squalor because I won’t live without love? Or am I supposed to go to bed day after day, until I get too old to work? Am I supposed to become that?’ Her eyes followed the anonymous lady delicately picking her way home, the end of her baguette poking out of the plastic shopping bag. ‘Just thinking about it fills me with terror. I lie awake at night, worrying. What will become of me?’ (Greer 1991, p.12).

Greer says of this fifty-something state: ‘Suddenly something was slipping away so fast that we had no time to register what it might be. All we knew was that it was irreplaceable. The way ahead seemed dark. Somewhere along the line, optimism seemed to have perished’ (Greer 1991, p.11). Greer makes the observation that men of the same age can and do attract women of a younger age and that this maintains a positive self-image about ageing, and women at this age are experiencing menopause, and being described as ‘past their prime’.

I am not as pessimistic as Greer or her friend Sandra at this moment. Sandra sees her life as a descent into squalor; she must see love and financial security as linked. Yes, time is slipping away, certainly moving at a greater speed than the long days and weeks of childhood summers, and sometimes opportunities seem to be not as available, such as employment or romantic relationships.

I hang onto my job. The accountant is surprised at my low income. In my silence, I think, it may be low, but it’s what I’ve got and I’ve got a good life. It’s been a choice to work part-time, so I have time to write, but now the accountant questions the economic sense of this. ‘Are you married? Do you have a partner? How much longer will you work? How much super do you have?’ Retirement and old age have caught up with me, caught me unawares.

A long, long time ago, I was married, and then divorced ten years later, and I am always reminded of the ‘failure’ of that marriage by the necessity to select the ‘divorced’ option to describe my status. I was married, I was divorced. Past tense. Not this ever-continuous past. I’m single. Singledom to Sandra is a lack. Singledom to me is freedom.

In the twenty-first century, Sandra would not need to get dressed up and haunt bars; she can sit safely in her home and scroll lists of eligible men through dating sites on the internet. She
may still have insecurities about ageing and dread loneliness, but she can post a flattering photo, create a profile, and see what transpires. She may even discover that there are men who are attracted to older women, or that singledom is preferable.

It’s not surprising that Sandra is depressed when youth is prized and full of possibility and promise, and middle age and beyond is seen as a slow decline to death. Looking younger than your age is taken as a compliment. Multi-million dollar industries exploit this and market products that purportedly slow the ageing process – from anti-wrinkle cream to cosmetic surgery.

I like it when people are surprised at my age, that I am a grandmother: ‘How old’s your daughter? Really?’

What is ‘looking your age’? What is ‘feeling your age’? What is ‘acting your age’? What is ‘showing your age’?

I stand in front of the mirror. How short can my skirt be? I like wearing this length and I will continue to until I choose not to. I have shapely legs. They are not unblemished. My hair has miraculously stayed blond, and I wear it long. Unlike my peers, I haven’t had to dye my hair to hide grey. For some of my friends the decision not to colour their hair was an affirmation and acceptance of their ageing.

When I know I will be on show – a date, a significant event or a public performance – I make up my face. I don’t do this daily. When I look close up, I see my wrinkles, blemishes, and, sometimes the sudden appearance of coarse hairs on my chin and around my mouth, some black. I’m good with the tweezers now.

I have my chin and lip waxed when the growth of hairs accelerate. I go to a cheap beautician in Footscray staffed by petite Vietnamese women. ‘You want eyebrow too? You like sexy eyebrow, make your eye bigger. You beautiful now. Doesn’t matter your age. And I know, you young at heart.’

So at heart, am I full of possibility and promise? I think so. As an older single woman I am free to make my own decisions, travel without consultation or agreement about itineraries and budgets. I’ve undertaken further education and embrace a creative life; I’ve written a play, had it performed. I can write an eccentric life story, knit a striped blanket for a baby, play in the garden, skip dinner, say yes to activities. Say no.

My house is set up for my needs only. I have a study, a room I enter to write. An elegant small armchair for reading by the window. I need immersion in my practice, and silence. I am used to this, and find it hard to imagine sharing my space – a space that I claimed only in later life.
There is a freedom with this age. I visit my family and they visit me. I’m not bothered by a grandchild who sometimes behaves badly. There is more fun and laughter in my life. Having a grandchild reminds me of my mothering and my mother’s mothering. Through the heirlooms and artefacts that I have, Milla is aware of our shared maternal history. She will know my poetry through the books I have written. She plays with the ebony elephants, and is learning that the portrait of the girl with black hair is my mother, Jessie’s grandmother and her great-grandmother.

Artist M and I are meeting friends for a birthday celebration. We walk to the African restaurant. Her mother has recently died and we are discussing the task of dealing with all her stuff. We wonder what will become of our possessions when we pass away. Artist M has an extensive art collection and a large library of books. She collects antique furniture and items: lace, gloves, jewelry, handmirrors, firearms, and uses them to create artworks. She embroiders and beads violent images on beautiful things (Evans 2017).

**Artist M:** I took a whole lot of Mum’s things to the op shop that I know she loved, they were precious to her, but I didn’t want them, I have so many other things of hers and my grandmother’s that are special. But it makes me think about what I’ll do with all my stuff.

**Poet H:** Have you decided where you want it to go?

**Artist M:** I keep changing my mind on who to leave all my art to. That’s why I need to become famous, so my art will be cared for, everything will be significant, ‘valued as a contribution to the discussion of colonisation and reconciliation’.

**Poet H:** That’s a good motivation.

We laugh a little. At this moment, Greer is right: life is slipping away, bit by bit. We enter the restaurant.

**Woman A:** How’s the Masters going? This is delicious. Fufu? You were going to write a play.

**Poet H:** It’s changed now. It’s a sort of a memoir.
Woman A: I can't eat eggs, are there eggs in this? I've cut out sugar, red meat, yellow cheese. They disagree with me. I've cut down on dairy, buying gluten-free. I've been seeing this great doctor at an anti-ageing clinic.

Poet H: I think it's barley flour, and ricotta. At the moment, it's called 'Not Fraying at the Edges – women, ageing and creativity'. My research question keeps changing.

Woman A: I thought it was about online dating?

Poet H: Initially, but then I took a break, six months. It was when Jessie was pregnant, it changed direction.

Woman A: How so?

Poet H: Becoming a grandmother – I wasn't sure about how to be one – Jessie seemed to have everything handled – she's so able. I felt that my mothering knowledge was out of date – I wasn't sure how I'd contribute.

It also made me think of Mum and her short experience of grandmothering.

I decided to knit – first, a cardigan for a newborn, tiny, and a hat. I used Mum's knitting needles – it felt so right to be using my hands.

And the act of knitting, the process, inspired a poem. It's called 'Heirloom'.

Woman C: Does it make you feel old?

Poet H: Not really, it makes me think about generations and that now there is a new one; how generations pass, how I am at the top now.

Woman A: Or the bottom...

Poet H: At best, I'm proud of this new status. And the new love I feel. I can't imagine life without her now. It rekindles my feelings of when I became a mother. I love having a granddaughter, seeing Jess a mother and Jack an uncle. All new material.

Woman A: And at worst?

I think about my transient place in the matrilineal line, and get sad about Mum.

Woman C: So is there still stuff about online dating? You've got so many great stories. You're so brave, putting yourself out there.
Woman B: So now it's about becoming a grandmother? Doesn't sound as sexy as online dating.

Poet H: It's still sexy, don't worry. From MILF to GILF.

Woman B: What?

Poet H: Mothers I'd like to fuck – Grandmothers…

Woman C: Really?

Woman A: So do you get younger guys contacting you?

Poet H: More than I would have thought. They think their youth is desirable. It's only about sex. They think I'd jump at the chance. I got a message the other day, opening with 'Hi cougar'. It came while I was working on my dissertation. This bit, in fact.

Woman C: Did you answer?

Poet H: Couldn't help myself. I mostly ignore them, but sometimes in the interests of research, or if I'm in the mood, I'll answer.

Woman A: It's like just because you're on a dating site you'll take all comers.

Woman C: Do you look like a cougar in your photo? Cleavage? Do you say you want a young guy?

Poet H: No, no cleavage. There's an age range you can pick, but not 30 and I say not to contact me if under 40.

Woman B: So you didn't take him up on it?

Poet H: Nah, his spelling and grammar were atrocious.

Stallion30: hi cougar

Me: Why say that? I'm just older than you. I'm not pursuing you.

Stallion30: I'm pursing you plus I think its a good term to be a cougar :) your hot Lol

Me: a cougar is a woman who pursues younger men. I'm not.
‘Independent feminist seeks loving equal’

I laugh and despair at the headline, and dare myself to do it. Both my daughter and son say I’ll get no takers. I agree with them. I worry about harassment and abuse. But I desire a fulfilling relationship, and have the vain hope that there is a man who reads that headline as confident and attractive. Why is it laughable? But then, I demur; how to maintain my independence?

Poet H: I’ve been inventing crazy ‘headlines’ for online dating.

Woman A: Like what?

Poet H: The one above – read it.

Woman A: Ha ha. Don’t hold your breath.

Woman C: How about ‘hairy older woman seeks toyboy’?

Woman B: ‘Hot granny for fun times.’

Woman A: ‘Spinster seeks sex.’

Poet H: ‘Poet desires muse and foot masseur.’

Woman B: ‘Short woman needs a man to reach the top shelf.’

Woman D: So is it poetry?


I’ve been printing some of them on tissue paper. Writing in a format to create a visual effect. Using the lines and spaces between words.

Woman D: Tissue paper?

Poet H: Dressmaker’s tissue paper I mean, making them into skirts, sewing the paper, pleating.

Woman D: How big are they?
Poet H: They’re miniature, I use A4 size paper.

Woman D: I’d love to see them.

Poet H: I’ll be having an exhibition. I’ll let you know. Read the next chapter on practice and you’ll get more of an idea about what led me there.

In my study, the Macquarie dictionary, my ex-husband’s, is on the desk next to me. An accidental settlement item, his name printed on the title page. I also discover that my copy of *A room of one’s own* is actually his, the marginal notes what he considered noteworthy. Has he got my copy? I digress.

The Macquarie is a big fat ready reference, and heavy – a generous book, but now over thirty years old. I open it, I always try to get as close to the word I’m looking up as possible – I’m looking up ‘spinster’. I’m ten pages out – I lick my finger and flick to page 1632.

You can use the computer, you know. Yes I know.

I prefer paper. The object. Macquarie and I have been together for a long time. Its spine is coming away a little, and the stitching is visible in some sections. The first few pages are creased and crinkled. I try to flatten the pages out, but they spring back. The paper is thin and delicate, and now slightly yellowed. I am reminded of the dressmaker’s pattern pieces, the printed instructions. There are other creases here and there throughout, and I spread out the wrinkles as I slide my finger down the columns.


I think, maybe the spinster was proficient at her labour and earned a living from it; maybe she liked the independence of this and never had the need of a man.

And what about this book I have, *Womanwords,* what does that say about spinster? Written by Jane Mills, it’s a niche dictionary that includes the etymology of words specifically related to women. From a feminist perspective, she investigates the semantic history and evolution of these words. In her introduction, Mills writes that ‘by selecting certain words, all of which relate to women, and exploring how, when and perhaps why, these words changed their meaning, I found a means by which to examine the balance of power between the genders within Anglophone society’ (*Mills* 1991, p.xii). I would add here, *patriarchal* society.
Mills enters almost 1500 words on ‘spinster’. She quotes references and reports on usage from fourteenth century to modern day, demonstrating over and over again the negative image of the spinster. She concludes this entry with, ‘Perhaps behind the attacks on spinsters and the negative connotations of the word lies the patriarchal fear that women, or at least some women, can actually do very well without men’ (Mills 1991, p. 228). And of course, women can and do choose to be alone to pursue their own creative ambitions.

I write a series of ten short prose pieces called ‘Spinster’ inspired by this research. They are linked thematically and stylistically. The first in the sequence includes a definition and etymology, and is followed by short narratives that develop ideas seeded in this opening piece. I explore the act of spinning, in the literal sense of physically spinning a thread, and in the metaphorical use, that of spinning stories/yarns. My history and generations are also recalled through the factual information about silkworms. I consider aspects of identity and the performance of roles: myself as a thread in the matrilineal line, as a writer, performer, feminist and as an older single woman:

II. ‘I’m seated, performing the act of spinning…’
IV. ‘I’m seated, performing the act of writing…’
VIII. ‘I’m standing, performing the act of poet…’
(from ‘Spinster’)

The form of ‘Spinster’ was experimental for me – I combine diverse and repeated styles in the pieces to create a narrative: reference and non-fiction, first-person perspective, the unknown narrator and in the most intimate piece, third-person perspective. The photographic images of silk, both spun and raw, are mine – I spun the wool from the raw silk that was harvested from the silkworms kept by my mother’s family.

I become interested in the word hipster. I wonder if it’s a new term for a twenty-first century hippy. My outdated Macquarie is showing its age here, as there is no mention of people in its definition. Macquarie is definitely not hip: ‘(of trousers, skirts, underpants) hanging from the hips, not from the waist’ (The Macquarie dictionary, 1981, p.829).  

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I google it. Dictionary.com (Dictionary.com 2017) defines a hipster as, ‘a usually young person who is trendy, stylish or progressive in an unconventional way; someone who is hip’. The Urban Dictionary, a hip resource in itself, tells me that hipsters, ‘value independent thinking, counter-culture, progressive politics, an appreciation of art and indie-rock, creativity, intelligence, and witty banter’ (Urban Dictionary 2017). I read on to find that hipsters are in their twenties and thirties. Am I too old to be a hipster? I vote Greens, subscribe to independent radio, grow my own veggies and dress myself from op shops. I even embroider and knit, repurpose objects. And I’m proficient in witty banter. Am I just an old hippy?

I, the ageing poet, the senescent sensual sexual sentient essential poet feels the influence of Hélène Cixous here. In ‘The laugh of the Medusa’, she writes: ‘writing is precisely the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural structures. (1975, p.419)

So, I write a subversive poem. I choose a form that encourages wordplay. ‘Hipster Spinster Rap’ is intentionally provocative and unpredictable. I want to disrupt the expectations of the reader and listener, and to create uncertainty about what the poem is about where it may lead and indeed what I am about.

how much fun I can have with serious stuff I indulge in a new form of wordplay
I’m proficient in witty banter word fun out loud hipster and spinster
half-rhyme I have a point to make alert to rhythmic tricks
hipster spinster hip spin hip stir form hip hop linguistic flips free
wheeling feeling dealing words here get real here

‘Hipster Spinster Rap’ has a clearly stated ‘feminist agenda’. I want to make mischief. I’ll show them, I will make this rap form my own. I can be hip, I’ll shock them. I’ll get them to think about their sexist, ageist views, the language they use, alert them to the stereotypes they have about older women. ‘Hipster Spinster Rap’. Go sister! I am a ‘hipster spinster’, a groovy name, ironic, full of alliterative effects and semantic incompatibilities. I am refining my voice.

So, is this hip-hoppish rappish rant a lyric essay? Read on. I unpick this poem line by line in the following chapter.

Poet H: Do you remember those conversations we’ve had about the use of the word ‘cunt’?

Woman D: For your research?

Poet H: I remember you saying that you reserved it for the worst person, the worst act. For when you were really angry.
**Woman D:** So you did write a poem about it?

**Poet H:** Partly – it’s called ‘Hipster Spinster Rap’.

I am an older woman writing and saying the word *cunt* in a poem, to shock, yes, but more importantly, to provoke an enquiry into its usage, to invite the reader/listener to reflect on their own use of the word and the associations they have. How did a name for women’s genitalia come to this?

**Woman E:** It’s feminist stuff, then?

**Poet H:** Feminism is at the heart of it – but it’s also about ageing – here we all are, single women in our fifties, and we still don’t have equality – not even wage parity.

**Woman E:** Yeh, but things are so much better than they were in our mothers’ days.

**Poet H:** Yes, but there’s still more to do – the pay gap, for instance. And getting into a top job. It’s happening, but it’s slow.

**Woman A:** And then the way women are treated once they are in positions of power – what Julia Gillard had to deal with…

**Woman E:** Yes, but she had to expect that it would be difficult.

**Poet H:** Of course, the job of Prime Minister is difficult, but she had to deal with sexist and misogynist views and language underpinning everything. Remember the placards Abbott stood in front of at Parliament House: ‘ditch the witch’ and ‘Ju-liar…Bob Browns [sic] bitch?’

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**In 2016, representation in government and in the higher echelons of corporations are not equal. Recent Australian statistics sourced from the ABS and published by the Workplace Gender Equality Agency demonstrate the inequity in salaries and positions of power within organisations:**

- the full-time average weekly ordinary earnings for women are 16.2% less than for men;
- average superannuation balances for women at retirement are 52.8% less than those for men;
- women hold 14.2% of chair positions, 23.6% of directorships, as well as represent 15.4% of CEOs and 27.4% of key management personnel in Agency reporting organisations;
- one-quarter (25.1%) of Agency reporting organisations have no key management personnel who are women.

When we look at the representation of women in the Federal government of Australia, it is clearly unrepresentative of the 50.22% of women in Australia. In Abbott’s Cabinet there was 5% women; under Turnbull’s leadership, 13 of 76 (17%) ministers are women. (Workplace Gender Equality Agency 2016).

**Woman A:** So how’s work going?

**Woman C:** Things are pretty bad – funding cuts and restructuring. Some people will
have to go, and our department has been cut back already. We've got a new manager who is harassing one of the younger women. He's creepy. He pauses at her desk and tries to guess her bra size. He leans down and says '12C? DD?'

