Essaying Bodies, Bodying Essays:
Write in the Middle is a Creative-Critical Research Practice

A project submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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August 2018
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.

I acknowledge the support I have received for my research through the provision of an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship.

Martha A. Sempert
August 2018
Acknowledgements

The notion of a *milieu*—the surroundings, or, the middle place—features strongly in this PhD.

I acknowledge all indigenous people on whose ancestral land I roam, research and write. In particular, I offer my respect to the Wurundjeri people of Australia, the First Nations people of Quebec, and the Multnomah and Chinook Native American people of Oregon. My deep regard extends to their ancestors, and to all their elders, past, present and emerging.

My sincere gratitude goes to those entities—human and nonhuman—which traversed the middle place with me over the past four and a half years, and have helped—in one way or another—to bring this PhD to fruition.

Those many and varied influences include:

My supervisors, Jessica L. Wilkinson and Craig Batty, for recognising my need to roam and for knowing when to call me back. And my appreciation goes to you both for making my supervisee experience such *rigorous* fun.

Polly Stanton, Yvette Harvey, Lone Bertelsen, Andrew Murphie, Norie Neumark, Stayci Taylor, Pia Ednie-Brown, Viv Waller, Andrew Goodman, Gali Weiss and your cello, Zehorith Mitz, and my sister, Sarah Sempert: thank you all for roaming with me, at some point, along the way.

Peta Murray: as a last minute request, I am enormously grateful for your gracious skim of the final draft, full of deep insights and useful critiques. Delivered to me playfully, of course.

In the School of Media and Communication, my appreciation goes to Corliss Mui Suet Chan and Victoria Tzamouranis for your calm administrative prowess that led to a smooth passage through the institutional labyrinth.

Steven Chong, copyeditor extraordinaire. Your many generous and incisive comments prompted me to take—and continue to take—the writing to another level.

Paul Mylecharane, designer extraordinaire. Your calm and elegant smashing rescued the final document from Formatting Hell and gave it a roomy, visual poetic.

Jen Davoren, Karen Jones and BB, my Fitzroy family: for your steadfast support, generosity, and countless nourishing meals.
The Dunmoochin Foundation: for the residency in Clif’s Old Studio. To the micro-bats, phascogales, pardalotes, cup moth caterpillars, meandering cahogs, chugging woodstove and all else within that milieu that provided me with inspiring company during the first two years of the project.

The Montreal-based SenseLab, the laboratory for thought in motion: for our ongoing emergent collectivity. I look forward to our emergence as The 3 Ecologies Institute.

The Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council/The Immediations Grant and RMIT for the financial support to make possible three immersive residencies in Montreal, where I was able to experience, directly, the concept of a collective subjectivity.

A special thank you goes to Erin Manning for introducing me to the concept of the more-than on that hot day in Avoca. Since then I have been irrevocably lured into the world of process-oriented philosophic thinking: with Spinozan Joy.

My many acupuncture clients, who, over the past 27 years, have helped me to realise that yes, indeed, our bodies do think.

My mother Mary Zerelda Gaines who instilled in her three children a deep love for the nonhuman world. I hope this project carries that love by bringing a more-than human voice into the fore.
The whole body thinks.
Baruch Spinoza, The Ethics, 1677
Essaying Bodies, Bodying Essays: 
*Write in the Middle is a Creative-Critical Research Practice*

Martha Sempert
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An Important Note on Ethics

Many of the concepts I am interested in and write about have to do with porosity, blurred boundaries, and liminal spaces. Of gaps and differentials, thresholds and transitions: those places impossible to measure or pin down, where, unbeknownst to most of us, we spend most of our time. That is, in the Middle Zone.

As an Australian Government registered health care practitioner, I am legally and ethically bound to a Code of Conduct. This Code ensures privacy and confidentiality for all of my clients (as well as their informed consent and harm minimisation). What happens in the treatment room stays in the treatment room. There is nothing blurry or permeable here. Professional boundaries need to be watertight. Trust, in a therapeutic relationship, is paramount.

In my first year of candidature as a creative practice researcher, I needed to satisfy the university’s ethics requirement. In order to do so, the following question had to be carefully and thoroughly scrutinised:

Do you need human participants for your research, for your data set?

I knew early on in my research that I wanted to somehow explore the relationship between body and language. That I would somehow draw on my extensive clinical experience (27 years at the time of this writing) and knowledge of the human body. That I had begun the daunting task of trying to comprehend process-oriented philosophy, and that those concepts would somehow inform the project. That I wanted to use the way I think as an acupuncturist—in complex, dynamic inter-relationships—and have that way of thinking somehow inform the methodology. That, somehow, I would find a way to get all of those things to blend as I explored the lyric essay form.

As a practising acupuncturist, I am privy to intimate spaces: spaces in bodies, and the stories that emerge from the safe space of the treatment room. I knew that these spaces (full of thresholds, transitions, liminality) would inspire my writing and create a desire to re-think notions of body.

Did I need human participation for my research, for my data set?
After several months of consideration and considerable confusion, it became clear. And simple: my research is not about acupuncture, nor is it about individuals from my clinical practice. As such, there is no data set. So no, I did not need human participation for my research.

Disclaimer:
Any perceived likeness to any of the clients in the clinic scenarios contained within many of these essays, is purely coincidental. Again, to ensure privacy and confidentiality—and to be able to think and write, ethically fret-free—all ‘clients’ are imagined.
Abstract

This PhD blends three practices that are not ordinarily put together: creative writing, acupuncture, and process-oriented philosophy (e.g. Spinoza, William James, Whitehead). An important aim of this practice-led research is to re-present notions of body through the writing of a series of essays that demonstrate how creative and critical components can move together within one body, and also within a collection of text-bodies. The PhD explores the relation between ‘lyric’ and ‘essay’ and how this relationship can generate a more-than quality that has the potential to affectively move the [dissertation’s] body beyond the sum of its parts. The practice of experimenting with the essay’s capacity to carry the force of thought forming can, by extension, make creative practice research a site for the production of knowledge. The project demonstrates how a method of making becomes the methodology. That is, the process of thinking and making—rhizomatically, from the Deleuzian middle—not only activates the practice(s), but also becomes the outcome. Or, as Whitehead says, “Knowledge is drawn up with the immediacy of its own importance, as fresh as fish.”
Preface

An important aim of this dissertation, situated within the fields of lyric and experimental essay writing, is to re-present notions of body. To do so, I make a practice of thinking transversally between three domains: acupuncture, creative writing/essay studies and process-oriented philosophic concepts. This approach—dizzying in its dexterous demands—is an effort to move away from the splitting effects of Cartesian thinking by making a body of essays that moves, and in the Spinozean sense, that is capable of thought.

A proposition that is repeatedly folded into this thesis is that the practice of experimenting with the essay’s capacity to carry the force of thought forming can, by extension, make the act of creative practice research a testing site for the production of knowledge: where the forces at work (and play) within thought—within language—become the vital “material”. To consider “body” and “text” as living tissue capable of forming whole bodies, alive with the capacity to immanently grow, change and become, is always in process. To do so can demonstrate how a process of making can become output; of how writing and thinking can become process itself.

The theory and practice of acupuncture pivots around the body perceived as a complex web of dynamic pluralistic activities; a concept I attempt to express through the essays’ bodies. Within the swirling middle of the pivot is unpindownable qi, the stuff that a twisting acupuncture needle moves. Poet-essayist Joan Retallack (2003) reminds us that “every inter-permeable living system works in dynamic, vertiginous flux – finding its patterns in contingent motion” (p. 36). Process-oriented philosophic concepts, I maintain, have the capacity to carry the force of thought, in-forming, with the essay’s body as the site of knowledge-making. Where “essay” and “lyric” meet generates the potential for immanent movement, as the whole body—the dissertation’s body—thinks. Developing a practice of thinking and writing in the middle allows for a more-than quality—or lyric, freed from the ego-bound subjective Lyric “I”—to emerge from the essaying bodies as a potential, agential force. That is, more-than lyric essay.

Included in the aim to re-present notions of body is a desire to demonstrate how the creative and critical components can move as one body; how, in the process of writing a series of
essays, the academic veracity can be ficto-critically embedded within the flesh of the essays’ bodies. Concepts created and developed by process philosophers (Henri Bergson, Deleuze & Guattari, William James, Erin Manning, Brian Massumi, Baruch Spinoza, Alfred North Whitehead) are twirled-in to provide sinewy conceptual tensility that is, concepts that generate the tension required for growth and change to take place within the dissertation’s structure. This includes the more-than qualities that affectively proliferate from the Deleuzian middle—the entre deux—into the field of infinite possibilities. In doing so, the method of making the essays becomes the methodology.

Bodying Essays
Since the nature of this dissertation is highly experimental, I will prudently highlight two writerly devices that I relied on heavily throughout the creative practice research journey. One is what I call connective tissuing language, a concept I put forth early in the project. The other device is the use of repetition. It was through the recurrent use of these two devices that the primary proposition of the thesis—how the essaying body has capacity to carry the force of thought, in-forming—is tested as a site for knowledge-making.

Connective tissuing language uses the physical properties of connective tissue as a conceptual analogue for the capacities of the essay’s body. Long considered inert—as mere glue that hold things together—connective tissue (including fascia and interstitial fluid) has recently been reconsidered by researchers (Schleip, 2012; Schultz, 1996) to be dynamic and alive. Alive in the sense that it responds to movement and stimuli by laying down more flexible connective tissue fibres, as well as providing a gooey matrix for the conduction of messages (nerve cells are coated with a kind of connective tissue) to gazillions of cells and tissues located throughout the fleshy body. Without movement, without operational tension, messages stagnate, affecting the whole body. If a body does not move, its structure becomes stiff; muscles atrophy, organs shrivel, and cell membranes collapse. The body will inevitably die.

As a conceptual analogue, connective tissuing language keeps text-tissue in relationship with surrounding text-tissue, allowing the essaying bodies to move, change, and become. It also allows for the perfusion of concepts within an individual essay’s
text-tissue, as well as spread through all of the essay bodies as they develop into one big body: this PhD thesis.

Conceptual connective tissue, I attempt to fluently assert throughout the thesis, is a middling agent for language. It is ubiquitous and discrete; always actively present, in the middle, in-between. It allows the bodying of essays to move into their indeterminate futures.

Embedded within the connective tissuing concept is another frequently used device: repetition. Just as an acupuncture needle’s repeated twirls—in that middling space located between the skin and the flesh—generate flow and movement (by physically twisting microscopic fibres into whirls, felt as a zing), repeated conceptual-twirls are required here to maintain the fluidity and pace of the essaying body’s movement and flow. Through the use of repetition—of key phrases and words, particularly related to philosophic concepts—the repeated folds and layering create a deeper dimensionality to the text (and gives me time to mentally metabolise the dense and difficult concepts that cling to process philosophy).

Besides the overlapping philosophic concepts, another repeatedly twirled-in idea is what I call Parasympathetic bliss. This term refers to a primary therapeutic aim of an acupuncture treatment: to reach a lulling and physiologically restful state, or “autonomic flux.” Parasympathetic bliss makes its presence felt several times throughout the thesis.

As I do with my acupuncture practice, I became alert to stiff theoretical spots that impede movement and call out for more space, for more twirling. Exasperating concepts are teased out, mollified. With repetition, the movements within the writing spill over, still alive. The text cannot be contained: twists and twirls and repeated folds generate movement in the language and the text seeps beyond the page. Conceptual loose ends dangle, ready to be picked up and twirled into another emerging essay body.

Each essay body expresses a desire to join the fluent flow and agile movement of the other essay bodies. Other betweening agents, such as white space, are potentially twirled in. As each essay finds its own content through its emergent form or shape, a dynamic pluralism is activated, or twirled transversally, between body and language. Rather than write about process, the writing itself seeks to actively embody process. The essays—each shape unique—start to move—and think—as one big body.
Essaying Bodies: more-than [lyric] essay
This research project launched itself as an exploration of the lyric essay form; but as I prepared for my final milestone, about three and a half years later, I experienced a radical shift in my thinking. Perhaps it was not so much a shift as it was a coalescing: many of the concepts from process-oriented philosophy started to gel and become metabolised by the assembled big body.

During this coalescence, I became aware of an uneasy coupling between lyric and essay. This led to a revelation: that it is the agential forces generated between lyric and essay that allows for more-than possibilities. That is, to become more-than the sum of its parts—to always be in process, elusive and intangible, just like the nature of qi—the essay must be free to roll around and gather conceptual loose ends. In order to feel the force of form, in-forming, essay and lyric needed to decouple as a form. It is the nature of essay to wander, seek and attempt. It needs to be free of lyric’s demands for intimacy. Lyric is always within proximity as a more-than potential, but can no longer be attached as a form. Connective tissuing language—write in the middle—ensures their existence as open concepts that are able to engender more-than qualities, forces and tendencies. As a result, I learned to listen harder for the spots that wanted more twirling, more space. I opened more spaces for lyric to inhabit.

To complete the PhD, however, the big body’s conceptual loose ends required cauterising to stem their movement and flow. Otherwise, it would continue to feel the force of form, in-forming, and want to keep essaying forward into its indeterminate future.

It is my aim to have the final big body still quiver with more-than possibilities and lyric forces. That is, for it to still be capable of carrying the force of thought-forming, alive.

Diagrams Becoming Biograms
Early on in my research I drew diagrams as a way to make visible the burgeoning ideas as my creative practice research got underway. I found drawing diagrams to be useful not only as a way to keep ideas from tangling into a hair-pulling mess, but also as a way to generate movement of thought, of ideas, into the subsequent phase of research. The early diagrams became an integral part of the method of making. Since the role of connective tissue—alive and dynamic both figuratively and literally—has a strong presence
in my ideas, I used several different colours of connective tissue ‘threads’ to link ideas/potential [lyric] essay bodies/theorists.

The idea-lines also helped to steady a trajectory as I worked to comprehend—and integrate—the dense concepts central to process philosophy. When I intuited a threshold into another phase of research, I would make another diagram. And always with loose ends—ideas deliberately frayed and open—at the right edge of the diagram to be picked up and potentially twirled into the next iteration.

As I became more practised at essaying—and exploring the edges of the form as I twirled the creative and critical together into each essay’s body—I no longer needed to draw diagrams. At some indeterminate point during the research practice, the line-ideas transmuted into text-ideas. The line-ideas, as valued as they were when needed most, were metabolised by the text. Instead of using a coloured pencil, the literary elements took over as they were tooled into the text. And instead of a line representing the potential movement of ideas, the text began to carry the force of thoughts forming, that is, it actively metabolised the concepts.

This transmutation of line into text can be carried by Brian Massumi’s (2002) quivering concept of a biogram: “lived diagrams based on already lived experience, revived to orient further experience” (p. 186). And to transmute further: the diagram into a biogram—that is, my living-breathing research repository, my living diagram as a creative practice researcher—allows the threads and traces of thoughts-forming in the schematic drawings to remain alive and active in the bodies of text. In particular, connective tissue continues to be a vital material doing its dynamic, discrete work to allow bodies to move, change and become.

The diagram-biogram is a useful concept—or thinking-technique—that can carry the movement and force of thoughts-forming. It also adds a synaesthetic dimension—of all the senses alive in various combinations—to the dissertation’s complex, dynamic body. Says Massumi (2002) of the biogram: “Since they work by calling forth a real movement-experience, they retain a privileged connection to proprioception” (p. 186). This suggests that the dissertation’s body carries the force of my thoughts forming as my living diagram continues to orient to further sensate experience. And the living diagram potentiates a lyric quality, since “they are uncontainable either in the present moment or in Euclidean space, which they instead encompass: strange horizon” (p. 187). As
mentioned before, for the purpose of completing the PhD, to stem the momentum of thoughts forming, the loose ends had to be cauterised.

As a way to lend the body of this dissertation structural tensility—as well as add a synaesthetic dimension—sections of the diagram are twirled between the bodies of essays. These visual references also act as another sort of betweening agent, along with all the different literary devices employed, such as juxtaposition, literary collage, alliteration, rich metaphor, sensuous imagery, and the careful placement of white space. Keeping the idea-lines revived within the dissertation’s final body allows the diagram-biogram—again, my living diagram as a creative practice researcher—to become a vital part of the method of making knowledge, alive.

Since this dissertation challenges the traditional thesis, here is a brief orientation to the logic of its structure:

I. To propel the force of thoughts forming, the Publications during my candidature are placed at the beginning.

II. This begins with a “framing essay,” Acu-Essays with Lyric-Punctures, which activates the proposition and sets in motion the movement between lyric and essay. Most of the essays contained in this part were an exploration of the lyric essay form (other than the first essay, The Bodyguard, which is a bit of a mongrel: part case study and medical narrative, with the arc, pacing and twist of the short story form).

The final essay in this part, More-than Personification, began as an attempt at a ‘conventional’ essay. The essay’s rotund middle section (comprised mostly of references and quotes from white male scholars) was stiff and unable to move with the more agile surrounding text-tissue. But during the redrafting process, instead of attempting to critically twirl the dense sections to join the more fluid and agile movements of the rest of the essay, I decided to leave them as they were. In doing so, an unexpected tension developed, which allowed the concept of the
more-than to come to life: rather than writing about personification, the body of the essay personified personification. This led to:

III.

* A Discovery as a single short essay, a sort of soliloquy.

IV.

Attempts to activate the more-than in the next few essays.

V.

The two ‘findings’ chapters, conceptually folding in on themselves, carrying the quiver of more-than forces.

A conclusion as cauterisation: To stem movement and flow (i.e. to complete the PhD), the fully formed PhD body’s conceptual loose ends—scattered throughout the text-tissue—require cauterising. This procedure takes place through a final short essay.
A note to my readers

I invite you to approach this thesis as a reading experience. As such, it requires adjusting to different rhythms and paces. For example, a few of the essays might feel like a daunting uphill slog (such as sections of *Perching*, and *Thinking in the Middle*): they are thick with dense concepts which, unless you are familiar with the slipperiness of process-oriented philosophy, require slowing to a snail’s pace and possibly risk skidding along loose rocks. Other essays glide along to make up for your strenuous efforts. Some are intended to disorient, and maybe induce dizziness. My dead brother reappears throughout as a kind of beloved haunting. The gaps between chunks of text might sometimes feel like making a leap across a deep chasm. But it is only white space! Some tension is needed for growth and change! For to be in process—always moving, changing and becoming, indeterminately—is uneasy and often uncomfortable. To quell the unease, many sweet spots—those affective delights—are twirled into your reading experience, such as those that take place within the intimate confines of the acupuncture treatment room.

So, please, step in and experience the bodies as they attempt to essay themselves—and embody process—as they enter into their indeterminate futures.

As you do, I also invite you to bear in mind the thesis’ primary proposition: does the essaying body—as it comes to be—have the capacity to carry the force of thought, in-forming? Can it be considered a testing site for knowledge-making, alive, and as fresh as Whitehead’s fish?
I. Publications

**Fascia Color Key:**
- Continuous: generative, capable
- Thicker: allows the whole to move, grow, change, generate new
- Bags: developing ideas, concepts, views
- Threads: ideas, laying down fresh to test

**Connect Tissue**
Abstract
As an acupuncturist and creative writer, I work with flesh and words. Put another way, my creative practices blend the ancient needling arts with contemporary literary arts; specifically, the lyric essay. As a creative practice researcher, I think transversally between the body and ideas as I write a series—or make a body—of lyric essays. In my PhD I aim to demonstrate that the lyric essay form is capable of re-presenting the body as a group of becoming bodies alive with possibilities, alive with knowledge. I propose that like the astounding capacities of the human body, the lyric essay is a form sufficiently flexible and agile to slip out of dualistic traps and flow into the multiplicities of the fluxes. As a conceptual analogue for the structural elements of the lyric essay, I draw on biomedicine’s recent rediscovery of connective tissue as dynamic and alive. To add critical and sinewy rigor, perspectives from New Materialism and process philosophy are ficto-critically embedded into the bodies of the lyric essays. By doing so, I aim to demonstrate how my idea of connective tissuing language is a new vital material that has the capacity to stretch the developing epistemological body of Creative Writing.

Keywords
Creative Writing methodology – New Materialism – process philosophy – lyric essay – connective tissuing language – immanence – creative research practice
Form is a necessity of thought; form is that thought, not just a device to be employed for poetic effect.

*Root*, Lia Purpura (2011, p. 99)

Knowledge does not keep any better than fish.

Alfred North Whitehead (1929, p. 98)

Writing from inside the body

As Creative Writing makes its way out into the global academy, separate from its world-wise older sibling, the critical study of Literature, Graeme Harper (2007) asks, “What methods are there for creative writers to make new discoveries?” (p. 94). During its relatively short academic history, Creative Writing has proceeded, claims Harper, on “shaky premises” (p. 93). In order to contribute to the construction of Creative Writing as a site of disciplined knowledge-making, Harper insists it needs more well-argued and rigorous “evidence” (p. 93).

Nigel Krauth and Tess Brady, co-editors of *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice*, also advocate for ways of seeking out—or discovering—methodologies that allow for creative writing to “find a research voice rather than to have learn to sing to another discipline’s tune” (2006, p. 15). They note that scholars have used a multitude of ways to enter the discipline of writing—“some are even climbing in the windows”—and that each approach contributes “a richness, a complexity” (p. 16) to the fledgling academic field.

In his chapter “The Domains of the Writing Process”, Krauth focuses his inquiry more directly: on the writer’s body as a site to be explored in the practice of creative writing. He argues (2006) for a more considered approach to the writing process as experienced *through* the body, since “the author’s body is the major recording device” (p. 189). Krauth also claims (2006) that writers have been “reticent to analyze the creative process as a personal activity, seen from the *inside*” (p. 190). This includes an attunement to the “minutiae of my body’s responses” and to write with a “kind of microscopic attention that the normal reader/experiencer has not had time or inclination for” (Krauth, 2006, p. 189).

It is as an acupuncturist that I have crawled through Creative Writing’s open window. As a creative writer it is through my body that I explore fresh ways of thinking about, and expressing in a
narrative form, notions of body that are potential antidotes to the Cartesian dualistic habit that continues to nag Western thought. As a creative practice researcher, I look to theoretical perspectives that critically examine notions of immediate lived experience outside of dualistic structures. Perspectives that background the human and bring to the fore more-than-human constructs. These perspectives include concepts central to process philosophy—and thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze and Alfred North Whitehead—as well as joining the current epistemic movement in Critical Studies called New Materialism.

Oriented in this way—towards my creative writing process as experienced and considered from the inside—I aim to demonstrate a methodology that is always, immanently, amid method. I propose that it is from this flexible and fluid position that the transversal movement between body and language, and the process of creative writing, emerges.

Always amid method
Taking my cue from lyric essayist Lia Purpura, I propose that the form is created as a result of the movement of thought, and thoughts’ successor, the movement of ideas. This suggests that knowledge—where we arrive as we are immersed within thought—is made immanently.

Deleuze, following Spinoza’s insight that the whole body thinks, suggests that thought is a milieu, or a kind of environment into which we enter and into which we participate. We are, therefore, already within thought, and not in those domains of representation that are outside of thought (world, self, god). For Deleuze (1994), thinking is about creating concepts that are in relation to other concepts, and that could be laid out on a “plane of immanence” (p. 41) where the thinker is immersed like a surfer is immersed in a wave and all the forces at play in the environment. Both Spinoza and Deleuze were interested in what we can become—and what the body is capable of—while all those forces act upon us (Deleuze, 1987).

To accomplish my aim of re-presenting the body expressed immanently in a narrative form, I situate myself on Deleuze’s undulating plane of immanence, as my whole body thinks. I also align my research method with the current New Materialism wave of thinking in cultural studies which, according to Dolphijn & van der Tuin (2012), “challenges the humanist and transcendental (dualist)
traditions, that have been ‘haunting’ cultural theory” (p. 49). They furthermore state (2012) that “What can be labelled “New Materialism” shifts these dualist structures by allowing for the conceptualisation of the travelling of the fluxes of nature and culture, matter and mind” by showing “how the mind is always already material (the mind is an idea of the body), and how matter is necessarily something of the mind (the mind has the body as its object)” (p. 49). This wave of thinking in New Materialism has the capacity to carry the momentum of Spinoza’s insights, conceptual forces conceived nearly 400 years ago.

Writing in the midst of forces is also a method of activating the transversal movement between body and language “that cuts across or intersects dual oppositions in an immanent way” (Dolphins & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 101). By immersing myself in the new materialist wave of thinking, a potential is created that can tease open the conceptual edges that have kept separate the different disciplines and domains of knowledge, because “the strength of new materialism is precisely this nomadic traversing of the territories of science and humanities” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 102). As I travel the fluxes making a body of lyric essays, the creative and productive forces are always at work amid the method.

The practice of experimenting with the lyric essay’s capacity to carry the force of thought forming can, by extension, make the act of creative practice research a testing site for the creative production of knowledge: where the forces at work (and play) within thought—within language—become the vital “material”. In an immanently changing field of possibilities, practice becomes the material site for creative production.

Twirl-whirl lyric essays
To reiterate, propose that the lyric essay is up for the task of expressing immanence. As a sort of nonfiction, the lyric essay—elastic and generative—is a form that is capable of forming form, of engendering change and growth. Of becoming-body. The lyric essay’s wild and unpredictable tendencies have the potential to articulate the mess and complexity of lived experience. It is free to roam but remain tethered—on a very long leash—to literary convention. Margot Singer, in *Bending Genre*, lists optional literary devices available to the lyric essayist: montage, juxtaposition, toggling, fragmentation, white space, etymological exegesis, the
weave, the tangent, and the digression (Singer & Walker, 2013, p. 140). The choice of device depends on the desired writerly and operational effect: such as how strategically placed white space offers the reader time to pause and reflect, as well as create elbow-room for the parts of text to articulate together; the jostling layers of overlapping text used in literary collage technique, assembled and re-assembled (and often re-re-assembled), designed to jar, stir, or possibly even nauseate the reader; or how fragmentation creates a friction-ing effect; or how weaving can tense knots of thought. These devices give the lyric essay its polymorphous agility, which allows it to elude genre captivity, and domestication. Singer adds: “Nonfiction propels them to the fore—continually reinventing the generic space where the writer plays” (Singer & Walker, 2013, p. 140).