**Poet H:** Has she said anything?

**Woman C:** She will, but she's not sure who to speak to. She's scared, he's the manager.

And everybody's expected to take on extra work. We do it – we don't want to lose our jobs. I'd love to leave if I felt confident about getting another job but I'm not. I'm getting too old...

You would think, wouldn't you, that all our experience, knowledge, contacts would count for something, but it doesn't seem to. I've had a few really successful interviews, the one at Melbourne Uni – a thirty-something got the job.

**Woman A:** Yes, I heard. Everybody thought that job had your name on it.

**Woman C:** Yeh, I know. There was quite a bit of travel, and I would love that – this is another thing – my children are off my hands. I'm free in that sense. I've got less family responsibilities. I can be more flexible, available.

Women are now gaining positions of power and there is an illusion of equality; we can say, 'Look at Thatcher, Merkel, Gillard and Clinton' – they have not been held back. However, this power does come at a cost, as Julia Gillard, in her misogyny speech (2012) so clearly demonstrated, where she described the sexism that she had endured in her time as the first female Prime Minister of Australia. In the 2016 US election campaign, Clinton's gender was used against her as a reason why she would not be fit and appropriate as President. Donald Trump tweeted in 2015: 'If Hillary Clinton can't satisfy her husband, how the hell can she satisfy America?' (Thompson 2015). and in an interview: ‘She doesn't have the look. She doesn't have the stamina’ (Cohen 2016). The opinion here links ability to her looks. Age is being held against her.

**Poet H:** What was I talking about? Does that happen to you? When your train of thought is interrupted, you lose track?

**Woman A:** Don't we all? It's a bit scary – I worry about dementia.

**Poet H:** I don't think it's dementia, just getting old. Were we talking about spinsters?
In this recent book, Kate Bolick offers her own definition of a spinster, firstly contriving the notion of the ‘spinster wish’ – the desire to be alone, and, as she emphasises; ‘It’s a wish, a yearning, not a plan’ (2015, p. 61). She suggests ‘spinster’ be used as:

shorthand for holding onto that in you which is independent and self-sufficient, whether you’re single or coupled. . .if you’re single, whether never-married, divorced, or widowed, you can carry the word spinster like a talisman, a constant reminder that you’re in very good company – indeed part of a long and noble tradition of women past and present living on their own terms (Bolick 2015, p.25).

Bolick often romanticises the notion of spinsterhood, ignoring the suspicion, derision and stigma attached to women who haven’t married. In her self-exploration of her personal life and writing ambitions, and alongside research into women writers before her, she poses the question: ‘Did becoming a writer require being alone?’ (Bolick 2015, p. 270). This is a question that often comes to my mind. I wonder how I would incorporate another person, a man, into my writing life. I need solitude and the freedom to immerse myself in my practice. It may not be always at the keyboard, putting words down – there is thinking time, staring out the window, having a bath, doing menial tasks, but I am thinking, allowing ideas and words to form. I return to the keyboard. I couldn’t cope with interruptions to this practice.

Historically, the spinster was stereotyped derogatively as a woman who was ‘childless, prissy, and repressed’ (Oxford Dictionary 2018, usage). In Western cultures, she could also be an economic drain and embarrassment to her family, although useful as a carer for ailing and ageing parents. Mrs Bennett in Jane Austen’s Pride and prejudice sees ‘the business of her life [...] to get her daughters married; its solace was visiting and news’ (Austen 1974, p. 53). An unmarried woman was pitied and scorned. The spinster, who may have chosen singledom (unthinkable!) to pursue her own interests or education, was seen as eccentric and, again, undesirable.

Like spinster, the term ‘bluestocking’ came to be applied in a negative and derogatory
way; here, toward women who sought equal opportunity to pursue intellectual and artistic ambitions. Bluestockings were stereotyped as women who were sexually undesirable and lacking the necessary skills and attributes of a wife. In Womanwords Mills prefaced her entry on the term ‘bluestocking’ with a quote from Nietzsche that illustrates this derogatory and offensive view of educated women: ‘When a woman inclines to learning, there is usually something wrong with her sex apparatus’ (Mills 1991, p.30).

The spinster and bluestocking were said to be lacking in some way; lacking a husband, lacking a child, perhaps without intelligence or sexual desirability, and, as Nietzsche proposes, not right in her body. A single woman, and especially one who chose not to marry, was not conforming to the accepted patriarchal structure and was a threat to the status quo, which favoured men. Could it be that many spinsters and bluestockings chose to pursue their art, follow their creative and intellectual passions and ambitions, eschewing the traditional domestic role of wife and mother? Did they know, that to realise their art, they needed to live alone?

Even now, and even though 40 per cent of women in Australia between twenty-five and sixty-four are single, this ‘lack’ of a husband or partner continues to be viewed as not normal (Rosewarne 2016, p. 36). Ergo, unless a woman is partnered, she is lacking. In her article in Meanjin, Lauren Rosewarne, who defines herself as single, recounts the story of being placed at the ‘lesbian table’ at a wedding:

> Apparently being a single heterosexual – being partnerless – linked me most closely to seven crunchy granola rural lady-gays. Apparently I lacked sufficient experience nodding my way through another fascinating mortgage rate/school zones/tennis-karate-gymbaroo conversation. She goes on to say, ‘that my normal, that the normal of my similarly aged single friends, isn’t totally normal in a culture where coupling up forever, like those Cape Barren geese is still the accepted norm’ (Rosewarne 2016, p.30).

> **Woman C:** Whatever happened to that criminal lawyer? I remember you loved his voice, his vocabulary.

> **Poet H:** He rang me the other day. I didn’t pick up, but he left a long message about how repentant he was.

> **Woman C:** What happened with him?

> **Poet H:** Lots of things. . .but I began to feel uneasy about some of the plans he had
for ‘us’. He questioned my decision to undertake a Masters, said he’d support me, my writing, said I didn’t need a Masters. He was a barrister, a master at presenting a case – and oh so eloquent in his argument. I could see he would want to dominate me.

He wanted to set up house with me.

I was re-reading *A room of one’s own* at the time and realised not only did I need a room of my own, but a life on my own. I reflected on how my mother’s life was not her own, that Dad was the breadwinner, so his career choices determined the course of our lives. It was not until my sister left home that she had a dedicated sewing room. It was a room I imagine she had always wanted, a room where her creative projects could be fulfilled in peace.

I studied Woolf’s small, seminal work in my last year of high school in 1975, when feminism was experiencing a second wave and the issues had direct relevance for me, as I developed into a young woman and considered my future. The generation of baby-boomers in the preceding decade, the ‘swinging sixties’, challenged cultural norms, especially those related to women. The traditional domestic role of the woman as wife and mother was debated and challenged, as new opportunities became available to women through increased access to higher education, employment and fertility control. Freedom was at the heart of this rebellion: freedom of choice, and more importantly for women, the choice over their bodies, freedom of speech and sexual expression; freedom from culturally constructed roles and freedom from discrimination. Equality was the critical issue – there may have been freedom, but was it equitable? These issues were also popularised by the publication of Greer’s *The female eunuch* in 1970.

As a seventeen-year-old, I could see how opportunities for women were far more open than in Woolf’s time, and my mother’s. I had an optimistic, perhaps naïve view that in my imagined future, I would not be constrained by patriarchal systems and attitudes.

Some forty years later, I return to Woolf, and see the injustices of inequality in my contemporary world more potently. There are the continuing voices of women accusing men in power of sexual harassment and abuse, which has followed the revelations about Harvey Weinstein, the Hollywood movie producer. This has given women a collective voice, and the #metoo campaign has allowed women to add their voices to a flood of personal stories.

The personal, indeed, is the political – and the cultural. I am unashamedly inspired by Woolf’s clarion call: ‘Thus when I ask you to write more books I am urging you to do what will be for your good and for the good of the world at large’ (Woolf 1928, p.108). Perhaps she would be gratified by the women who have spoken and written about sexual harassment and abuse, but also angered that men in the twenty-first century use their power to suppress the voices of women.
Woolf acknowledges that whilst many barriers to women’s education and participation in society were in place, some doors were opening a little for women to be treated equally: the right to vote and own land, and education was becoming more accessible. Women, as writers, were no longer encouraged to sign their work ‘Anon.’ or to use male pseudonyms in order to be taken seriously, or to be published. She urges women to write about a woman’s experience of the world, to challenge patriarchal structures and find their own way, own style, write the reality of their lives, as women.

This is an important book, the critic assumes, because it deals with war.
This is an insignificant book because it deals with the feelings of women in a drawing-room. A scene in a battlefield is more important than a scene in a shop (Woolf 1928, p.108).

Woolf suggests that, as writing was considered a man’s domain, it was his interests that determined what was read and published. The view was masculine, the feminine world trivialised, the domestic life considered mundane, and an inclination to write about emotions unimportant. Of course times have changed, however her book still resonates with me, perhaps because it was the first book I read that discussed the role of women as writers, and issues around feminism. It was historical, but it was still relevant, and still it is. There remains a nervousness that my creative writing is seen less worthy in the academy because it is primarily concerned with a woman’s experiences and emotions. At times, this has resulted in a struggle to see my poetry and this dissertation as being a contribution to knowledge in an academic context.

Greer, writing in *The change: women, aging and the menopause* in 1991, (Greer 1991) comments on this same lack of stories and images of older women in popular culture. She is critical of the notion that women’s stories, especially those of middle-aged women, are not of interest: ‘How can this be, I thought, our hearts break, our lives are overwhelmed, spectres of pain and fear loom at every turn, and this is “nothing happens”? If there is a belief that nothing happens to middle-aged women, it is only because middle-aged women do not talk about what does happen to them’ (Greer 1991, p. 27). If women’s lives are to be valued, they
must be put at the centre of a narrative, not on the periphery. Woolf also makes this point, saying that unless women are writing about their lives, readers will not have an opportunity to engage with a woman's experience of life. Greer refines this in *The change: women, aging and the menopause* (1991), with her focus on older women, specifically in relation to menopause and post-menopause. Fortunately, the publishing industry does see women's stories as worth publishing in these contemporary times. The older woman's story is seen through such memoirs as Magda Szubanski's *Reckoning: a memoir* (2015) and Helen Garner’s *Everywhere I look* (2016).

**Artist M:** I was having a clear-out the other day and found some articles that you might want to read. The French feminists – Irigaray, Kristeva, Cixous.

**Poet H:** I'm re-reading Cixous at the moment, *Laugh of the Medusa* (1975) I always seem to be re-reading her. I've got books on how to interpret her, and they are difficult also.

**Artist M:** That's the one I've got. I remember it being a bit over-the-top.

**Poet H:** Certainly passionate – exuberant. She uses a lot of destructive and violent metaphors – ‘eruptions, explosions, seizing, shattering’. But alongside these she has womanly images of abundance and outpouring. Images of water, movement, flow. ‘She writes in white ink’ – mother’s milk.

**Woman A:** I like that – feminine and creative.

**Poet H:** It also ties nicely with my ‘matrilineal line’ theme so well. It evokes a womanly creative force, almost primal. I'll use it somewhere.

**Woman A:** But then, wouldn't white ink disappear?

It reminds me of magic writing – a code – maybe you have to read it, see it in a certain way to really ‘see’ it, understand it.

**Poet M:** Maybe that's her point – women not being seen or read or heard. She's angry about the silencing of women's voices.

**Artist M:** Imagine the hate mail she'd receive. I wonder if she's on Facebook.
Poet M: Is she still alive? How old would she be?

Poet H: Yes, she'd be about eighty.

Poet M: You could befriend her. Remember you wrote that imaginary online chat conversation with Virginia Woolf – you could do the same with Cixous, but it could be real!

My immediate reaction is a bodily one, a kind of scoff, and then an uneasiness in my gut. Earlier on in this project I had cast around for allies. I wanted a smart friend to be radical and brave with – an artist, writer, a smart woman with experience and confidence. A mentor, a literary older sister or big cousin. I was introduced to Hélène Cixous. I didn’t understand her half the time, a lot of the time, actually, and still don’t, but I love her passion, her fearlessness, her not giving a fuck, doing things for the subversive fun of it. She scares me. She’s devoted her life to scholarly feminism. She’s a revolutionary, a radical. We need radicals, I’ve always said. I’m just entering the feminist realm as a writer. I like to think she would enjoy my self-sampler.

We have the same first name. I could be Hélène-Marie, so Frenchy so chic.

Poet H: She’s in the background all the time in this project – ‘foundational’ as my supervisor would say.

Poet M: Cixous uses metaphor so well – and so do you – the lines, threads in your work. Your work has potency also. You could send her your poetry.

Artist M: She’s like a turbo-charged Woolf, isn’t she?

Poet H: What I’m finding is that Woolf, Cixous, Greer, are all urging, demanding that women write, to develop a feminine voice, not hold back – writing that is not to be constrained or self-censored. Cixous calls it écriture féminine – women’s writing.

Poet M: Cixous and Woolf love the long sentence don’t they?

Poet H: Which makes Cixous particularly hard to quote – she goes on and on…

I experiment with genre and form to challenge patriarchal structures and investigate how the memoir or personal narrative may be written and read. My poetry, poetic prose and artworks are woven into the expansive and flexible framework of écriture féminine – a framework that encourages experimentation and subversiveness. I need a new term for my eccentric memoir. I call it a self-sampler.
Poet M: Self-sampler?

Poet H: I explain in the next chapter about practice.

The self-sampler and this dissertation explore the complexity of identity, with me, an older woman at its heart. It is located in various and changing traditions of feminism and is particularly expressed through écriture féminine. They are inclusive, fluid collectives that are concerned with cultural and political change. I feel encouraged – given courage to contribute my senescent woman’s voice to these movements. I draw strength from these feminist writers – Woolf, Greer and Cixous, as they have influenced my feminism at critical moments in my life. They are my literary Elders, and now I add my distinct voice to their line of feminist discourse. As I show in ‘Hipster Spinstor Rap’, I put a discussion of ageing on the feminist agenda through poetry.

I am inscribing myself over moments at this time. I am being this woman at this age. I have an older woman’s gaze.

in a manner befitting I produce a mature body of work – a body of mature work – work of a mature body
oh cixous cixous can I write like you
ania back in the day held the view that the uni-versity wasn’t creative enough for you
but it’s a new milieu
I reckon
they’re ready for me
and they’re more than ready for you

oh Cixous

oo oo ooo

ready for writers
like me and you

oo oo oo

I’m an elder now
this notion knits itself in playful lines
draws me out

I spin a fine
literary thread passed
from my elders

the women passed by

I’ve got a body of work in mind
I mind my body yes I do mind I’m working my body my mind I’m a body of work of words a lovely labour

a body

a labour of love words

bleeding

inking

pinking

the page

birth ing of a work of words my body of worklovewords

Woman A: You should call your memoir Helen the Brave.

Artist M: I’ll do the illustrations. I can see it – a buxom breastplate, weapon – a pen held forth in one hand, mobile phone in the other. Head up, your hair flowing out behind you, an intrepid and determined look.

Woman C: Going from one date to another.

Poet H: Or poetry reading.

Woman B: With Milla on your shoulders.

Poet H: Or knitting.

Woman A: You could be reading your poetry, standing at a microphone.
Poet H: Or sitting at the keyboard.

Woman A: In beautiful contemplation.

Woman D: Surrounded by messy piles of paper and books stacked precariously.

Poet H: Triumphanty pressing ‘send’ or ‘print’.

hey there. sorry I couldn’t be there tonight. Having fufu?

Hi Dee, we’ve just been thinking my memoir should be called Helen the Brave.

Perfect!!!! 😊

We think so.

Helen the Brave. Well you are brave – the things you are prepared to write, say. Thanks for sending hipster spinster btw. Love it.

Thanks, I loved writing it. I love performing it too, although sometimes my legs get shaky.

It makes me brave too. Onward!

Can’t really chat now. Better go. xxx

To write a memoir, or autobiography, self-sampler or sell a ‘kiss and tell’, is to make oneself vulnerable. Is that brave?

To be brave I have to be naked, take off the armour, take risks, and try to maintain a sense of humour. Not always possible. UK poet, songwriter, rapper, playwright and novelist, Kate Tempest (2013), says that performance is more an act of taking something off, stripping, rather than putting on something extra for performance, costume. This can be said of writing memoir also.

Artist M once painted full body portraits of herself and her late husband, naked. The paintings were displayed side by side in the NGV. Naked! That was brave. Full length. To do that she must have viewed herself intently in the mirror; she painted these portraits in the days before ‘selfies’. She confided that she had slimmed her thighs. I consider this, as I wonder how exposed I want to be, what I will and won’t say and how I will say it. Cixous calls for women to be brave, to be unashamed and unsuppressed in expression of the female view, the female gaze – this expression sourced through experience, intuition, emotional response and research.
Not fraying at the edges expresses my gaze, at this age and of this time. Pretty soon I have doubts about the moniker of Helen the Brave, because, in the role of aspiring Masters student, I often feel like Helen the Fraud, Helen the Anxious, Hélène La Misérable. In my worst moments, I feel I don’t have the academic rigour required, that I am a poet out of place, trying to find my niche.

I arrange colourful magnetic letters on the fridge HELEN THE BRAVE. I try it on as an aspiration, an inspiration, an affirmation.

The various monikers expose the contradictions of who I am. My poetry and poetic prose demonstrate the messiness of me as I attempt to draw all the tangled threads together into a well-considered and well-crafted text. Is this me? I struggle to articulate what it all means. I call on Helen the Resilient, the Curious, Helen the Able.

Inherent in the nature of creative experimental work are failures, unexpected tangents and outcomes that lead to new lines of thought and practice. While I talk here of writing a kind of memoir, I also think of sewing and knitting as it connects me to my mother and the creative woman in me which seeks expression. The clothes she made for herself, my sister and I, were the results of a creative woman expressing her self.

Sewing and handcrafts exist in a feminine domain. In the Western world it was what women have been expected to do, and allowed to do, in a culture where men have made the rules and women must follow. Handcrafts contributed to the household through the making and repairing of clothing and linen; women also sewed to support war efforts. These domestic skills were passed down to female children and maintained the patriarchal system. This activity also kept them at home and under control. Subversively, quietly and defiantly Emily Dickinson hand-sewed her handwritten poems into miniature books. She used the metaphors of this domestic activity in her poetry. The recent film about her life, A quiet passion (Davies 2016), shows her seeking permission from her father to write between the hours of three in the morning until dawn, so she will not disturb anyone. The film depicts her enactment of this quiet passion, but also shows an angry woman, living in a cult of domesticity, determined to be her intelligent, articulate self. The enactment of Dickinson’s passion in the film is powerful and moving.

Dickinson’s resolve would have been described as wilful – a term investigated by Sarah Ahmed, in Living a feminist life (2017). ‘Wilful’ is an adjective mostly used to describe girls and women who are disobedient, disagreeable and independent of spirit. She suggests that this adjective is used to describe feminists:

If feminists are often called willful, then feminism is understood as a problem of will: a way of going one’s own way, a way of going the wrong way. The word willfulness exists in close relationship to other words such
as stubborn, obstinate and contrary, as words that imply a problem of character. (Ahmed 2017, p.65)

It refers to behaviour that is associated with non-compliance – the following of a creative passion, the demonstration of an astute mind, or the utterance of an alternative opinion, judged as behaviour in defiance of family or societal expectations or rules.

When I went to my seat in the small cinema to see the film, sitting in the seat next to me was a woman I had met at university. She identifies as a lesbian-feminist filmmaker. She is about my age. Our academic research and interests overlap. She and her partner were relaxing in the generous chairs, enjoying a glass of wine, pretending they were in their lounge room. She has finished her Masters. I haven’t, I tell her; I took time off. First time – losing my way; next a heart attack, then the death of my father. She tells me she is unemployed. I remember she wanted to be an academic researcher. She is angry about the lack of work opportunities available for women our age.

I left the cinema, greatly moved by the beauty of the cinematography and Cynthia Nixon’s portrayal of Dickinson. I was saddened by the thwarting of women’s passions and ambitions by patriarchal rules, but also heartened that Dickinson’s life and poetry had been considered an important story to tell, to continue to tell.

In my online dating profile I am Helen the Self-Assured, Helen the Sensual, Helen the Intelligent, Helen the Writer.

**Letsmeet:** I want to meet you

**Me:** We could meet on Thursday or Friday night. I’ve got a writing deadline to meet first. It can be a reward for my good work.

**Letsmeet:** If we connect, lets fuck.

**Me:** I’m not going to promise that.

**Letsmeet:** Maybe u want a break from writing now. I cld come around and fuck you and then leave. LOL

**Me:** Let’s just meet first. I don’t even know you yet. I’m not going to say I’ll fuck you

**Letsmeet:** Im so horny now. I want to see yr tits your so gorgeous
To the masculine readership on dating websites (and apologies to the men who don’t think this way), sensual means sex-mad; a stated enjoyment of sex (in chat) means I’ll fuck anyone and it will be wild. Casual sex means we’ll fuck when we first meet.

*Unreserved*: I’ve been away, sorry for the delay in getting back to you

*Me*: that’s ok

*Unreserved*: Yeh, my dad is very ill, my time is spent driving to Albury to seem him.

Anyway WOMAN I will dream of us dancing together naked in the moonlight, holding, seeking your beauty, dropping to the ground in wet passionate embrasure and eating from all those glorious parts of you, gouging myself in your wet wanting pleasures as you arch your body at me screaming uncontrollably for more more more …. eat me please ... eat me hungrily ... gouge my love forcefully with your lips, your tongue your face your head ...

*Me*: Steady on

I give myself permission to get angry here. I’m angry that I’m mostly related to online as a sex object – that the way these men express their desires, ignores me, a woman, as a person with their own needs or wants. Their words are demanding and explicit. *Unreserved’s* sexual fantasy is violent and dominating. Both men consistently returned the chat conversation to sex. These interactions were in the very early stages of contact. They had already decided that they would want to fuck me. One called me cranky because I just didn’t say: yes, let’s meet, let’s fuck.

Writer and feminist Clementine Ford, in her book *Fight like a girl*, includes a chapter titled ‘It’s Okay to be Angry’. She regularly receives online abuse in response to her feminist views. She writes paragraph after paragraph of reasons to be angry. An outpouring:

It’s okay for you to be angry because you’re a woman and the world has given you a lot of fucking shit to be angry about…

…To a world that instructs women to be passive and conciliatory, anger is a terrifying thing… People are afraid of women’s anger because they are afraid of confronting its source – inequality, violence, degradation, dehumanisation, misogyny. If you don’t want to accept these things exist, you won’t want to accept the validity of women’s feelings of rage (Ford 2016, p. 265).

I get angry at this modern cult of perceived freedom of expression and equality. The women who are abused online are those who speak out about sexist and misogynistic behaviour and
language that still strongly exists. This abuse is a way to silence women. No wonder women are cautious. The internet can be a great source of information and a platform for exchange of views and making connections, but unpick the fabric of the phallocentric coat, pull a thread and see what unravels.

I get angry and write it out. I get angry that women and men are complacent, that it’s accepted that men’s physical need for sex overrides respect and manners and the law, that their bad behaviour is excused because ‘they’re men’. That it’s okay to leer and wolf-whistle, and comment on women’s bodies.

I’ve read so often from men, ‘Of course I want sex. I’m a man.’ As if wanting sex is purely a man’s domain. I’m angry that women are called sluts, whores, tarts, molls if they seek and enjoy sex. The words are all derogatory and judgmental.

I am no longer shocked by young men – and I mean young – contacting me, assuming that I am flattered by a youth’s desire and that I think stamina is important.

My body is more than an object, a receptacle for a man’s lust. I choose who I share it with sexually. And usually it’s not making a decision based on a photo and a few (often clichéd) words thrown together.

Besides my anger at issues related to feminism, I am saddened that words are cheapened. My carefully chosen words are reinterpreted, disregarded, skimmed over, or not read at all. My voice is not heard, not believed, not important, not relevant. And it’s not just me, or those two men.

So Helen the Angry Feminist, with a need to calm herself, becomes Helen the Grandmother. She sits comfortably and cross-stitches the names of her female kin in red thread and immerses herself in this maternal, womanly and patient work. She spreads it out flat on the table and she and Milla talk about the names. They turn it over and look at the messy back. There are sections of small straight stitches that look like the inner workings of a computer – a motherboard?

I teach her about the names sewn in the sampler; we say the letters, the numbers, and I thread a needle and she sews her first stitches.

My embroidery threads are tangled and looped and knotted on the underside, bearing little resemblance to the design on the front. Helen the Poet sees metaphors and layered meanings. The red thread – blood my matrilineal line. My well-crafted poems, and the messy workings of my thoughts and my handwriting. Myself as presented to the world, and the private, complicated side, shared with intimates. The tangle of threads and the tangle of ideas that result in creative arrangement. The busy hands that knit or weave these threads to create something unique and new. My poetic memoir made of patches and scraps of me.
I choose poetry for my self-sampler as it is able to accommodate these fragments of identity. I will explicate this choice of form in the following chapter, where I discuss poetic technique. Thematically speaking, to continue the metaphor, each of my poems can be seen as a unique handcrafted patch that is thoughtfully arranged and sewn together with other patches, to create a unique quilt. Each poem can be read individually, while contributing to a greater narrative. For instance, my poem, ‘Mother and daughter go to work’, places us in our individual sites of inspiration and creation and contributes to a larger conversation about our creative endeavours as artists akin.

Poetry allows me to explore ideas in a medium that invites engagement with rules, including devising my own or breaking someone else’s. Within the spirit of écriture féminine, ideas can be guided by emotions, intuition or quirk. Certain poetic forms have rules that can be followed, such as haiku or a villanelle, but they can be ignored, adapted or subverted. The form can be invented through the writing of the poem – the placement of words, length of lines, spaces. Poetry’s subject matter and its mode of expression are infinite. Any small moment, such as the sewing of a stitch or the effect of a word, can be captured in a poem. Also, big ideas or themes, such as oppression or love can be explored in poetry; its brevity can belie its depth, the economy of words exploited – their sound, beat, rhymes, meanings and associations.

The freedom to choose how I occupy the space of form somehow throws off inhibitions about how I occupy my themes. It challenges me. I ask myself, ‘Can I write that?’ I use poetry as a way to investigate my ideas and memories, and to find expression as a woman. As a feminist, writing poetry can be a wilful, subversive, provocative act that pushes boundaries. It also can be fun. As Bonny Cassidy and Jessica Wilkinson say in the introduction to their anthology, Contemporary Australian feminist poetry ‘. . .the inherent playfulness of poetic language offers to enact or embody feminist politics’ (Cassidy & Wilkinson 2017, p.xi). I use the versatility of poetry to reflect the diversity of identity, use poetry to provoke the unexpected.

The Poet Takes Note


Poet H: I don’t know it. That’s a coincidence – I’ve just been looking at her Botany bay documents (1996).

Woman E: This book reminded me of what you are doing. Handsewing, heirlooms, the matrilineal line. The size of the poems is based around a scrap of embroidery that belonged to her great-grandmother Ethel. Each poem is a patch or patches on the page – seven lines per stanza/patch, and seven syllables on each line.
Poet H: She likes using a strict form – working with mathematical ideas – and musical ones – spaces, rhythms. When she reads, it’s compelling – her breath is almost part of the poem.

Woman E: There are a couple of verses in Ethel that are about remembering people through sewing:

a piece of Anita a
presence of Lucy odds sods
to stitch them in mind far far
where memory strays in Time
a Henderson hand-me-down
Trahair trousseau somebody’s
face-kerchief lappet-cap bow
my bodkin flies feather-stitch
herring-bone tying off Scraps
in a patch-work of Find it!
Trace it! Cut it! to fit then
puzzle the pieces sew this
to that oblong oval trap-
ezoid square Place it! here there

(Albiston 2013, p. 22).

Woman E: This made me think of your cross-stitch embroidery, your ‘Heirloom’ poem.

Albiston’s work is mostly concerned with exploring the experiences of women. She clearly enjoys historical research and uses primary sources as inspiration for her poems. Her poetry draws attention to the quotidian detail of feminine experience and its deeper emotional implications and resonances.

For *The book of Ethel*, she researched the life of her great-grandmother, who immigrated to Australia in 1887. I’m not surprised that Woman E saw clear thematic connections between our work: the embroidery, the making of women’s stories, remembrance through handcrafting. Particularly in the verses above, the matrilineal line is remembered metaphorically and literally in fabric and threads – through the act of sewing – ‘stitch them in mind’ – and in the making of samplers. The act of sewing creates a tactile and material connection to the women who are not physically with us. This is the central theme in my poems ‘Heirloom’ and ‘Red Thread’. My mother and sister are reimagined in the act of knitting and sewing and subsequent generations have this possibility also. Jessica Wilkinson, in her essay, *Experiments in poetic biography* suggests that, ‘[T]he book of Ethel, constitutes a meeting place, perhaps of women artists across space and time, connecting through a feminine pastime’ (Wilkinson 2016, p.10). Poems written to ‘resemble’ an embroidery
sampler are recognised immediately as a poetic decision made by a woman. Honouring and remembering loved ones through the pastime of sewing is significant in women's stories and memories.

My own project had its genesis in celebration of a new baby, another girl – another future creative woman in my matrilineal line and a new source of inspiration for creative narratives that explore identity and experience.

In *The laugh of the Medusa*, Cixous states that *écriture féminine* ‘places experience before language and privileges the anti-linear, cyclical writing so often frowned upon by patriarchal society’ (Cixous 1975). The poems and artefacts in my *self-sampler* bring together the experience and identity of the older woman in a deliberately meandering and cyclical fashion to reflect my experience and memories. It keeps the reader alert to the unpredictability of the text and the diverse aspects of identity and experience.

The notion of placing experience before language validates the role of intuition and inspiration in my work, both thematically and in practice. In the next chapter I discuss practice in greater detail. Here I am interested in the thematics, and I return to the subtitle of the project – women, ageing and creativity. I put myself forward. I allow myself to experiment, and I put poetry onto paper skirts.

The creation of the paper skirts emerged confidently by following my women’s intuition and allowing whimsy to guide me. The tactile nature of the handcrafts recalls a bodily memory of myself as daughter learning from my mother. I can pass this on. I’m in touch. I’m feeling. These intangibles are borne from the influence of women in my life – through bloodlines, literary lines and sisterhood. The poem ‘Heirloom’ draws these ideas together.

Now, I consider Cixous, and wonder if she means that women’s writing can reflect our embodied feminine cycles. I also consider the work of craftivist and performer, Casey Jenkins, whose installation *Casting off my womb* (2013) I discuss a bit further on in relation to the online abuse she received in response to her artwork. In this work, Jenkins knitted a scarf over twenty-eight days from wool inserted in her vagina. It is a provocative and physically embodied statement, decensoring the woman’s body, with her menstrual blood staining the wool she knits. The installation makes me think of cycles (menstrual, life) and regeneration in my own work. In my handcrafts, I leave my hair in the cardigan I knit for my granddaughter; in my written work, I share my private self, make it public through words and lines. I repurpose items of my mother’s, recycle them into new objects.
I make comparisons between the act of writing and sewing/knitting. They are productive, solitary activities. They can be collaborative. They are handcrafts. They are immersive. I swim in words spin words I am a wordsmith I spin silk a word spinner

Metaphor can be used here. Poets use metaphors.

There are influential threads to be followed connecting threads matrilineal line entwine with stories I engage with unlike and like minds my literary line I make relations have relations introduce myself to literary types women who write flirt with ideas play around drop names entwine with entangle untangle intersecting generating lines of thought sowing words in lines ideas sewing words in thread back stitching to the nineteenth century

Meet my Great Great Literary Aunt Emily.

She is a famous poet.

Emily Dickinson was a spinster.

She was a recluse.

Emily Dickinson handcrafted.

She stitched her words.

She sewed pages into books.

We are related by words and threads.

Dickinson grew up under New England Puritanism, in a time that came to be known as the ‘cult of domesticity’ a term that defined the state of ‘true womanhood’. ‘Piety, purity, submissiveness and domesticity were the four ideal attributes of the true woman and by far the greatest of these was submissiveness’ (Hughes 1986, p.17). In her article, *Subverting the Cult of Domesticity: Emily Dickinson's Critique of Women's Work*, Hughes says that Dickinson provided a critique of this culture through her poetry. Whilst she complied to undertake domestic activities, like sewing and gardening, she subverted them in her poetry through her masterful use of puns which allows alternative interpretations of her poems. Dickinson exploits the layers of meaning embedded in words. In poem 617, starting with the line, ‘Don’t put up my needle and thread’, she uses the language of sewing (the female domestic) sew/sow, stitch, seam, furrow to also allude to agricultural practices the sowing of seeds (the male provider). The poem becomes almost erotic with one potential reading of ‘sowing’ being an act
of fornication. She also comments on her own creative practice – the sowing of ideas, stitching these together and her necessity to write, to produce, create. As a childless woman, perhaps ‘sowing’ is also a creative activity. She takes the seed of an idea from her environment, her observations of her society, and her personal experience, and grows and sows and sews poems.

‘Til then – dreaming I am sowing
Fetch the seam I missed –
Closer – so I – at my sleeping –
Still surmise I stitch – ’

(Dickinson 1970, p.304)

In the craft shop, I am looking for a cross-stitch embroidery kit. I take the advice of the woman who owns the shop – a sampler in traditional red and white. The design has the alphabet and numbers, cotton reels, needles and thread, buttons, a dressmaker’s mannequin. She tells me that ‘notions’ is the word for the accoutrements of sewing. How apt, I think, as sewing fills me with memories and ideas. I adapt the pattern and stitch the names or initials of my sister Kathy, Mum, Jessie, Milla and I into the design.

Words are             so notions are pins and needles, needle and thread                  lines are
threads poems are finished garments                myself unravelling loose threads and
scrap of me here and there                          ideas knit interweave overlap
stitches drop are unpicked re-sown Emily           a finished poem is
seamless tangles and unpicking the finishing knots invisible the woman she sews she is
her messy underside invisible                       invisible her inside writing sewing spinning words
into notions fraying edges restitched the body refashioned
fabric of my life laid flat me material thread lines umbilical cord birth blood bloodline matrilineal
line literary line

I lay down my sewing and write

patchwork memoir each patch an aspect of my
womanhood expressed the elder mother grandmother daughter sister
cousin writer the artist and online dater the student the friend and
confidante lover feminist sensualist the crafter
sewn

the measure of a woman                             the making of a woman
Woman F: You took time off, didn’t you?

Poet H: Yeh, wasn’t coping that well.

Woman F: Why?

Poet H: I felt like I had lost my way – my original idea of writing a play was gone, and it was heading in a direction that was getting away from my themes. I was doing a lot of reading that didn’t seem relevant. Some I just couldn’t understand, let alone engage with.

Woman F: I bet Judith Butler was one of them. Gender Trouble? (1999).