As a writerly device, the oxymoron is well suited to the elusive lyric essay form. An oxymoron is situated in the differential—thinking in the Deleuzian in between—as the effect of putting together two opposing ideas generates an operational twist. A surprise, a flinch, a lifted brow; a nonsensical yet affectively vital effect. What occurs as a result (operational tension) of the movement between forces is more important than resolving the tension, or arriving at fixed knowledge. Rather, an oxymoron is operationalised by the method of bringing the form into existence: knowledge made on the fly, by the seat of a writer’s pants attuned to the whims of the form’s forming. The form is thought made in an operational twist, such as an oxymoron. “While the lyric essay is ruminative,” says John D’Agata, writing with Seneca Review co-editor Deborah Tall (1997), “it leaves pieces of experience undigested and tacit, inviting the reader’s participatory interpretation”.

To explore how the method of writing—the practice of thinking through making—potentiates fresh knowledge-making, I bend towards my other creative practice: acupuncture. The practice of precisely placing needles in the middling space—between the skin and the flesh—and their active engagement with connective tissuing forces. The microscopic place where material forces can be met, twirled, activated: always from the middle.
Form emerges from The Middle: 
Connective tissuing language
A way to contest reductionism and avoid contributing to binary 
splits—this or that thinking—is to go between this and that. “The 
only way to get outside dualisms is to be between, to pass between, 
the intermezzo,” say Deleuze & Guattari (1987, p. 277). Connective 
tissuing language, I propose, is a potentially useful conceptual device 
that could allow for operational tension to occur between different 
knowledges. Elastic and robust, connective tissuing language could 
act as a sort of between-ing agent, or what Deleuze & Guattari call 
the middling. In tinkering with this concept as a writerly device, I 
aim to see if it can allow for a stretch between binaries that have 
long been perceived as in irreconcilable opposition: such as between 
conventional scientific medicine and traditional East Asian ethno-
medicine. Or the centuries-old Cartesian split between the mind and 
the body. Or the hard-edged binary wedged between art and science.

What has inspired the invention of this concept—and its 
potential usefulness as a device—has come from all the thousands 
of needles that I have inserted and twirled in fleshy bodies over 
the past 25 years of practice. As I twirl, fine microscopic fibers of 
connective tissue wind around the needle’s body, eliciting a zing— 
which instantly instigates a cascade of physiological responses in the 
body of the person receiving the zing. In traditional Chinese medical 
theory, the system activated by the twist–zing is called the san jiao, or 
“The organ with a name but no form” (Wu Jing-Nuan, 2002).

The theory and practice of acupuncture comes from an 
ancient Chinese tradition based on pluralism: the view that there are 
no divisions made between the thousands of systems—and forces—
constantly at work and play in the body. It is all one pulsing smear of 
simultaneous activity, unfathomable in its complexity, always moving, 
always in relationship. Always changing, growing and becoming. No 
form—discrete yet ubiquitous, for every part of the body contains it—is 
the Deleuzian middling agent, always present, immediating the 
action. Intermezzo. As I connect to the forces in the midst, the needle 
twists the forces in-forming form, always into the middle.

More than 25 years ago, conventional biomedicine radically 
shifted its understanding of the connective tissue system, which 
could be considered the occidental equivalent of Chinese medicine’s 
“no form”. The recent discoveries have brought the occidental 
understanding closer to what the ancient Chinese had thought all
along: that the connective tissue system—no form—is dynamic and alive in the body as a “sensory organ-system” (International Fascia Research Network, 2012; Schleip, 2012, pp. 77-79). Far from passive, occidental researchers have found that fascia and connective tissue respond to movement and tensional forces (such as an acupuncture needle’s twist), and in doing so, determine the shape of the body (Schleip, 2012, pp. xv-xvi). It is no longer considered the inert stuff to scrape away in anatomy class to better view structures underneath. Instead it has been found that connective tissue, in response to movement, is the organising factor. For example, muscles are enfolded within fine layers of fascia (a type of connective tissue), and movement of the muscle acts on the surrounding fascia. As the body moves, connective tissue immediately responds by stretching and laying down more fine fibers. Movement is not possible without the integral presence of all-pervasive fascia.

Because bodies need to move (and change and grow and become, which requires movement), the gooey substances—discretely hidden within and between the joints, organs, vessels, bones, in the brain and just under the skin—are constantly responding to movement and external forces by laying down more fine fibres of connective tissue. If there is no movement, the connective tissue becomes stiff. With little vitality to mobilise it, the shape shrivels.

“Structure is thus the result of movement,” says R. Louis Schultz (1996), one of the leading pioneers in fascia research. “Connective tissue defines the body contour and is the organ of structure and movement in the body. This is a new concept in the field of Western bio-medicine,” he adds (p. 4). Schultz’s simple declaration has far-reaching implications: fascia re-conceived as a dynamic, generative material, always active in the midst of forces, and always in the middle of immanent change.

In re-presenting connective tissue as a conceptual analogue for the capacities of the lyric essay body, I draw on this fundamental property of connective tissue—to respond and determine shape—to form the structure of the body of lyric essays. To explore how the ideas and concepts within the bodies of the lyric essays move together and form the structure. This suggests that structure is the result of movement. If the idea-movements aren’t able to stay in dynamic tension, the connective tissue—the Deleuzian middling agent—has nothing to respond to. There is no operational tension, so the idea(s) become stiff, atrophy and die. Thoughts need to move
with other thoughts and generate force, and *become* form. Or, as process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead has said (1929), in order to keep knowledge alive “it must be drawn out of the sea with the freshness of its immediate importance” (p. 98).

As conceptual connective tissue seeps between the spaces of its parts, it expresses how well the lyric essay body moves with dynamic tension created by the movement with other bodies, other parts. Again, as suggested by Lia Purpura, form is thought, and, from the perspective of process philosophy, thoughts move. Thoughts, according to Deleuze, have creative and productive *force*. Conceptual connective tissue is a discrete and dynamic material-force—a vital material—that is continuously responding to the movement of thought and idea-bodies, that is, bodies that have the capacity to affect and be affected by other bodies.

Twirl-whirl becoming nar

Because the method of writing is integral to the propositions made in this paper, I have included an example of *twirled*-together lyric essay bodies. The *whirl* effect is generated by the responsive quality of *connective tissuing language*. This writing example intends to demonstrate how thinking and making (that is, creative practice research) are always inextricably linked; a concept that activates the method and is central to process philosophy.

The *Twirl–Whirl* sections are textual assemblages placed before and after the lyric essay, with the aim of exploring this new notion of *connective tissuing language*. As stated before, I am conceptually re-presenting connective tissue with its re-discovered properties: as alive, quivering with affective vitality. As the concepts move in relation with other concepts—the structural elements of the lyric essay—the body grows, changes, and becomes. If the concept isn’t able to stay in relation with other moving concept-bodies, it will shrivel and die off.

A full-bodied lyric essay, *Becoming Nar*, is composed of three different narrative strands, which are separated by plenty of white space. The loose placement of the strands allow for a pause, a vibrating echo, a silent space to carry the *connective tissuing* concept. The spacious placement of the text also allows for the affective forces to slide, scrape, jar, recoil, that is, *move* the reader in some way. This is an example of how the method becomes the structure made in its movements. The essay *Becoming Nar* explores
perspectives on human perception, and wonders about the changing nature of touch as it jostles between human, non-human and more-than human contexts.

Like the interdependent relationship between muscles and enfolded fascia, the relationship between the Twirl-Whirl parts and the body of Becoming Nar depends on the effectiveness of the connective tissuing concept to respond and determine the essay’s sir shape, together.

Here are a few questions to consider about the method as it is made manifest in the writing: Do the Twirl-Whirl sections contribute to the becoming capacities—affective variations—of the lyric essay Becoming Nar? Does the toggling between research and creative writing bring about ease in rhythm and register? Does the movement across the textual field allow for a potential stretch across disparate domains of knowledge—bodies, contained both in Twirl-Whirl and Becoming Nar? By exploring and experimenting with the lyric essay form, can the concept of connective tissuing language add to a method for generating new possibilities of knowledge-making? As Whiteheadian fresh knowledge that is capable of traversing the fluxes that breaks free of binary and dualistic constraints? As a writerly conceptual device, does it stretch methodological possibilities?

By exploring these questions through my research, I aim to demonstrate how a living body of lyric essays contains a critical perspective on the making of a method in Creative Writing. This process of making—of twirling in and assembling, testing and re-assembling—is the methodology. It has the potential to demonstrate the process of Creative Writing as research; of its structure as the method.

As another lyric essayist Judith Kitchen (2011) puts it: “The lyric essay eschews content for method, and allows method to become content” (p. 120).

(to avoid repetition in the unpublished work of the dissertation, this section has been removed).
Conclusion
My research has set out to make a body of creative and critical work alive with possibilities, alive with knowledge, where the method I am using to make this body becomes or is becoming the methodology. To show how the embedded ficto-critical assemblages jostle and move with the creative assemblages, and as the poetics of the work dances with the conceptual, the body can be re-presented rigorously. To do so successfully, I believe, has the potential to add sinewy strength to Creative Writing’s evolving epistemological body. Its capacity to grow, change and become. Immanently. Words and body, creative and critical, entwined, with crafted connective tissue carefully positioned to respond, always from the middle, allowing the form to move and take a shape.

As my method of creative practice research, I am always within thought, engaging with the waft of forces within thought, writing from the middling, as my whole body thinks. I will continue to experiment with re-presenting conceptual connective tissue as a vital material—that is, as structural elements of the lyric essay—that are always at work amid the forces, responding, determining the shape. And as I write a body of lyric essays, I will continue with my explorations: of what the lyric essay is capable of doing; and ways that knowledge can be made, as fresh as Whitehead’s fish.

Endnote
The ‘body’ preferred here is not just the fleshy thing, but body as guided by the principle that what defines bodies is their capacity to affect and be affected. This includes Gilles Deleuze’s definition of body: as any whole composed of parts, where these parts stand in some definite relation to one another, which has the capacity for being affected by other bodies (Parr, 2010, p. 35). For Deleuze, even ideas have bodies. Bodies that move and generate force, relationally. Bodies with edges that rub, scrape, crash, rupture. Or caress.
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Abstract
This article considers how creative writers can use research to text, expand, experiment with and reflect on the written form. Focusing on modes of storytelling for fiction and non-fiction, four current research degree candidates and a supervisor–mentor from RMIT University present ideas about and snapshots of our works-in-progress to reveal how they are negotiating the sticky yet rich relationship between theory and practice. Specifically, we offer innovative ways with which we are expanding the written form to connect and combine creative and critical modes of thought, resulting in distinctive contributions to knowledge and practice that are authentic to their forms and subject matters. The candidates, working across the lyric essay, screenwriting, performance writing and radio, are also members of a peer-to-peer learning group facilitated by the supervisor–mentor, which supports research training in creative writing and the formation of new research identities. This collaborative and connected support structure assists candidates in the transformation from creative writers to creative writing researchers, and is simultaneously playful, experimental and rigorous. This article, then, offers a collective approach to defining and arguing for innovation in creative writing research – methodologically speaking.

Keywords
Creative writing research – methodology – methods – PhD – creative practice – innovation
Introduction
In his article about the “radical trajectory of the creative writing doctorate in Australia”, Nigel Krauth (2011) draws on his vast experience of supervising and examining research degrees to argue that while creative works have stayed much the same since the 1990s, “the exegesis [has] metamorphosed”. Drawing on practices of reflection common to the visual arts, the expectation of the Creative Writing exegesis early on was “a sort of critical journal, a reflective account of processes undertaken while creating the accompanying work, having a close umbilical relationship to it” (Krauth, 2011). Over time, however—specifically in response to questions of rigour and scholarly originality—the accompanying written work has shifted “from reflective text, to parallel text, to plaited text” (Krauth, 2011). We now regularly see many styles of exegesis, dictated by factors such as form, genre, the practitioner-researcher’s previous experience, and cultural—even institutional—contexts. While these exegetical developments are important, it is what Krauth notes at the end of his article that is of significance to this paper: “The creative writing exegesis has picked up momentum on its liberating trajectory. A similar trajectory is now predicted for the creative component” (Krauth, 2011).

In their recent article on “radicalising the scholarly paper”, Watkins and Krauth (2016) ask, “Is creative writing the discipline in the box seat for exploring and exploiting new, flexible and dynamic knowledge forms?” Capturing the confusion and concern of some creative writing academics¹ about writing scholarly papers broadly, and framing their research with a scientific model specifically, they argue for new ways of “doing” and “writing up” research that are discipline and form/genre relevant. They touch on two areas where this is very possible in creative writing: fictocriticism and multimodality, both of which are in fact discussed and exemplified at length in this paper. If fictocriticism “offers a means to employ and play with the skill set of the writer, and that employment and play is ironically directed at understanding the act of creativity itself” (Watkins and Krauth, 2016), and if multimodality affords strong opportunities to collaborate and present work digitally and internationally, then what we are really talking about here is

¹. One could, however, argue that a creative writing academic—a creative writing researcher who chooses to occupy a non-teaching only position—should be well aware of the expectation to publish in scholarly outlets.
methodology: the design of a research project (or research degree) that enables it to achieve what it sets out to.

While often viewed as a scary and somewhat scientific term, methodology is actually quite simple. Also known as research design or the approach to research, methodology is necessary in all fields—creative writing included—ensuring the work being undertaken is in fact research. Methodologies can adapt and in fields such as the creative arts, are often responsive and reflexive. In some instances, the contribution to knowledge is the methodology: a way of working that is based on the incubation of and reflection on a project/practice. Discussing a practice-led approach to a creative writing PhD about the historical romance novel, supervisor Mike Danaher and candidate Margaret Jamieson note how she, Margaret, “knew she could draw on her life’s experience as part of the methodology in preparing the novel and exegesis” (Danaher & Jamieson, 2016, p. 158). In this case, the “outside question” is about the representation of empowered heroines in romance novels, who subvert traditional representations of women’s roles in society. The “inside question” connected to this, methodologically speaking, is also about the empowerment of the candidate–writer herself, who, they write, has spent time incarcerated in the so-called corrective system.

Nevertheless, Jamieson’s PhD is still “traditional” in the sense that it uses a practice-led approach that will result in the writing of a novel and an exegesis (i.e., two parts; two documents). While the research fosters “an ongoing dialogue between the practice, concepts, precedents, and topic” (Danaher & Jamieson, 2016, p. 160), it still produces what we might call an exegetical “reflective text” (see Krauth, above). Not methodologically innovative—though acknowledging that candidates do not always seek such innovation—this account is similar that of many creative writing research degrees. This is not surprising, given the literature available on creative writing methodologies. For example, McNamara laments:

> It is helpful instead to establish an independent research question from a context that consists of a rigorous literature review that examines other practices, wider creative and cultural contexts, historical precedents, or shared themes explored elsewhere in other practices –
all of which permits a certain degree of critical distance from the remorseless consideration of one’s own practice (2012, p. 8).

While we wholly agree that the exegetical form can lead to self-absorption and, worse, knowledge that is of use to no one but the individual practitioner–researcher, we feel that there is scope to push methodological boundaries and create a body of work that combines all required aspects of creative practice research: a work that is the research project or research degree. This article thus takes on the mantle of methodology, arguing that in creative writing research both knowledge and text can be innovated through open-minded and reflexive research incubation. It draws on work in progress from four current higher degree by research candidates at RMIT University, who are at various stages of candidature. Working across lyric essay, screenwriting, performance writing and radio, the candidates reflect on their encounters with theory and practice and how new methodologies regarding knowledge creation and dissemination have arisen.
As an acupuncturist and creative writer, I work with flesh and words. Put another way, my creative practices bring together the ancient needling arts with contemporary literary arts, specifically through the lyric essay. As a creative practice researcher, I think transversally between the body and ideas as I write a series—or make a body—of lyric essays. To generate rigour, concepts from process philosophy are fictocritically embedded—or twirled—into the bodies of the lyric essays. Thoughts need to move with other thoughts and generate force to become form. Or, as process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1929) has said, “in order to keep knowledge alive, it must be drawn out of the sea with the freshness of its immediate importance” (p. 98).

For my PhD, I seek to demonstrate that the lyric essay form is capable of re-presenting the body as a group of becoming bodies alive with possibilities; alive with knowledge. The “body” preferred here is not merely the fleshy thing, but also body as guided by the principle that what defines bodies is their capacity to affect and be affected. This includes Gilles Deleuze’s definition of body: as any whole composed of parts, where these parts stand in some definite relation to one another, and which has the capacity for being affected by other bodies (cited in Parr, 2010, p. 35). For Deleuze, even ideas have bodies: bodies that move and generate force, relationally; bodies with edges that rub, scrape, crash, rupture—or caress. With the PhD, then, I am interested in exploring what the lyric essay form is capable of doing – as a method of creation, or as a method of knowledge-making. To do so, the method I use to make the bodies becomes the methodology. Or as Judith Kitchen (2011) puts it: “The lyric essay eschews content for method, and allows method to become content” (p. 120).

My practice of writing is like my practice of needling: twirled on the constitutive level of thinking–making. My fingers transpose the textures—as experienced through my sense-perceptions, or through my mind and body—into words. As initiated in my writing practice, I think-feel through language, through words, making text. Both practices arise, immanently, from my body. Margaret Singer (2013), in Bending genre: Essays on creative nonfiction, includes on her list of optional literary devices available to the lyric essayist: montage,
toggling, white space, the weave, the tangent, and the digression (p. 140). These devices contribute to the lyric essay’s polymorphous agility, which helps it to elude genre captivity and domestication. Singer adds: “Nonfiction propels them to the fore – continually reinventing the generic space where the writer plays” (p. 140). Can this toggling between research and the creative components generate a fluency in rhythm and register? And how can twirling together the creative and critical into the same body demonstrate a method in the making: of knowledge made, alive?

“The only way to get outside dualisms,” say Deleuze and Guattari (1987), “is to be between, to pass between, the intermezzo” (p. 277). The intra-active forces generated by the movement between all of the articulating parts and perspectives—between the needle and the skin, between the assemblages of text—generates movement and flow. In doing so, the work has the potential to contribute to a narrative framework that is not only agile and able to slip out of binary constraints but is also capable of expressing the unfathomable complexities of immediate, lived-in experience. As the whole body thinks.

When acupuncturing, I listen with my hands: I cannot see through the density of flesh, but I can listen and feel into it. Textures on the surface give clues to disturbances underneath: knots, hard or soggy spots, rough patches, soft cysts, dents, icy toes. I search out spots on the skin where the flow can be met below. Toggling and twirling need a betweening agent, such as white space on the page. Strategically placed white space offers the reader time to pause and reflect, as well as create elbow-room for the parts of text to articulate together. As a lyric essayist and as an acupuncturist, I stay acutely attuned to both language and the body’s potential for movement. As my whole body thinks.

The rhythm between thinking and making—like jazz riffs—is a co-created circularity, requiring a conduit of relationality. The lyric essay requires the reader to lean in and participate. And like a quality of connective tissue, the form is porous; it seeps beyond itself (see Kitchen 2011, p. 120). Far from passive, both creative forms—acupuncture and the lyric essay—are relational, improvisational and generative in my PhD.

The jostling layers of over-lapping text used in montage—or literary collage technique—assemble and reassemble (and often re-reassemble), designed to jar, stir, or possibly even nauseate the
reader. Literary collage technique takes as literal the space between. For Donald Kuspit: “Collage is a demonstration of the many becoming the one, with the one never fully resolved because of the many that continue to impinge upon it” (cited in Shields, 2010, p. 112). Impingement is a kind of force, generating an intensity, a movement. Translated as “glue” in French, collage acts like connective tissues in the body, allowing for fragments to respond, articulate and move.

John D’Agata (2003) describes the lyric essay another way: “It’s an oxymoron: an essay that’s also a lyric; a kind of logic that wants to sing; an argument that has no chance of winning” (pp. 435-6). An oxymoron is situated in the differential—thinking in the Deleuzian in between—as the effect of putting together two opposing ideas generates a twist. A surprise, a flinch, a lifted brow; a nonsensical yet affectively vital effect. What occurs as a result of the movement between forces is more important than resolving the tension, or arriving at fixed knowledge. Words are tapped onto the word processor’s keyboard as my body’s sensorium streams, or as a gently grasped needle twists just under the skin: bodies affected as forms form, always in motion, always becoming-body. Or, as lyric essayist Lia Purpura puts it, “form is a necessity of thought; form is that thought, not just a device to be employed for poetic effect” (Root, 2011, p. 98). That is, as I stay attuned to the whims of the form forming, form is thought made in an oxymoronic twist.

There are many other writerly techniques eager to be useful as thoughts form. Handy tools such as oxymoron’s cousin, the rich metaphor, which Judith Kitchen (2011) refers to as “the supreme agent by which disparate and hitherto unconnected things are brought together” (p. 118). And the digression: how it can warp time by showing us “that knowledge does not keep any better than fish” (Whitehead, 1929, p. 98). The weave can tense knots of thought. And, while trapped in the weave’s tension, we can learn to shrug and “surrender to the writing process itself to show us the essay’s intent” (Miller, 2012, p. 109).

The swirl of forces: scraps of text generate friction from the rub of difference, attempting to say something new. Punctures are performed from decisions made, on the spot. Where to place the needles? What word to use? How to organise the text? All decisions are sourced from the body, from my body; our bodies. Making cannot take place without thinking and thought cannot be done
without a body. Immanent and improvisational: we do not know what our bodies are going to do next.

What can a lyric essay do? It can show us that knowledge is alive in the sense that the body is capable of generating further growth and change, as it is made on the constitutive level of thinking (research) and making (creativity). As a method of making, the lyric essay can show us how knowledge can be made, on the fly, by the seat of a writer’s pants, and pulled up as fresh as Whitehead’s fish.
I cannot move. No action on the page. These characters do not speak to me. I have not chosen this font, this Courier 12. My words are lifeless, lacking. My own voice does not matter here. Here no author present. Neutral. Industrial. Conventional. Invisible.

When a screenplay “is constrained by the rules of its form on the page, and is the subject of industrial norms and conventions” (Macdonald, 2004, p. 89), a writer has limited possibilities to present their screen story. Yet a screenplay that deviates from traditional practice is seen as “amateur” and unlikely to be considered for production. But if screenplays are written outside of the industry and are not viewed as “blueprints” or “invisible processes” (see Nelmes, 2007), they have the potential to be “treated in their own right” (Baker, 2013, p. 1) – as forms of creative writing that might be destined for the screen, but are valued in an of themselves as legitimate and worth creative artefacts. It is in the space of the academy where my screenwriting practice has intentionally broken the rules of a craft I have spent years perfecting.

During my candidature so far, I have argued that the form and writing style of a screenplay should not be restricted by industrial practices, including the way a screen story is developed, formatted and read. As a result of experimenting with the function and presentation of the text, a new methodology of writing has emerged. This methodology, which I frame as part of the script development stage of a screen work, follows Graeme Sullivan’s broad definition of practice-led research, which “is circumscribed by an equally important emphasis on the artist-practitioner, the creative product and the critical process” (2009, p. 47). By developing a screenplay that interweaves the scenes of the proposed film (creative product), the theoretical understandings that underpin it (critical process) and personal reflections as artist–practitioner, I acknowledge that each part is essential to the whole. Therefore, I have placed the scenes (artefact) and process (dissertation) in
parallel—in one document—to create “a dialogue between theory and practice” (Brabazon & Dagli, 2010. pp. 36-37). This can be seen in the example below (Figure 1).

Central to my PhD and its methodological experimentation, I question how this interwoven documentation of the creative, critical and personal challenges not only conventional screenwriting models and paradigms, but also ways of me, the screenwriter, knowing about my practice. I have found an answer through a fictocritical style of writing, where the creative and critical merge into a hybrid form. I call this new writing style and mode of presentation the fictocritical screenplay.

![Figure 1: Teacher speaks to audience](image)

2. **Inside**

   My One in a Million Girl framed on a landscape page. Here, in this moment. I perform a role in process. Weaving in and out of the scenes. A part to play in the research narrative.

   Drawing from the field of creative writing, a fictocritical writing style acknowledges the author’s presence within the
work. As Schlunke & Brewster note, “the personal voice is used. It is intensity, performance, and shifting temporalities” (2005, p. 394). Like the characters in my screenplay, I am a subject in the narrative, playing “the dual roles of the researcher and researched” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 51). Nettelbeck describes fictocriticism as “a mode of performance” (1998, p. 6) in which the “I” is ever present in the text. Through a fictocritical practice I engage with the process of writing the scenes of the proposed film and by doing so come to understand my place within its meaning making. In the fictocritical screenplay, then, the self is presented in the fragmented narratives that accompany the scenes; side-by-side, read together, they tell the bigger story of the screenplay’s development. Below (Figure 2) is an example of a dialogue exchange I, the writer, have with a character from one of the scenes.

| The female journalist from the previous scene comes out of the story. We discuss the process. | FEMALE JOURNALIST | I can’t wait for her to answer my question. |
| LOUISE | It’s not a necessary part of the story. |
| FEMALE JOURNALIST | My audience wants to know. |
| LOUISE | This is my audience too. |
| FEMALE JOURNALIST | Her story is more important than yours. |
| LOUISE | I’m telling two stories. Mine and hers. Both stories matter. (beat) To me, the process is just as important as the final product. |
| FEMALE JOURNALIST | What does that mean? |
| LOUISE | It is important for me to acknowledge how the screenplay is being constructed. I question the characters’ actions and intentions. |
| FEMALE JOURNALIST | Including mine? |
| LOUISE | And mine. Every character has a part to play. |
| FEMALE JOURNALIST | You’ve made me a minor character. |
| LOUISE | Minor in the sense that you only have a line to say. But it does say a lot about the role and roles women play. |
| FEMALE JOURNALIST | So, why didn’t you let her answer the question? |
| LOUISE | She wasn’t planning to answer it. We shouldn’t need to justify our decisions. |
| FEMALE JOURNALIST | But, she is getting married? |
| Louise walks away... |

Figure 2: Interview

In this example, the character’s actions and intentions are questioned. By stepping outside of the film narrative, for a moment, I am able to have a fictional dialogue that not only adds another layer of meaning to the accompanying scene, but an insight into the creative process. Through this dialogue with a minor character, I acknowledge the importance of telling two stories, the fictional
and the critical. These playful narratives that sit in “the nexus between theory and creative writing” (Prosser, 2005, p. 18) extend my screenwriting practice, which is not limited to the actions and dialogue that will appear in the scene.

As I write each scene, I place myself “in the moment” of the story to build on each character’s experience, scene by scene. In a sense, I am an actor, improvising with the character’s dialogue, actions and emotions as they occur moment to moment in the scene. At this stage of the screenplay’s development I am not so much concerned about the overall structure of the story, which is the standard practice recommended by the hundreds of screenwriting manuals on the market. Rather, by being “in the moment” of the scene I am able to “approach things for the first time, each time. This is about moving away from a linear sense of time and seeing each event as unique and of itself” (Lee, 2013, p. 21). In this sense I can experiment and play, discovering each beat of the scene and linking dominant (thematic) ideas to the next, until I can gradually build the story in a way that feels authentic to my intentions. During my experience of practice-led research in the academy, it has been vital to find my own way:

When I draft each scene in isolation from an overall narrative, I write without rules. If I am too concerned about fitting a story into a screenplay template, I am unable to incorporate the extra narrative material and reflections that have helped shape my practice (Sawtell, 2016, p. 38).

3. Between


Given that a PhD is, as Nigel Krauth puts it, “a site for radical experimentation” (2011), it has been important for me to extend the possibilities of both the screenplay and the dissertation. By breaking
away from traditional approaches to writing and presenting a screenplay and its accompanying thesis, I have been able to capture the fragmentary and iterative nature of my practice. In my work, then, the dissertation appears in fragments rather than continuous text, replicating the sparse and economical language of the screenplay’s scenes (see Figure 3):

Additionally, the work is presented in a landscape layout that is intended to replicate a future screen. Each page has been designed as a response to the scene with accompanying illustrations that visualise certain moments or underlying themes that are being explored. For instance, in the example opposite (Figure 4), I have imagined how 16 chorus girls who all look the same might be positioned in a square formation, which is a direct response to the description in the scene. However, there is also a recurring visual motif in that each chorus girl illustration is shown through faceless representations where their bodies are the focus and their individual emotions have been erased. While the chorus girls will have faces in the future film, these illustrations, as they are depicted in the screenplay, reveal their lack of individual identity and personal agency in a way that cannot be expressed through words alone.
By considering its design and visual presentation, the fictocritical screenplay is able to capture the unique aesthetic of the narrative via its methodological approach.

As I get closer to concluding my PhD, in a space I see as existing between the academy and the industry, I consider how a fictocritical screenplay can represent my practice as both a researcher and a writer–director. On the one hand, a screenplay should be written for a proposed film (see Baker, 2013); on the other, the work remains a PhD and will be examined as such. In addressing both of these needs as the writer–researcher, I consider how a hybrid form of presentation can sit within these spaces. My PhD weaves creative artefact and dissertation to articulate an individual and process-driven stage of script development. This work can be created in isolation, tied to the academy, and eventually, for the film industry.
In a recent issue of TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses, Paul Williams (2016), through an article entitled “The Performative Exegesis”, surveyed a dazzling field of “fictively playful”, exegetically-inclined works that, in their number and variety, serve as clear indication that when it comes to the research degree, most remaining boundaries between the creative artefact and the scholarly dissertation have been all but erased. Building upon and bringing into the present moment earlier surveys of the evolving creative arts doctorate in Australia (see Booth & Martin, 2006; Krauth, 2011), Williams describes the exegesis as paracritical, performative, fictocritical, doppelgänger, counterpoint and epistolary, to name a few, before concluding that the exegesis is well on course to being no longer “an appendage to the artifact but rather a component of it” (Williams, 2016, p. 16).

For an erstwhile professional playwright such as myself, this admission of the fictively playful to the academy is a breath of fresh air, especially at this stage in my PhD candidature when I am attempting to find the means by which to present the findings, flourishings and failings of my research in a manner that is not only examinable but also authentic to me. The core of this current task can be summarised with the following question: How might the page stage, indeed display, the live-ness of the vanishing act that is performance? A quest for the means to do this has taken my practice into new grounds while also opening up new possibilities in the exegetical field that may, I hope, make a contribution to the expanding taxonomy of creative practice research.

On re-entering the university three years ago, I found myself struggling to develop what I hoped might pass as a suitably academic voice. Early efforts on the page were earnest if lacklustre imitations of what I took to be “scholarly writing”. These did not come easily; more than this, they did not carry my intent or speak to my purpose in any worthwhile way. I was not an academic, nor was I convinced I could become one. Over time and through reading the experimental creative practice works of my peers (see Eades, 2015; Glisovic, 2014; McDonagh, 2010), I began inventing neologisms for what I was making and for how I was conducting my praxis in spaces I termed the inter-lands.
I was creating play/writes, I declared, and I was doing so as a paracademic: one who practices not so much within as alongside, beyond or beside the academy.

These new namings, coupled with what Francesca Rendle-Short (2015) describes as “thinking prepositionally” (p. 95), gave me not only a method and a means, methodologically speaking, but also afforded me a new site of resistance; a determination not to allow my own voice to be subsumed by the so-called conventions of disciplinarity. This, in turn, afforded me an altered awareness, a faux-scholarly view, arising from what Ross Gibson (2010) terms the “oscillation between being inside and being outside” (p. 5) the maker-as-researcher experience.

These sidesteps, this slant-ness, this threading of a path that ducks and weaves beside, beyond or around rather than forward or through, has been characteristic of my creative writing doctoral journey, where the focus of my research has also been conducted, slant, in the forward slash (/) of creative non/fiction. My project, a queered feminist autoethnographic enquiry into the experience of ageing in arts practice, is entitled “Elder/flowering: Creative Endurance and the Theatre of Resistance”. It builds on an earlier enquiry into the experiences of the woman artist as late bloomer (Murray, 2011), and sets forth in quest of subversive alternatives to the well-mapped binary narratives of decline and triumph that have dominated wherever ageing discourse is examined (see, for example, Gullette, 2004; Segal, 2014; Woodward, 1991). The project has been conducted using intuitive and mixed methods, and in response to Judith “Jack” Halberstam’s (2011) call for a queer art of failure wherein we “First, Resist mastery” (p. 11, italics in original) by marrying low theory, popular knowledge and bricolage to test the proposition that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world” (Halberstam, 2011, pp. 2–3).

Central to my performance-based enquiry are experiences regularly associated with “advancing age”, such as effacement, falling and forgetting. Neologisms continue to arrive, via the

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2. Halberstam (2011) repurposes the notion of “low theory”, a term she borrows from Stuart Hall, as a site of alternative and anarchic knowledges in “in-between spaces”, which allows for “the possibility that alternatives dwell in the murky waters of counterintuitive, often impossibly dark and negative realm of critique and refusal” (p. 2, my italics).
the creation of texts that exemplify what I am calling *essaysque dismemoir*: a practice akin to what other traditions have pronounced “orature”, in that they inhabit the “liminal space between speech and writing, performance and print, where the channels of communication constantly overlap, penetrate and mutually produce one another” (Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 2013, p. 110). For my purposes, textual artefacts are recreated—perhaps a more accurate description is recomposed—by a method I call *retroscripting*. I record the live performances in which I extemporise, mixing recitation, oration, improvisation, found texts, memories and mis-rememberings, borrowings and other “speech acts”. This leads to the making of new texts; texts of *-esqueness* that resemble but are neither memoir nor essay. All of this happens in the context of a series of engagements as an artist-in-residence at the Footscray Community Arts Centre, in Melbourne’s west, under the umbrella of its Creatively Ageing program. Here, through gestures parodic and rhapsodic, I devise new texts that perform and exhibit a queered resistance to the invisibilities so often conferred by advancing age.

My work, then, is interdisciplinary and nomadic. It foregrounds *queering*, *performing* and *essaying* as methods, free ranging amongst discourses of botany (Mabey, 2015), gerontology (Cruikshank, 2006), anthropology (Dissanayake, 2008), play studies (Henricks, 2006) and burgeoning scholarship on creative nonfiction and the 21st century essay (Lazar, 2014), while also nudging playwriting techniques towards what nonfiction frontier Noelle Janaczewska termed “the performance essay” (Janaczewska, 2013). Hybridity is the watchword of this venture, which has seen me capture artefacts of a triptych of *play/w/rites*. Each of these artefacts marks a phase in a case study of elder/flowering (see Murray, 2014), charting a rites-of-passage that sees an established woman artist farewell late-midlife for early-elderhood.

Phase one of this doctoral journey was valedictory: a separation from past practices of playwriting and theatre production, staged as an extravaganza for performance. The title of this work: “Things That Fall Over: An anti-musical of a novel inside a reading of a play, with footnotes, and oratorio-as-coda”. Phase two saw the broaching of a threshold, that of performing myself through installation and exhibition in a gallery space. The title of this work: “embOLDen”. Phase three brings re-emergence and re-integration in the form of a participatory and immersive
community “Mass for the Venerable” ("Missa pro Venerabilibus"). This final stage of “flowering” exemplifies the practice of “essayesque dismemoir” as an innovative contribution to the field of creative non-fiction, within the frame of the performance essay. Only recently, in the late phase of my doctoral journey, have I stepped back far enough to view the work in its larger context. Now, and seen against policy and funding developments in the Australian arts and cultural sector at large, and against seismic shifts and catastrophic weather for the so-called creative industries in the period 2013 to 2016, (see O’Connor, 2016; Pledger, 2013), do I come to a broader understanding that part of my purpose is to record the testimony of an endangered, or at the very least, a threatened species: that of the independent artist in the later stages of her creative life course.

Returning to Williams’ work on the fabric of the exegesis, the final form of my performative articulation of elder/flowering is to be a florilegium. Integrating creative artefacts and dissertation, it is fictively playful having both botanical and liturgical readings, the latter as a bouquet or gathering of sacred texts and doctrines; the former as a kind of portraiture in a catalogue of exotic, possibly even extinct, blooms. The work will be presented in a form that resembles a court case or parliamentary hearing, thereby tabling a range of incomplete or failed texts in an array of voices and styles. My own voice, such as it is, comes from the margins; or more precisely, in the footnotes. Adopting this approach has allowed for a queer polyvocality, or what Marion May Campbell calls “polyamorous ventriloquy” on the page (Campbell, 2012). This allows me to experiment with what I hope will be received as a kind of textual live-ness, allowing for active participation and engagement from readers, and capable of displaying the many complex impulses informing this creative–critical enquiry.

Through these methods, the research space, and indeed the dissertation proper, emerge methodological sites of play and possibility that allow me to draw together theory and practice into a manifesto for a still visible, still audible paracademic practitioner, and a re-emergent elder-artist.

From one body to the other, a thread is made that stitches to two together in a temporal instant, while remaining loose, slack, to unfurl back into the general humdrum of place (LaBelle, 2010, p. xvii).

Listen.

Imagine a quiet kitchen. You cannot see the kitchen, but you can hear it. A person moves slowly around the space, and you can tell she is familiar with it.

She opens a cupboard, pulls out a cheese grater, and sits it on the chopping board. You can hear the timber of the wooden chopping board, the metal of the grater, and the space between and around them in the sound of the moment they meet. The person in the kitchen places a saucer full of avocado seeds on the chopping board.

The seeds roll around, their dry skins crackling as they meet one another.

She picks up a seed and begins to grate it. The sound is like the sawing of timber; the rhythm uneven because the seed is hard to hold. The metal of the grater wobbles with the pressure from the seed and her hand. She breathes as she grates, sighs when she pauses. The grating is hard work.

The central theme that has emerged from my research on food waste is about the materials themselves; how and why (or not) they are valued; and how that changes through the process of intervening in normative practices with those food waste materials, and reflecting on those practices. Through modes of creative writing, my creative practice research seeks to document the shifts in how I value these materials, and to encourage others to reflect on their own practices with so-called food waste. Theories of social practice underpin my autoethnographic approach to and analysis of my own practices, within a broader social and cultural context. My creative writing practice—and in particular the form I have named the “sonic essay”—seeks to account for and explore the sensory and embodied elements of these social practices.
I will first address my reasons for incorporating sound into my work—methodologically speaking—and then make a case for combining sound and text/the spoken word to create the sonic essay. I argue that one of the key methodological innovations of my research involves the use of sound to foreground and critique cultural and social practices that are taken for granted around the everyday construction and management of waste. By drawing from a working draft of one of the scripts for these sonic essays, I attempt to illustrate textually the use of sound in my work.

Hearing voices
As I move through my candidature, writing is becoming increasingly inadequate for documenting what cultural geographer Tim Ingold calls a “following of materials” (2010, p. 92) in the process of making. I have struggled to “give voice” to the materials themselves in writing and to the sensory, spatial and temporal experience of my changing relationship to these materials through the practice of making things with them. This struggle leads to an interesting tension in my creative writing, suggesting a space for the essay form to expand and include additional elements.

My creative practice research reframes waste objects as actors in the world and as central players in habituated practices of the everyday. It draws from social practice theorists such as Elizabeth Shove (2003), whose work examines the motivations behind social practices that can and do have a negative environmental impact, as well as the ideas of anthropologist Mary Douglas (1980) around cultural categorisation and “dirt” (i.e., waste) as “matter out of place”. My research also draws on political theorist Jane Bennett’s conceptualisation of “vibrant” or “vital” matter, in which she argues for a vital materiality that acknowledges a vibrancy inherent in all matter—human and nonhuman—not as “a spiritual supplement or “life force” added to the matter said to house it”, but in a way that equates affect with materiality, and makes vitality intrinsic to materiality (2010, p. xiii).

My creative writing work seeks to account for this vitality of matter and to create space for it alongside theories of social practice and cultural categorisation. We can begin to hear the vitality of an avocado seed in these descriptions of its texture and look, from of one of my sonic essays:
An outer skin dries out completely, turns a gum-tree grey-brown, cracks, and slowly comes loose from the seed. Inside that, the avocado seed itself is a darker brown, sometimes artfully mottled.

Imagine the sound of a woman humming quietly to herself (continues under voiceover).

In my fingers, this inner part of the seed is like softwood: as if the core is firm and solid but the outer layer or two have some give. It feels powdery, fibrously, still with some moisture.

In trying to develop an approach to both the process of research and presenting that research, for this particular project I draw on work from the broad field of sound studies, as well as discourse from within ethnography to expand modes of presenting studies of culture beyond the written word (e.g. video and audio) (see Makagon & Neumann, 2008; Pink, 2009).

Sound threads
Sound, writes Brandon LaBelle, “may create a relational space, a meeting point, diffuse and yet pointed; a private space that requires something between, an outside; a geography of intimacy that also incorporates the dynamics of interference, noise, transgression” (2010, p. xvii). This idea of the “relational space”, I argue, is particularly useful for research and reflection, as it encompasses simultaneously an attentive intimacy and a sense of distance from which to reflect. However, LaBelle also acknowledges here the possibility (or indeed, inevitability) of “interference, noise, transgression”; that sound, like all forms of perception, is mediated by the space through which it travels from one (human or otherwise) body to another. “Space” might be taken to refer to physical space but also to spaces of understanding and interpretation as influenced by culture. The necessity of acknowledging hearing and/or listening as a cultural act, rather than simply direct experience, is one to which I will return later, namely as it speaks to my justification for the inclusion of essay—in particular, personal essay—in the methodological discovery of the sonic essay.

Sound art researcher Peter Cusack (2013) also writes about sound and listening as ways of finding and exploring
relationships between things, when he suggests that field recordings can be “potent triggers” both for people listening to works in sound, and also for researchers. Cusack (2013) writes “attentive listening on location can reveal sonic threads running through the narratives and issues under examination, and suggest unexpected questions and directions to be pursued” (p. 27). He uses the word “thread” here to conceptualise a link between different parts of a narrative, where Labelle uses the same word to describe sound as a way of traversing the “relational space” between two bodies. We can hear this “thread”—a metaphor I like because of its connection to the notion of making—in this small description of the avocado seed’s skin:

Imagine the crackling of the avocado seed skin. The outer skin crackles when I crush it, and flings itself in pieces out of my hands and around the kitchen.

I argue that the word “thread” in its singular form is important here, too, as it suggests something tenuous and potentially fragile; and, at the same time, the likelihood of other or additional threads. This way of conceptualising sound—and listening as research—is reminiscent of Ingold’s notion of making, which considers that the materials with which a person makes are not inert, or as Bennett would have it, have “vibrancy”. Ingold (2010) suggests that a skilled making practice is to “find the grain of the world’s becoming and to follow its course while bending it to [an] evolving purpose” (p. 92). For me and my research, Ingold’s “grain” and LaBelle and Cusack’s “thread” are synonymous, and as such weave together my social practice approach to food waste and my creative practice approach to research, in which I document and reflect on those social practices.

Listening to cultural and social practices
Increasingly, anthropologists and ethnographers are paying attention to the body and sensory perception, and the roles that they play in the expression and/or creation of culture (see Makagon & Neumann, 2008; Pink, 2009). This attention to the senses seems especially important to research like mine, where questions of materiality meet questions of social and cultural practice. Within these disciplinary discussions have been suggestions for alternative ways to investigate and represent culture,
including for my purposes the use of listening and sound (Carter, 2004; Erlmann, 2004; Makagon & Neumann, 2008). Importantly, while some have warned against simply replacing seeing and writing (the dominant modes of observation and representation) with listening and sound (Carter, 2004; Erlmann, 2004), others have argued that listening is not merely direct perception, but rather a phenomenal event “operating in the space between affect and intelligibility” (Butera, 2011, p. 54).

Ingold (2010) suggests that making is a form of wayfaring or wandering (p. 92), and that writing is a form of “mind-walking”, with words inscribed on a page having “just as much of a material presence as do footprints and tracks impressed on the ground” (Ingold, 2010a, p. 16). My particular creative writing research methodology weaves together sound and the written word, both to create the relational space that LaBelle speaks of, and then to attempt to “mind-walk” through that space. It offers creative writing and listening together as an approach to investigating the theoretical, sensory and material elements of making things as a social practice.

The materials have their own temporality. Their slow change quietly and repeatedly demands my attention in a way that also gives me time to myself. Slows me down to the speed of a drying avocado seed.

There’s a sense in which this slow time becomes almost timeless, the repetition across weeks and months and years meaning the motions of making become muscle memory, unattached to any particular point in time. This time is the last time and the time before that and before that and even the very first time, and all the time yet to come.

A palimpsest of avocado seeds, each one enough like the last to carry the traces of its predecessors so that the mark it leaves on my memory—cerebral and corporeal—is not quite all its own.

Imagine layers of avocado sounds – grating, seeds rolling around on the wooden chopping board, hands rubbing shavings off. A long exhale.
Conclusion
For Creative Writing research broadly, and the Creative Writing research degree specifically, the written (or performed) word can do the work of research. Creative and critical texts/artefacts do not always have to sit side by side with a stated or suggested relationship: the two can work together, on the same page, methodology and output becoming one. The research design—the methodology—for a creative writing research project does not have to remain fixed, front-loaded or hidden: it can be replicated on the page (or stage or screen) for all to see (or hear). More than this, when fully embraced as both a frame and a form, methodology can innovate the very fabric of a work through its stitching together of methods, practice, reflections, and creative and critical outcomes.

As we have demonstrated, using methodology as a creative tool rather than dismissing it as a scientific constraint can open up possibilities for developing new ways of working (process) and new practice outcomes (artefacts). In the research space specifically, creative writing—in any form or genre—can find its way through the myriad of academic demands, guided with rigour by the practitioner–researcher who is simultaneously discovering new ways to think and do. As the work of the writer is innovated by/through research, so is their ongoing practice. Entangled with methodology, then, is the development of new—and hopefully distinctive—research identities, which is especially important for those undergoing research training.
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Abstract:

Or, How (or when) does a Panel Become a Playpen?

Playwright and novelist Michael Frayn reminds us “the world is irregular and confused [and] understanding this is where any inquiry into the nature of things has to begin” (2006, p. 37). A conference panel, such as the one that we (the authors) arranged ourselves into in late 2015, would appear to resist such irregularity and confusion. Presenters speak (as we did) in a predetermined order, observing a time limit and, where possible, aiming for coherence in theme, content or field. As creative practice researchers knee-deep in our doctoral projects, each of us spoke of our recent experiences in different immersive writing environments – residencies, labs and boot camps – proposing there might be such a thing as “living in the research project”. Our session was lively and well received. Within our different approaches was room for playfulness and spontaneity. These spilled out into the presentation as a whole: with no prior consultation, we were surprised and delighted by unexpected connections. The residency, lab and, yes, even “thesis boot camp” had playful elements in and of themselves, and perhaps these were the uniting factor. We were encouraged to publish together and expand on the ideas discussed. But, as Francesca Rendle-Short has written, “We are too often obsessed with content, the “what” [rather than the “how”]” (2014, p. 92). We wondered if there was something further to mine. Had the panel itself become its own playroom? Three HDR candidates decided to assume the role of “panel beaters”, slip on some overalls, and find out.
Biographical notes
Peta Murray is a writer, dramaturge, teacher and HDR Candidate. Her practice-led research project, Elderflowering: Creative Endurance and the Theatre of Resistance, employs variations of the “performance essay” to devise queered and performative non-fiction on themes of the creative life course and the embodied experience of ageing. Her short fiction has been published in *Sleepers Almanac* and *New Australian Stories*, and her best-known plays are *Wallflowering* and *Salt*. Peta’s critical writing includes a chapter in *Creative Manoeuvres: Writing, Making, Being* (2014), edited by Shane Strange, Paul Hetherington and Jen Webb.

Mattie Sempert is a practising acupuncturist and is well into a doctorate in Creative Writing. For her PhD project she is making a body of lyric essays. Her practice-led research blends the ancient needling arts with the literary arts, where she aims to re-present notions of body from the perspective of process philosophy. Mattie is a member of RMIT’s non/fictionLab and is also involved with the Montreal-based *SenseLab*.

Stayci Taylor is completing a PhD exploring gender, comedy and script development through creative practice, incorporating her industry background as a screenwriter, actor and playwright. Published in *Senses of Cinema, Philament, Journal of Creative Writing Research, Journal of Writing in Creative Practice, New Writing* and *TEXT*, Stayci works as a Research Assistant and teacher of screenwriting at RMIT. She has also co-editing special issues of *Networking Knowledge* and the *Journal of Screenwriting*.

Keywords
Creative writing - Creative Practice Research - Process Philosophy - Queer Theory – Interdisciplinary Collaboration
Act One:
Panel (Beaters) Bump Skulls, Playfully

Those who say “Yes’ are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those who say “No” are rewarded by the safety they attain – Johnstone 1981, p. 92

Play and the academy are no strangers to one another. Here in Australia, within our particular field of creative practice research, a raft of scholars and researchers have examined play as a discipline-specific mechanism (van Loon, 2014), as the engine of all research (Opie, 2007), as an invigorating approach to considerations of structure (Rendle-Short, 2014) and as a vital force within the intimate space of the candidate-supervisor relationship (Berry & Batty, 2016). Attention has also been paid to an abundance of fictively playful new forms of the doctoral dissertation, or exegesis (Booth & Martin, 2006; Krauth, 2011; Williams, 2016). But to our knowledge, no one has as yet, until now, given any attention to the conference panel as a site of playfulness.

This paper explores Thomas Henricks’ contention that “play is the laboratory of the possible” (2006, p. 1) and it does so in the context of panel presentation(s) that the participants “staged” at a “conference” in the School of Media and Communication at RMIT University in 2015. These words are “ironised” to a purpose. Our Graduate Research Conference is a kind of a Clayton’s2 conference, as in a-conference-you-have-when-you-are-not-having-a-conference. It is an in-house affair, curated by Higher Degrees by Research (HDR) candidates for HDR candidates as a kind of a hypothetical or a mock court. The aims of this conference, held twice annually for the past several years, have been firstly to provide a platform for the staging of mandatory milestones on the postgraduate highway—formerly called confirmation, mid-candidature and completion, these have since been more prosaically named, Milestone 1, 2 and—and secondly as means to showcase research to build a more dynamic and collegial culture in our school. All HDR candidates are pressed to present, and studio or research group-specific sessions are common, uniting students with shared interests, fields of practice, or particular methodologies. To facilitate these presentations while also inducting trainee researchers into
the protocols and procedures of conference curation, students are encouraged to create or to be co-opted onto appropriately themed panels. These panels usually run for an hour, allowing space for three presenters and for moderation and Q&A conducted by a fourth student, who gains on-the-job training in the experience of the duties of preparation, introduction, time-keeping, pot-stirring and debate-management generally required of a well-oiled chair.