Poet H: Trouble’s right. It was slow going. I ended up ordering it from my local bookshop because I was renewing my library loan so much. I didn’t get it out of the paper bag for months. Kept looking at the bag, it became a symbol of my failure. Finally, I got it out.

I appreciate what she has to say about roles and performance, the repeated actions we make that enact our identity. But she’s so difficult to read. Butler’s writing excludes readers – her writing is the antithesis of what I aim to do – I want my writing to be intellectual and engaging, but accessible.

Woman F: Even enjoyable.

Poet H: And the research meant reading, understanding and engaging with some writers, like Butler, and I couldn’t.

So I was delighted to come across Walwicz’s essay No, no, no – the reluctant débutante, (1996), as she addresses the problematic issue of creative expression within an academic environment – the same problems that I am grappling with:

Her essay responds to a question – ‘Is the University Creative?’ – the question for debate at Melbourne University in 1996 at an Alumni Fest (Walwicz 1996). In her unique style and voice, Walwicz enacts her creative argument. In order for the university to be creative, she posits, there would be a necessity for academic institutions to accept innovative and unconventional (non-linear) texts, which she has doubts is possible. ‘Could I write like Hélène Cixous within a university? Hélène Cixous would fail here. This is a worry. You can write a poem, but you can’t write a personalised essay. You can’t write a fictocritical essay, not yet. No, no, no’ (Walwicz 1996, p.336). Further to this, she points out that the university is based on patriarchal (hierarchical) structures and that a feminist approach may be more accepting of non-linear experimental approaches: ‘Daddy tells me. I say that I am sorry. So sorry. Daddy doesn’t understand me, but mommy does do’ (Walwicz 1996, p.336). I also challenge these structures in this work; the inclusion of ‘I’ personalises the academic voice, makes it a woman’s voice, by locating me in the research, the ideas and the text. I place poetry in boxes, create fictional dialogue, include images and use poetic prose to illustrate salient points. This dissertation intentionally experiments with the form of accepted academic writing.

In other words, Walwicz acknowledges that conflicts and tensions exist between the traditional methods of academic enquiry and creative practice-led research, where artistic process and output are valued as a valid form of research and a contribution to knowledge. She is also suggesting that there is a greater listening and understanding of experimental writing amongst her female community, which contributes to contemporary feminist discourse.

The academic landscape has changed and developed dramatically since Walwicz wrote her essay (Walwicz 1996). Higher degrees in creative disciplines are now commonplace, and experimentation in one’s practice is more accepted and acceptable as contributions to knowledge. Her part in the debate would have contributed to the adoption of these new ways of thinking about creative disciplines within the university, and encourages me to be more experimental and adventurous in my approach, and to see my work as a valuable contribution to women’s writing – écriture féminine. She is an older woman whose words carry authority and confidence when she speaks. I am an older woman and a creative writer attempting to find an authentic voice that fulfils the requirements of the university. I am nervous about this as I write my personalised essay; I want the language and style to be something that the reader is compelled to engage with. However my approach, my way, doesn’t fit with my experience of academic writing. It does not follow the conventions of a formal dissertation. Is it too personal?

Helen the Anxious revisits from time to time.

But I need to adhere to those conventions, don’t I? I need to read enough, and prove that I have by referencing. I need to demonstrate a depth of research and critical thinking. There
is an anxiety of influence, of appropriating too much the work of others, consciously or unconsciously. Or not enough.

The university has rules, and as a creative practitioner, an old hippy, hipster feminist, rebellious daughter, I find it hard to comply happily within this. I am Helen the Undisciplined. I resist and comply, resist and comply, until I find my way.

I find the idea of a creative discipline incongruous. I look up ‘discipline’ in the Macquarie:

**discipline**  
*n. 1.* training to act in accordance with rules; drill: *military*  
*n. 2.* instruction and exercise designed to train to proper conduct or action (*The Macquarie dictionary* 1981, p.513).

I’m a rule breaker. I’m wilful.

I object to the word Masters and Bachelor, terms so accepted in the language of the academy.

I resist the language of academia and seek other rule breakers, seek other female writers who experiment with form and content in an effort to unlock the shackles of the discipline.

A young woman from another table at the restaurant waves at me.

*Woman F:* Who’s that?

*Poet H:* She works at the Sun Bookshop. They all do at that table. She’s a poet. She’s been intrigued in what I’m studying by the books I’ve been ordering.

*Woman F:* Gender Trouble?

*Poet H:* It was more about two books that I picked up at the same time: *I Love Dick* (Kraus 2006) and *Eat Me* (Jaivin 1995).

*Woman D:* Great combination.


*Woman F:* Helen, what are you reading? This is for your Masters?

*Poet H:* Dick is a man’s name. It’s a sort of memoir.
Chris Kraus's *I love Dick* (2006) is a broad-ranging, feminist memoir, and I consider it a contemporary example of *écriture féminine*. It is experimental, combining personal and cultural insights through letters, descriptions of road trips, self-reflective pieces, exhibition reviews and commentary on the work and status of women artists. The letters are written to Dick, an art critic with whom Kraus has become infatuated. The act of writing becomes a way of understanding herself and, in a sense, the letters to Dick are a conduit for this.

Kraus blends the intimate — her relationship with her husband, her infatuation with Dick and her artistic successes and failures, with a feminist critique. As a woman, an artist, she articulates the many unheard voices of women, the ‘Plus Ones’ that are attached to men. She uses the letters to voice the woman artist.

It’s more a project than a game. I meant every word I wrote you in those letters. But at the same time I started seeing it as a chance to finally learn something about romance, infatuation... Don’t you think it’s possible to do something and simultaneously study it? If the project had a name it’d be *I Love Dick: A Case Study* (Kraus 2006, p. 153).

Like Kraus, I’ve loosely used the strategy of using myself as case study in this essay to explore and express ideas and invite enquiry into the experience of older creative women in contemporary times. I’m interested in what unfolds in the writing when traditional approaches are resisted; how memoir, fiction, poetry and intellectual discussion can be integrated into an innovative and accessible poetic narrative — what I can learn about myself and my writing practice. My poetry extends beyond text on the page to artworks and performance. The artworks recall the influence of my mother as maker of clothes, herself as craftswoman. The incorporation of handcrafts into my *self-sampler* evokes the domestic; the text on miniature garments blends my writing craft and my mother’s handcrafting creativity. I am a craftswoman too.

As mentioned above, Kraus’s memoir blends diverse aspects of her personal and professional life into a work that challenges the expectations of memoir. Through poetry and handcrafts, my *self-sampler* draws together aspects of identity and the experience of the older female artist for a contemporary readership.
The Poet Is a Feminist

**Woman G:** I hear Jessie’s had a baby girl. Are you Nanna or Grandma?

**Poet H:** Grandma. Nanna or Nanny reminds me of goat. Mum was Grandma; in our family, it was Granny or Grandma. I like Grandma, like the stature that ‘grand’ evokes. I’m an Elder. I’m strangely proud.

**Woman G:** I’m a bit jealous.

**Poet H:** The arrival of Milla actually got me back into writing some new poetry – another strand – the identity of grandmother. What does being a grandmother mean?

My young lover at the time jokingly called himself a granny-fucker. Unfortunately that conjured an image of a helpless, wizened, really old woman being sexually abused in a nursing home. It certainly didn’t fit with the current image I had of myself, although it is the terrible reality for some. The stereotypes exist powerfully. It’s stereotypes like this that I am challenging, ‘rupturing’ in academic speak.

**Woman G:** So how’s it going now, the Masters?

**Poet H:** Right now, it’s feeling good. I’m feeling more confident in my approach, the voice.

**Poet M:** She’s found her Master’s voice.

**Poet H:** Finally. Finally, I’ve found a creative way of writing my dissertation that suits me.

Helen the Insecure secretly worries about this – it may suit her, but will it be ok for the academy?

**Woman C:** I suppose you’re writing feminist stuff.
Poet H: Feminism has to be there, given my themes.

Woman C: You call yourself a feminist?

Poet H: Of course.

Saying yes to this question can be tricky. It can cause arguments. As Ahmed explains, women who say that they are feminists and point out sexist or misogynist behaviour, are seen as killjoys – they are perceived as creating a problem when there isn’t one (2017, p. 37).

Woman C: I’m not sure I am. I like men.

Poet H: And I don’t? You know me better than that. Feminism is just about equality, not hating men. It’s become a negative word for many women, unfortunately.

Woman C: Like me. I can’t agree with everything they say and do, the Slut Walk, the more outspoken young feminists, like Clementine Ford – her talk of rape culture – I don’t think it’s that bad.

Poet H: Do you understand what it means?

Woman C: It sounds so horrible, ‘rape culture’ – it’s not the culture I live in. If being a feminist means I have to accept that, well I’m not a feminist.

Poet H: I found it a distressing term too, so I googled it, the two words don’t seem to go together – ‘rape culture’ – a culture, my culture.

Woman G: But can’t you see? All these recent allegations confirm that we live in a rape culture, that men take advantage of the positions of power. It’s not new, it’s just been named.

On the website, Everyday feminism, Shannon Ridgway (2014) discusses some of our cultural practices as a way of explaining rape culture. I found this useful as I thought of cultural practices in my world, the contemporary society in which I exist, like barracking for a football team, the Australian obsession with sport, or drinking alcohol at all social occasions – things that I don’t do or support wholeheartedly or necessarily, but must live with. Ridgeway says in her article, 25 Everyday Examples of Rape Culture:

To understand rape culture better, first we need to understand that it’s not necessarily a society or group of people that outwardly promotes rape (although it could be). When we talk about rape culture, we’re discussing something more implicit than that. We’re talking about cultural practices
(that, yes, we commonly engage in together as a society) that excuse or otherwise tolerate sexual violence. We’re talking about the way that we collectively **think** about rape. More often than not, it’s situations in which sexual assault, rape, and general violence are ignored, trivialized, normalized, or made into jokes (Ridgway 2014, para 9).

**Woman B**: Do you remember that video of Trump on the bus during the election campaign?

**Poet H**: Yes, I’ve quoted him in my dissertation. Been watching it over and over. Now that’s a perfect example of behaviour in a rape culture. He basically said that he could do anything he wanted to women: ‘I just start kissing ’em . . . I don’t even wait . . . and when you’re a star, you can do it, you can do anything. . . grab ’em by the pussy. . .’ (Access Hollywood, 2005)

**Woman G**: And all the guys around him laughing.

**Poet H**: Normalising his behaviour, reinforcing it. Reminds me of that sequence of poems Sandon Mcleod wrote called The Rape Files (McLeod 2005, p. 29). Do you remember it?

**Poet M**: Yeh I do – uncomfortable, powerful stuff – hard to listen to, how guys see it as their right to take a woman . . .

**Poet H**: Hard performing them also. I read them at a tribute reading of her work. She was never scared to write about taboos.

**Poet M**: Yeh, how was that menstruation poem? I bleed, wasn’t it? The image of the red blood on the white toilet bowl: ‘snow white, rose red, snow white, rose red’ (McLeod 2005, p. 39).

**Woman B**: Were those rape poems about her?

**Poet H**: I don’t know, we never talked of it, but I assumed later that they are from her experience – they are written from the guys’ point of view. There are three poems.

> Those lovely tits starin’ at me, so young and perky not like Mavis’s – hers went droopy after the kids. I think I’m in with a chance – these hippies are into everything – root like rabbits . . .

( McLeod 2005, p. 29)
Don’t like this bitch playin’ cards, an’ she talks as well. 
Why the fuck they want bitches around, I don’t know. 
So, anyway, I decided to give it to her. 
I reckon she must want it or she wouldn’t be there. 
(McLeod 2005, p. 30) 
*
She was pissed too, 
but then Tezza was pulling her jeans off 
and he fucked her, y’know, 
and then Billy did then me… 
(McLeod 2005, p. 32)

There continues to be a notion that rape victims are ‘asking for it’, and therefore at fault; looking at the behaviour of the victim rather than the rapist. In a rape culture both men and women assume that sexual violence is a fact of life. Feminist websites and blogs provide lists of examples, some quite lengthy, of behaviours, attitudes and uses of language that create and reinforce a rape culture. This is from the website Everyday feminism:

Y is for your sister. 
O is for oh-so-tight. 
U is for underage. 
N is for no consent. 
G is for grab that ass (Ridgway 2014, para 20).

Sadly, the sexist behaviour of young men in universities is often cited, and the above chant was included in the examples. I say ‘sadly’ because I had hoped/thought that young men who have grown up with feminism and entered higher education would have demonstrated these influences on their attitudes and behaviour. I had hoped, naively, that they would challenge the phallocentric traditions, structures and attitudes of their forefathers, and reject the abjection and objectification of women.

Feminism contains many facets and expressions, including radical and minority views that not all women relate to, may even disagree with; but at the most basic, feminism is about human rights and equality – the belief that women should have the same rights as men in social, political, legal and economic spheres. A feminist is someone, male or female, who holds that view. This sounds, on the surface, reasonable and unremarkable.

However, some women will not say that they are feminists, yet would agree with the tenets of feminism and find that its agency is apparent in their lives. Toril Moi, in her university course ‘Feminist Classics’, found that the young women at her university felt that if they called themselves feminists, ‘people would think that they must be strident, domineering, aggressive,
and intolerant – worst of all – that they must hate men’ (Moi 2006, p. 1736). Feminism seems to have developed a bad name, as women who do not want to associate themselves with feminist radicalism remove themselves from the debate.

Closer to home, the Australian Foreign Minister, Julie Bishop, stated at the launch of ‘Women in Media’ at the National Press Club, that the word ‘feminist’ was not in her lexicon, and she didn’t find it useful. She disassociates herself from the feminist movement, even though she has greatly benefited from it, and speaks about it as if all the aims of the movement have been achieved, as if it exists in the past: ‘I recognise the role it has played. I certainly recognise the women’s movement and the barriers they faced and the challenges they had to overcome’ (Bishop, cited in Price 2014). Bishop believes her achievements are based on individual merit, not on the advances that feminism has made. Sociologist Raewyn Connell explains Bishop’s stance: ‘She is the product of fifty years of neoliberalism . . . and in this environment, there is a much more insistent individualism than there was even in the same class, a generation or two ago’ (Price 2014).

This individualism is counter to interpretations of feminism that are inclusive and collaborative. In contrast to Bishop’s stance that she has not been held back by a glass ceiling, and that her achievements are primarily a result of her hard work, Joan Kirner, a former Premier of Victoria and on the opposing side of politics to Bishop, believes that community and a sense of commonality will further feminist aims. ‘Women’s collective experience is important,’ Kirner states, ‘Our collective wisdom is unbeatable, our collective strength is formidable, and our continuing exclusion from an equal share of power in shaping society is untenable’ (cited in Sheppard 2017).

Feminism has been popularised by celebrity feminists such as Beyoncé and the media coverage of Emma Watson’s speech at the UN in 2014 (2014), and influences a broader and younger female audience. Outspoken feminist women and men, who are successful and famous in artistic fields, have an opportunity to educate, through their media profiles and the coverage they receive. The availability of content through social media means that feminism reaches an audience that may not be actively seeking this type of information.

Roxane Gay laments the rebranding and marketing of feminism in an article in The Guardian in 2014, saying, ‘Feminism should not be something that needs a seductive marketing campaign. The idea of women moving through the world as freely as men should sell itself’ (Gay 2014, para 15). Unfortunately, this is not the case.

The discussion of feminist issues is broad, active and dynamic and demonstrates the diversity and complexities of feminism in the twenty-first century, through internet sites and blogs such as Everyday feminism and Feminaust, and more progressive blogs such as Shakesville which addresses the concerns of the LBGTQI community. There is even a website, FWD/Forward, which is a platform for issues related to disability and feminism. Second-wave
feminism has been criticised for overlooking the women in minority communities, and specific sites now work to redress this oversight. In my writing, I seek to intersect feminism with the marginalisation of the ageing body.

The internet facilitates the creation of communities with like interests and can nurture debate, provide support and take collaborative action. However, it also creates a place for bigotry and abuse. Clementine Ford has a legion of trolls, and receives hate mail regularly. She responds to these directly, not following the advice given to ignore trolls, instead, publicly naming and shaming the abusers. In *Fight like a girl*, she published a selection of the abuse she had received (Ford 2016, p. 151).

Similarly, the craft activist/performance artist, Casey Jenkins, received abuse online from people reacting to her installation *Casting off my womb* (Jenkins 2013). I reference this exhibition in my poems ‘Heirloom’ and ‘Spinster’. As a response to this trolling, Jenkins created a further exhibition in, *Programmed to reproduce* (Jenkins, 2016) where she used a knitting machine to reproduce the online comments she received. Like Ford, Jenkins was not prepared to stay silent. ‘Intriguingly, most of the negative commentary came from people who presented as women, the very people who would themselves be the target of abuse if they ever stepped into the spotlight in a way not deemed to support dominant culture’ (Jenkins cited in Tolj 2016).

Poet M had alerted me to the video of Jenkins’s earlier ‘vaginal knitting’ installation, as it was headlined by the press and social media. Poet M and I have worked on poetry collaborations. She knows my Masters project well, and could see the connections between Jenkins’s work and my work – my interest in handcrafts, feminism, the feminine, and the embodiment of art. The program notes for *Programmed to reproduce* confirm this: ‘weaving words and wool and through Jenkins’s own body, obsolete knitting machines and electronic hacking, *Programmed to reproduce*, unravels the complex web between our public and private selves’ (Arts House 2016).