It was in the spirit of all of the above that the authors of this paper came together, and were subsequently empanelled for the first time. We were all creative writers; one a screenwriter, one a lyric essayist, and the third an escapee playwright fleeing the theatre for the field of creative nonfiction. All were latecomers to the academy, all femmes d’un certain âge, but in disciplinary focus there was little overlap, or so it seemed at that time. What did connect us, however, or at least appeared to afford some common ground, was the fact that we had each had a recent encounter with what one might call the intensive-immersive; by this we are speaking of the experience of taking one’s research away from its everyday locus of practice and dropping it into a space that is not one’s usual workplace, so as to conduct and reside with it there through prolonged periods of intensely focused and uninterrupted engagement.

This synchronicity interested us. Why had we sought out these intensive-immersive experiences as part of our respective candidatures and had we found what we were looking for within them? Did experiences of going away from the familiar and setting up camp in the strange serve as an accelerant, a crucible, a method? What happened when one set out to more fully inhabit one’s research process? It seemed to us that here was a panel-in-waiting, and so we cobbled together a proposal that would allow us to set our experiences side by side. As case studies, our foci would be Stayci Taylor’s weekend at Thesis Boot camp, Mattie Sempert’s immersion in the Montreal-based SenseLab, and Peta Murray’s extended artist-in-residency at Footscray Community Arts Centre. Our panel would compare and contrast these models of intensive immersion and consider their value to the trainee creative practice researcher. Perhaps each would prove to have invited that fresh apprehension of the world that Tim Ingold (2000) argues is, anthropologically speaking, “not a matter of construction but of engagement, not of building but of dwelling, not of making a view of the world but of taking up a view in it” (p. 41)?
In due course our panel was presented, as described, with three papers delivered and time for discussion at the end. Few surprises there, but what did surprise was a certain abandon on the panel floor, a genuine sense of ideas “in play” and, more than this, of something new arising in the inter-lands between and around our discrete contributions. Why was it so? Later, reflecting upon this experience, we wondered if it may have attributable to what cultural geographer Doreen Massey (2005) would term the “throwntogetherness” of our panel (p. 149)? And if so, was there more to it? Was the materiality that is panel space a miniature of the intensive-immersive, another playful instance of “a laboratory of the possible”, wherein new knowledges might arise? Moreover, cued by Rendle-Short’s (2014) suggestion for creative writing scholars, we wanted “To take our thinking a step further to not think only about what it is we are saying but how we are saying what we are saying in terms of design and form and experiment to underscore our thinking” (p. 93). Therein, within this new (for us) world of academic conferences—a culture often seemingly resigned to papers with only a passing nod to the conference theme, hastily written on planes and delivered to barely listening peers who are busy checking email or Facebook or editing their own slides—we wonder if it is possible to expand the parameters of the panel, to rethink or reimagine its boundaries? Can a panel, like the notion of play itself, be its own laboratory of possibilities – just as the immersive environments we discussed had been?

Massey (2005) writes of “the business of walking around a corner and bumping into alterity, of having (somehow, and well or badly) to get on with neighbours who have got “here’… by different routes from you” (p. 94). Typically, a panel is a kind of expo of ideas, a place to exhibit one’s academic wares. But what if we reconsider our approach to panels so that they are less of a platform, and more of a playroom for ideas-in-process and for bumping into otherness? Considering the “thirdspace”, or “third place”, variously defined by Babha (1994), Habermas (1984), Oldenburg (2000) and Whitchurch (2008) as a place both public and private, a neutral ground for dynamic interaction, could the panel then playfully and usefully open a “thirdspace” for new approaches to scholarship? Interrogating ideas of “play”, of “room” and of “panel”, as well as drawing on a broad range of scholarship around research and play, we set upon the task of co-writing “playfully” as we brought together our insights and
hunches pertaining to, and arising from, the panel presentation. Included (we hope) usefully and/or provocatively is text that breaks away from the traditional structures of scholarly writing, in the form of lists, transcriptions and—inspired in part by Watkins and Krauth (2016)—correspondence. Ultimately through the collaborative “skull bumping” that follows, we invite readers to ponder the suggestion that a panel is not so much a playroom as a playpen within which, by definition, one is left to play without supervision – or, in the spirit of the “thirdspace”, privately, in public.
Act Two:
Play (Un) leashed

[A] degree of play creates the potential for the emergence of the new, not in frontal assault against structure but at the edges and in its pores
Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 99

“Play” as a guerrilla tactic for research requires, as process philosophers (and founders of the Montreal-based SenseLab) Erin Manning and Brian Massumi seem to suggest above, use of the full flexible scope of the word’s implication to carry the creative momentum: how a degree of play can result in a stretch, creating more room to give; or how play engages thinking, creates movement, and potentiates messy tangles of thought. Tangles of thought create possible openings, and invent ways to fray the closed seams of overworn methodologies. That is, those tired and stiff methods that do not reciprocate and encourage play.

On Australian arts-practice research shores and hinterlands, airborne seeds are germinating fresh methodologies that share a germ-line with the Canadian version, Research-Creation. Australian arts researchers Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt repeatedly demonstrate that “practice-led research” is a “new species” of discipline that draws on “emergent methodologies that have the potential to extend the frontiers of research” (Barrett, 2009, p. 1). They share tactics with their Canadian academic playmates Manning and Massumi, primarily through their proposition that arts practice be viewed as “the production of knowledge or philosophy in action” (Barrett, 2009, p. 1) (emphasis added). That is, knowledge is made on the fly, by the seat of the arts researcher’s pants (including situated and tacit knowledge), as thinking and making co-penetrate, in the act.

The lure to the panel began as an ineffable tug from invisible forces: a twinkle, a dare – inspired by the contagion of fun, and the possibility of an adventure off the beaten path of convention. Retrospectively, it was the possibility of play—and the possibility of doing a panel differently—that lead our collective step onto porous and uncertain edges.
Play on words
Play in five words, or: Five ways of thinking about the residency (and about the panel-about-the-residency) as play.

BLANK
MOCK
THEFT
DISPORT
CONTAGION

Skullsbump#1: Panel Play

When skulls bump, the resulting brain-wave interference pattern can be a revelation to both Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. viii

When reckless abandonment takes over during play, it is not uncommon for heads to bump. As close collaborators, Manning and Massumi often deliberately bump skulls. For them, skull bumping is necessary for the invention of new philosophical concepts. In the operative tradition of process philosophy—that is, concepts are only as good as their usefulness—concepts can only be invented in the act of collaboration, thus “contribut[ing] to a continuous collective culture dedicated to an ethics of engagement” (Manning & Massumi, 2014, p. 106).

For our panel, there were no rules for engagement other than the 10-minute time constraint allowed for presenting. Our Clayton’s conference—that conference-you-have-when-you-are-not-having-a-conference—already initiated a disruption from convention and the pressure to conform, whereby edges were loosened before we started. Also, in hindsight, what engaged us from the start was our eagerness to share our respective intensive-immersive experiences with our trainee cohort as well as our willingness to risk bumping skulls. In that spirit of open exchange, each of our idiosyncratic and intrinsic senses of play came to the foreground in our presentations (as observed by each other):

(playwright)
Peta’s meta-improvisational approach (improvising about
improvisation as a way to reflect on her residential in-house performance essays); her self-effacing silliness; the props to prop up; the hidden mastery of her pretence of the precarity of performance.

(screenwriter)
Stayci’s comedic rapid-fire delivery condensed the Boot Camp experience into a loosely scripted sit-com; the dead-pan Kiwi accent and captivating “umm” hair/head flicks.

(lyric essayist)
Mattie’s knee-jerk tendency to make wild associations—images of narwhal tooth, pink wigs, and double-dutch skip-roping—to convey her SenseLab experience as intense fun.

Mock. Verb (t). To assail or treat with ridicule or derision. 2. To ridicule by mimicry of action or speech; mimic derisively. 3. To mimic, imitate or counterfeit. 4. To defy, set at naught […] 10. Being an imitation or having merely the semblance of something. Also 11. Mock-up, to build or construct, especially quickly, as a mock-up.

Also in hindsight, during the panel-play, a creative contagion seeped across the porous boundaries of our presentations, making edges irresistible. Later, as we engaged in Writing-Play (this paper), the contagion seeped into each of our creative practices during our collective engagement. As our skulls continued to bump, play and its accelerant—fun—created possibilities for moving away from the fixed conventions of the predictable.

Fun subverts. And, as the skull bumping increased: more laughter.

The idiom of play
Easily enticed away from work, the idiom of play is irresistible. Loose, improvised movement trumps rigid predictable plans. When open to surprise, even accidental skull bumps that might hurt for a bit are better than passively waiting to have fun.

play it cool
play it out
play fair
play the field
play on words
play musical chairs
play dead.

Skullsbump #2: *Writing Play*

In the co-composition of this paper, our skulls deliberately bumped. We asked of ourselves—as each of us brought to the co-composing writing table reflections on the panel/playpen, if we could suspend protective gestures—the urge to avoid skull bumps and allow for accidents that can result from the movement of spontaneous free-play. How to resist a hasty retreat into isolation for fear of collisions on the play field? As we engaged in our collective play, Manning and Massumi hovered—virtually—in the wings and cheered us on as thinking-coaches who insist on *rigour*, and offered ice packs when the bumps become too robust.

In other words, as we stepped into our collective writing event, we followed Manning and Massumi’s lead: “In our own acts of writing together, we have had to learn how to ripple the difference between two stone-hard heads” (2014, p. viii). Can the potential of new knowledge-making—of seeding fresh methodologies for creative research practice—be carried by the kinetics of our skullbumping? Can the notion of *agency* be reconfigured as arising out of our collective engagement, rather than the usual hands-off isolation of solo intellectual efforts?

Our skulls bump into Writing Play, with adrenalin pumping as we learn how to ripple the differences.

- Play as an intrinsic reward and its link with creative process
- Play as a pathway to innovation
- Play as subversion and disruption

**Post-Panel Q and A**

**PM:** I wanted more of the residency time and less of my own life. Because I had to keep my other work and commitments ticking along in a parallel universe. If I had had my way, I would have picked up [the venue] and put it on the other side of the world and done the whole thing there. Full immersion and none of the other hats that I have to wear. I think there’s something about taking them all off, and saying: “I’m just this one thing for just this period of time.”
MS: I think being in another hemisphere in another season and going into this I had no idea what was going to happen. So. An absolute immersive experience. (TO ST) Was there a moment when ... I mean I’m hanging out for that moment when ... Was there a shift in your thinking? Putting yourself in that environment. Was there a moment?

ST: I had a couple of those. And I really didn’t expect that. I’d thought it was simply be a word-factory. And that it would at least get me further than I am now. But yes, I had a couple of kind of (gestures) … I just made this connection of ideas. In terms of the practice though – I didn’t turn into a non-editing writer overnight. That’s still coming. But I know now when I’m trapped in the vortex of the perfect sentence. At least I know that’s what I’m doing.

Blank

Blank. Adjective. 1. (Of paper etc.) free from marks, not written or printed on. 2. Not filled in. 3. Unrelieved or unbroken by ornament or opening. 4. Lacking some usual or completing feature. A blank look. A blank wall. Blank stupidity.

The word “blank” comes from Middle English and is connected to the idea of “blanc” – therefore white, colourless. As Peta typed up the transcript of our panel presentation, she noted how often the word was used, how many times it was spoken out loud in the presentation. This word: blank. Peta used it to describe the gallery space, the white-walled cube in which she was housed as one of the artists-in-residence, there to make an exhibition of herself. She spoke of the furniture imported as being blank … and it was. It was nude cardboard shelving and desks. Something about the blank space, the blank canvas, the blank page of course, is how it invites. The blankness makes you itch. It invites inscription; it invites assault. It invites a defacing of its blankness, the application of colour to its colourlessness, an application of visual “noise” to its stark silence. Blankness is a kind of space. Like play, it is a space of possibility, a space of potentiality, an emptiness.
We chose to proceed by embracing “the happenstance juxtaposition of previously unrelated trajectories” whereby, as Massey (2005) suggests, “your being here together is, in that sense, quite uncoordinated. This is an aspect of the productiveness of spatiality which may enable ‘something new’ to happen” (p. 94). Rather than seeking seamless, integrated content, we aimed instead for messy mashing–together of process. We improvised, actively resisting the pull towards the usual scholarly coherence, believing an experiment in “play” should not immediately conform to a paradigm whereby “Normative journal articles are linear arrangements” (Watkins & Krauth, 2016). Instead, we took inspiration from the fact (as Watkins & Krauth continue) that, despite these articles’ linearity, “our reading of them is commonly non-linear; that is, we read intertextually, connecting concepts and arguments via internal and/or external knowledge schemata” (2016).

Disport

Disport. Verb (t) To divert or amuse (oneself); exercise or display (oneself) in a sportive manner. Archaic: Diversion; amusement; play; sport.

How do you define sport and how does it differ from play? What is a sportive manner? Perhaps it is practised in the panel as playpen.

Sportive. Adjective. 1. Playful or frolicsome [FROLIC SOME!]; jesting, jocose, or merry. 2. Done in sport, rather than in earnest.

Sport. Noun 1. An activity pursued for exercise or pleasure, usually requiring some degree of physical prowess … [thereafter a long list. Writing is not on it! Hunting, fishing, racing, baseball, tennis, golf, bowling, wrestling, boxing all make the cut.]

2. A particular form of pastime […] to trifle (TRIFLE!!!!) playfully and the obsolete: to spend or squander (SQUANDER!!!!) recklessly or lightly.
Frolicsome: merrily playful, full of fun.
Jocose: Given to or characterised by joking, jesting, humorous, playful.
Squander: to spend extravagantly or wastefully… Time, money.
And, somewhere, the word: merry.
And, somewhere, the word: trifle.
We are displaying (disporting) ourselves on the page.

Can a panel be a playroom?
Katherine Coles (2013) suggests “Research is what we do to court intuition and to make ourselves ready for it when it comes” (p. 158). As creative practice researchers-in-training we are developing methods involving following hunches and testing propositions. Our PhDs are predicated on meticulously composed and hard-won research questions. As panel beaters and skullbumpers, perhaps it is liberating to make a research question out of something ludicrous. Like this question, posed to Alice by the Mad Hatter in Alice in Wonderland: “Why is a raven like a writing desk?” (Carroll, 1865).

Can a panel be a playroom? This endeavour requires abilities of persuasion toward a suspension of logic – a conference panel is not a room, it is the temporary assemblage of people within one. But if “play” has the potential to subvert and disrupt, then the enquiry is already playful in itself. Eminent teacher and author of theatrical improvisation Keith Johnstone (1981) remembers as a child “reversing every statement to see if the opposite was also true”, suggesting “as soon as you put a ‘not’ into an assertion, a whole range of other possibilities opens out” (p. 14). What happens if we negate the assertion that a panel is not a room? After all, as Massey reminds us, space is “always under construction’ (2005, p. 9).

Perhaps, then, we might begin to think about all the possible meanings of “room”. (It may already be apparent that we panel beaters enjoy a play on words.) “Room” suggests four walls and a ceiling, a defined (or confined) space. It also evokes the opposite, when considered within phrases such as “room to move”. The Collins Gem English Dictionary Gift Edition definition makes stark this conflict: “enclosed area in a building; scope or opportunity” (2010, p. 505). What scope or opportunity is possible if the panel is its own play/room?

By reflecting on Panel-Play and relating those reflections to a speculative engagement with Writing-Play, we aim to collaboratively
invent—through our gentle skullbumps—techniques for play in the spaces of rigorous creative practice research. Manning and Massumi (2014), still hovering on the sidelines of the play field, remind us that “techniques are not descriptive devices – they are springboards. They are not framing devices – they activate a practice from within. They set in motion” (p. ix).

Techniques to spring our collective practices into motion. Skullbumping towards something new in unexpected ways.

Theft

Noun. 1. The act of stealing; the wrongful taking and carrying away of the personal goods of another; larceny.

Whatever happened in that first panel delivered us somewhere else. In hindsight, we would argue that the magic happened in two streams. The first of these was in the panel’s provision of something, perhaps close to Émile Durkheim’s notion of a “collective effervescence” (1912) that grew naturally from our initial theme. We were speaking to liminality and to place, to the translocation of thought, and to “the transactions that occur within that position of being ‘neither here nor there’” (Turner, 1969, p. 104). Having tried to describe what each of us had experienced in our solitary inhabitations (residency, lab, boot camp) the panel extended upon these notions, affording us now a space of cohabitation, and “alongsideness”. The panel became a space to extend upon already lived experience, along the lines expounded by Greg Dening (1996) when he writes “we never learn the truth by being told it. We need to experience it in some way” (p. 316). This sense of the experiential, especially in regards to playful collaboration, might suggest the panel opened for us a version of the aforementioned “thirdspace” environment.

This notion perhaps recalls Ross Gibson’s ideas of the capacities of the creative practice researcher to oscillate, to be both inside and outside the making process (2010), and ideas of habitation and orientation. A thirdspace might be an ideal vessel for this kind of research? Alongsideness, of course, invites—indeed, risks—play.
ST: Once you’ve both had a chance to read whole thing, you’ll see what I mean by how it becomes less of an article and more of a series of notes as it goes along, structured first with bridging sentences and paragraphs, then only mashed together according to my whimsy. Please feel free to mess about.

MS to PM: I’m wondering if your Act 3 could be spun into your conclusion, i.e. the recent GRC as it seemed to expand on our play laboratory? “A new culture of conference play-lab possibilities?”

PM: I’m still sketching some inconclusive remarks along the lines you’ve suggested, Mattie. Will share when ready … the (in)conclusion is starting to come together. I am hoping to complete a rough cut this afternoon.

MS: Also, I’m wondering if the “thirdspace” thingie is all very much tied with invention-play-ambiguity of practice-based research … and allowing the unpredictable to influence what is found. And I’m wondering if what we’re proposing—in the process of doing and on reflection—is that the panel IS indeed a playroom, not just like one? And possibly that we’re generating a playful but rigorous paper using that proposition? Our method is the methodology? To subvert and disrupt? (those naughty girls at the back of the classroom) …

PM: Yes I think we are onto something … and here’s a par from my (in)conclusion:

“Mix the word panel with play [and] You are now in a playpen …”

ST: Jaysus, PM, that’s genius!!! GENIUS!
Indeed, this whole thread is very inspiring.
I’m excited!
I also believe we’re onto something.
Am I getting one document or two when it all comes back to me?
PM: It’s funny to be writing this conclusion before I’ve seen the whole thing, but it kind of works anyway, to be writing it out of sync. Again, subversive.

Yes, I’ve been having great fun playing with the anagrams of panel. Here’s another line-in-prog you may like:

“A simple inversion of vowels turns the word panel into the word penal, reminding us that the conventional p-word is often a constrained and airless affair, a place of posturing, and of knowledge—ossified and labelled—yoked to the trope of the thinker-as-solitary-intellectual.”

ST: LOVE!!!!!!!
Peta Murray, I do believe you’ve found your mojo.
Or, as they say on the reality shows, peaking at just the right time!
ACT Three:
(Un) Panel-Play’s (In)conclusion

Five words and their definitions –
with digressions. One more.
CONTAGION: the communication of any influence, as enthusiasm, from one to another.
Are these the five stages of subversion?

Skullsbump #4: Play Writing-Mash #2

MS: My dear Panel Buttresses! Okeee!
MS did a MAJOR reconstructive surgical CUT and PASTE and jostle of headings … (AND she needs to do WAY more MAJOR rewriting of critical bits esp in the middle section).

ST: I’ve resisted adding to the doc itself (even where there are some easy housekeeping fixes) because I’m conscious there are already two on the go - which is fabulous having the two of you getting messy with the clay but in the interests of meeting the July 29 deadline I’ll show some restraint until both globs are chucked back together on the wheel.
Hashtag awkward pottery analogy...
Ew, I hope I’m not starting to unconsciously perform my emails in case they get repurposed for potential public consumption...

PM: Morning, Panellists. Mattie, I think you have performed some kind of a miracle here. At a first glance, anyway, I think it has a clear structure that kind of holds. Having said that, I’m not going to look too closely yet, especially while you are still doing lots o’ tinkering with the middle bits.
I too, like the end of Act Two. (I also love Stayci’s hashtag awkward pottery analogy and self-reflexive double-reflexive comment about the performance of emails below.)
What I’m going to do today is bash the (in)conclusion onto the end of this draft you’ve circulated as 18 July, rename it 19 July, and see what that does.
Post-Panel Q and A #2

ST: I’m in a phase at the moment that’s opposite, where I’m finding that the differences are increasingly blurring. But I write in a medium that’s got very strict formats anyway, unless you’re challenging those. I did a presentation over the weekend at AAWP and then this one … I’m just finding that, more and more, they’re part of the same lump of clay.

(Hashtag awkward pottery analogy premonition?)

MS: I suppose my practice … I’m an acupuncturist and a creative writer. I do find myself discretely scribbling down ideas while I’m needling people. (ST: You wouldn’t want to get your hand mixed up.) And suggesting Double Dutch as a therapeutic option. My poor clients …

PM: Come out with writing on them? “Note to self: Oh, sorry.”

Q: I was just thinking about these residencies, workshops … and wondering if they’re really informing, or not, your methodology. Mattie, clearly this whole business of process philosophy is part of your methodology. Peta, if yours had been a year earlier…?

PM: I don’t think I would have been able to make the most of it. There was something about the thinking I had done as a preparation that I needed to do before I was in this space. But I’m glad you said that, as it’s something I meant to say as part of this presentation. And that’s that I think that “residency as method” is a really interesting proposition. And I’m really keen to try to tease out that idea a little bit more.

(Un) Panel-Play’s (In)Conclusion

My idea for a class is that you just sit in the classroom and read aloud until everyone is smiling, and then you look around, and if someone is not smiling you ask them why, and then you keep reading – it may take many different books – until they start smiling, too.

Ruefle, 2012, p. 255
In her book *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam (2011) signposts the words “serious” and “rigorous” as red flags, arguing that they are “code words for disciplinary correctness in the academic world; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights of flight or fancy” (p. 6, emphases added). Instead, among other exhortations, she entreats us to “**First, Resist Mastery**” (2011, p. 11, emphases added). Noam Chomsky, too, in his work on the human capacity to learn and the potential roles of scholarship, reminds us that it is subversion that is fundamental to the formation of fresh ideas and innovative worldviews (2003). To **subvert** is, of course, to **overturn**, something that is far more likely to happen to ideas in the rough-and-tumble of play, than in the polite deference of **remember-to-share** and **take-it-in-turns**, under the watchful eye of the panel police.

On which theme, a simple but subversive vowel swap turns **panel** into **penal**, reminding us that the conventional p-word is too often a constrained and airless affair, a place of posturing, and of knowledge—ossified and labeled—yoked to the trope of the thinker-as-solitary-intellectual. It is no great distance from here to an evocation of the university as what Judith Halberstam, interpreting Harney & Moten (2013), describes as a “site of incarcerated knowledge” (2011, p. 15).

Mix the word **panel** with **play**, however, and a new anagram presents itself (not to mention a spare “la” in case you feel a song coming on). You are now in a **playpen** which, as the dictionary reminds us, is “a small enclosure, usually portable, in which a young child [or putative researcher?] may play safely without constant supervision” (emphasis added). In other words, an incubator rife for creative and intellectual risk.

Our first panel was, by sheer happenstance, play-full, and we took pleasure in it. As HDR candidates we are, happily, no experts, nor are we (yet) jaded by conference-fatigue or fully versed in the approved modes of trundling our ideas into the public domain. This sense of fun led us to schedule further play-dates in which we entertained other methods whereby we might bump skulls, without (parental, supervisory or disciplinary) supervision. Tag-team writing; dis-ordered, out-of-sync writing; list-making; punning and riffing; kooky-captioning; metaphor-mixing; blackboard brainstorms; failures to stay “on task”; bizarre email exchanges and shared transcripts of
audio recordings of our banter have all been grist to our mill. Over time, this essay began to find its shape via a range of spontaneous turns and unplanned moves characterised by frivolity and freedom, by refusals and failures, and by the release that comes with not having to own or fully “shape” an idea by oneself. In short, by a kind of creative contagion.

When a panel becomes a playpen, helmets and kneepads may be necessary. Play is invigorating, if bruising, work. A degree of risk is called for, as well as the capacity to use academic space in imaginative and undisciplined—safely unsafe—ways. We are not alone in having an appetite for this venture. In scouting for other panel-beaters, we found an array of subversive and disruptive gestures in the academy of recent times, the work of rogues and mavericks, those Harney & Moten call “fugitive knowers” (cited in Halberstam, 2011, p. 8). Instances include an experiment in the form of a refusal to cite white male authors in a forthcoming work of scholarship—Sara Ahmed (2016) does BLANK—collective direct action via multiple authorship (11 writers on one paper) in the name of a feminist practice of slow scholarship—Alison Mountz, et al (2015) do MOCK—a professor of women’s studies and humanities from the University of Delaware, who wears Playboy bunny ears to give lectures—Prof Margaret D. Stetz does DISPORT (Spivack, 2014)—and the amalgam of high and low theory that Halberstam (2011) models for us (more MOCK), alongside Harney & Moten’s calls for THEFT and subversion in the undercommons (2013).

We offer our own mixed methodology, a kind of SUBVERSION FIVE WAYS as a good fit with Halberstam’s next entreaty: “Second, Privilege the naïve or nonsensical (stupidity)” (2011, p. 12, emphases in original). And so we have naively, nonsensically continued our explorations (un)conferenced, unravelling the word panel itself, again and again, until it delivered a further plane of possibility from which we might leap—connected etymologically, as Rendle-Short (2014) explains, to “the verb to play [which] comes from Middle Dutch pleien to leap for joy, to dance, rejoice, and to be glad” (p. 92)—towards our latest GRC offering (again “staged” at our Claytons conference), this time under the banner of an (un) panel. Here we declared a bid “towards an experimental de-panelling that strives to fail to be a panel in any conventional sense of the word. Presented by a punnet of playful mavericks who aim to resist disciplinary coherence and may only ever make a difference by,
in Judith “Jack” Halberstam’s words, “thinking little thoughts and sharing them widely” (2011, p. 21). And this we did, employing similar strategies to those we have used in compiling this paper, but in the live space of the panel proper before a thrilled and engaged audience.

Might these playful moves, this spirited undisciplinarity, afford an alternative framework for thinking about the sharing of research, one that poses more questions than answers, one that privileges our capacity to wonder over our need to know? Is it possible that, as Halberstam (2011) contends: “Knowledge practices that refuse both the form and the content of traditional canons may lead to unbounded forms of speculation, modes of thinking that ally not with rigor but with inspiration and with unpredictability” (p. 10)?

This is our in/dis/unconclusion, a little thought or inkling that the best played panels of mice and women have the capacity to provoke a kind of creative fever, inciting us to “catch” others’ little thoughts on the fly in a spirit that sparks ideas and refreshes our practice, while also affording us a thirdspace in which we may transmit ideas contagiously towards something unexpected and new.

Or—and with apologies to Bryce Courtenay (1989)—never underestimate the power of UN.
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IV.

Navel Gazing, or,
The Immanent Twist

You never reach the Body without Organs, you can’t reach it, you are forever attaining it, it is a limit. People ask, So what is this BwO? – But you’re already on it, scurrying like vermin, groping like a blind person, or running like a lunatic: desert traveller and nomad of the steppes. On it we sleep, live our waking lives, fight – fight and are fought – seek our place, experience untold happiness and fabulous defeats; on it we penetrate and are penetrated; on it we love.

Deleuze & Guatarri, 1987

A friend told me recently that she’s kept the desiccated umbilical cords of her three children.

In a hidden shoebox? I forgot to ask.
What happened to my umbilical cord will always be a mystery. Most likely my mother bundled it into my dirty nappy. Her farm-girl pragmatism wouldn’t have allowed any sentiment over our shared remnant.

However, I do know that during my birth, my mother, out of it on gas, recalled meeting St Peter at the Pearly Gates. He was very pleasant and welcoming, she said when recycling the story over the years. But while she was conversing with St Pete I made my way out of her yawning vagina, which was stretched to the point of tearing. Forceps must have gripped my soft temporal bones. I can still feel a dent above my left temple.

Is that original shock, the violent separation, held—like a miasma—inside our navels?
“The becoming-body,” writes Erin Manning (2009), “has no fixed form. It is an exfoliating body” (p. 124). Perhaps like the suspended state of becoming-snake, when it is in-between skins. One has been sloughed off and the re-assembling of another has not yet emerged. The snake, between skins, has lost its form. The becoming-body is a virtual body. It is de-territorialised, “free of the fixed relations that contain a body all the while exposing it to new organizations” (p. 67). Becoming-bodies are re-assembling all the time, in process and in relationship with other assemblages. Exfoliating is a doing, a ‘verbing,’ an action. To shed the restrictive skin of a binary allows for becomings to unfold. Movement and rhythm exfoliate, says Manning (2009). And for total exfoliation, laughter (p. 21).

Most people watch the ceiling as I probe their bellies. But this young woman hasn’t taken her eyes off me. A fixed, wide-eyed stare bores into the side of my face. I sense a frozen stillness as my hand rests over her taut navel. She stops breathing. The deer is hiding in a grove of trees, holding dead still until the bear lumbers past.

I glance over at her deep red stockings draped over the side of the chair, which still hold the shape of her feet. More of a venous shade of red, I decide. There’s a hint of blue. It was only 10 minutes ago that I passed her standing at the reception desk, her long red legs capped by a vinyl black mini-skirt, feet planted in ankle-high black boots with severe zippers on the side.

I remove my hand from her navel and do the rest of my information-gathering over her abdomen. Temperature. Tone. Areas of tension. Skin texture. No scars, moles, or other irregularities. Only a few scattered freckles. Her ribcage is on the narrow side, indicating a relatively weak constitution. My hand moves with a sure, swift touch, conveying confidence born from exploring hundreds of bellies over the years.

Her chief complaint is tight shoulders. Too much computer work, she tells me. But I know it comes from a deeper tension, a deeper source.

When I move my hand away from her navel, she relaxes. Move it back over, and she tenses up again. Like the tree falling in the woods, does her navel relax when no one is probing? Judging from her taut musculature, including her neck muscles stretched like guy wires to the point of snapping, I don’t think so.

Her middle is clenched. Tight.
When I remove my hand, the side of my face relaxes. The deer comes out of hiding and watches the bear shrink in the distance. She’s here for her tight shoulder muscles, not her belly. I move up towards her head and press my fingers into the muscles on the top of her shoulders. Cement.

“In this Japanese style of acupuncture we treat your whole body starting from your abdomen,” I say, as I move around to the other side of the table to check the top of her other shoulder, which is also hard as cement. I press my fingers in again.

“We see a connection between your tight shoulders and the tension in your belly.”

I notice a thin layer of foundation on her face, discretely blended into her neck. A tiny crater, left by an absent nose ring, stands out. Her black eyebrows nearly meet at a crease in the middle. Long earlobes. A sign of longevity, according to the Chinese.

As her eyes follow my face, the fear-bulge appears again. My cheek tenses. I look square at her, into the stunned stare. The carefully applied make-up suddenly makes her more vulnerable to me. Removing my hand, I make sure my face and voice are soft.

“We need to free up your belly in order for your shoulders to loosen.”

She gives a little quick nod, but I don’t think she has any idea what I mean.

Her body is like a gated community surrounded with razor wire and sirens. I move away to jot down my findings in her fresh case file. And consider a way in. Maybe I should take the steering wheel and drive straight for the barbed-wired barricade, head-first into her fear. Or make the white-coated decision of The Expert and disregard her frightened state, her naked vulnerability, however much she’s tried to conceal it.

And what of informed consent? I’ve witnessed plenty of tears over the years, the moment of sweet relief when held-back feelings give way to a rupture. And several times the unrestrained sobs on the treatment table when a belly has unbuttoned, the clenched fist opens and blood floods back to the source. The disoriented stupor of having finally let go but not knowing how to fill all the freshly freed space. I do know this: too much energy is bound up in watching, in holding it all together, in concealment.

The clinched core. Fisted feelings. Anxiety circling a small room looking for a way out.
Without the oppositional tensions of a binary to keep it intact, when skin is neither on nor off, what can the becoming-body do? Deleuze took up Spinoza’s idea of immanence: Not only don’t we know what a body can do; we don’t know what our bodies will do from moment to moment.

Spinoza never ceases to be astonished by the body: not of having a body, but at what the body is capable of. Bodies are defined not by their genus and species, nor by their origins and functions, but by what they can do, the affects they are capable of, in passion as in action”.
(Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 74)

By rebuking binaries, possibilities open up. Becomings are potentiated by the rub of difference, juxtaposition and paradox, and aspire to ambiguity. Difference is affirmed, celebrated even. Elizabeth Grosz (1994), a philosopher devoted to re-thinking the body, notes that:

[Deleuze & Guattari’s] notion of the body as a discontinuous, nontotalizable series of processes, organs, flows, energies, corporeal substances and incorporeal events, speeds and durations, may be of great value to feminists attempting to reconceive bodies outside the binary oppositions imposed on the body by the mind/body, nature/culture, subject/object and interior/exterior oppositions” (p. 164).

By taking up the challenge to contest binaries, such as the Cartesian habit of privileging the mind over the body, somato-phobia—or fear of the body—can be looked at square in the face. This could be an antidote for the centuries-old Cartesian splitting headache: to step into Deleuze & Guattari’s world, comprised of thousands of wide-open undulating plateaus where the body and the mind can roam, aimless, together as one.

Our umbilicus. The site where the original lifeline, the chewy cord, connected to mother. The odd pucker of dense tissue left over once the shrivelled lifeless cord falls off like a dead branch snaps from a tree.
Maybe the wail of a newborn baby comes out as a grieving protest to being cast off from the mother ship. The shocking finality of the lifeline’s snip, never to return. I recall the nightmare I had as a child after watching 2001: A Space Odyssey – that astronaut floating, forever alone, into deep space, into infinity. The cold sweat of horror turning quickly to dread that is still not far away inside me.

Could it be that our navels hold that memory? The shock of the snip leaving the trace of our first unforgivable wounding? Could that be why so many people have an aversion to having their navels touched?

Belly button. Our belly’s button. Push a button. Don’t push my buttons. A button gathers and holds two surfaces together.

Deleuze took up the term “Body Without Organs” (BwO) from Antonin Artaud, another Spinozist, who invented the term as a means to free himself from the disgust and hatred he held for his own body. “Man is sick because he is badly constructed ... when you have made him a body without organs, then you have delivered him from all his automatic reactions and restored him his true freedom.” Deleuze folded Artaud’s term into his philosophy, having the BwO insinuate a deeper, hidden reality. For Deleuze, the BwO embodies a virtual space outside the hard edges of well-formed wholes constructed from functioning parts. “Then,” says Artaud (1988), with the conceptual evisceration complete, “you will teach him to dance wrong side out as in the frenzy of dance halls and this wrong side out will be his real place” (pp. 570-571). But to “dance wrong side out” isn’t enough, suggests Rosi Braidotti (2014): “To switch to Spinoza is a switch to the radical materiality of the body: the entire body thinks. You don’t think with the mind, you think with the entire fleshed existence.” Therein lays the inescapable human rub, the same one from which Artaud sought freedom. “You cannot step outside the slab of matter that you inhabit,” adds Braidotti (2014).

“How’s your sleep?” I ask as I move over to the treatment cart. Time to get the flow started.

“Is it going to hurt?” Her voice is pinched, small.
I head towards her feet with a packet of pins.
“Not really, they’re so fine and thin,” I say. To tell her
there’s no pain isn’t the truth. Sometimes the zing can be felt as pain. I start to peel the packet open.

“It’s a shame they’re called needles because it conjures up injections.”

Anticipation thickens the air in the room.

“If it makes you feel any better, when I was little I was terrified of getting my shots. And now I’m an acupuncturist.” Most people respond with a surprised really? She says nothing.

I touch her toes. Icy. I also notice her feet aren’t flopping out at a relaxed angle from her hips. Hip joints can often mirror shoulder joints. Both are holding on tight in this client. Her gluteal muscles are probably also clenched.

“I wouldn’t say it hurts, but you can feel a little tingly sensation. Acupuncture is about getting things flowing again, like flicking little switches, and ...”

“You’re not going to put one in my stomach are you?” Her voice cuts through the thickness, taking up space. The air moves. Good. She’s got spunk.

I press my warm hands into her icy arches, pulling her attention down to her feet. Better not head for the barricade, at least not today. Do I risk another rattled meltdown? And what of informed consent? Tell her: Sorry, but there’s a chance you’ll have a sobbing attack if I go straight to your clenched navel. Are you up for that? Unbutton it and underneath is access to another land of possibility. The unblinking grip of your implosion habit is a familiar, steady presence. Exhausting, but familiar. Keep it all contained, quiet, camouflaged.

Anxiety circles the room faster, faster. Frantic. Got to be a way out.

Forces are always at play, even in stasis, in stillness. Brian Massumi (2002) points it another way when he says “positionality is an emergent quality of movement. The distinction between stasis and motion that replaces the opposition between literal and figurative from this perspective is not a logical binarism. It follows the modes by which realities pass into each other. ‘Passing into’ is not a binarism. They are dynamic unities” (p. 8). Moving forces—earthbound and material, animate and inanimate, human and inhuman—rub, crash, scrape, caress, explode and fuse as dynamic unities. The swirl of forces on and against surfaces merging into
The New Materialists conceptualise “traversing the fluxes” (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 86) as a strategic move away from dualisms. Grosz comments on Deleuze and Guatarri’s elemental—or molecular in their terminology—conception of the body, which “implies a clear move toward imperceptibility . . . their work is like an acidic dissolution of the body, and the subject along with it” (Kaufman, 2012, p. 52). Cartesian thinking has benignly neglected matter with its preoccupation with the mind. As a relational ontology, the perspective of the New Materialists allows for the immanent enfolding of matter and meaning (Dolphijn & van der Tuin, 2012, p. 48). This re-conception of matter tolerates, encourages even, an apparent oxymoron; such movement in stasis. The endless possibilities of becoming create a power so potent it is capable of defying the classical laws of physics. The forces created by the actions of multiplicities can yank free of binary constraints by twisting around into the middle, and pass into each other.

I gently prod a spot on the inside of her ankle, a particular spot on the body that can manifest the fear-bulge. The prolonged fixed stare.

“Is this tender?”

She goes frozen again and winces. Just the feedback I need. But I want her to acknowledge it more directly.

“Does it feel sharp when I press it? Or more like a bruise?” I press it again.

“Sharp.”

“And this spot?” I reach over and press into the same spot on her left ankle.

“Ow. That’s worse.”

Swiftly, I tap a needle into one of the ankle spots.

“There, it’s in. Did that hurt?”

Silence. The air in the room circulates again.

“Is that it?” Her tone is incredulous, on the edge of a laugh.

“Yes, that’s it. Now, remember how I said acupuncture is like flicking little switches and getting things flowing better?”

The pinched voice reappears: “Ah, huh.”

“Just let me know when you feel a tingly sensation.” Very, oh-so very gently I give the needle a minuscule twirl, barely a whisper.

“Ew! I felt it down to my big toe. Like a tingle of electricity.”

“Yes. That’s the switch getting flicked on.”

I’ve already moved to her other foot and tap another in. I
don’t bother tweaking the second spot. One zing is enough to start the shift, to initiate the drop.

I move up to the head-end of the treatment table. She’s looking at the ceiling. Trillions of cells in her body are starting to hum and head towards equilibrium, like bees reforming a swarm. The fear-bulge disappears.

“How’re you doing?”

“Good. I feel really ... good,” she responds, dropping down into free flow. Dynamic homeostasis is just around the corner. She closes her eyes.

I place my hand just under her navel. She doesn’t flinch.

“Take in a big breath, and fill up my hand.”

She does, with surprising ease.

“And keep doing it several times, okay?”

Once free of the dualist structure of oppositional thinking, territorialised bodies—the literal body, as well as social, economic, political bodies—can find ways to challenge power disequilibrium. With the binary straightjacket removed, we can find out what our becoming-bodies are capable of doing. One option is to leave the stuffy, preoccupied interiors of psychoanalysis and roam on the surfaces of our intermingling, (organ)less assemblages. We can contest Freud’s phallocentrism. And the pinched negativity of desire understood as an insatiable lack. Desire as something missing. Instead, desire, according to Deleuze & Guatarri (2005), is defined as a “process of production without reference to any exterior agency; desire is a process of experimentation on a plane of immanence” (p. 63). Their philosophy is one of affirmation: desire is re-conceived as abundance, as excess. A plentitude. Our assemblages are in movement, in action, in processes of making. Not looking to fill a hole. “The BwO is never yours or mine. It is always a body.” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 164) Without an external agent, the BwO refuses to be owned.

Birth is shocking, simple enough. Once outside the womb the air pressure changes, forcing the tiny heart flap to snap shut. In the time it takes for the lungs to inflate, the mysterious morphing from amphibious creature to land mammal takes place.

Cast out into a sea of blue scrubs and machines bleeping, the perilous journey outside the womb begins. The unnecessary slap on
the bottom that was done in the old days. Vernix, like a thin smear of wet scrambled eggs, gets rubbed off by a scratchy towel. A needle prick to the base of a fresh heel. Add blinding lights, the cold embrace of metal, and this beginning outside the womb is enough for any creature to want to turn around and crawl back inside the mother ship.

But to return inside is impossible. Docking to the breast is the next best option.

Deleuze (1993) returns to the middle as a source of becoming: “It is in the middle where one finds the becoming, the movement, the velocity, the vortex. The middle is not the mean, but on the contrary, an excess. It is by the middle that things push” (p. 208). Events pass through the middle, in transit, neither here nor there. Activist–philosophers of change, Manning & Massumi (2014), say that each centre-point of movement, also known as the any-point, “twists around into the middle. In the middle, the immanent limits are in abstract superposition” (p. 42). Midway, betwixt and between. The middle holds it together, just. “Touch resets the any-point of movement,” they add (p. 54).

“Your hand is really hot.”
I snap back into the room.
“Yeah, they do warm up.”
My left index finger marks a spot a couple of inches below her navel.
“How about I tap one in here?”
“Okay,” she says, hardly hesitating.

Several thousand years ago, the ancient Chinese scanned the night sky for the North Pole Star, the prominent constellation used as a coordinate to chart the heavens. They considered it the fixed point around which everything orbited. As it is above, so it is below, they said, extending the celestial guidepost into the body, fixing it in the space just below the navel.

As long as we can locate our Pole Star, it doesn’t matter how far we venture across the horizon. But if we lose our way, by a tangle of fear or a flare of rage, a few calm, focused belly-breaths will lead us to back to the hub—our body’s night sky. Yes, there it is. Homeward bound, back to our source.
Perhaps touch, in resetting the any-point of movement, also resets potential? “Potential is abstract by nature,” Manning & Massumi (2014) continue, “in the sense of not yet being this or that, here nor there. What is abstract feeling, if not thought?” (p. 41). Perhaps, also, home is found “in the immanent twist” (p. 41). In one moment, one breath. One touch. Back to the source: the middle.

My left finger continues to mark the way in, easily found on the south side of the small rise in the flesh below her navel. This fleshy gateway into the Pole Star is always there, no matter if the surface terrain is a large mound or flattened surface. A pale freckle, like a faint nebula, sits next to her entrance.

Placing the metal guide tube on the spot, I give the top of the needle a quick tap. It pierces the skin, and the portal opens. The needle sinks just under the surface. A few gentle twirls send down slow ripples. I feel a tiny tug. Contact.

Returning to the desk to light the moxa, I hold the tip of the cigar-shaped stick over the candle flame waiting for the dense punk to smoulder. Her breathing is slow. The flame’s wobble is mesmerising.

My mother, while giving birth to me, either had a profound, drug-induced dissociative episode or a near-death experience. Did the experience also get embedded in me? Maybe it helps to explain my love of flying, of watching clouds, or my phobic terror of tight spaces. Does my navel hold that memory? Maybe that’s why my friend saved her babies’ shrivelled cords – to secretly hold like a talisman, preserving the connection. The pain and the ecstasy, forever mummified, hidden in a shoebox.

For my becomings to become becomings, my “series of assemblages”—me, that is, in Deleuze’s terminology—is required to relate with other assemblages—human, animate or inanimate—whereby my molecules affectively morph with whatever it is I’m in the process of becoming. As I think-feel into the density of flesh, through the gooey interstitial tissue, I listen for an opening. I refuse to collude with this or that thinking, side-stepping the binary pothole. My sense-perceptions stay focused, attuned. My listening finger is a becoming-needle. Like how a painter think-feels through colour, or how a dancer think-feels through movement.
My becoming-needle think-feels through flesh. I find the grain of things through the movement of feeling-forward. Stasis is a needler’s nemesis. Exfoliating on the cutting edge of a skin’s assemblage, I twirl internal whirls and alter the surface, alter the flow within. Our realities pass into each other by twisting into the middle.

Her feet are flopped out, relaxed. She sinks deeper onto the table. Trillions of cells are happily humming as yin and yang do-si-do around her Pole Star.

Blowing on the cherry-red ember, I move back to the table and hold the burning stick an inch or so over her skin around where the needle is planted. She hardly stirs.

“You’ll feel some warmth below your navel,” I say. She exhales, lets out a barely audible moan. The guy wires on her neck go slack. Her head slumps slightly to the side.

As the heat is conducted down the needle, it sends her source a strong reminder: Burn bright, hold fast, keep her oriented. As the heat seeps deeper, a message orbits back to her: Here’s your energetic core, located under your umbilicus-stem, its coals smouldering, providing the light whenever you need to find your way home.

My thoughts return earthbound: Will you feel lost unclenched? Are you ready to spill from your middling in your immanent twist?

Deleuze & Guatarri offer a prescription for a healthy BwO:

This is how it should be done. Lodge yourself on a stratum, experiment with the opportunities it offers, find an advantageous place on it, find potential movements of deterritorialization, possible lines of flight, experience them, produce flow conjunctions here and there, try out continua of intensities segment by segment, have a small plot of new land at all times. It is through a meticulous relation with the strata that one succeeds in freeing lines of flight, causing conjugated flows to pass and escape and bringing forth continuous intensities for a BwO. (1987, p. 161).
Hovering my open palm over her skin, I feel the warm glow coming from underneath. Enough moxa. Just a few more minutes and I’ll take out the needles.

A few gurgles, a telltale sound of relaxation, come from her belly.

After placing the moxa back on the treatment cart, I sit to finish my notes.

More gurgles emerge, sounding like a long line of trapped air bubbles finally freed, rush to the surface.

“The BwO is permeated by unformed, unstable matter, by flows of all directions, by free intensities or nomadic singularities, by mad or transitory particles”, Deleuze & Guattari (1987, p. 40) reassure us.

The stockings sag. The foot’s shape is gone.
II.
Exploring the Lyric Essay
(Acu-essays)
with Lyric Punctures

Acupuncture:
   acu (Latin, “with a needle”)
   +
   puncture (English, 17th century);
   zhenjiu (Chinese, ancient):
   zhen (“to prick”)
   jiu (“to burn”)

The two activities—prick and burn, acupuncture and moxibustion—entwine, are twirled together, for the most effective therapeutic results.

To perforate, prick, nick. Penetrate.
With heat’s seeping sear:
Soothes.
Essay (French, essai): an attempt; a trial or test

*Essaying: To imagine. Explore.*

My dad had high hopes for me to become a professional golfer. In my early teens, I could out-drive his golfing buddies, who would gape at my easy swing and hand–eye–body precision. This would pump up my father’s determination to groom my natural ability. He entered me in summer tournaments throughout the northwest Pacific. But I lacked the cutthroat drive necessary to win sudden-death playoffs. What I enjoyed was nailing the sweet spot of the golf ball: the clean crack that sent the ball soaring high and long, and carried with it the effortless feeling that the ball and I were inseparable.

In the context of poetry, *lyric*, according to Virginia Jackson and Yopie Prins (2014), has been considered a “mummified remnant of Romanticism” (p. 2). Jackson & Prins (2014) also maintain that lyric is associated—too simplistically—with the lyre and music, even though “it is true that if we think of choral hymns or Sappho’s odes or even tribal chants or popular song as the roots of lyric, a critical genealogy of lyric as a modern theory does not make much sense” (p. 1). As a way to challenge the knee-jerk twitch that is made between “lyric” and “poetry”, they compiled a collection of essays in *The Lyric Theory Reader: A Critical Anthology*, “so we may be able to see not only where our ideas have come from but also where they might be going” (Jackson & Prins, 2014, p. 2).

The acupuncture needle’s tip finds the sweet spots and sends the body onto a trajectory of repose: out of pain and into relief.

In compiling the anthology of scholarly essays, Jackson and Prins hatched a new field of academic inquiry, Lyric Studies. Another academic custodian of the lyric, Jonathan Culler, has joined his colleagues’ critical examination of the old models in order to generate fresh possibilities. For Culler, lyric has been assimilated—due to its pedagogical dominance—into Narrative Studies. “If narrative is about what happens next, lyric is about what happens now,” says Culler (2008, p. 202, italics mine). “A successful revival of the study and teaching of lyric may depend on foregrounding such aspects of lyric,” he adds (2008, p. 202).
In *The Poetry Foundation’s* glossary of poetic terms, the term *lyric* “refers to a short poem in which the poet, the poet’s persona or another speaker expresses personal feeling”.

Perhaps, as Lyric Studies grows and develops, the rusty pivot around which the lyric “I” has turned—the subjective, singular perspective—will fully destabilise as it wobbles into fresh possibilities?

A photograph of the needle’s tip at the twirl site—taken by ultrasound—appears like a microscopic hurricane eye (Langevin, 2005, p. 41).

In 1997, a special issue of the literary journal *Seneca Review* was devoted to the lyric essay. Editors Deborah Tall and John D’Agata (1997) describe some of the dextrous qualities of the form—how it can somehow simultaneously straddle fiction/fact and prose/poetry—without the need to tether it to a decisive definition: “It partakes of the poem in its density and shapeliness, its distillation of ideas and musicality of language. It partakes of the essay in its weight, in its overt desire to engage with facts, melding its allegiance to the actual with its passion for imaginative form” (p. 1).

Translated as “glue” from the French, *collage* acts like connective tissues in the body, allowing for fragments to respond, articulate, and move, together.

In his article “Why Lyric?”, Culler (2008) suggests a way to break “lyric” from Narrative Studies: lyric must disembowel the speaker and the subject position—such as during dramatic monologues—as *the* condition of experience. Instead, lyric can foreground the structure of language, especially in the way rhythm affects bodily experience. If narrative structures are translatable, then lyric, says Culler, “in its peculiar structural patterning, figures the givenness, the untranscendability, of a particular language, which seems to its users a condition of experience” (p. 205).