I see Jenkin's work as another expression of the ideas I raise in my ‘Heirloom’ poem, where I acknowledge and celebrate the existence and future of my matrilineal line through the symbolic act of allowing a strand of my hair to stay in the cardigan that I knitted for my granddaughter. Jenkins develops this notion of the artist or maker’s physical embodiment in *Casting off my womb* (2013) by knitting for twenty-eight days, which, naturally, included the days of her menstruation. The female reproductive cycle is seen through the pinking of the yarn, the traces of her blood in the scarf – evidence of Jenkins’s feminine and physical being within an object.

There was a serenity in Jenkins’ act of knitting – she sat quietly, productive, intent on the task and comfortable in the process. She is an activist, using the handcraft activity of knitting to explore her own young woman’s body and femininity.
Woman C: That’s disgusting.

Poet H: I didn’t find it that way. There was a quiet contemplation about it.

Woman F: Yeh but you’re a knitter.

Poet H: What do you mean?

Woman F: You get into a zone. Nothing matters.

Woman C: Why does she feel the need to do that?

Poet H: I don’t think it’s so much a need. She’s an artist – an activist. Artists and writers put their work in the world so we can consider the ideas expressed in their art.

Woman C: But you don’t need to make an exhibition of yourself.

Poet H: But that’s the whole point of her work, to share her ideas and art, get people talking about the feminine experience, to provoke a response.

Woman C: Well, she certainly did that.

Poet H: Anyway, I related to it – feel connected somehow with Mum when I sew or knit. Maybe Jenkins was connected to something other than what we are seeing.

Woman C: I just can’t imagine putting myself on display like that.

Poet H: Well you don’t have to. That’s why we have artists.

Artist M: It’s her way of expressing ideas. She’s got people talking about women’s bodies.

Poet M: See, you could ask yourself why it bothers you.

Woman B: Who’s having dessert?

Woman C: Where’s the menu?

Whilst Jenkins and I share themes in our work, my concerns are with the ageing woman, whose voice is not so prevalent in popular culture and is overlooked in the feminist discourse. As I have become older, I have become vocal and now wilfully add my senescent voice to the evolving conversations around feminism. I might not knit from my vagina, but I will embroider subversive ideas and write and perform poetry that provokes an enquiry into issues around the ageing woman.
At the African restaurant, I look around me and see my peers engaged in creative, thoughtful conversations, witty banter and storytelling. In the 1970s and ‘80s, we benefited from free tertiary education and sought careers, determining not to live the lives of our mothers, whose roles were set by a patriarchal system that demanded and expected a domestic role for women; a role that limited and undervalued their contribution to broader society. There are changes that we see in our daily lives – a woman can be a leader of a country, a woman can drive a tram or a train, pilot an airplane and play football. Superficially the world has changed, but still we experience everyday, entrenched, subtle and blatant sexism and misogyny. We do live in a rape culture: we lock our doors, ask each other to ring when we have a date, and walk home quickly in the dark. As older women, our age adds to our feelings of vulnerability.

Woman A: Are we right to go then? That was such great food.

Poet H: It sure is and it’s been great to catch up.

Woman B: More birthday dinners to come. Sixty next year.

Woman C: I don’t need reminding.

Woman A: How are you getting home?

Poet H: It’s just around the corner. I’ll walk.

Woman C: Don’t be stupid. I’ll drive you.

Poet H: See you.

Woman B: Good luck with the Masters.

Woman D: Let me know about your exhibition.

Poet H: Sure, don’t know where it will be yet.

Woman A: Exhibition?

Woman C: Let’s go.

Poet H: You can read about it in the next chapter. It’s just over the page.
THE PRACTISING POET

The Poet Joins the Academy

The decision to undertake a practice-led project within an academic environment was appealing to me as a poet, as I felt it would provide support to produce a body of creative work that was experimental in nature and grounded in research; a body of work that demonstrated a clear focus and intentionality.

The notion of academic rigour was both daunting and exciting – a project with a Higher Degree of Adventure. How will I measure up? Do I have what it takes? What would this add to my creative practice? What new areas of thought might I become immersed in? At once I was fearful of the unknown, of failure, then excited at possible discoveries and outcomes. Engaging with academic writing has been challenging; reading Judith Butler, for instance, untangling her long sentences, trying to mine her text for what was valuable for me to engage with, finding what was pertinent for myself and my practice. Cixous can be difficult to follow also, but she has been foundational in my approach to this project. I have written about her relevance in regard to themes in the previous chapter, and here, I will discuss her influence on my practice.

At the commencement of my candidature, I viewed my creative practice as undisciplined and distracted, and felt that that the structure of a creative higher degree by research, along with the input and guidance of supervisors, would support my aim to produce a collection of experimental poetic ‘memoir’ pieces. The project also offered an opportunity to investigate and reflect on my practice, which was a novel idea for me. I had not previously considered my writing as a subject of academic research, nor explored the how and why of my practice. I can now confidently place myself within a community of practice and the academy.

Finding my authentic voice and form for the exegetical work has been, and still is, a confronting and illuminating process – emotionally, creatively and intellectually – as I consider fundamental questions about what I wish to achieve, and what kind of contribution this will make to feminist discourse. From the beginning of this academic trek, I have felt confident with my creative writing, but anxious about my ability to write for the academy.
Remember Helen the Fraud?

**Poet H:** My first attempts were so boring – dry, uninteresting long sentences, in dry, uninteresting paragraphs, with forced citations supporting unformed ideas. Broad statements with no evidence, repetitions, tautologies.

**Poet M:** You’re being a bit hard on yourself, Helen.

**Poet H:** I was trying to do what I thought was expected. When I see this early stuff, I’m surprised that I ever wrote it. I never wanted to write like that. It wasn’t me. It wouldn’t excite any curiosity or enthusiasm.

It made a mockery of my topic – women, ageing and creativity.

**Poet M:** Ha! You could have called it Woman, ageing and the prosaic.

It was necessary for me to return to those fundamentals, to remember why I write: I want readers to be engaged with my writing; not alienated or bored by the language I use. I want to provoke curiosity. This has meant that the poet has intruded into the dissertation, and jolly good that she arrived. I have developed courage and confidence to experiment – allow my poetic and artistic intuition to guide me – to feel confident about a creative response and approach to academic writing.

The feminist subversive in me also wants to challenge the structure and expression of academic writing, so I push boundaries here. For this, I credit my mother, my supervisors, Helen Cixous, Chris Kraus, Ania Walwicz, and more. These influential feminist voices are responded to in both my creative artefacts and this exegesis.

I am also encouraged by the words of Josie Arnold:

…the academic text [can] be sewn together as a compilation of the scholarly, the anecdotal or popular, and the autobiographical (Arnold 2012, p.11).

This statement reassures me that a fragmentary approach to the personalised essay or scholarly memoir, or indeed a dissertation, can accommodate the attributes Arnold refers to above. The structure and style of Not fraying at the edges is risky and innovative. I intentionally disrupt the expectation and form of the exegesis, incorporating diverse styles of expression such as dialogue, poetry and images, to engage with the themes and ideas. It does not follow a linear path.

Nor does my creative self-sampler. I am pleased to discover that this practice of constructing narratives through fragments of varied text is found among experimental women writers
who are exploring ways in which text may challenge patriarchal traditions. The writing of
over thirty experimental Australian women writers has been brought together in Mud map:
Australian women's experimental writing, edited by Barbara Brooks, Moya Costello, Anna
Gibbs and Rosslyn Prosser. (2013). Anna Gibbs, in her introduction to the collection, reflects
on how the selections were made and how ‘experimental’ was defined. She posits:

What would happen, then, if we took work by women to define the
experimental – if the idea of experimentalism was generated from
the work itself rather than any particular pre-given image of the
experimental?...New ways to explore these themes need to be found,
ways which focus on the writing, on the how that actually transforms the
what (Gibbs 2013, p. 3).

The ‘how’ is of course what practice is about and here I reflect on the innovation in my own
work. This innovation is driven by 'a self-conscious practice of writing’ (2013, p. 3), as Gibbs
might say, whereby experimentation is an intentional method of making active choices about
form, and exploring ways of expressing the self in authentic and dynamic ways that subvert
existing (patriarchal) tropes and conventions. One of the key ways I have done this in my
project is through crossing or hybridising forms and genres not only in my self-sampler, but in
the dissertation also.

Moya Costello, in her article Irrigorous uncertainties: writing, politics and pedagogy, points out
the significance of hybridity by referring to the Judges’ comments for the South Australia’s
Festival Awards for Literature in the 2004 ‘Innovation in Writing’ shortlist. She says that that
the judges’ comments, ‘were primarily directed at the hybridity of the texts which crossed
fiction and essay, life writing, memoir, history (political, social and cultural) and geography’
(Costello 2005). Poetry, poetic prose, dialogue, and theatrical writing were not mentioned
by the judges as being prominent aspects in the short-listed texts, but there is no shortage of
examples of hybrid writing that does employ these forms. Indeed, Marion May Campbell’s
Fragments of a paper witch (2008) was shortlisted in these awards in 2010, and showcases, in
the one volume, poetry, essay, playscript, puns, mythic subversion, and feminist theory.

Kraus, in I love Dick (2006), and Nelson, in Bluets (2009), both explore the complexity of
experience, emotions and knowledge through fragmented textural structures and broad-
ranging narratives. They experiment with a non-linear form that accommodates personal
experience within cultural, historical and political contexts. This results in texts that are
difficult to place into any one genre; they refuse to be reduced to one label.

Both Kraus and Nelson experiment with memoir, as I do with my project. Nelson’s Bluets
(2009) might be considered a poetic memoir; it consists of short pieces of poetic prose,
presented as two hundred and forty numbered ‘propositions’, as she calls them. These
propositions range from intimate confessions to descriptions of scientific findings; from
intensely emotional to anecdotal. At the book’s centre, though, is Nelson’s obsession with the
colour blue. Her scholarly research investigates the colour blue, from scientific, philosophical
and psychological angles. She also explores her own fascination:

Why blue? People ask me this question often. I never know how to
respond. We don’t get to choose what or whom we love, I want to say.
We just don’t get to choose (2009, p.5).

Her scholarly enquiry is interwoven with a discussion of her depressed emotional state.
Her sadness is mostly shown through two intensely personal reflective narratives – one
documenting the end of her romantic relationship with ‘the prince of blue’ (2009 p. 8), and
the other noting a relationship with caring for her close friend who has become quadriplegic.

The fragmented narratives interweave, which kept me, as reader, alert to the uncertainty
in Bluets (2009). Where would we go in the next section? What might be revisited or
developed? Will I learn something about colour, or will I be moved emotionally? I strive for
this unpredictability in my work ‘Spinster’, but also in my self-sampler as a whole complete/
incomplete text. The flexible structure that Kraus and Nelson use keeps the reader curious
and unable to settle comfortably. I bring this tension to my work to keep the reader engaged
in the process of reading, but also to link to the thematics in the first chapter and the self-
sampler – that is to challenge the traditional notions about older women and creativity – what
of myself will I express?

The handcrafting metaphor has a literal significance for me in this project, as I do knit,
embroider, crochet and sew. The terminology and culture of handcrafts have a physical
currency in my life that is evident in the themes of my self-sampler. I’ve found that the
metaphors that arise through engaging with handcrafts are relevant to how I think about my
writing practice. Fragments or scraps come together to form a whole. I think of crocheted
squares, each one unique, sewn together to create a ‘granny rug’, or small embroidery stitches
forming a pattern or an image. My poems express different aspects of me – my memories, my
autobiography, my thinking. My poems, like the granny squares, are carefully constructed
and placed strategically to create a unified yet fragmentary whole, that can be ‘sampled’ from
different perspectives. I engage thematically with my practice, and engage practically with my
themes.
An underlying aim in my feminist poetry and performance, and this dissertation, is to keep the reader intrigued as to how I will write myself – how I will express different aspects of my experience and identity. My self-sampler is designed to surprise and unsettle the reader or audience – allowing no room for assumptions or expectations to be formed about which ‘Helen’ I will reveal, or where my gaze will fall. I want my poetic narrative to be compelling, a page-turner, where the reader has a need to know how and what I will reveal, how I will appear in the text, and what form it will take.

The ordering of the poems is unpredictable also; the reader samples – poetically, emotionally, visually and stylistically – the mother, the daughter, the lover, the student, the single older woman; from strength to weakness, from vulnerable to confident and provocative. These characters or selves turn up in the dissertation in different garb: Helen the Brave, with breastplate and pen in hand, Helen the Short-sighted searching for her glasses, and Helen the Sensual fantasising in the bath. They are all Helen Lucas – they all represent aspects of myself in the recent past.

In her foreword to Sellers’ reader on her work, Cixous considers the multiplicity of identity: ‘This is why I never ask myself “who am I?” (qui suis-je?) I ask myself “who are I?” (qui sont-je?). . .’ (Cixous 1994, p. xvii). My project emphasises Cixous’ feminist philosophy that identity is not fixed, nor is its expression. Cixous relates this fragmentary nature of identity to her own writing oeuvre, in its breadth of genres:

No one fragment carries the totality of the message, but each text (which is in itself a whole) has a particular urgency, an individual force, a necessity, and yet each text also has a force which comes to it from all the other texts. (1994, p. xvii)

I see comparisons with this project. Not fraying at the edges presents different aspects of me, expressed by Helen the Writer. The poetry, the artworks, this dissertation, are individual contributions that together create a conceptually resolved creative and academic project.

Below is a poem where I apply the metaphor of handcrafts to the writing of a text. It originally began in an academic style with appropriate conventions: complete sentences, academic vocabulary and ‘correct’ punctuation; I was battling with this style – re-wording it over and over, but it was not expressing the connection between writing and sewing well enough. My sentences were convoluted and repetitive. I felt frustrated by the structure of a sentence. I switched to poetic, fragmented words and phrases – it still allows for repetition, and demonstrates the practice, rather than trying to analyse it. The shorter phrases, stitched together seem to explain and illustrate the metaphor more potently.

My supervisor calls these poems ‘break-out’ passages because they interrupt the traditional academic text. They are my defence against Helen the Fraud where Helen the Poet asserts
her authority. Struggle and frustration often precede my decision to choose this form. These
negative emotions have become a signal for me to try a different approach. Go back and have
a look at Chapter 1. The first ‘break-out’ I wrote was the description of the women in the
African restaurant.

The visual aspect of the following example is also important: the poem is a block of text, a
rectangle with justified right and left margins. The text within the rectangle gestures toward
movement: there is fluidity within the structure as space punctuates the text and syntax
falls away, and a reader might read left-to-right, or downwards according to the zig-zagging
pattern; my voice finds a more fluid expression within the conservative traditions of academia.
Perhaps women’s expression exists (outpourings, torrents), despite the confines of a structure
predetermined by the patriarchy. Here is the poet, writing a dissertation, stitching together a
self-sampler, making artefacts for the exhibition.

making of a garment            skirt or dress or bikini            selected pieces             shaped
put together with pins or tacked in temporary crude li
nes easily undone hand stitched sewn
mechanically viewed reviewed unpicked restitched
redone repeated view review try it on how does it
fall? the mirror how does it look? does it suit? is it me?

My self-sampler (what I previously had been calling a ‘memoir’) is an experiment in how to
use my memory, experiences and influences to poetically and creatively explore my identity
at this particular time in my life. It is not a memoir in the sense that I make no attempt to
provide a chronological narrative or aspire to tell a coherent story about an event or events in
my life. My positively distracted process has created a collection of discrete pieces of writing,
or ‘samplers’, that weave together the threads of my life into a body of work.

The sewing sampler has obvious connections to the themes of handcrafts and the matrilineal
line in my work. Wonderfully, the term ‘sampler’ has several meanings that all contribute to
an understanding of the multilayered nature of this project:

sampler
NOUN
1. A piece of embroidery worked in various stitches as a specimen of
skill, typically containing the alphabet and some mottoes (Oxford
dictionary 2017).

Read: each crafted poem, piece of text, the lines, the spaces, the layout, using
letters, words, symbols, metaphors
2. A representative collection or example of something (Oxford dictionary 2017).
Read: a portrayal of myself through a collection of poetry and artefacts not restricted to the page
3. A person or device that takes and analyses samples (Oxford dictionary 2017).
Read: I, the Masters student examine my poetry and analyse samples in a dissertation

As the poems are autobiographical, I added ‘self’ to the name, after considering other words such as life, personal, auto, ego. Self-sampler reflects the nature of my work and contains the notion referred to by Cixous, of the multiplicity of identity.

This practice-led approach has given me a new understanding of myself as a practitioner and creator of new knowledge. I had not previously seen my experience and work as subjects for research and a contribution to knowledge. As a result of this revelation, I have been emboldened to experiment more and the modes of my creative practice have broadened and developed and have led to new artistic processes and outcomes. These new modes provoked an enquiry into my practice, its context and relationship with research. It was gratifying to learn that my poetry is at the heart of creative arts research. Gray and Malins describe creative practice research this way:

…firstly, research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems and challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioner; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners (2004, p.3).

Although not envisaged at the outset of this project, handcrafts now form an element of my writing practice and creative output. Initially, I found the act of knitting for my granddaughter a catalyst for new work; it provoked memories of my mother and provided insights that informed the poems, so I embraced sewing and knitting as a critical component of my practice. It has moved beyond traditional sewing and knitting practices now, with the creation of my poetry skirts. I have found, as Dean and Smith say, that ‘the unique combination of creative practice research can sometimes result in distinctive methodological approaches as well as exhilarating findings and artworks’ (2009, p. 3).
The skirts are a blending of poetry and handcrafts – my words are not restricted to the page and are in part, a response to my growing appreciation and experimentation with the visual aspect of a poem. A selection of poems and works-in-progress are printed or handwritten on dressmaker’s tissue paper. They are made into skirts and presented as artefacts that form an exhibition.