The lyric essay, says Judith Kitchen (2011), an early pioneer of form, “functions as a lyric. It swallows you, the way a poem swallows you, until you reside inside it” (p. 18). Once swallowed, Kitchen goes
on to consider another possible function for the form: “The lyre
then, becomes accompaniment. Something that aids and abets in
the writer’s quest to discover what’s under the surface, following an
impulse where ever it leads, its aim not meaning, but being, and in
the fullness of its being, at least something of meaning” (2011, p. 118).
Experientially, lyric and essay smear together into one body that has
the capacity to move—and swallow whole—the reader.

I am writing acu-essays with lyric punctures. This makes me
think of Roland Barthes’ notion of punctum as an aberrance, an
unintended shock or surprise that escapes language. “What I can
name cannot really prick me,” Barthes claims (2011), “therefore, the
inability to name is a good sign of disturbance of punctum” (p. 51).

How to express the inexpressible—and the imperceptibles—
through language? Maybe through those sweet spots when the
moment a needle’s tip zings—like a lightening flash—a discharge of
calcium ions bound-up in taut muscle tissue.

The zing is a thunderclap after the flash, sending ripples across the
body’s internal horizon.

Harold Bloom attempts to steer lyric away from rhetorical speech
towards the “New Critical privileging of lyric form as sui generis.”
In other words, lyric is a genre “with special rights and its own
peculiar pathos […] of the lyric’s internal struggle to achieve and
simultaneously disrupt its own aesthetic form” (Jackson & Prins,

I wonder: does lyric need its peculiar pathos? What would happen if
lyric gave up its internal struggle and turned outward?

On their own, acupoints are inert. But they project a quality. To be
open, and to be clinically effective, a point needs to be met, stirred.
Agitated.

Despite the historical and contemporary quagmire of theories
surrounding notions of lyric, “In practice,” say Jackson & Prins (2014),
“the lyric is whatever we think poetry is” (p. 2, italics mine).
Until about 30 years ago, connective tissue and fascia had been considered inert, mere glue that holds things together. It was the stuff to be scraped away in anatomy class to better view the structures underneath. But recent research in biomedicine has rediscovered connective tissues as dynamic and alive (Schleip, 2012; Schultz, 1996).

Imagine if all bones, organs, muscles, and blood vessels are removed: what would be left is an enormous drooping bag of connective tissues that retains the shape of the whole, quivering body.

C. D. Wright’s essayistic poem, “Why Poetry Offers a Better Deal Than the World’s Biggest Retailer” fiercely defends poetry’s dignity, and its determined risk taking:

> When has poetry not availed itself of everything from full-frontal sex to crackpot economics. When has it not worked every effect known to literature, especially the longer its history and the more extended its compositions. When has the uncategorizable not justly been called poetry. I say, when it begins to stink. At the stinking point, all writing should retreat to its own smelly corner—as bad poetry, bad fiction, bad theater, bad meat. Poetry should not be the default for every writer’s mess. Otherwise, it is a poem if I say it is (C. D. Wright, 2016, p. 36-37).

In seeking a fresh model for the lyric, Culler (2015) turns away from interpretive techniques for the reader to make meaning, and instead orients towards “the ritualistic dimensions of lyric: rhythm, lyric address and invocation, and sound patterning of all kinds. These incantatory elements are very often what initially attracts us to a poem—prior to exploration of its meaning—and of course they are what make lyrics different from prose reflections on the world” (p. 350). The musicality of language sticks honeyed—or stinky—lyrics to memory.

During an interview for The Guardian, when asked for her definition of poetry, Anne Carson answered: “If prose is a house, poetry is a man on fire running quite fast through it.”
Scottish percussionist Evelyn Glennie, who has been profoundly deaf since she was 12, performs barefooted so she can better hear the vibrations as they move between her body and the ground.

According to the ancient Greeks, how the speaker is oriented or positioned in relation to the listener/audience is broadly classed in three groups: lyric, epic (or narrative) and dramatic. The lyric speaks in the first person, the epic speaks in his own voice (but also allows characters to speak), and for drama, the characters do all the speaking. Culler (1997) singles out the lyric speaker as the most complicated: “The poet, in singing or chanting, turns his back on his listeners, so to speak, and pretends to be talking to himself or to someone else: a spirit of Nature, a Muse, a personal friend, a lover, a god, a personified abstraction, or a natural object” (pp. 72-73). Culler also notes that the Greek approach is still used, for the most part, by contemporary theorists of genre theory.

The technical term for “sweet spot”, according to the science of physics, is “the centre of percussion.” However, the impact point that feels best is usually the node of the fundamental vibration mode, not the centre of percussion (Crossa, 2004, p. 622). That is, the sweetest sweet spot is in the vibration, just off centre.

Poet and essayist Lia Purpura says that lyrical or poetic requires “a trust in free wandering” or, as she says, “this moving away and returning to” (as cited in Root, 2011, p. 98).

When making a lyric essay, my mind meanders, makes wild associations and attempts to spin pure sensibility through words. When I twirl a needle, the narrative can take an arbitrary, unexpected turn and wander in a completely different direction.

To put it simply, lyric essays do not necessarily follow a straight line ... they are songlike in that they hinge on the inherent rhythms of language and sound. Lyric essays favor fragmentation and imagery; they use white space and juxtaposition as structural elements. They are as attuned to silences as they are to utterance ... they require us to complete their meaning”. (Miller, 2012, p. 106)
Vibrations come through my attuned affective body and out my fingertips: twist the needle or twist words for the desired effect. Alliterations, rhythms, activities that I can see, feel, smell, as I attune to the reverb of nonhuman sounds.

In the process of finding spots to needle, I listen with my fingers on a body’s surface: like the sonar sensitivity of a tundra owl finding prey under half a metre of snow.

The ancient Chinese called connective tissue the *cou li*, or the *organ with no form*. Such as the band of fascia – called the *huang gao* or the greasy membrane – that wraps around the diaphragm and assists with the act of breathing. No form—including intercellular goo that’s the consistency of egg whites—provides the slippery medium for change to take place. Messages are relayed across liquified sheets containing homogenous cells that scatter then flock into coherent excitations: like the flash of fireflies, or chirping crickets, or the synchronised beat of the heart’s pacemaker cells.

Judith Kitchen (2011) says that “the lyric essay generates its meaning by asking its readers to make leaps, to make a kind of narrative sense of the random and chance encounter” (p. 116). The reader, in her willingness take risky leaps, becomes a part of something new in the making.

In a lyric essay, no single narrative carries the movement forward. Rather, the movements between many mini (un)narratives generate a waft much like how the twirl of a needle can cause sudden shifts and scatter the movement onto new trajectories.

*Xue*, an acupuncture point, literally means hole. Classically *xue* meant a cave, or refers to a “chamber below the earth.”

I practice lyric-ing the body with punctures.

Or, in puncturing the body, lyrics are made.
Acu-Essays with lyric punctures

A Case Study: The Hot Pink Scar

As she rattles off wedding plans, my hand explores the dent on the inside of her lower leg, just below her left calf. She does Irish dancing so her calf muscles are particularly meaty. Around the dent’s edges I locate a few possible spots that I can use to find my way in. I can fit three knuckles into the hollow space. The scar, though well older than a decade, still has a surprised look about it. Flushed with iridescent pinks and purples like the inside of an abalone shell, the middle of the scar retains the shock of the wounding moment. Of disbelief.

Motorbike accident? She told me on the first visit but I forget and don’t bother checking my notes. Anaesthetised with ouzo as she crashed into a tree, I think. Happened in Cyprus; that I do remember. Or maybe it was Sicily.

At the other end of the table she’s preoccupied with everything that needs to be done in the next few weeks. She’s oblivious to my prodding fingers. I’m careful to stay along the scar’s bank and not go directly into the old wound. But the most important aim of the treatment isn’t working on the scar. It’s just a local means of generating flow upstream to her abdomen, in her core, where the deeper wounding lies. Restoring circulation around the scar is sort of like removing a logjam.

“I’ve picked out the dress. It’s a hot pink! Very 70s.”

I can imagine it: her trailing train of flamboyant pink, defiant.

“Where are you having it again?” I ask, and sneak in a needle without her noticing.

“On the beach. At Eggs and Bacon Bay, down past Cygnet. You know, last time you said you’d been there.”

Cygnet, Cyprus, Sicily.

“Yes, of course. Magical spot.” As I head back to the cart for more needles, I circle above her and tweak the one on top of her head, sending her down into parasympathetic bliss. She goes silent. I return to her leg and quietly open up a couple of spots around the old scar.

I explored the area around her upcoming wedding site a few months before I met this vivacious woman. She came to me on the recommendation of her psychologist. After the third visit, she reported nightmares related to sexual abuse from her girlhood. The excitement and stress of her upcoming marriage seem to be flushing out submerged symptoms that have been hidden deep
inside. I let her know that the part of her brain—the amygdala, whose sole job it is to keep her alive—doesn’t know the difference between “good” and “bad” stress. Every intense stimulus is a potential threat. But if a threat does result in significant wounding, flares and rockets will often be sent off into the sleeper’s night sky to signal the need for attention. Acupuncture is one way a message is returned, delivered at the level of a bat’s sonar frequency: *We hear you, help is on the way.*

Eggs and Bacon Bay is about an hour’s drive south of Hobart. The cove is sheltered from the wild weather that builds off Antarctica and is delivered in great gusts by the Roaring Forties. Heading further south from the bay is Cockle Creek, the last tiny hamlet before heading to the southern-most tip of Tasmania. There is no other body of land until Antarctica is reached a few thousand miles away.

I made the three-hour walk out to the point from Cockle Creek. I was told by a local that surfers make the trek out to the frigid waves that are birthed off the continental shelf, forests of bull kelp pushing the waves up, helped along by the Roaring Forties. Through the soggy heathland along the two-planked boardwalk, sure enough, the only person I passed along the way—racing against the clock as it was getting dark soon—was a wild-eyed surfer, barefoot, surfboard perched on one bare shoulder, boots slung across the other. This was the middle of winter. His mossy green eyes radiant with an ecstasy of which most people can only dream. I asked him how far I was from the bluff. Another 10 minutes, he beamed. I said thanks and he strode off down the planks, leaving residue of a vitality that made my heart want to burst.

Very gently, I wake up a slumbering trauma that had lodged itself in her leg, her own mind having to split away from the offending area. The tissue on the edges dense, close to losing life at the surface. But the still pink centre has just enough blood flow to move the lymph, just enough vascular pressure to keep the tissue viable. *Just enough.*

With a few more gentle tweaks I move the flow, quietly, back up to her lower abdomen. Stagnation on the banks of an old leg wound give way to the power of fresh flow as it swirls around locally, then courses upstream towards the vital, intimate spaces of her belly.

A fresh flow can help her consume space, inhabit her body, wear her hot pink dress with a flare that comes up off the depths of the shelf, washing onto the shores of her wedding site.
Acu-essays with (lyric punctures)

_Versuch_ (German): essay, attempt.

Poet–essayist Joan Retallack (2003) dissects the translation further: “_Versuch_ has ‘search’ (_suehe_)—seeking, tracking—embedded in it. _Versuch_ is an experimental seeking whose writing—act and trace—accommodates clear directionalities and peculiar contingencies” (p. 40).

Over 400 years ago, the shearing force of bereavement _moved_ the essay’s inventor, Michel Montaigne, to experiment with a new way of writing. The sudden death of his friend—whose conversation he cherished—left a void he needed to fill. What Montaigne started to write became a form he later called the _essai_.

An acupuncture needle would be nothing without tissue to twirl and a body with which to converse.

The essay is awry, off balance: “Montaigne cultivates sentences that admit unsteadiness while finding a moving balance in disequilibrium. This is the way every interpermeable life system works—in dynamic, vertiginous flux—finding its patterns in contingent motion” (Retallack, 2003, p. 36).

Judith Kitchen, when considering the interactive nature of the lyric essay and how it works (besides its capacity to swallow the reader), looks to critic I. A. Richards’ notion of a “ground” in the context of metaphor, “the supreme agent by which disparate and hitherto unconnected things are brought together” (Kitchen, 2011, p. 118). In the making of a metaphor when two disparate words or phrases co-mingle, or collide, the force generated potentiates a new, or enlarged, meaning. No particle of comparison is used, as does another figurative tool, simile. As a result of what Richards calls “the transaction between contexts,” that is, when the tenor and vehicle _move_ together in a metaphor, they need to have a common ground. “And ‘ground,’ in this sense,” says Kitchen (2011), “is what I think is the essence of the lyric essay—and perhaps any essay” (p. 118).

Joan Retallack puts essay-ing as a risky activity with an uncertain outcome. As a poethical act, she wagers the risk as necessary. A spirit of playful experimentation motivates the form to forgo the air of
mastery, and instead actively seek out precarity and ambivalence. She recalls Montaigne’s words from 400 years ago as relevant today: “If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial” (Retallack, 2003, p. 36, from Complete Works, pp. 610-11). Retallack reminds us that the essay deliberately seeks out slippery contingencies without toeholds for the mind to gain purchase.

This is a fact: the physiological properties of connective tissue—from fine microscopic strands to the thick planes of fascia—respond to movement in the body and change as a direct consequence of bodily movement (Schleip, 2012, p. xv). Movement changes the behavioural responses of connective tissue.

If the essay as a genre is—or has been—defined by “fact” then “the lyric essay”, says John D’Agata (2003), “asks what happens when an essay begins to behave less like an essay and more like a poem” (pp. 436-437). A reviewer of the anthology translates D’Agata’s words as: “He has looked at the future of the essay and it is us – writers caught in the act of weighing out, imagining, exploring. But isn’t that where the essay begins?” (Bartkevicius, 2003, p. 157).

The interaction between ideas lays down conceptual connective tissue and creates the capacity for the body of the lyric essay to grow, change and become. If an idea cannot stay in relationship with another idea, it shrivels, atrophies, and dies.

Retallack (2003) also looks to Theodor Adorno’s claim of the essay’s anarchic tendency to destabilise “official thought” as a poethical act, because it is a “discursive form that confounds the dangers of ideology and entrenched thought” (p. 40). If Retallack (2003) inverts wager as essay, then Adorno’s equivalent could be the essay as “an intention groping its way” (p. 40). Without the firm footing of coherence, the essay gropes, feeling its way forward indeterminately and, says Retallack (2003), “the goal is to resist all those standards that create what Adorno calls the ‘illusion of intelligibility’” (p. 40).
What sort of force does groping induce? A barely perceptible updraught? Since failure is the risk, I’d say something stronger.

To grope in the dark.
Give it a whirl.
Hazard a guess.
Lay on the line.

What drives Robert Vivian’s “dervish essays” is anaphora and he has no idea where they come from or how they wrap themselves up in a whirlwind. “The biggest thing,” he says, “is the impetus behind writing them: the intense and focused use of language” (as interviewed by Earle & Martino, 2014).

Even though he is at the mercy of the form’s unpredictable climatic conditions, Vivian does know that one is about to finish because he senses when the whirlwind is about to expire.

Xu, or cleft points, are located in anatomical fissures or narrow gaps on the body’s surface landscape. These interstitial points are places where stuff can accumulate and get stuck, much like a logjam in a river.

A virtual needle coming out of my fingertips. A mapped acupuncture point on its own is static, inert. A live spot on the skin needs to be activated, brought to life. It needs to be met. Informed touch warms up the spot and locates the gate precisely (Yes! That’s it!). A gentle tweak opens the gate, granting flow entry. Repetition of inserting needles, thousands placed under the skin, finding the space, tapping into free flow, is invited back in as the gate is gently pushed open.

After giving the needle a gentle twirl, a microscopic fascial footprint is left behind.

Connective tissue is the subtext, discreetly holding all the parts of the whole together. From fine cobwebby connective tissue to the thick planes of serous fascia to the interstitial fluid, the stuff that makes us juicy, gooey and bendable. It is the system, often ignored because of its discretion and near invisibility, that delivers information to all the cells.

I aim for each lyric essay to pulse with synergistic flux, made contiguous by the discrete presence of connective tissues as
an analogue. As the body moves, changes and grows, connective tissue responds in kind, lending sinewy strength and elasticity as the ubiquitous substance seamlessly participates in the generation of incipient change and movement. Juxtaposition, wild associations, breathy white space, smooth and jerky rhythms, are some of the writerly devices that add to a connective tissuing of language.

“The lyric essay requires an allegiance to intuition. Because we are no longer tied to a logical, linear narrative or argument, we must surrender to the writing process itself to show us the essay’s intent” (Miller, 2012, p. 107).


That miniscule meeting place—one single cell-layer thick—between arteries and veins when tissues are suffused. During diffusion oxygen and carbon dioxide meet in the middle, exerting equal gaseous pressure. As my fingers tap out these words into sentence-ideas, it is happening: gazillions of capillary beds make their exchanges. Under my fingertips; in my lungs tender alveoli; within my intestine’s undulating folds.

Do words have bodies? A viscera? Vibrating guts? Peristalsis? Words need something to vibrate against to generate a resonance, or dissonance. Language, like nature, abhors a vacuum. Without a body, thoughts would have nothing in which to stand up. They’d collapse. Without edges, words would be sucked into a vacuum or a black hole to hang out with all that unfathomable dark matter.

Thoughts move. Writing sticks thoughts to paper to words sentences, rhythms punctuate a flow, or not. The thrill when a thought gathers other thoughts and form vortices that potentiate a concept. As the forces gather strength within the idea’s vortex, a more-than quality forms that is out of human earshot.
Jackson & Prins (2014) suggest that “[a] resistance to definition may be the best basis for definition of the lyric—and of poetry—we currently have” (p. 2).

“A student asks me what a lyric essay is. She is holding her pen above a pad of paper and looking at me expectantly and all I can think is, ‘It doesn’t matter’” (Eula Biss, 2013, p. 199).
The Bodyguard

I once read about an experiment undertaken to show how heart cells need to join up in order to beat in unison.

The heart’s pacemaker cells beat when a complex series of gates open and close in an organised way. When the beating cells don’t touch each other, their beats are independent—sometimes faster, sometimes slower.

The experiment shows that after two-to-three days, the single cells form interconnected sheets of cells that start to beat in unison. Pores, called gap junctions, open between adjacent cells, making their cytoplasm—their internal cellular goo—interconnected. It is these gap junctions that ensure that the interconnected cells work as one.

Like the billions of synapses connecting nerve cells, it’s the biochemical messengers that relay the information through the gap junctions.
Struck by what this experiment implied, I realised: reduced to the molecular level, pacemaker cells never actually *touch* each other.

*Visit 1*
I’m not sure if he’ll fit on the treatment table. That’s my first unsettling thought as he walks through the door, as his shoulders nearly graze the threshold. I’ve treated plenty of muscle-bound people before—mostly hairless body builders, thighs thick as established tree trunks—their bulging muscles seem hollow to me, without purpose.

His gaze is furtive, not quite landing on mine. Jet-black handlebar moustache. Middle Eastern heritage is my guess. One swipe from his mammoth Popeye forearm could flatten me. Or a bear hug could pop my lung’s pleural sac in a single squeeze. I’m certain his muscles have purpose and I’m curious to find it.

As I close the door behind him, a waft of spicy aftershave gets trapped in the room. His gigantic head has been freshly shaved.

Without a word, he hands me the referral letter along with my intake form, still not meeting my eyes. He sits down. The way he moves is light, measured. But I sense a heavy weight hidden somewhere. Buried, tucked away.

A quick look at the letter. Referred by a GP colleague. Turkish name, Tukru, like the kebab place on Sydney Road, in Melbourne’s inner north. As I continue to read, I push my sleeves down to cover my arms.

... thank you for seeing Mr Hatsya for acupuncture treatment... he’s 44 years old with a persistent pain under the left scapula the past few months...

“Dr Shepherd sent me to you. Seen physios. Chiropractor. Even had a shot. The pain still there.”

I strain to hear him. His accent is soft, undulating, like bobbing in a boat.

“How long have you had the pain?”

“Long time. It’s there all the time,” he says, staring at his feet. Sandals, must be at least size 12. The leather like burnt sienna, the same hue as the Pilbara desert in Western Australia. All that iron ore.

“What’s the pain like? Is it dull like a toothache, or sharp and stabbing like a knife?”

He shrugs.
“It’s pain.”
Reading down, I land on additional problems: Anxiety, depression, hypertension, type 2 diabetes, followed up by a list of medications: antidepressant, cholesterol lowering, reflux, hypertensive, insulin.
“How long have you been on the meds?”
“A year, maybe.”
“Where’s the pain located?”
“In my back.”
“Can you point to it?”
Facing me in the chair, he motions behind his left shoulder. Standing up, I turn my back to him, within his reach.
“Show me where on my back.”
Behind me I sense him hesitate, then he traces a circle, barely grazing my shirt, around the inside of my left shoulder blade. The back door to my heart. The back door to his heart.
I move towards the treatment cart.
“Okay, Tukru. Take off—”
“Tom.”
“Okay Tom, take your shirt off please. Let’s start off with you on your back,” I say, gesturing to the treatment table. “I need to check in with a few other things before we focus on your shoulder.”
As he hoists his shirt over his head and turns to fold it neatly over the back of the chair, I look again at the report of the CT scan of his mid-back. Nothing revealing other than some fatty infiltration suggested in portions of the liver. I flip back to the letter from Shepherd and notice for the first time: ... the pain occurs only when immobile.

In Chinese culture, like a lot of non-Western cultures, the mind is inseparable from the heart.
In Traditional Chinese Medicine, the Heart stores the shen, loosely translated as “spirit.”
The eyes reflect the strength of a person’s shen. If bright and clear, the shen is strong. If dull, it’s weak, like someone struggling with depression. If nobody’s home, the shen has been scattered. Big shocks can scatter the shen.
My brother was killed in a scuba diving accident in southeast Alaska. It happened a month before 11 September, 2001. He got sucked into a drainage pipe in a shallow body of water on the grounds of a hydroelectric power plant. He was given the wrong blueprints and the turbine was left on and no protective grate covered the pipe. It took five hours to get him out; he was so tightly wedged in. I got to see him in his casket before it was permanently sealed for his sea burial. My first thought when I saw him laid out in the casket, dressed in his beloved red dive suit, was he needed a haircut. A deep gash over his right eye looked like the mortician filled it with wood putty. Even though the coroner reported “death from drowning,” I wanted to believe the gash was from slamming his head on the side of the pipe when he got sucked in, knocking him out. I couldn’t bear, and still can’t bear, the possibility that he was trapped and conscious.

His shocking death severely rattled my shen. Sleep became an exhausting snorkel on the surface. Letting go to drop down into deep sleep meant to risk facing the death monsters lurking underneath. No matter if it was day or night, I never got a break from the cruel truth: Craig’s gone. It took years for me to face that fact.

The deep ache in my heart stayed there for a very long time. And it was worse when I was immobile. Like when I was trying to fall asleep.

Tom’s shen is dull, like a dimmer switch is turned down as low as it can go. Or when light can’t get through a blocked entry.

As I palpate his abdomen, he clasps his arms behind his head, the only way his broad girth can take up less space on the table. He winces every time I apply mild pressure on his belly. His olive-toned flesh pushes out over the top of a thick black belt, set on the last notch. Several fatty cysts, like embedded soft grapes, are scattered across his upper abdomen. My investigating fingers push against a hard spot at the base of his sternum, the reflex area for his heart, that is, his “Chinese” heart. The tissue refuses to give.

“How’s your sleep?”

He takes a moment to answer.

“Not good,” he says, coming out as a sigh.

“We’ll get to your shoulder soon. Hard to fall asleep or stay asleep? Or both?”
I press a spot in the middle of his sternum and he arches his back. It can be a reflex spot for anxiety.

“Never good sleep. Not for long time.”

Twenty minutes left for his appointment. I need to find a way in. I have him turn over.

After passing my hands over his broad back it becomes clear that I’m not going to find a way in without using some force. The silky, unblemished texture of his skin creates a mocking diversion from his musculature’s steely shield a few millimetres underneath. How am I going to get at the spot without using a chisel? He wants relief, but to chip away at the hard protective layer risks exposing the raw source of his deep sadness. That is the core of his pain, with a musculoskeletal overlay of discomfort.

I place my palm over his left shoulder blade and, with my thumb, try to move the inside corner of the triangular shaped bone. It’s fixed and immobile, cemented in place.

As I start to prod around the lower margin, the heart reflex area on the back, I ask him to let me know when I’m on a sore spot. After I poke around for a minute or so, increasing pressure as I do, he remains motionless and mute. Low pain threshold on the front, high threshold on the back.

I crouch down by his head. From his earlobe droops a gold earring, the size of a tiny woman’s wedding band.

“Tom, I’m going to use the edge of a ceramic Chinese soup spoon to scrape your skin around your shoulder blade.” I know the pain is hidden deep underneath. But the most I can do for now is draw some fresh blood flow into the area. Into the surface, at least.

“It might look like a purple bruise when I’m done but will disappear in a few days. Is that okay with you?”

I’m not convinced he understands but he gives me a nod anyway. After smearing a generous amount of liniment over his left upper back, I get to work with the spoon. The fumes from a mix of menthol, camphor and eucalyptus oil overpower his aftershave. I blink against the sting. The friction generated by scraping the spoon’s smooth bevelled edge over and over on his skin draws blood into the area, stimulating a lymphatic response. It’s an old folk medicine technique, a quick and efficient way to start moving stubborn stagnation.

Passing over the inner margin, the spoon bumps over a tough strand of muscle. An old micro-tear?
I lean over by the side of his head, my hands slick with liniment. The edge of a cramp sits in my right palm. I switch the spoon to my left hand.

“Can you remember any old injuries to your shoulder?”

After a considering pause, he answers. I notice he considers everything. Attentive. Precise.

“Five years ago. Boxing.”

I resume scraping, my right hand grateful for the short rest.

“Oh, you’re a boxer?” I say, wanting him to tell me more.