The poetry skirts allow a different engagement with the written word, with readers able to walk around the object to view and read the text. This disrupts the expectations of how and where a poem can be read. The reading of the poem will be a unique experience, as the exhibition will end. It may be shared with a friend or stranger. It is a unique experience – images may be taken to document their inclusion in the project, but the physical experience of being in the exhibition space cannot be reproduced.

The familiarity of the skirt as a traditional symbol of the feminine is obvious – the paper skirts are pretty and delicate, be careful how you handle them – but this notion is troubled by their subversive nature. Dirty and bloodstained skirts flutter on a clothes line – they have not been cleaned; the hidden, or unseen elements of womanhood are on show. Bloodstains on a skirt evoke menstruation and carry with it feelings of shame and disgust. The verbal content in some poems challenges the notion of the female as being demure.

I write of them now to indicate their novelty, a ‘sample’ of the creative possibilities of a personal narrative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The language of handcrafts provides a rich metaphor that I use to explain both the thematic links and the processes at work in my practice. An insight or idea leads to another and another, and before long related themes and activities overlap and interweave. New threads, new lines of thinking emerge and are sewn, or knitted or knotted together.</th>
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<td>For instance, a blending of the thematic threads of the matrilineal line and a feminine/feminist literary line encourages an enquiry into creative practice and its relationship to</td>
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heirlooms and legacy. The poem ‘Mother and daughter go to work’ is about my mother and I, and the minutiae of our respective workrooms and creative activity. More broadly, it explores women in their personal workplaces – their rooms, (an oblique reference to Woolf), the creative environment, the practice and process of making, and the creation of artefacts to be passed on. The tactile nature of handcrafts and the craft of writing invite comparisons: the senses – the feel of the fabric, the paper; the sound of the sewing machine, of fingers on the computer keyboard, pen on paper; the movement of the hand across a page, the handling of material. Material can be seen as fabric but can be further defined as ‘the matter from which a thing is made’ or ‘information or ideas for use in creating a book or other work’ (Oxford dictionary 2017). In this poem, mother and daughter work with material – mother makes a garment, daughter crafts a poem. I, the daughter create something new by combining my inherited skills in sewing and handcrafts with my own learned practice in writing poetry.

’she doesn’t hear you me she is startled is that the time?’
(from ‘Mother and daughter go to work’)

I compare the complexity of interconnected ideas and themes in my writing to the untidy threads on the underside of my cross-stitch embroidery. Some threads tie together neatly and others criss-cross and intertwine. At times you can see a likeness to the finished side amongst this tangle.

Turn it over, turn the page, and see how clever I am – how it’s a sample of my finished work. You can’t see the reworking at first: the unpicking and restitching, the re-designing; often a frustrating part of the process that underpins the desire to create an object of beauty and merit. The messy process is there though, underneath, if you want to look closer, and I am happy to share it.

My embroidery sampler is evidence of my skills, fortitude and creativity, of risk-taking – just what it takes to return to university as an older woman and undertake a Masters degree in Creative Writing. This is my first attempt at cross-stitch embroidery. My eyes aren’t failing me.

The cross-stitch sampler is not an adornment to my Masters degree, or to be seen merely as an item that inspired a poem. It embodies the themes in my creative writing – my matrilineal
line, women’s activity, and the creation and passing down of heirlooms and legacies. I am stitching, sewing myself into the fabric, just as I write myself in(to) my poems. This cross-stitch sampler says something about me – I have immersed myself in a traditional women’s activity, but have a need to subvert it somehow, make it something more than it first seems. I am an older creative woman sewing, writing, creating heirlooms. An Elder in my family, passing something on.

The sampler design includes the letters of the alphabet in different fonts and sizes. It also includes ‘notions’, the basics of sewing – the pins, needles, buttons, thread, a dressmaker’s mannequin. The threads form lines, become crosses, crosses become letters, words are formed, names, and it becomes a story, history, her story.

Yes it has the alphabet all the letters look my initials Jessie’s too and Milla’s name and Mum’s KL KL my sister everywhere she’s embedded there we’re all in there stitched in red needle and thread and thread we’re all in there needle and thread or dead stitched alive

In years to come, my framed cross-stitch embroidery may take pride of place in Milla’s house. In that plastic box with ARCHIVE written on the lid, her children may discover more of their great-grandmother’s life: read my published books, the reviews of my plays and peruse my visual diaries, read the notes, the scribblings, the process. They may find my framed Higher Degree by Research qualification in Creative Writing. And this personal essay, finished and bound, the first edition of the poems. Photocopies of draft after draft, notebooks of research lifted from relevant texts.

They may carefully handle the pretty, miniature tissue skirts with poems and images printed on them, perhaps these will be moth-eaten. Will they delight in them? What will they make of me?

I wonder if they will find the printouts of my unpublished online erotica. What will they make of the dialogues?

‘Do you think this is true?’

‘She did write those erotic poems and online dating play. They were based on her experiences, so it could be true. She was out there, you know.’

Q: If you were to die, would whoever goes through your personal belongings be shocked by what they find?

Yes

No

Maybe a little bit

source www.okcupid.com

If? This is not a hypothetical.
So now I have these photographs. Possessing them has created a strange retrospective intimacy with my mother – her ease with nudity, her willingness to be photographed, to pose.

I wonder how I will use them. I allow them into my life, want them to become familiar; I spend time with them. They sit on the dining table, on my desk. I observe them in detail and write archival descriptions of each photograph:

*Fireplace nude 2: seated on cushion in front of fireplace (fire lit) arm round legs bent toward the body, looking down and forward away from fire, contemplative.*

I wonder where my sister and I are as Mum poses for these photographs. The photographs become conversation pieces with friends who visit and with my children. The images invite questions and create an unfamiliar mix of emotions: love and loss, pride – my pleasure at witnessing my mother’s ease in her naked body, delight that my parents played like this. Disappointment that we were never grown women together.

I place the photographs safely in the glass cabinet where I can still see them, and know the moment will come when I know how the photographs will be used.
When I decide to use them to make a skirt, there seems to be no ‘deciding’ in it at all. It is a spontaneous, creative act. I scatter the photographs in an overlapping pattern, face down on the photocopier and print them onto dressmaker’s tissue paper. I handcolour them with a watercolour pencil, and fold them into a skirt held together at the waist with paperclips. It has an underskirt with lines of black stitching that give the skirt some body. It is still a work in progress, as I may write between the embroidered black lines at the bottom edge of the skirt.

I name it **Ashfield** after the Sydney suburb where we lived at the time the photographs were taken. This skirt is a new fragment of my *self-sampler*. It tells of my mother, a dark-haired woman, a domestic goddess perhaps. The images show a side of her that was not for the children, snapshots of the intimacy in my parents’ marriage. I feel she would have loved this skirt: the boldness of it. I respond to these and other images of my mother in the poem, ‘Knowhow’.

I have created enough skirts now to call them a collection. I consider a name. It must be French, fashionable and edgy, literary and avant-garde, and of course it must refer to my project at hand: *Écriture Féminine*—*Cixous Skirts*—*Écriture couture*—écri-*couture*

Allowing myself to see my creative practice as research has elicited a more inquisitive and exploratory approach to my writing, and resulted in new processes and methods in writing practice.

An example of this is my move away from handwriting, to composing my poems on a keyboard from the outset. I touch type, so I don’t need to look at the keys – it reminds me of playing the piano. Perhaps the familiarity of my fingers on the keyboard invites play, speed and improvisation. This can be exhilarating – seeing the letters appear, words into lines, ideas committed quickly to the screen. They can be easily moved, altered and repeated.

This has been quite a radical change in my writing practice, particularly for my writing of poetry. I have always handwriten in a visual diary. I like the physicality and tactile nature of it...
— the act of opening to a new blank page signifies the entering of a creative space. I enjoy the slightly rougher texture of the paper, the thickness of it. Traces from the previous page — the ink, the imprint of words — don’t disturb the blankness and potential of a new page.

There is a freedom in writing in a book with no lines. I draw boxes, circles and connecting lines. I draw lightbulbs to highlight ideas to follow up. There are lists — rhyming words, words that are thematically and sonically associated, remembered and half-remembered lines and phrases, new words and their definitions. My visual diaries are not only workbooks — but references and primary sources — books that record my thinking and retain remnants that I may revisit at a later date, either with a clear purpose or wandering through, seeing what I might rediscover.

This image shows ‘Hipster Spinster Rap’ in its early stages. In the top left corner of the verso is the typed first verse, which is literally cut and pasted into the book. The printing and pasting of the verse means that I’m ready to move on. The progress of the poem can be traced. Nothing is lost — there is no ‘delete’ key that can so easily disappear some notes or lines I might use later.

The move to keyboard writing evolved because I was experimenting with punctuation initially as an aid for spoken word performance. The length of spaces indicate the length of a pause — a comma could be too short, a line break or full stop too disruptive to the flow of the words. Instead of commas, semicolons and full stops, I began to use dashes and spacing between words and phrases. Then I started to see that I could make textu(r)al patterns.

This idea was developed in my ‘Poet-in-residence’ series of skirt poems. Handwriting has found a place in the skirts in the écri-couture collection through the inclusion of work-in-progress transcriptions and prints taken from my visual diary. These show the process, the forming of lines, the following of thoughts. Handwriting is intimate — a person is recognised by their handwriting — they become and remain familiar through their script. Like in handcrafting, a physical trace of the maker is left in the work.

a stray hair in the garment
it can stay DNA
in the knit (K) 1 purl (P) 1
Knit (K) 2 together (tog)
(from ‘Heirloom’)
The inclusion of both typed text and handwriting in the écri-couture collection contributes to my aim of creating unpredictability for the reader/viewer. This basic aspect of the written word – how the text is formed and therefore read – add to the multiplicity of my practice and how themes are expressed. The non-uniformity of form and design is in itself subversive. Each skirt is unique – they cannot be easily reproduced – and a unique aspect of myself is captured in each skirt – my handiwork is embedded in each piece.

In the early phases of this project, when investigating and trying to articulate the processes in my practice and its relationship to research, my thinking (and my writing) often became confused. How do my themes relate to each other? How do my poems demonstrate these connections? How can I relate the research and themes to my creative work, and vice versa? What role do handcrafts play?

At various stages I attempted to explore these questions diagrammatically, and the result was a complicated web of overlapping lines, words, arrows and circles. Its complexity illustrated my difficulty in articulating the answers to the questions. I wanted my diagram to help me untangle these interconnecting thematic threads and stitch them neatly into my practice and create some clarity of design. It did not help.

However, it did make very clear that ‘women’ are at the heart of Not fraying at the edges. Women’s voices inform this collection, pose questions, suggest answers – this woman finds her self-expression through and amongst other women. My mother, my daughter, my granddaughter, my friends, writers and artists and critics, feminists. I am supported by a literary sisterhood, artists and practitioners with a ‘feminist agenda’. My writing responds to these influences and these relationships – they give me courage to be provocative, to be self-revelatory, to find my own ‘Masters’ voice. Helen the Poet writes for them, wants them (and others, of course) to enjoy the mischief, the love, the craft, the wit, my desire to share and to be confident and vulnerable. Helen the Brave is bolstered by being a part of a feminist community.

Dean and Smith developed a model that they describe as an ‘iterative cyclic web of practice-led and research-led practice’ (2009, p. 19). It has been useful for me, as it provides a practical framework and action checklist for the creation of new work. It validates my process of pursuing ideas in different directions. It resembles an embroidery design.
It also serves as a way to inspire/aspire to new directions both in producing art, and in the areas of academic research. My practice is anything but linear, and the repeated and cyclic aspects of this model elucidate my process. Linear design follows sequential steps, a straight narrative that leads from a beginning to a logical end. I have not created my self-sampler or this dissertation by following a straight line. I move between different modes of activity: research, writing, sewing, gazing out the window, walking, and more. These activities are often guided and provoked by intuition, my emotions and the happenings in my life – such as the birth of my granddaughter, Milla. These activities are revisited, repeated and recycled. I see this practice as an example of *écriture féminine*, as it ‘places experience before language, and privileges the anti-linear, cyclical writing so often frowned upon by patriarchal society’ (Cixous, 1975, p. 421). My approach and output may be judged negatively by traditional (read patriarchal) standards as illogical or disorganised. Successful and inspiring experimentation has led me to embrace a practice that I once saw as not worthy, not good enough. My poem ‘Practice’ now celebrates this distracted approach.

As I have said, the visual aspect of the poem has gained agency in my process and practice. In ‘Practice’, each cell/patch/verse contributes to a patchwork poem about practice: a poetry quilt. It could be embroidered on fabric – the words of each verse stitched and the verses sewn together. I would choose different coloured threads and fabric, and the stitching together would create new effects and responses. It would be soft and I could wrap myself in it.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Practice</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I doubt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I procrastinate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>pull some weeds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>punctuate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hear a line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>massage my neck</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read aloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read and smoke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I procrastinate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>count words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sweep the floor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stare out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chin in hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make a coffee</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hear a line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>online dating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>read aloud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>felt pen notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>words with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>count words</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>write more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>make a phone call</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>chin in hands</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>re read re read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>check zucchinis</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>felt pen notes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keyboard strokes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>straighten my back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>re read re read</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>move a phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>drink and smoke</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>new document</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>second line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>keyboard strokes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>press print</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hard copy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>write more</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>stare out</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>resist a cigarette</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>move a phrase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>punctuate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prune the lemon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>first verse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wash the dishes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I wrote this poem as an experiment in form – a bit of a challenge – three line verses, the second line repeated as the first, in each subsequent verse. Initially, it was not in a table. My loose and distracted practice is described within each verse/box. It is a poem where I accept that this practice works for me, and delight in it. Previously, I felt that everyday diversions took me away from my work, but have come to understand that these distractions and repetitions of thinking and domestic actions were elemental to the process of my creative practice.

The formatting as a table allows for the poem to be read in different directions across and down the table. The reader may discover the pattern of repeated lines or not and come to accept, like me, that practice is not always logical or linear; they can be unpredictable, cyclic. The distractions, ‘check the zucchinis’ or ‘make a coffee’, are thinking times when I may find the words I want and then return to the keyboard.

This formatting is borne from whimsy and subversion. Why not put the verses in boxes like this? Why not colour some of them? Leave them blank? Where do I go in these empty spaces? Could this be the subconscious? The patched design evokes the granny rug. It also reminds me of a board game – a ‘snakes and ladders’ type of game involving movement up, down and across, back and forth – a play that contains successes and setbacks. Progress, or lack of it.

This poem describes and demonstrates my distracted practice; it is both ‘loose’ and structured, playful and tense. My practice foregrounds the body – at play, at rest, contemplative, seductive:

Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. (Cixous 1975, p.419).

This is a place where Helen the Brave and écriture féminine meet. Helen the Brave, the Poet, speaks for women, to women, as a woman.

The Poet Unravels

I have decided to ‘unpick’ my practice using two case studies, as this will point directly to my creative output. Firstly, I consider the rationale and processes at work in the creation of my poetry skirt collection, écri-couture. And secondly, I unpick the detail of ‘Hipster Spinster Rap’ through a study of poetics.

One of the early inspirations for the poetry skirts came from viewing the beautiful facsimile edition of Emily Dickinson’s envelope poems, Emily Dickinson; the gorgeous nothings (Werner
I had borrowed it from my local library and was sharing it with Poet M. From across the room, she held open a double-page spread – the varying shapes of the envelopes reproduced on the page, the colour, reminded me of the layout of dressmaking pattern pieces, the yellowed tissue paper pinned onto fabric, ready to be cut. Tissue texts. It was reminiscent of my childhood – I recalled our loungeroom, my mother resting on her knees, pins held between her lips, at work, creating.

I also imagined Emily Dickinson carefully reusing envelopes, thrifty and creative, (like my mother, like me). The envelope poems show a playful attitude to serious business, which is a practice I share with her. I can see her refashioning, making them into something ‘other’ – she is intentional about her use of the envelopes – she plays visual tricks with the paper, reshaping it, folding and cutting it. She divides the fragment and her handwriting plays within the space. Bevin, in the introduction to Gorgeous nothings says:

To understand how forcefully Dickinson is manipulating the form of the page itself, take a simple household envelope and see how many of these forms you can re-create. You will quickly find that what looks simple, simply is not. There is not one instance here of an envelope reopened out into its die-cut shape. Look with care: what may look like a whole envelope is only one face of it, slit open (Werner & Bevin 2013, p. 9).

I am asking my reader/viewer/audience to look with care at all my work, at me – read with a curiosity and a willingness to engage. Bevin sees the envelope poems as ‘the small fabric Dickinson writes of in one corner of the large envelope interior.’ (Werner & Bevin, 2013, p. 8). In her poem 636a, the ‘small fabric’, is not small at all; it can be viewed as elemental and significant – atoms and the northern stars.

Excuse | Emily and | her Atoms | The North | Star is | of 
small | fabric | but it | implies | much | presides | yet

(2013 p. 8).

The envelope poems or fragments are nothing small or unfinished; they are a part of her process and practice. The layout of her envelope poems in this book highlights the physicality of her creative process, the ink, the pencil and the lines, the cutting and tearing and folding of paper. Dickinson’s thinking and thoughtful revisions and working are shown here, her process laid out. She used the shape to frame her poems, wrote for the space, as I do with the skirts. The unfolding of the envelopes reminds me of my mother and the folding and unfolding of the paper pattern.
pieces for dressmaking. We learn about Dickinson through these fragments. Her poems have been found after her death, she left her poems to be discovered, for part of her self to be unfolded.