Purposeful punching. Roll with the punches. Throw in the towel.

“But that came good,” he adds. “This time it’s bad even when I go to the toilet.”

Rib, facet joint, diaphragm. Intercostal muscles. Layers there. But I’m sure my hunch will find a deep loss at the nub of the pain. Two years ago is my guess. Hypertension doesn’t start overnight. Neither does depression nor type 2 diabetes. His whole body is in a holding pattern. There is a story trapped under the stony weight of his scapula.

A splotchy redness from the frictioning heat spreads over the area. Hints of dark purple—evidence of deep stagnation—start to pool under the red.

With a moistened hot towel, I wipe the liniment off his back.

“All done for now, Tom, you can get up,” I say as I wash my hands. “And take a look in the mirror on the back of the door. The purple marks show how stuck it is. That’s why the pain hasn’t moved.”

Tom rolls off the table and stands up. As I dry my hands, I motion to the mirror.

“Take a look.”

Craning his neck, he twists to see his back’s image in the mirror. He doesn’t say anything. Instead, he tests his shoulder by rotating it in small circles, then stands quiet, as though listening.

“Pain still there.”

“It’s in there deep. If you can come back three more times, I think we can get at it. Once a week would be best.”

I move back to the desk to scribble down notes.

After he puts his shirt back on and gathers up his wallet, cell phone and keys, he looks up.

“Okay.”

I see a feeble flicker of light. A negligible shift in the boulder.
As he leaves the room, I glance at the clock. Seven minutes over time.

Practices that focus the mind’s attention on the area of the heart while mustering sincere feelings of love and appreciation lead to a more regular variation of heart rate. This is a physiological state referred to as coherence. A steady rhythmic beat reflects a coherent state of the system in charge of the heart’s tempo: the autonomic or involuntary nervous system.

The moment a twirling acupuncture needle elicits a zing on the surface of the skin, in less time that it takes to blink a message has been sent from the needle site up the dorsal ganglion of the spine to the basement of the brain, where the autonomic nervous system resides. The zing sneaks in below the vigilant, judging gaze of the neo-cortex upstairs. A cascade of physiological processes are set in motion and the body tips towards coherence, a humming restful state of equilibrium that cells in the body are tuned into seeking.

For now, sweet relief. To beat together, unified.

Visit 2
Again, the plume of aftershave lingers after I close the door behind him. Freshly shaved and showered, head shiny, handlebar moustache jet-black. So black it looks like shoe polish has been combed into it. Like a caricature, but of who I’m not quite sure.

“Work maybe call me.” He’s already pulling his shirt over his head and makes for the table. “I need my phone on.” He lands face down, puts his phone up next to his head. I scramble to arrange the pillow under his chest and the small rolled towel under his forehead to support his neck.

The marks on his back have nearly faded, except for a patch of greeny yellow, like the end stage of a bruise.

“How’s your shoulder been?”

“Still pain.” His voice is muffled by the sheet.

With light pressure I start to check in with his back. It’s more springy; there’s more give to his skin.

“Is the pain still constant? Has it changed at all?” I’ve already decided to use the blowtorch today. Need to use the penetrating effects of direct moxa to get deeper. Maybe a bit more chiselling, as well.

“Maybe a bit better. Hard to tell.”
My fingers land on the cryptic spot I noticed last week. It has the dense texture of scar tissue, but it’s too superficial to be the source of the petulant pain lodged under his shoulder blade. Twisting the standing lamp’s neck to light up his back, I make out a faint scar, about five centimetres long. He tenses slightly.

I’m getting closer to another story, and I don’t think it has to do with boxing.

“Any other injuries since the one from boxing?”

His phone lets out a rock-and-roll blast. He looks at the screen and, before the next guitar twang, answers it.

“Yes,” he says. “Yes.” He hangs up, and places his forehead back on the rolled towel.

“Any other injuries to this shoulder, Tom?” My hands continue to survey the lay of the land on his back. Something else has happened. The more specific the information I get, the better.

“I’m a bodyguard for a CEO. I had to restrain someone. Maybe I hurt it then.” That doesn’t explain how the scar got there, but I don’t push it.

I get to work, choosing about six spots around his shoulder to burn the moxa. The heat penetrates, like a laser beam, deep into his tissue. After a few minutes I sense his body giving in slightly, sinking into the table. I finish the treatment with more scraping around his shoulder blade and along his spine. Like last week, under the redness some more dark purple is pulled up from deep below. We’re getting closer to the source.

As he slides off, his massive hands grip the sides of the table to keep it from toppling over with his weight. His foot finds the floor and he moves to the chair with quick, buoyant steps, and quickly buttons up his shirt.

“Next week?” he says, heading for the door.

“Yes. Let’s do two more. I think that will shift it. At least take the constant pain away.”

As he turns around to close the door, he looks at me.

“See you,” he says. A sliver of light is coming through the cracks between the boulders, showing the possibility of a way out.

For more than 800 years, in the middle of December, hundreds of whirling dervishes converge in Konya, in central Turkey, to recognise, celebrate even, the death anniversary of the Sufi poet
Rumi. The pilgrimage takes place for a week and culminates in a massive group twirl on his death day, 17th December. My understanding is that Sufi mystics believe one must die before one can live.

I’d like to be there when all the dervishes spin, each focused on reaching a trance-like state of divine ecstasy. I’m curious to find out if the collective twirl creates a breeze. Each dervish has one hand tipped up towards the heavens, and the other curved down to the ground. Round and round, the rhythm of bells and tambourines surrounding the circles of dancers add to the growing pace of concentric circles rippling out from Rumi’s shrine, the central axis. Spinning clockwise, hundreds of white skirts fanning out, heads cocked to the side topped with a red thimble-shaped hat, eyes softly closed in contemplation. The heat, the sweat, the puffs of dust.

Does the centrifugal force created by whirling purify the soul by separating out the dense and heavy ego, like plasma from red blood cells? Would it be enough to witness the spectacle in close proximity, to feel the breeze? Would all troubling doubts and fear of death vaporise as the hundreds of dervishes reach the tipping point of their mystical journey? Or would the motion of the collective twirl combined with their focused attention create a vortex so powerful that it would engulf, like getting sucked into a tornado?

Visit 3
I’m getting used to his aftershave. It’s mixing well with the moxa smell people often mistake for cannabis. Today he’s wearing shoes that turn up severely at the toes.

That’s it. Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves. All the trouble in the magical cave. He could be Ali Baba’s bodyguard. I can imagine an emerald-studded dagger tucked under his thick belt.

Again, he makes a graceful plunge for the table without looking at me.

“It’s better. No more ache when I go to the toilet.”

The tissue has eased, softened. More fresh blood flow is getting to his muscles, even the delicate intercostal ones. The marks from the spooning are gone. Lymphatic tissue has been woken out of its lazy slumber, and is back on the job of flushing out metabolic waste. The space is starting to open.

I linger on the scar for a moment. My hand waits, listens.
“It’s from a knife. Didn’t go deep. No stitches.”
All at once his body eases, surrenders.
“I’m on parole. Aggravated assault.”
As I slip my thumb under the margin of his scapula, it yields. A boulder shifts. A howl from below is discernible. The warmth from my hand answers. I leave his back to get the direct moxa gear on the treatment cart.
The Heart shu, or “transport” point, located just above the scar, is still knot-like. That’s my way in.
“Has the pain been there at night?”
In the silence I hear him think, carefully considering my question.

For a teasing second, my dead brother stands in the door’s threshold. He has his arms crossed, leaning against the door jam, grinning. I look his way and he vaporises.
“I’m not sure.” Tom’s tone is hesitant.
I put on my glasses. With the tip of my pinkie, I mark the entrance on his back with a freckle-sized dab of purple shiunko cream. I’ll add a needle if the moxa doesn’t reach it.
“And sleep? Still working overtime?” I ask, placing a bit of moxa on the cream, the size of a caraway seed. I pinch the top of the soft punk into a point so it’s easier to light.
“One more week and I’ll have enough.”
Lighting the moxa, it burns down. The thin layer of cream keeps his skin from getting burned. A sliver of heat finds its way through the cracks, reaching the pain.
My heart gives an expectant thud.
“Enough for what?”
I continue to burn more bits of moxa, finding a steady rhythm. It’s starting to open. His body sinks.
“Emre’s grave. His memorial. Costing me 10 grand.”
Emre. The source of his heartbreak. The loss that’s unravelled him.
“Emre?”
“My son.”
We’re both quiet as I focus, working. My fingers go into automated action, knowing what to do, giving me the space to be with my strong feelings. My grief for my brother’s death is awoken and mixes with Tom’s grief. Our breathing is in sync: slow, steady.
“I’m so sorry,” I say.
I keep up the pace burning moxa. The space gives way.
Open sesame.
The mouth of the cave opens. The pain slips out.
When I’m finished, I press my hands into his back like a hug.

Visit 4
What I notice immediately when Tom enters the room isn’t his
overwhelming aftershave, but his eyes resting on mine. The sadness
is there but the dullness is gone. His shen has returned. He sits.
“Fifty per cent better. Pain is much less. Even slept better
this week.”
“Good. Today I want to do some points on the front, then
I’ll do some more on your shoulder at the end.”
With his usual quick, light-footed movements, he places his
shirt on the chair and slides onto the table. He hooks his thumbs
into his belt loops. I stand by the side of the table.
I check in with his belly. His navel is shaped like a perfectly
symmetrical sinkhole. The “sugar lump” on the side of his navel is
thick, like the texture of a stiff caterpillar embedded under his skin.
People with diabetes often have the little lump. I press the anxiety-
button in the middle of his sternum. It doesn’t even elicit a blink.
I tap in the needles.
“When do you see Dr Shepherd?”
“Next week.”
“Is he sending you to a diabetes doctor?”
“Don’t know.”
The answers come back too quickly. He seems preoccupied.
I continue to tweak the needles, and check to see if the sugar lump
softens. Back at the desk I stand to jot down notes, add the sugar
lump to the map of his belly.
“When he was a baby he got hepatitis,” Tom says. “I was
here in Australia. His mother didn’t take him to a doctor.”
I sit down.
“She didn’t want him.” His thumbs tighten on the belt loops.
“The fevers, his brain cooked,” he continues. “And the fits.
He got cerebral palsy. I went to Turkey and brought him back.”
He keeps his eyes fixed on the ceiling. His bare feet, jutting
out over the end of the table, start to squirm.
“Two years ago his lungs stopped. They put him on a
ventilator. They said he wouldn’t get better. They said he was dying.”
He pauses, and then continues in his swaying, soft accent.
His feet settle.
“They told me he would die okay after he was unplugged.
But it took three hours.”
I sit, transfixed. Here it comes, the source.
“He kept looking at me. His eyes were full of tears. Like he
was pleading with me. For three hours. I still see his eyes. That’s
why I can’t sleep.”
I watch him watch the ceiling.
“He was 19. Last week he be 21.”
His enormous body looks so vulnerable on the table, like
Gulliver pinned down with absurdly puny needles. I feel a humble
awe for this gentle giant’s strength, his compassion, and his
contained pain.
I can’t not ask.
“Which cemetery?”
He frees his thumbs and crosses his arms over his chest.
“Fawkner, in the Turkish section.”
I put my bike on the train and go to the Fawkner cemetery,
located 10 or so kilometres north of Melbourne. At the gatehouse I
pick up a map, and locate the Turkish section on an outlying edge
on the opposite side.
It’s a Sunday, late autumn, sunny and clear. I start riding.
Past a dense clump of willow trees, over a bridge, past the Russian
section. A bin made of thick wire holds plastic vases. It’s nearly
empty. The sign reads: Flower Vases: Only two per grave please. On a
pink granite monolith, a middle-aged woman is on her hands and
knees with a scrub bucket. Then past the Italian mausoleums, where
a new Mercedes straddles the narrow road. Following a half-moon
curve in the road, I join up with another narrow road, turning back
in the direction of the gatehouse.
I decide to ride aimlessly for a while. I’m not in a rush.
I meander through a Protestant section, past the low-lying
crematorium, and stop by crypts the size of mailboxes. Hundreds
tucked in the concave brick wall, about three metres high, that
follows the curve of the road. I get off my bike and stand on one
end of the crypt wall.
The Whispering Wall in Beijing, an ancient engineering mystery, was designed to carry sound. A person on one end would whisper to a person at the other end, a good 30 metres away, who would hear what was said as clearly as if standing close by. I imagine whispering along this crypt wall, and all the ghostly ears that would hear my whispers.

I re-orient myself in the direction of the Turkish section. According to the map, it’s at the end of a gravel road, along a creek. Picking up speed along a straight stretch, I pedal hard, enjoying the late-afternoon sun’s warmth on my back. The shades of red and orange and yellow leaves underneath blur and rustle as I ride over them.

Something off to the right catches my eye. From a distance it looks like rubbish has been strewn along the grass. Leaning my bike against a tree trunk, I realise it’s not rubbish but dozens of toys, some wrapped in clear plastic, but most looking soggy and abandoned. A Bert and Ernie doll face down, arms just out of reach of each other; a purple plastic unicorn, toy cars, several Bananas in Pyjamas, and lots of butterflies and angels stuck on the ends of wire jammed into the ground at the edge of the grass. Gumnuts and autumn leaves litter the surface between the toys. Wilted and decaying flowers are still wrapped in ribbon. Only one fresh bunch.

Rows and rows of small, rectangular brass plaques. Babies, many of them stillborn, most of them with names. A rainbow spinning wheel catches the wind, blows around.

It seems wrong, deeply wrong, that no one else is around. I walk away, aiming, I think, towards the Turkish section. The gravel under my feet is loud as I walk towards dense greenery along a creek’s edge.

A glimpse of the crescent moon symbol of the Turks pulls me out of my stupor. I’m here. The section is a mix of flat graves and shoulder-high memorials, roughly 10 rows. I start to look for Emre, beginning at the end by the creek. It doesn’t take me long. His memorial stands out: taller than the rest, the black marble glowing in the late sun. *Emre Hatsya* I recognise among the flowing Arabic script.

His picture, a photo embedded at the top, sits square in the centre. Above his lopsided grin, Emre’s eyes shine.
Learning to Move Qi

So matter resolves itself into countless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all influencing each other, and travelling in every direction, like shivers through an immense body.

*Matiere et memoire*, Henri Bergson

Acupuncture is, very simply, all about *moving* qi.

*Zheng qi*: healthy atmosphere (or tendency); upright, vital energy

In Chinese etymology, one of the original meanings for *qi* (pronounced “chee”) was *the mist that rises and forms the clouds*. Having its roots in ethereal concepts gave rise to its changing forms and extended meanings over time. Much like Inuit people have generated many meanings for the word snow, the Chinese have at least 164 meanings for the word *qi*. The many usages—words and phrases—are animated by the concept of *qi*. 

**Xiao qi:** laughing gas; nitrous oxide
   I wonder: as the Arctic snow melts, will the Inuit’s snow-concepts also shrink?

**Nuan qi:** central heating
   In Chinese medicine, *qi* is the force that connects the entire organism of the human body together. It circulates—along with blood and fluids—through the system of pathways known as the *jing luo*. Put another way, the *qi*—and its intimate relationship with blood and fluids—is the medium for the exchange of information between any one part or function of the body and all others. Say, for example, inside a capillary bed, or in a nostril’s flare.

**Tian qi:** weather
   How is it possible to move something you can’t touch? How can you pin down the unpindownable?

**Shen qi:** expression, air, manner; spirited, vigorous; putting on airs, cocky
   But since I’m not Chinese, I didn’t grow up with the concept of *qi* embedded in me. I needed to learn to feel *qi*.

Early in my acupuncture schooling—nearly all the students in our class were of Occidental heritage—in order to begin to comprehend *qi*, we were shown a Chinese character that was derived from a steaming bowl of rice. Our teacher—a Greek–American—emphasised the relationship between the steam and the rice, a symbol for health and nourishment in China. “This is *qi*,” he said. “It is the animating force in nature.”

**Yang qi:** foreign flavour; Western style; outlandish ways
   Soon after seeing the pictograph of steam arising from a bowl of rice began the arduous task of comprehending *qi* bodily.

**Yong qi:** courage, nerve
   With an ongoing lesson of humility.

**Ao qi:** air of arrogance, haughtiness
   Growing up, I learned to be invisible and to tune into the imperceptible. To try to sniff like a dog. Sing like a whale. Tune into a bat’s frequency. Have the sensitivity of a spider’s legs.
**Huan qi:** get some breathing room; have a respite, take a breather

In learning to forage for comprehension in this foreign land of *Qi*, it was necessary to accept that *something* had been activated. That a motivating force was behind the action.

That I needed to cultivate my own *qi*.

**Song qi:** relax one’s efforts

I practise by attuning to barometric pressure drops and by leaning into up-draughts of air. I learn that our global atmosphere is always *seeking* equilibrium, but will never actually get there. I gradually realise that there is no place or state at which to arrive.

As I begin to bodily grow into the concept of *qi*, I extend this insight to the workings of the human body: That it is a biological drive for our bodies to *seek* homeostasis of dynamic equilibrium. Even at rest.

There is no such thing as absolute balance.

Only a quivering flux.

**Qi qia:** balloon (literally “*qi* ball”)

We learned that *qi* can become disordered in the body and manifest as physical signs and symptoms: fever, chills, spontaneous sweating, dizziness, tinnitus, fainting, cough, palpitations, belching, hiccups, vomiting, diarrhoea, numbness, pain, frequent sighing.

**Qi fen:** atmosphere

I wonder: Do clouds have bodies?

**Qi jiu:** sparkling wine

Or *qi* can be vacuous, such as in someone with a poor memory, urinary incontinence or a low sex drive.

**Sang qi:** feel disheartened, lose heart; become crestfallen

We were taught that when needling, it is essential to get *de qi*, which means “obtaining *qi*” or the “arrival of *qi*.” When a needle is inserted and gently twirled, there are techniques to summon the arrival of *qi*, such as pecking manoeuvres, or rapid tiny thrusts, or sneaky sudden lifts to tease the *qi* closer to the needle’s tip.
When the grasp occurs, we were told, it can feel like when a fish, deep down in the water, bites the hook-needle. That there’s a barely perceptible, tiny tug under the skin.

Qi xi: breath; flavour, smell
We were taught that qi is information.

He qi: to engage in sexual intercourse (literally, “unite the qi”)
Most importantly, that obtaining qi has a double aim: its arrival is to be felt simultaneously by me, the needler, and the person I am needling.

Sheng qi: to get angry (literally, to make qi); vitality, life
My mother came from a line of water dowsers who were effective at finding veins of fresh water hidden deep underground. She is a voracious reader and bird watcher, but has never dowsed for water.

Sheng qi: information; voice, tone
Where to start to look, search out spots to needle? How do I know where to go?

Chu qi kou: gas outlet, air vent
Perhaps I’m lured by lethargy, or called to agitate a stagnant pool of blood.

Qi se: complexion, colour (of the face)
Or drawn to a grimace, one of pain’s magnets.

Shan qi: hernia, rupture
What have I learned to feel-sense when I’m locating a spot to needle?

Tong qi: ventilate; aerate; be in touch, keep each other informed
A potential.
What do I feel when I get de-qi?
In a whisper-blink, our co-joined jellyfish-body gives a barely perceptible shiver.

Qi lang: blast (of an explosion)
With the tiny tug under the skin, qi moves.
Pulses

... the living thing has an exterior milieu of materials, an interior milieu of composing elements and composed substances, an intermediary milieu of membranes and limits, an annexed milieu of energy sources and actions-perceptions.

_A Thousand Plateaus_, Deleuze and Guatarri, 1987

On the side of my left index finger, over the first knuckle-crease, there’s a small vein. It’s located up from the tiny shard of graphite that broke off when Jim Spagle accidentally jammed his pencil into my palm. Our desks were next to each other in second grade. The carbon is lodged deep under the skin, and it’s there for good. Like a fossil.

I’ve developed a habit—a sort of behavioural tic like hair twirling—that I do usually when I’m avoiding attempts to concentrate: with moderate pressure using the base of my thumb, I glide over the little vein, watch it disappear, then just as suddenly, it refills with blood. Over and over, I play with the vein with mild
amazement. How I can dam up the flow then release it, as a way into my body and its persistent ways. It’s like a window into my body’s real-time activities, a glimpse of what is held inside and the ongoing pressure to sustain movement. I’m reminded of a sea lion that glides towards the thick window of the aquarium tank then makes a sudden U-turn. The blood moving through that small surface vein looks at me then darts down deep to join up with bigger veins on its trip back to my heart for more oxygen.

I’ve also discovered that in the same spot—with light pressure—I can sometimes feel a pulse.

“Every milieu is vibratory,” say Deleuze & Guatarri (1987), which suggest that a milieu is a “direction in motion” that forms a “block of space-time constituted by the periodic repetition of the component” (p. 313).

“My blood pressure is up. The anaesthetist isn’t happy about that.”

My fingers, placed lightly on her wrists, listen to the pulse underneath.

“Surgery’s at the end of month. Be good to finally get the thing out.”

Her question hovers over my head, but my focus remains on her pulse: Is it choppy? Or maybe knotted?

“Do you think we can bring my BP down?”

Blood pressure. The blood’s pressure: the pressure of the push against the walls. Arteries and veins are the vessels that hold blood as their ducts and valves work to help propel blood along their slick, muscled walls. The tremendous push from the heart’s left ventricle begins the circuitous trip. The first big push thrusts oxygenated blood up and out through the thumb-size aorta that makes a hairpin turn down, pushing blood into bifurcating byways and tributaries. Pressure ensures fresh blood saturates flesh, perfuses organs and gets deep down into bone. Capillary beds are the minuscule sites for gaseous exchanges, trading oxygen for waste products, and a venous system trudges it back to the heart and lungs for more fresh oxygen.

Every two seconds or so there’s another thump-push-squirt from the heart’s chamber as blood is propelled through the aorta. Over and over and over the repeated splash, like waves wearing down rocks as blood is pushed through the body.
The metronomic beat quickens with fever, sex and a fright; or slows with cold, relaxation or when in deep undisturbed sleep. Veins labour against gravity, pushing—with dogged effort—the blood back towards the heart and lungs. Gravity often wins when valves give up, collapsing under time and pressure: varicose veins pop out. But even as walls thin and erode, the heart insists: “Get up! Keep moving. Life must go on!” Until the aorta, the great garden-hose vessel, gets so worn down and stiff from all the incessant forceful splashes that it gives way to a rupture. Or a collective organ mutiny: the kidneys’ filter gives up and toxins seep out; or the brain, so overtaxed and exhausted, also gives up. Enough. But until then, the pulses keep time.

“But until then, the pulses keep time.”

“From chaos, rhythms and milieus are born,” they say (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 313).

I press into her wrists. Closer to the bone.

“They said it’s the size of a cantaloupe. With legs coming off of it!”

The pulse disappears. Hollow? Hidden?

“Like an octopus,” she adds.

Even in the low light, her face looks pale. Lack-lustre. Lacking lustre. Lacking blood, that, if plentiful, creates sheen, a lusty hue to her skin. The presence of the uterine fibroid is causing her menstrual flow to flood, draining her iron stores. Iron in blood carries oxygen, lending lustre. Most likely her lips are a shade of purply–cyan under the thick smear of bright-red lipstick.

“Creepy, isn’t it?”

It’s an odd fact: in traditional Chinese medicine, the uterus, along with the brain and the gall bladder, are considered “curious” organs.

Like playing a double bass, my fingertips jam with the percussive pulse coming from under her wrist. I press and release with my fingertips, moving from spot to spot. Underneath, the pulse responds, playing a duet with my moving fingers. Forming a line with my fingertips, I break from the duet and press them down in unison. And hold. I imagine the octopus–fibroid hiding under a rocky ledge. Listening from the surface, I can feel the vibrations on the sea floor. I track the movements of the fibroid-octopus.
Above, the waves break, making the water choppy. Yes, choppy! For a moment, the octopus comes out of hiding but with a wild swirl of current, darts back under the ledge. No, hidden. The wind above the water must be gusty.

Is there such a thing as a gusty pulse?

In traditional Chinese medicine, wind is considered a potentially malignant pathogen, the “origin of 10,000 myriad diseases.”

“The milieu” in Deleuzian terminology, says cultural theorist Andrew Murphie, “is like chaos, composed of ‘middles’ which are not units or yet territories in any sense, but ‘dimensions, or rather directions in motion’ (Deleuze & Guatarri, 1987, p. 21). The difference is that in the milieu there is a significant shift in organisation – this being a form of cyclic durational organization” (Murphie, 2013, Milieu, rhythm, refrain, territory, para. 1)

Years of circulating Chinese medical theory, planted in my explicit memory as knowledge over two decades ago, perfuses my thinking. As it does, my imploring fingers respond to the vibration coming from the surface of her wrists, which are draped across her distended abdomen. In traditional Chinese medicine, pulse taking is usually the first port of call before deciding on which points to needle. Points are selected from a diagnosis made partly from what the pulses are indicating. In traditional Chinese medicine, theory leads the way.

“And I’m not sleeping. My mind keeps waking me up. Over and over, I can’t quiet it down. Around three a.m., every night.”

Her comment pulls me up from the watery, sensuous depths under my fingers back to heady theory: Three a.m. is Liver hour on the circadian clock. The Liver circulates the blood. Not enough blood to hold down the qi. So not enough qi to anchor down the yang, which floats up in the middle of the night and Boing! Wide awake. Noise fills her head, Heart-blood too weak to fend off the ruminating Spleen. Liver is clamouring for attention.

The dynamics—the inter-relationships between her viscera—are out of sync and stuck in a chaotic rhythm.