Where Dickinson combines two activities that occupied her life – letter-writing and writing poetry – my self-sampler combines two activities important to my own life – handcrafting and writing poetry. The poems in my self-sampler are the ‘small fabric’ of my life, each expressing an aspect of the older woman’s experience. Stitched together, they present aspects of my life experience in ways that are unique and significant to me. I take this concept of ‘stitching’ and use it literally. Selected poems and assorted texts are printed on dressmaker’s tissue paper, which becomes the fabric of a skirt. All of it becomes material in content and form. The activity of skirt-making brings forth Helen the Daughter, a woman who has learnt a craft from her mother and is using it to her own poetic ends.

I wrote about dressmaker’s tissue paper in a poem twenty years ago, about my mother beginning the process of dressmaking, kneeling to cut the fabric in readiness for the making of a garment. It is a vivid and enduring memory from my childhood and this poem honours the creative and domestic woman: my mother, her loving handwork, her resourcefulness and creativity. When I look at the family photos of my childhood, the clothes we wore – my mother, my sister and I – they were all made by her.

There is a sacred quality to the poem. She kneels, she contemplates, and brings her full body to the task. It is a sensual act – the cold steel of the pins warming between her teeth, the weight of the scissors in her hands, the sound of those scissors interrupting the quiet in the room as my mother cuts the material. The crisp scent of the fabric, the cigarette burning away in the ashtray behind her. Her hands unfold and lay out the material, spread it out, enjoy the feel of it, imagine it on the body, how it will fall, how the colour or print will look. The tissue paper is fragile, her movement careful and deliberate in the handling of it.

she kneels
holds the heavy coldness
of the scissors in her lap
and contemplates the cloth
(from ‘Sempstress’)

2.8 Envelope poems (Werner & Bevin, p. 63)

2.9 Detail from ‘Sempstress’ skirt
This poem becomes my first poetry skirt. I decide to print it on dressmaker’s tissue paper. I buy a roll from Spotlight, smaller than I had expected. I measure and cut the paper into A4 pieces so that I can print them at home. I experiment within the confines of this size and shape.

I type lines and rearrange them to fit the format. I sew lines of red, fiddle with the thread to gather the waist. The red recalls my bloodline, my matrilineal line. I call on Mum to give me patience as I fashion the skirt. I learn how this dressmaker’s paper behaves. It is surprisingly robust and forgiving. It survives needlepoints and the soft pull of thread, folding and creasing. It accepts blood and coffee stains. It rips predictably. As I screw it up and unscrew it over and over, I have the image of the frustrated writer who screws up a page of text and throws it into the bin. The writer retrieving and carefully opening it. This process repeated, on a loop. The paper becomes soft and more precious in this process. I am not discarding it. The paper is stronger than I had thought, can take rough treatment and sensitive handling.

I experiment. I handwrite lists of words with a black felt pen; scraps of text taken from my visual diary, quotes. I practice cursive script, try to do my best, recall the concentrated effort of my younger self in primary school. I also adopt a relaxed attitude and let the letters flow. I have plenty of paper to play with. I keep my practice pieces and computer misprints to recycle as underskirts. I try to stain the paper the yellowy colour of the dressmaker’s patterns with coffee and make coffee rings instead (traces of me at the table, my drink of choice). I prick myself when sewing and my blood stains the paper. Good more of that, I think. This playful, experimental aspect of my practice is guided by intuition and serendipity.

The writing and drafting process is symbolised through these petticoat layers or on the skirts themselves. The texts are taken from my work-in-progress – partial, unused poems and lines, quotes, and wordlists from my visual diary. The transcribed texts contain errors and corrections. These creative moments are revealed as the petticoat layers of skirt are lifted up.

Dans le cadre de l’écriture féminine, ma collection d’écrit-couture n’a pas la prétention to be perfect. I am not trying for perfection. I am trying to subvert.

Each skirt in the écri-couture collection is finished, but contains unsettled elements and imperfections. Ink smudges, crossed out words, pin holes and dangling threads contribute to
the sense of incompleteness or untidiness in the skirts. These unwearable skirts are paradoxes – they are in a state of being both complete and incomplete, resolved and unresolved, fluid and static.

I think, maybe, the skirts are me – I forgive myself my flaws now – don't mind loose threads being visible. They are a part of me – they express my story.

NOUN

skirt: 1. a woman's outer garment fastened at the waist and hanging down around the legs' (Oxford dictionaries 2018).

Let's not skirt the (t) issue.

The skirt evokes woman. I like to wear skirts, unzip them, let them drop to the floor. Skirts are playful – I am playful.

Do you think this is too short I like to show above my knees you can see your nickers when you bend ever so slightly at school a ruler to dictate the appropriate measurement above the knee is this too short showing a bit of leg a lot of leg an ankle you're not leaving the house in that

The Poet-in-Residence

I was asked to be Poet-in-residence at a community gallery, which I happily accepted. One of the aims of this residency, as set by the local council that funded the residency, was to make the creative practice of writers accessible to the public. The exhibition that was open in the gallery during my residency was titled ‘Works on Paper’ – an acquisitive Art Award competition. The showcased work by numerous artists was diverse – drawings, photographs, linocuts, etchings, and three-dimensional works – a diorama of a suburban backyard, a remodelling of a thick antique reference book, and a collection of small woven paper sculptures hanging from the ceiling. I found myself in a space of abundant ideas, creativity and paper.

My room was passed as you entered the gallery space. A small white room with high windows. The door was always open when I was there. I was ‘in residence’ for three months. I talked with the volunteers who woman the gallery. Some are artists.
I set up my workspace. I am the Poet-in-Residence – very validating. It is a room of my own. It is a room dedicated to my craft – a poet’s space.

I wondered what would inspire people to venture in – dare to come into a poet’s workplace. I needed to make my room inviting. My biography and photo were outside the door, advertising my residency. Inside, a long table, a bench along one wall. I covered the bench with a dark pink, velvety fabric – I use this fabric as a background for my handspun silk writing in the ‘Spinster’ series. This, along with colourful embroidered cushions soften the hard edges in the room. I stuck pictures to the walls that related to my work: a patchwork of images of my cross-stitch embroidery, a photo of the tissue paper coat my mother made, images of silk, my ‘Homage a Héléne’ and Sandon McLeod’s ‘I Bleed’ poem (McLeod, 2005, p. 39).

Even though my intention with this interior decoration was to draw people into my space, this homemaking activity was helping me to feel comfortable also. In this room, I had artefacts and symbols of my friends and family around me. Subconsciously perhaps, I had used these homemaking activities to bring myself to an unfamiliar place, settle in, inhabit the space authentically, and receive visitors.

Note to self: I could do this consciously, intentionally, in other contexts. Maybe I do this already, and haven’t noticed. A strategy? Take notice.

Passersby peered in on their way to the gallery; the curious entered. Others had heard about the poet in the art gallery and wanted to see for themselves. They came in and talked to me about my work. I showed them my embroidery, read poems to some.

I was working on the dissertation at the time and doing my cross-stitch embroidery. Helen the Fraud was having trouble with her dissertation and was feeling very unconfident about what she was doing. She didn’t really want to talk about it with strangers. Anyway, she wasn’t there in her capacity as Anxious Masters Student. Much more affirming and pleasurable to be Poet-in-Residence. Come in, come in.

What makes a poet worth visiting? All I did was sit at my computer, sometimes type, and read, make notes in notepads, surrounded by A4 paper, dressmaker’s tissue, academic books, and red embroidery threads.

I pondered what it meant to be a public poet, a poet in an exhibition space. I was an exhibit. My body would be viewed. Questions could be asked of me. How do I show I’m a poet? How will my performance be received? What is my practice? Why are you here? What's
embroidery got to do with it?

I begin a series of visual poems that explore this. I use lines, dashes, dots, colour and spacing as poetic and punctuation devices. The symbols resemble lines of thread, stitched and embroidered between lines of text. These poems were never intended for the page – they are for display, exhibition.

The ‘Poet-in-Residence’ skirts exploit the symbols available on a keyboard. The skirt design contains text in different fonts.

These skirts inspired the making of more skirts, and with ‘Sempstress’ and ‘I Bleed’ (2005), the écri-couture collection was launched. Thematically they added to the diversity of my self-sampler in an expression of aspects of my identity. As a Poet-in-Residence I was on show – similarly the skirts are exhibits – curiosities to be discovered. They are subversive in their delicacy and fragility, yet the text is not. The skirts create new possibilities for the expression and understanding of what poetry might be for the writer and the reader. Thinking about it now, their creation may have been a reaction to the difficulties I was having with my dissertation. The gallery rather than the university was the place to reside for a while. The artistic space nurtured my creativity and helped me to develop my creative practice outside of scholarly contexts. I realised that I, the Poet-in-Residence, could draw strength from spaces outside of the academy, return to my Masters, with a greater understanding of how my distracted and multi-faceted creative practice links with the themes in my project. The residency made me more confident in my position as a creative writer within academia.

The dissertation has a poet.

The Poet Has an Exhibition

Nine months later, the art curator for the gallery asked me to put together an exhibition in the small white room to showcase the outcomes of my residency. This was an opportunity to develop the handcraft aspect of my work and to fully exploit the visual aspect of my poetry. The small room suited the miniature skirts. I was to do a workshop where I would talk about my practice.
This provided a deadline to work towards and was the midway point in my Masters. It also supported and deepened my enquiry and reflection on why and how handcrafts and the skirts had become part of my writing practice.

The small exhibition space allowed me to play and to explore this idea in a physical and embodied way. I had begun to think that I may have an exhibition as part of my Master’s project. My writer’s room became a dress rehearsal space for this.

The exhibition was open for one month. I did indeed take note of how to install myself in the room. I wanted this exhibition to encourage visitors to view poetry in a new context. Again, I made this space my own – embedded myself comfortably in a domestic and feminine space. Inhabited it. Displayed myself through text on skirts, on show. Take note of me.

Paper skirts were displayed in a Perspex box. They also fluttered on a clothes line. The skirts invite the reader to come close, which creates an intimacy with the poems. The reader has to move around the object in order to read all the words.

Feminine, sacred and textural – one corner of the room was an eccentric altarpiece, a memorial to the women of maternal and literary influence in my life who have passed away – my mother, sister, and poet friend Sandon McLeod.

cross-stitch embroidery
a pincushion in the shape of a teapot
loose red threads
a black felt pen

on the wall
a photo of a tissue paper coat made by mum
cross-stitch photographic collage patchwork images
highlighting my sister’s initials

I handwrote Sandon’s poem ‘I Bleed’ on a concertina skirt with blood patterning its hem. It is a poem about menstruation, and it brings together my themes of bloodlines and literary lines, cycles. Sandon was very active in the Melbourne poetry scene and was well-known for her poetic scribblings on any paper to hand. Her well-crafted and intimate poetry confronted social issues and challenged taboos and stereotypical views of women. If not for her encouragement to write and perform poetry, my writing career would not be on this trajectory.

The miniature skirts are both artefact and poem, like Dickinson’s envelopes. Their inspiration comes partly from the shape, but serendipity also has its place. As Susan Howe says in her
preface to *The gorgeous nothings*, ‘viewing these “envelopes” as visual objects, while at the same time reading her [Dickinson’s] words for sound and sense, one needs to seize upon luck and accidents – slips on paper slips (2013 p. 7). *Écri-couture* draws on these happy accidents – no ‘mistake’ is discarded.

The skirts in the display case were finished in situ – the backs of the tissue skirts and underskirts added from pieces made in earlier experimental play. I reused materials found in my domestic and workspace in the designs. I incorporated circular coffee cup stains, doodles, ink smudges, blood and coloured pencils. The fixings are all temporary: paperclips, bulldog clips, thread and Blutack. This signals the idea of impermanence and change – showing that my creative process is flexible and adaptable. I used old sewing patterns which I found in the op-shop around the corner from the gallery as petticoats. The colour of the dressmaking patterns reminds me of aged paper, evoking a sense of history. There are instructions on the pattern pieces in French and English. Another French connection. Cixous!

The skirts hung on the clothes line evoke domestic activity and the intimate – but subverted:

- the clothes line is inside (a gallery)
- some skirts are dirty and stained
- the ‘drying clothes’ are public
- the skirts are not wearable
Their smallness and fragility make them precious and inspire close and careful examination. They can be read or viewed in any order – the skirts present pieces of me, but are anti-linear, anti-narrative.

There is a sense of transience about clothes on a line, of recycling – clothes get taken down, others are put up, the process is repeated over and over. These skirt poems are added to as new ideas are developed, tried on, pegged up for closer scrutiny. The clothes line also added actual motion to the installation, the skirts fluttering, caused by the movement of people in the gallery and the unintended but effective airflow from the heater.

The exhibition explored identity and how it may be expressed. Here the poet and the poetry were visible. The audience needed to engage in a new way. The visitors to the installation spent longer than I had expected in the room – they examined the artefacts, followed the lines of text through the folds of tissue paper. Many were immersed in the experience of poetry presented in an intimate and innovative space.

The Poet as Artist

I prepare for an exhibition and poetry reading for the completion for my Masters. It will be in a larger space – the Urban Writing House, a room used by students at RMIT and visitors to the university to develop creative writing projects. A house of writing, a space to house writers and ideas. Artists and writers use it for residencies – it is a discussion room, a meeting place, a creative working space – definitely not a gallery, but a space, nevertheless, that I will make mine. I like that it is called a house – it fits with my intention of creating a domestic creative space that served me well in my residency and previous exhibition. The Urban Writing House will be home to me and my work. I could call this space an installation also – I will install myself there.

furniture and fittings  kitchen sink  bench  cupboards three shelves on a wall  2 metres long  floor to ceiling blackboard about 3 metres long  lighting  wooden floor  windows at the front next to the door  round coffee table  small rectangular table taller  Scandinavian-design dining table and chairs  two modern/retro armchairs  aqua  a two-seater couch

This new exhibition is a development of my themes and their expression, and an exploration and demonstration of my creative practice. It develops the idea of the creative process as being always in motion, that work is always in progress. It will reveal the back story, share the background material, the influences. It will add another dimension to my feminine narrative, my self-sampler. This is where the multi-faceted nature of my work will be shown. The exhibition makes my story experiential – it is visual, tangible and tactile.
'Take note', I wrote above, and I recall the accidental strategy of using homemaking activities 'to bring myself to an unfamiliar place, settle in and inhabit the space authentically'. Domesticating the space, inhabiting it, gave me confidence and helped me claim ownership of the exhibition and residency.

I know this now, and have found my place as a poet within the academy and the gallery. I will read my poetry to you. The _écri-couture_ skirt collection will be on show. We will be curious and comfortable amongst these paper skirts and dressmakers' notions. My mother’s sketchbook will be open on the small table showing her designs, fashion illustrations and miniature paper coats. Fabric will be laid out, ready to be cut – the pattern pieces pinned to it. You can sit in an armchair and examine my cross-stitch embroidery held in its circular frame. I want the messy underside to be seen, fingers to feel the stitches. I have sketched a design for another embroidered homily that will be hung on the wall. It is subversive and I am tempted to share it here, but I want to surprise you when you visit the house. I want you to appreciate the theme of unpredictability and whimsy that exists in the project as a whole.

Since my first exhibition, I have framed the miniature half-jacket that my mother made as part of her textile course and this will be hung in the House. She made it to demonstrate her proficiency in tailoring. It is lined, with a besom pocket with a flap, buttons, and a notch lapel. For assessment, the garment must show the requisite skills and half a jacket is enough to show this. I can’t remember when I acquired it, but it has been with me all my adult years, from a time before Mum died – perhaps I claimed it in my teenage years. It has lived in one of my drawers, with other keepsakes from my mother’s sewing life: embroidered napkins, handkerchiefs, doilies, a child’s bodice, her silk nightie, and some packets of embroidery thread. Every now and then I would examine the jacket, poke two fingers in the tiny pocket and be impressed at my mother’s skill. I can picture her fiddling with this, working at it, shaping the fabric, pinning and tacking and stitching and ironing – her hands crafting.

The act of framing the coat was to honour my mother’s creativity and skills. Framing it has made it visible; it hangs on a wall now and has become an artwork. However, I do have a small twinge of regret, as I can no longer handle it, run my hands over it, open it to marvel at the inside.

in the frame I am reflected
my face in the frame a slice of the room
the leafy green of outside slatted through
wooden venetian blinds
I we move the view the reflection it is me in the
half-jacket in the room with a view of leafy green
the light from outside slatted through wooden
venetian blinds
parts of me in the frame the background
the reflection my phone take the shot

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2.15 Framed half-jacket made by Anne Peachey
I have always known it as a half-jacket, but in the frame, it has the appearance of the whole coat neatly folded in half. Inadvertently, it now contains a visual trick - is it a half or a whole? How can you tell? Was this intentional? Like Dickinson's envelope poems, it demands a second look. The viewer indeed has to 'look with care'. When I look, I see myself. Like the skirts, it is both finished and unfinished, complete and incomplete.

I will use the blackboard in the space. The blackboard reminds me of school, of the practice of handwriting, copying from the board. A memory of learning, of learning by memory, repetition and practice. The blackboard was so everyone could see. Text on a blackboard is temporary, the length of time it stays varies. It may demonstrate a salient point or a diagram, an illustration or explanation, words to be copied into books. Ultimately they are wiped off to create a blank space for new work. There is a chalk residue left on the board, traces of erased text, traces of the writer.

The existence of the blackboard in the Urban Writing House is serendipitous. It is a perfect device to further my ideas about the practice of writing: the repetitions of ideas and language, the shared experience of reading, the traces of past knowledge and history, and the tactile nature of handwriting.

I will use the dining table to lay out pattern pieces on fabric in preparation for cutting. This shows a moment in the dressmaking process. Perhaps a work-in-progress poem will be handwritten on the paper. Perhaps I will let you scribble yourself. I am confident to use my intuition and serendipity to guide me in how I present this idea, as this worked successfully in my previous exhibition.

In regard to creative practice, the exhibition troubles the notion of completion. The installation is one part of the completion of my higher degree and should demonstrate a resolution of artistic and academic ideas. I play with this idea by including artworks that are stalled, or in-progress and imply further action, deeper thought, but are worthy objects for consideration in this unfinished state.

My creative practice has expanded to include the artworks in the exhibition. The poet is an artist.
The Poet Applies Poetics

Poetics has become the means by which writers formulate and discuss an attitude to their work that recognises influences, the traditions they write within and develop, the literary, social and political context in which they write and the processes of composition and revision they undertake… (Lasky 2013, p.14).

In her chapter, ‘Poetics and Creative Writing Research’, Lasky discusses the difficulties faced by creative writing students undertaking practice-led research in an academic structure. She asks, ‘… how do we articulate this strange symbiotic relation between practice and theory, between process and outcome?’ (2013 p.14). Her answer is through a study of poetics.

One of the early difficulties she points to, and one I faced, is acknowledging that my poetry can be the subject of my own academic enquiry. I have come to trust the process whereby creative writing will deliver new lines of thought and vice versa, introduce me to the work of other writers and artists, and deepen my understanding of what I am doing when I write. I see practice-led research as a self-sustaining activity – the writing leads me to the work of others, which then informs my poetry, which then leads me on…

When I study my own poems for research, new questions can emerge. Why have I chosen this form to write in? What influences are overt or hidden? What traditions do I accept or reject, subvert? Where do I want the poem to go?

I use poetics as an approach to understand these questions for myself, through a case study of my poem ‘Hipster Spinster Rap’.

Performance Poetry

The inspiration to write and perform ‘Hipster Spinster Rap’ was twofold. Firstly, within a feminist paradigm, I was especially interested in the language related to gender, and wanted to explore the stereotype of the older woman. I wanted to locate myself, as an older woman, boldly (bodily) in front of an audience, daring to ‘sample’ a style associated with youth and masculinity. Remember Helen the Brave?

Secondly, as this poem was written for performance, I wanted to appropriate elements of the spoken word forms of hip-hop and rap, and see where my writing led me. I wanted to experiment and see what may open up – would it be ironic? forceful? Would it enable me to
speak in a new way? I wanted to provoke a curious listening to what I had to say, and how I would say it.

Many spoken word artists and rap poets approach their work from an oral tradition and may not commit their words to the page. My practice is not like this, so my rap was written with specific attention to the spaces and the timing. The speaking of it out aloud has meant I have internalised sections of it, feel it in my body when I perform it.

Diverse traditions are evident in contemporary spoken word performance. Rhetoric, hip-hop, monologue, storytelling, music and theatrical elements combine to create a dynamic spoken word culture. Also the rant. I had a point to make, and this seemed a possible way to do it. But most often the idea of the ‘rant’ was coupled with angry men shouting down a microphone, hurling their words at the audience and certainly offering no opportunity for engagement, online and in venues. These rants were often about being oppressed, neglected or ignored. Many are concerned about identity. I suppose the shouting must be part of it – the need to be heard. However, the rant can be nuanced - I think of Daniel Beaty and his performance poem ‘Knock Knock’ (2010), powerful in its delivery and its message – learning to be a man in the absence of his father, a black man in jail. Themes of racism and discrimination blend with a sense of power and responsibility. Beaty brings humour to ‘Duality Duel’, a performance poem about the complexity of identity: ‘the battle between the nerd and the nigger in me’ (2012).

My project concerns identity and the silencing of women’s voices, the invisibility of the older woman, but an angry rant wasn’t my way – a clever, funny thought-provoking rant was my way. I wanting to engage with people about the issues facing the older woman, to inspire conversation.

I hear you sister, I say.
Poetry is a way to find language for anger, I hear.

In Melbourne, where I live, the spoken word poetry scene is vibrant and diverse, with regular readings and performances held around the city and suburbs in venues as diverse as public libraries, pubs, cafes, art galleries and museums. My poetry performance experience started in a hotel in Fitzroy thirty years ago, one of a handful of venues supporting poetry. There are now more opportunities for poets to share their work and for audiences to hear poetry of all kinds. ‘Hipster Spinster Rap’ draws influences from poets I have seen perform. These include poets including Steve Smart, Maxine Beneba Clarke, Andy Jackson, Anna Fern, Thomas Keily, Elf Transporter, Anthony O’Sullivan, Robin Rowlands, Kerry Loughrey and Emilie Zoe Baker. Their work is intimate and well crafted, intelligent – and an emotional connection is made through their ability to be both vulnerable and confident through their poetry performances.
In her first participation in a slam poetry event at the age of fourteen, Sarah Kay felt that she had to write something angry as this was her impression of the style and content of slam poetry. This didn't come easily to her, and she suggests that expressions of anger are not encouraged in girls and women. Using words to rant – to browbeat and overpower the audience – was not natural or authentic for her.

Nor me. I am angry about sexist and ageist stereotypes and attitudes, but yelling is not for me. I wanted my poem to work with my older, female, albeit white voice – and also to be funny and ironic. I know that when I create a relationship with an audience, develop a careful listening, the reading is more powerful, and allows me to be vulnerable and authentic. To his end, for the performance I learnt the poem ‘by heart’. I find that it appears to come from the heart and is heard that way.

Performing and sharing my poetry in public informs my practice. Reading my poems aloud is an integral part of the process. Through voicing the words, the musicality of them becomes clear. Performance is another component of the editing, an opportunity to revise and refine the transference of the written to the spoken word. For me, the voicing of a poem connects me to it physically and emotionally, and helps, as Middleton puts it, to ‘gain a sense of its range of potential’ (2005, p. 10). Sharing my work through performance also allows me to experiment with ideas and elicit feedback.

The Poet as Performer

I am taking my friend Joan to a poetry reading where I have a ten-minute spot along with nine other poets at a community-festival-finger-food-gala-event. She is twenty years older than me and she is the first woman I heard say the word ‘cunt’ in a poem. This was twenty years ago. I will be reading my new poem ‘Hipster Spinster Rap’ for the first time. It is intentionally provocative. In it, I say ‘cunt’. I’m nervous.

The audience will be partly familiar; I will know some of them well, others not at all, but the general demographic could be described as over-forty literary types living in the Yarra Valley.

I have another reading later in the week. The MC says that the audience will be ‘a bunch of extremely keen appreciative young alternative visual artists and a few regulars from the poetry scene’. Inner-city gallery – milk crates for seats – cheap wine. I think they will not be shocked by the word, maybe shocked that it’s coming out of my mouth, but willing to engage with the ideas in my poem. I am still nervous. I practise in the car on the way to the reading. I repeat the verse that I particularly don't want to fumble. Joan learns it, too.
Do I dare eat a peach? let the juice slurp down my front
insert a fig inside my cunt?
Do I dare eat a peach? let the juice slurp down my front, insert a fig inside my cunt?
Do I dare eat a peach? let the juice slurp down my front insert a fig inside my cunt? Do I dare eat a peach? let the juice slurp down my front insert a fig inside my cunt? Do I dare?

Hipster Spinster Rap:
a Case Study
in Poetics

I have said that the act of performance is a way of testing out a poem. For me also, it is an act of validation of myself as poet, and a way of presenting my writing for public scrutiny. In this poem I put myself forward as a ‘hipster spinster’.

The performance of a poem transforms it into a corporeal event. This concerns my personal bodily connection with the poem and my relationship with the audience. The enactment of the poem allows me to embody the words, respond to the rhythm. It inspires movement and hand gestures or facial expressions. The voicing of the words reconnects me with the process of writing the poem and the reasons I wrote it. I want to activate an enquiry and language around woman and ageing, and how it affects attitudes and behaviours. The older woman is centre stage, as a poet, performer and feminist. Performance of this poem enables the older woman to be physically seen and heard. This intention is expressed in the first line. I put myself forward. I step up to the microphone.

I want to write hip-hop
I like the descriptor of myself
as a hipster spinster
it rhymes with sister trickster quipster fixer
and he kissed her

Poet H: By now the audience may have giggled and become intrigued. I have questioned stereotypes about ‘hipsters’ and ‘spinsters’. The audience is thinking about who can aspire to write and perform hip-hop.

Poet M: I love seeing you perform this, the way the audience is drawn in from the first line.

Poet H: It usually goes well, and people come up to me after and say they liked it.
Poet M: It’s such a cheeky poem. It’s like a mischievous child you can’t help liking for her wit.

I place myself clearly within a feminist context and I’m aware that not all the audience is enamoured to feminism. So I am playful and ironical, by adding ‘a’ to feminist so that it rhymes with sister from the previous verse (and being cool in my boldness in appropriating language not aligned with my older white woman status). I relax ‘of’ to ‘a’ in ‘midsta’ and ‘lista’ to make it more colloquial and befitting the conventions of hip-hop form:

in the midsta feminista
I got a lista
other rhyming words

This also seeds the possibility of a rant – what do I want to say? What words will I choose? How will they be delivered?

yes, I gotta list a words
to define redefine
not confine to straight lines
I make refinements polish illuminate
make the words shine
I like to blur lines
cross them

The word ‘lines’ is used both literally and metaphorically. It refers to the written or spoken lines in a poem, and the invisible lines that we draw or construct to make judgments about attitudes and behaviour. I challenge these cultural limitations by writing and performing; the performance of this poem has become exhilarating to me, especially when facing an audience of hipsters half my age, who are surprised by my very place in the venue, and challenged to examine their attitudes and language use when it comes to gender and age.

yes I’ve got a list
a feminist agenda
a fifty-six year old perspective
not a string of invective
a feminine voice, not cloistered,
nor boisterous.

I challenge the norms of hip-hop by affirming my age and gender and distinguish that my approach does not conform to the loud rants that typify so much of this genre. However, my voice will be heard. I use the word ‘cloistered’ as it evokes imposed silence and isolation from outside influences. I think of nunneries and women’s submissiveness. My voice is not
cloistered or suppressed. It is not boisterous – it is heard for its value not its volume.

collected thoughts and words
arranged for rhyming
the timing important
and here it is my time

Poet M: I like it when you read this bit. You pause when you read this last line. Like you’ve reached something and you’re looking back.

Poet H: The right time to write this. Like this age.

Poet M: Another pun – you can’t help it. Yeh, but now it’s your time to speak.

Poet H: I’m reminded of Woolf and Cixous here – I’m expressing an urgency to write.

Poet M: No time like the present.

Poet H: I chose it to as it has historical echoes.

Poet M: Of what?

Poet H: ‘It’s time’ was the slogan the Labor Party used when Whitlam was elected. It was also the time when second wave feminism was happening – it seemed to me, as a teenager, that it signalled a time of cultural change.

I pause longer before this next verse, to emphasise my new direction in taking risks. It opens the way for me, as a writer, to push personal and cultural limits. This is Helen the Brave:

I continue with uncertainty
which is a place I like to be
using words
dangerously

as you might see
my age isn’t stopping me
a hip-hop rant
is inside and out of me
we will see what this form
can storm forth, flood from me
cos hip-hop is a new construction
a re-form-a-tion
Again I affirm that age and gender do not limit my voice. The poem is now ‘out of me’ – visible and audible in performance, the older woman poet finds her strong voice.

Watery imagery is commonly associated with women, and here I allude to Cixous’ writing, particularly ‘Laugh of the Medusa’. Her language is exuberant and an exhilarating rush. She sees women’s self-expression in writing as an outpouring of emotion, the release or bursting of constraints, flooding and destroying patriarchal structures.

In the last four lines of the verse, I heard the sonic similarity between ‘a new construction’ and ‘knee reconstruction’ which led me to the pun in the last line, ‘a hip replacement of poetry’. Not only does it allude to ageing and the need for physically adapting the body, but the adaptation of my poetry to the hip-hop rant. It also demonstrates that ageing feminists can have a sense of humour:

Poet M: I love that hip replacement line.

Poet H: Me too, gets a laugh.

Poet M: It’s witty. But do you think it’s a replacement?

Poet H: No, but it's got a different label, offers a different entry point to poetry.

‘I grow old, I grow old’
shall I wear my trousers rolled?’
can I be so bold to
transpose Tom’s quoted and misquoted lines
time-travel them to a new millennium
cross-gender and
render them feminine?
‘do I dare eat a peach?’
let the juice slurp
down my front
insert a fig inside my cunt?

Poet M: I like the way you used Eliot’s lines ‘I grow old, I grow old! I shall wear my trousers rolled’.

Poet H: Yeh, some of his lines have stayed with me since I studied him in high school. Now that line has more relevance.
Poet M: Prufrock, wasn’t it?

Poet H: Yes, I checked the quote in my high school copy, and realised I’d quoted it incorrectly. I’d written it as a question – ‘Shall I wear my trousers rolled’. In Eliot’s poem, it isn’t a question, it’s a statement.

Poet M: It’s better as a question

Poet H: Yeh, it opens up a conversation about ageing, rather than accepting decline as poor old Prufrock does.

Poet M: That was a lucky misquote.

Poet H: I’ve been learning to watch out for these happy accidents – serendipity moments. I feel that I’m accepting something at work other than my thoughts.

I then follow with a rhetorical question: ‘Can I be so bold...?’ The poem is calling on Helen the Brave to see herself as a writer who can appropriate and subvert the work of others in a new context and for a new time.

Woman C: Do you really say cunt in this poem?

Poet M: It rhymes with front...

Poet H: It actually wasn’t my intention. I wanted to make the fruity act of eating a peach more feminine, more contemporary. I was living in my flat at the time, and writing the poem. I was gazing out the window... .

Woman C: Yeh, yeh, and you saw your massive fig tree.

Woman E: Now that’s a sexy fruit.

Poet H: Exactly, better than a peach.

Woman D: So luscious.

Poet M: Juicy and fleshy – it’s like a vagina.

Woman C: You think so?

Woman E: I’m thinking about Jaivin’s Eat me (1995).
Poet H: So was I.

Woman E: So the research helped?

The usage of the word ‘cunt’ had not been explicitly in my mind when I started this poem, however it had been something I’d talked about with a few friends.

Woman D: So you did write about it – you clever cunt.

Woman C: Oh really!

Woman D: Do you find it hard to say in public?

Poet H: Initially, but it's in a different context, the speaking of it is the point and the audience get that.

so here I define myself
as a hipster spinster
I see no reason not
to dare to use the ‘c’ word
you see it rhymes with front

In the last section, I return to my earlier definition of myself as a hipster spinster and what I claim as an older woman poet. The mood of the poem changes here from a playful and exploratory discourse, to a serious consideration of the way a woman's genitalia has come to be used as the worst swear word. It becomes intimate through the use of the inclusive pronouns ‘us’ and ‘our’. We are together in this.

so here I define myself
as a hipster spinster
I see no reason not
to dare to use the ‘c’ word
you see it rhymes with front
this word     this dirty curse word
this everyman go-to vulgarity
this fucking word
reserved
for our worst profanity
in another world it refers to a sacred place    a sublime space
a place of birth
pleasure and exquisite pain
not an expression of hatred
and shame

**Woman E:** *How does the audience react?*

**Poet H:** *They go a bit quiet.*

I don’t want to linger here
cause a fuss or commotion
just want to trigger some notions
point out the paradox
cos in life in private this place is adored
but in language in public it’s spat out
in anger and abuse
it’s abhorred

My critical analysis of the detail in ‘Hipster Spinster Rap’ has sharpened my understanding of the context in which I write, and highlights the processes and influences at work. I have said that the act of performance is a way of testing out a poem. For me, it is also an act of validation of myself as poet, and a way of presenting my writing for public scrutiny. I am putting myself, as well as my poems, forward.

This exercise has inspired broader reflection on my practice. I realise that my use of dialogue is a strategy to draw together poetics, practice and analysis. It is a container for the expression of differing views amongst older women.

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**Just the Hem To Do**

The girl
dizzy and hot
on the kitchen table
in an inside out dress
with just the hem to do.

Oh look! It’s the shape of a skirt!

The words above form the last verse of an earlier version of my poem ‘Sempstress’. The marking of the hem of a dress or skirt signifies that the garment is nearly ready to wear it has been tried on at various stages adjustments have been made to darts
necklines                               the girl and her mother                  collaborate in this final stage
discuss the length                      turn                                          stand still                               she says                       turn
she                                      chalks the line                             I spin slowly on the kitchen table
pause                                      stop-and-start                              circling
a height                       over view                  look back                                      look over
look at me                           how do I look?

She holds her hand out for me as I step from chair to floor.

I’m in my inside-out dress                   you can see what’s on the inside now               the stitching
the outline                               we can unpick

Finally, the dress is ready. The hemline is neatly handstitched. I try it on, regard the fit and
look at my reflection in the mirror. I sway my hips to see how the fabric swishes around
my legs, twist to see the back. It suits me.

My Masters is ready now                   I step out in my new body of work in my new dress.
Like my mother helping me down off the table, my literary sisters hold out their
hands and send me on my way. Helen the Master, and her many selves.
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