The heart’s milieu—its “direction in motion”—can occasionally throw ectopic or stray beats that are out of sync and might feel chaotic. They are usually clinically benign, harmless, but can be unsettling. “Meter is dogmatic, but rhythm is critical; it ties
together critical moments, or ties itself together in passing from one milieu to another” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 313).

When learning how to interpret the pulse—one of the main diagnostic tools in traditional Chinese medicine—different qualities are discerned as fingers are trained to listen to the flow within a person’s body. It is a fundamental skill in becoming an acupuncturist, particularly if practising traditional methods. The daunting task requires memorising, and integrating through touch, all of the 26 or so different pulse categories with their clinical indications. To be an accomplished practitioner of this ancient traditional approach, an acupuncturist must master all of the pulse categories. Each reflects the qualitative state of the substances that are circulating through the body at that moment in time. Like snapshots of the state of flow in the body, taken with knowledgeable and discerning fingertips.

For example, a floating pulse—felt on the surface with only light touch—indicates a superficial pathogen, such as wind and cold that has snuck in and hasn’t (yet) penetrated deeper into the body. Whereas a sinking quality—a pulse that can be felt only by pressing hard—usually indicates that the illness is located deep in the interior of the body. When the pulse is sinking, commonly referred to as a deep pulse, the body is attempting to deal with a serious problem threatening the viscera. Other qualities—such as soggy (feeling like a thread floating on water) or slippery (like feeling pearls in a basin or beads on a plate) or hollow (like pressing into a shallot stalk) or wiry (like fingers on guitar strings) are among the categories to be memorised and used to form a diagnosis.

A choppy pulse, which comes and goes choppily in jerks, like a knife scraping bamboo, can indicate sluggish blood circulation. Slow moving blood can get stuck. A choppy pulse is considered more severe than a knotted pulse. Both indicate degrees of blood stagnation.

Whether knotted or choppy, hidden or hollow, this woman’s blood—from a traditional perspective—is weak and stuck. With a gigantic fibroid obstructing the flow.

“Why can’t I sleep?”

“Because your Chinese Spleen can’t keep your Chinese Heart quiet at night,” I shoot back a chunk of theory as an answer, released from the archives of rote memorisation.
She takes in my obscure answer. Ruminates. “Oh,” she says, in a tone that matches the hollow pulse quality.

More bits of theory float up and circulate in the foreground of my thinking, but I shoo them away and return to my listening fingers. I practise a type of mongrel medicine that prioritises pragmatics—led by informed touch—over theory. Go straight to the body, to its unfathomable complexity and continuous state of change, for direct feedback. The sense-perceived field—in the present moment, for the body never stands still—is more important than imposing theoretical chunks of knowledge. In the moment, the atmosphere within her body is humming alive and pulsing with relational complexes. The pulse can give a vibratory clue to the current state of the body’s internal environment. My listening fingers are giving a quick sense of the atmospheric conditions inside this woman’s body. Which way the wind is blowing. Low-pressure troughs brewing. Shifting jet streams.

Just as I’m about to leave her wrists, another chunk, tucked deep in my dusty archives of Chinese pulse theory, emerges. I recall that a hollow pulse can also feel like touching the surface of a drum, which can not only indicate blood loss, but can also occur with hypertension.

Or was it a hidden pulse? Pain can hide the pulse. Pain drives the pulse into hiding. But she’s not in any pain right now. The image of the octopus hiding under a rocky ledge sweeps across my vision. The explicit hollow pulse-chunk recedes back into the theoretical archive.

“So, do you think you can lower my blood pressure?” I leave her wrists and the forest of subtle differences—Choppy? Knotted? Hollow? Hidden?—all wide open to interpretation, and go to her abdomen.

Her hara. Her dantien. Her sea of qi. Her body’s ocean floor. To where my hands listen directly to the lay of the land, to the present moment, not relying on theoretical interpretations. I’ve learned to trust my fingers’ implicit knowing as they meet the meeting ground: her body. For the body lives in the present moment, not in theory. Informed touch is a way into the present moment.

I move away from pulse poetics and head towards the crass inelegance of messy, lived experience. Go directly to the felt, stuck spot.
“Drying up, death, intrusion have rhythm. It is well known that rhythm is not meter or cadence, even irregular meter or cadence: there is nothing less rhythmic than a military march” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 313).

Feeling confident that I’ve captured the general atmosphere of her body from her pulse, I go straight into the landscape for information. To find a way in to stir the atmosphere with a few carefully placed needles as my tool. Used for several thousand years, this simple tool can nudge her blood pressure down. And smooth the choppy flow. And nudge her Spleen, Liver and Heart back to a more amicable relationship for better sleep.

“I believe so,” I tell her, not quite convincingly.

My left hand investigates the lower left side of her abdomen; the surface of her body’s seabed. It’s the area, according to Japanese **hara** diagnosis, where blood tends to pool and stagnate. Using light pressure with my left middle fingertip, I can feel the top of the fibroid.

I press around the edge of the huge but harmless mass lodged in the muscle tissue of her uterus. There is a sliver of space, a way in.

With my right hand, I reach down to a spot on the top of her left ankle, and press in. It’s a spot, downstream, that is directly related to stuck blood. Related to the area in her abdomen where the cantaloupe–octopus–fibroid lives.

“Is this tender?” Again, I press into the spot.

“A bit.” She winces with the imposed pressure.

After holding the spot for several seconds, I recheck the space by the fibroid, pressing in once more. The sliver widens.

“The milieus are open to chaos that threatens them with exhaustion or intrusion. Rhythm is the milieus’ answer to chaos. What chaos and rhythm have in common is the in-between – between two milieus, rhythm–chaos or the chaosmos” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 313).

Swiftly, I tap in a few needles: one into the reactive ankle-spot, two into points on her lower leg, one into the top of her head, and one into the opening space that hugs the side of her octopus–fibroid. Gently twirling each needle, I feel for the tug, the subtle sign that the message has been delivered to her body. Contact.

Immediately, she drops into parasympathetic bliss.
With the moxa lit, I hold the smoldering pole over the needle that is perched over her fibroid. She’s resting, silenced, with her eyes closed. Soon I notice a pink hue fill her cheeks. Curious, I place my fingertips on her wrists. I don’t have to think because the sensation is clear and unmistakable: her pulse is smooth and even. Calm, open seas.

Yes.

For now, the flow has found a way around her fibroid.

“Yes,” I finally answer her question before turning to extinguish the moxa pole.

Again, crisp: “Yes, it has come down.”
Becoming Nar

Can’t you hear them whisper one another’s touch?
*The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study,*
S. Harvey & F. Moten

The narwhal is an Arctic whale with an extraordinary tooth.

In Japanese nursing homes, residents practise *origami,* the art of paper folding. The group is led to make one single fold at a time. Busy fingertips are like busy brains growing new neural circuits that can carve fresh paths to the big brain. Ageing brains lose density and complexity. There’s less juicy goo to form fresh rivulets of neurons, tributaries that shimmer with novelty, the stuff the brain craves.

*Nar is an old Norse word for corpse; the whiteness of the narwhal’s body often appears in the water like a drowned sailor.*

These days, it’s not that uncommon for one year olds to learn to use an iPad before learning to walk. A plump finger smears
the glassy surface to change Barbie’s clothes. Tap, tap, smear and Barbie changes from a skimpy bikini to a disco dress. No buttons and clumsy fumbling as the brain etches the buttonhole into the fingertips as a way of knowing. Yes! Success! Fingertips never to touch Barbie’s absurdly pointy petite feet, plastic breast bumps or tensile hair. Or to feel texture: soft satin, scratchy wool, hard sequins. Instead, fingers point and slide, point and slide, point and slide. The pointer finger doesn’t join the thumb to pinch, pick up, grasp and claim. Or learn to persist with the fiddly frustration of buttons, when thumbs are needed. Gotcha.

The narwhal tusk is actually a tooth that is embedded in the jawbone. It has nothing to do with chewing.

For French philosopher and self-proclaimed “vital materialist” Gilles Deleuze, the human subject must be conceived as a constantly changing assemblage of forces, an epiphenomenon arising from chance confluences of languages, organisms, societies, expectations, laws and so on (as cited in Parr, 2010, p. 27). Deleuze’s philosophy of dynamism has the capacity to dislodge stick-in-the-mud being onto loose trajectories of becoming. Never static, motion generates a waft of forces—lines of flight—as assemblages jostle and converge, indeterminately.

Boundaries are smeared by difference in the porous process of becoming.

Inuits living in the Canadian High Arctic report watching the nar-tooth bend a foot in any direction.

Nearly three million years ago, our ancestors came out of the trees to stand upright on the African savannah. To communicate they had to gesticulate to each other. Spoken language was invented. Frontal lobes started to grow as opposable thumbs took up their bossy position on the hand: to hold, grip, command. Thumbs and fingers do things, make things, create things.

The Inuit name for narwhal translates into “the one that points to the sky”. This describes the narwhal’s unique behaviour of pointing its tooth straight up out of the water.

Contemporary process philosopher Brian Massumi—who often thinks with Deleuze—opens his 300-page essay Parables of the
**Virtual** with a deceptively simple consideration:

When I think of my body and ask what it does to earn that name, two things stand out. **It moves. It feels.** In fact, it does both at the same time. It moves as it feels, and it feels itself moving. Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other? (2002, p. 1).

In response to his own question, Massumi explores—in exquisite detail—the virtual guts of human perception:

- Of thinking as unthought.
- As the force of thinking becomes unthought.
- As a way to feel and move into a new politics.

What will be laid down in the pristine folds of the toddlers’ growing brains? Which pathways and neural circuits will be etched in the virgin landscape of their gooey grey matter? Will it be swiping over pinching? While their index finger leads the way, is the swivelling design of the thumb joint at risk of redundancy?

The dextrous old fingers and thumbs make the final fold. Fiddly fingers work to tilt the continental drift back to memories: shoe laces, buttonholes, doll dresses, balsa airplanes. Knowing fingers can recover lost knowledge, like leaving retraceable breadcrumbs on a path back to a memory.

The shape suddenly makes sense: it’s a crane!

> The entire length of the narwhal’s tooth is supplied with nerves and blood. Instead of a hard, protective layer of enamel covering the tooth—such as on human teeth—the surface is soft and porous, allowing millions of tiny tubules and channels to be exposed to the elements, that is, the frigid Arctic water.

Human fingernails are considered relics of claws. As an acupuncturist, I keep my nails clipped short. My bare finger-pads are then free to press in and saunter over a body’s surface to collect information without the interfering poke or jab of hard keratin.
Contemporary researchers speculate that the narwhal uses its tooth as a tool—a sense-organ—to navigate ice floes, detect salinity changes, dive into the icy pitch dark in search of food, feel for cracks and openings in the ice as they ascend to surface for air.

Deleuze (1995) claims that in order for us to express ourselves, we need intercessors. “Intercessors are fundamental,” he says. “Creation is all about intercessors. Without them, nothing happens.” In Deleuzian terminology, intercessors intervene in a process of formation, and “they can be people, [...] but things as well, even plants and animals. Whether they’re real or imaginary, animate or inanimate, one must form one’s intercessors” (p. 125).

While at acupuncture school in Boston, I was a slate and copper roofer. My German slate hammer—one end sharp like a pick and the other a narrow hammerhead, became more like a well-trained appendage than just a tool. With quick thwacks, I’d punch precise holes, leaving a concave hollow for the head of the copper nail to rest and secure the slate flush with the roof. The copper nails, two inches long with ridged bodies designed to hug the wood, felt satisfying. With more thwacks I’d sink them, pleasurably, into the fascia planks. The nails sit snug inside the bevelled space, like hidden roof jewellery. The hammer’s leather handle became shiny and smooth, like an old boot.

To better locate the copper nails from my pouch, I’d snip the end off the glove’s fingers. The hole invited in dirt and slate dust. My fingerprints’ whorls—especially my index finger and thumb—filled with dust. The fine lines were etched deep with grey, orange and purple.

It is also plausible that the nar-tooth detects sound vibrations, although little research has yet been done to look into this capacity.

The kind of acupuncture needles I like to use have fine copper wire twirled around the handgrip, making them feel like little sculptures. The needle’s body—about the thickness of four human hairs—is made of surgical stainless steel, and the tip is sharpened to a slightly bevelled, microscopic point.

The narwhal’s tooth is straight on an axis, and spirals—like a candy cane—counter clockwise. Always.
Weary from—and wary of—human consciousness, Massumi’s thinking meanders away from the human and closer to the non-human animal. As a way to rethink the nature of instinct in creativity, so long marginalised by the dominant currents of evolutionary biology, Massumi (2014) looks to the non-human animal’s ludic gesture—and creativity—as emerging from instinct: “Play instinctively belongs to the aesthetic dimension,” he says. And the human, or “the chattering animal’s” capacities for language, and the conditions of evolutionary possibility, “are set in place by play, on the continuum of instinct” (p. 10).

Like Deleuze’s need for an intercessor for expression, Massumi’s (2014) becoming-animal requires “finding the right artifice, and letting oneself be swept up along by the ludic gesture.” It emerges immanently, in a thought’s twist, as one swirls into another. “Following this movement, one finds oneself always already more-than-human: mutually included in the integral animal continuum as it follows its natural path in the direction of its immanent self-surpassing” (p. 92–93).

With the swipe of a thought-paw, possibilities lurk in-between the forces at work and play.

The needle’s tip, once inserted just under the skin and gently twirled, grasps fine microscopic connective tissue fibres. The twirl generates a sonic pulse, sending ripples in the interstitial fluid across the internal horizon.

Narwhals have displayed obvious avoidance responses 50 kilometres from icebreaking ships, indicating extreme sensitivity to disturbances. Rather than flee, the ice whale freezes, stops vocalising, and sinks to the safety of the benthos.
As a patient sinks into parasympathetic bliss, I marvel—nearly every time over 25 years of practice—at the paradox: how the effects of making tiny cuts, closely followed by electrical zings, soothe. The non-conscious bare activity of acupuncture lullabies.

As a potential way to avoid the Anthropocene’s looming boil, Massumi (2014) insists “there is only one way out: to quit the human arena and reclaim animal existential territory.” This requires “letting oneself be swept up all the more horrifically intensely in the enthusiasm of the body of vitality affect” (p. 56). As an example, Massumi references Kafka’s horror at becoming-cockroach as Gregor’s way out in The Metamorphosis: “What is expressed is the vitality-affect signature, the -esqueness of its actions arcing through all its movements, the manner in which the animal continuously performs something extra to the functions of behaviour [...] There is a cockroachicity of the cockroach, a mousiness of the mouse, and it is these form-of-life signature styles that get into the act of writing” (p. 59, italics added).

Inuits have reported to researchers that narwhals rub teeth together in what looks like a display of pleasure, or play; or behaviour not necessarily needed for survival.

As a way to get these signature-styles into the act of writing, Massumi (2002) offers a clue: “All you need to do – quoting Deleuze and Guattari – is look only at the movements” (p. 206).

The narwhal can dive a mile deep to feed on cod, squid and Greenland halibut.

Try not to flinch and at the same time be affectively attuned to the wild and untameable movement of esqueness, and allow it to seep into the act of writing. The pure expression of lived abstraction—in esqueness—also has the capacity to seep into evolutionary possibilities because, according to Massumi (2014), “the written act goes the furthest, most intensely” (p. 61).

Several attempts have been made to keep narwhals in captivity, but none have survived.
Massumi (2014) goes on to explain: “The style of writing composes itself around this -esqueness of the analog animal, taking up its species overspill into creative language” (p. 59). By stepping onto the animal continuum, and motivated by a bit of stylised imagination, “it allows the real stakes to revolve around play” (p. 52).

How will I become the feeling of moving-with the narwhal? Perhaps by feeling the signature-style of a nar’s whaling. Wailing nar-ness.

The narwhality of the narwhal, overspilling to dive deep with language. The unknowable, elusive nar, made in its movements. Made in its gigantic, porous feeling-tooth.

My narwhal-esqueness intercessing with nails, needles, and a nar-tooth.

My nar-touch overspilling into words.
Written in Nar.

_Becoming._
Perching

I’ve had to resist the urge to prune the straggly dead branches off the scrawny red box gum trees outside the window of my mud-brick studio. It’s situated in the dry, crackly Australian bushland within cooee of Melbourne. The trees appear to be struggling, but surprise me every autumn with tender shoots that sprout the leathery, fragrant pale green leaves. Dry, pencil-thin branches reach up towards the roof where a nest is tucked inside a crack between the eves and the top of the mud-brick wall.

Small birds, called *pardalotes*, a colourful yellow-throated, wren-sized songbird found only in Australia, use the branches as a perch, so that they can fan out their wings and quiver. This makes them look twice their size for a display meant to guard the nesting chamber from other pardalotes.

To snap off the dead branches might neaten up the view – and satisfy my urge to prune – but would remove perching possibilities.

“I feel like glass that’s about to shatter,” he says to the ceiling. The tremor in his left hand is obvious. The rest of his body is rigid, frozen
like a stone statue, laid out long on the treatment table. The nuance of a quiver spreads down to his left foot, which extends over the table. He folded his suit jacket carefully over the back of the chair.

He is not able to see the neurologist until late May, another month and a half away. A long wait, and a long time to hold the feeling of glass about to shatter. I’m hoping the treatment will at least release some of the tension. And make his clinical picture clearer. Clearer for the better.

Like glass about to shatter. My attention wanders. Yes, I feel like glass about to shatter. News from my sister this morning. Nausea sweeps up towards my throat at the thought of it.

“My uncle had it.”

A tremor of terror has seeped into his voice, and yanks my attention back. The nausea recedes.

“He died within two years. He couldn’t breathe in the end.”

Motor neurone disease is a cruel condition that destroys the nerves that power muscles. It is irreversible, without a cure. Life expectancy is three-to-five years. Feedback loops and signals from the brain to the nerves embedded in muscles stop working. Gradually—and sometimes rapidly—the ability to speak, swallow, walk, stand, gesticulate, and breathe, ceases. Part of the internal torture of motor neurone disease is that the mind—unaffected by the disease—helplessly watches as the body becomes less and less capable of responding to what were once simple, automatic cues. Brushing teeth becomes impossible. So does scratching an itch. Or saying yes.

“The tiredness could be from many different things. So can weakness. And muscle twitching. Have you been drinking enough water?”

My question ricochets off his tense body. The tremor intensifies, making the shatter seem imminent.

“Muscle spasms and twitches can simply be from a lack of hydration. And trouble swallowing could be from feeling so anxious. Let’s let the treatment do its thing to help you to relax. Lots of these symptoms can disappear,” I add.

My efforts to find reassuring words smack against the glass. I’ll hurry and get the needles in and let them do their reassuring work on a non-conscious level. Many of his noisy symptoms—from the multifarious systems and forces simultaneously at work—could be on a functional level and easily settled, quieted down. If the
source is due to a neurological pathology, it is unlikely that a return to functional regulation will be enough to make them disappear.

“I doubt very much you have motor neurone disease,” I add. Even if he does have the beginnings of it, my “untruthy” declaration—it’s only an opinion not a clinically verifiable fact—won’t make any difference. For now, at least, I can use my clinical tools to soothe, calm him. Possibly slow down a progression. Even if the disease is well underway in his body, he can leave the treatment feeling better. And less like glass about to shatter.

For Virginia Woolf, “moments of being” were experienced most often as “sledgehammer blows”. As shocks. Big events—arriving as moments—can leave deep dents in memory, and remain as fibrous scars or marks, even as just a trace is left on the surface. These marks can act as a reference point for memory to re-trace back to a happening.

But what happens when the Woolfian “moments of being” occur more insidiously? When there is no sudden sledgehammer blow but the slow seep of time festers a sinister happening?

How chronic low-grade inflammation and adrenal exhaustion can gradually turn the body against itself and transform into an autoimmune disorder. The body sneakily—right under our noses as we sleep—turns on itself as a foreign invader. Like a snake eating its tail. Or when rogue cells ‘decide’ to proliferate and cancer grows out of control.

A phone call from my sister this morning left me with the reverberations of an after-shock. The worst of the sledgehammer blow has eased, already folding into my body.

I head to the treatment cart for the needles.

“I’ll get the needles in,” I say, as my attention shifts back to him. I’m secretly grateful for the distraction, the reprieve from my own fears, if only for a moment. “And release this tension,” I add as I peel open a packet of pins.

“She couldn’t recall Multnomah Boulevard,” my sister told me early this morning over the phone, from the other side of the world. “And she got confused about the TV remote.” I took in her words, delivered in the unblinking incredulous tone of a newsreader, as I watched the pardelotes dart from the spindly dead branch into their
hidden nest. In less time than it took for a pardalote to dash off the perch, the inference of those two sentences landed like a thick lead weight in my chest. The sledgehammer blow. A swarm of buzzing ambushed my head, disorienting me with the sudden realisation of what this could mean: Mom could be showing signs of stepping into the black hole of dementia. A sour lump of nausea sat in my throat.

Multnomah Boulevard is a familiar, much travelled road close to where she lives, and has lived for the past fifty or so years. *Just head up Multnomah,* Mom would often say when giving directions. For her to forget Multnomah is a frightening sign. Our sharp, decisive mother—the sort of decisiveness that I wouldn’t dare challenge for fear of her disapproving gaze—could be loosing her sharp edge. Losing those attributes that makes her who she is: inquisitive, delighting in wonder, always darting to the dictionary. To the bird book to identify an unfamiliar bird; always after precision.

Once the needles are in place, I sit to write my notes. The pane of barely breathing horizontal glass over my right shoulder, just a few feet away, still vibrates. I’ll wait another few minutes. If he hasn’t settled, I’ll add something more.

But *what kind* of pardalote is nesting outside my window? She will want to know. *Would* want to know. This could be a leaving.

He has no idea, but we are both caught in the dreadful grip of waiting. His wait to find out if he has a hideous neurological disease. For me, waiting to see if my mother’s memory is retrievable. The possibility of her permanent leaving is no longer abstract. Instead, it is now very concrete in its nearness.

A niggle from the lingering shock pulls my attention back to thoughts about my mother. To the cascade of events that often happen with the frail elderly, initiating a landslide. That landslide is now happening to our mother. To us. Sweeping across my sister’s and my emotional landscapes. *Congestive heart failure and atrial fibrillation.* Common and reasonable enough signs of a tired 86-year-old heart.

But vertigo is her most debilitating symptom. Since her heart episode a few months ago, she spends most of her day curled up horizontal on the couch with a book, a dog tucked behind the crook of her knees. To stand upright brings on waves of nausea as
the room sways. Her chest aches from the flutter of her atrium; sometimes a frantic beating that brings on panic. There is no ‘clinical reason that can be pinned down,’ claims her cardiologist. “It’s not a plumbing problem with your heart. It’s electrical. But don’t worry. You’re not going to die from atrial fibrillation!” says her specialist, in a dismissive tone. This careless comment intensifies Mom’s vertigo, coming as a wave of anger.

He’s still vibrating. I get up.

“You’ll feel a zing in a moment,” I tell him, and give the two needles, each placed in a spot on the top of his foot, a little tweak, eliciting a zing. The zing instantly generates a minuscule shiver down his second toe and simultaneously shivers up my hand into me and, within seconds, spreads through his body.

A few seconds pass. Something shifts. I lean over the desk and make a note of the change.

Over the phone, not long after her heart episode, Mom gave me her moment-by-moment recollection of the events as they unfolded. It happened soon after she was admitted to hospital and was settling into her room across from the nurse’s station. “It was so strange, like watching a dream,” she told me. “At first I saw brilliant red that then flashed to black, then brief white. I was aware of them surrounding the bed then holding hands up high like they were about to sing in church. Then I felt a cannonball hit my chest and everything went black.”

My sister, who was at her bedside when it happened, gave me her version: “Suddenly her blood pressure shot up and the monitor alarm went off and Mom barked at me to get out! I left and watched the crash-cart team storm her room. It was terrifying. I guess she was being protective and didn’t want me to witness it.”

And the little shock of surprise when Mom later changed details on further retellings. And another surprise when I found out much later the true—or the factual—clinical nature of the dramatic heart story.

What more immediately surprises me—in the blow’s reverberations from this morning’s news—is the joint arrival of the familiar visceral stickiness of grief. That familiar and deeply uncomfortable feeling of a never again finality. The impending loss of my mother’s mind—and soon, the end of her life—sticks to, and
pulls to the fore, another loss: that of my brother’s accidental death 14 years ago. My body doesn’t hesitate to remind me: the swarming ear buzz and its disorientating stupor, a parched mouth, clenched throat, the fright-driven urge to pee. Symptoms of shock. An affective tonality that seizes my body, demanding all of its attention.

Caught in grief’s timeless up-draught: for my brother’s death as it is revived and viscerally swirls with my mother’s impending death—concrete, no longer abstracted—now not too far away.

My body remembers it all, now.

According to Daniel Stern—a psychiatrist best known for the work he did in the 1980s on attunement between mothers and infants—the present moment occurs in two ways: in the now present moment, and in the retelling of a past present moment. “Telling is a now experience,” Stern (2004) said, “even though it refers to a present moment that occurred in the past” (p. 23). The reliving is going on now, and “this allows the past to be constantly folded in” (p. 199).

In describing the temporal architecture of a present moment, chunking is the term Stern used to describe how a moment is recalled. We tend to chunk moments together to make meaning. “In short,” says Stern (2004), “the flow of perceptual stimulation must be chunked into meaningful units best sized to make us most adaptive, rapidly and efficiently. Chunking is the work of the present moment. It is the basic building block of psychologically meaningful subjective experiences that extend in time” (p. 43-44).

Another way of seeing it—and Stern (2004) paraphrases philosopher William James to make this important point—is that the present moment can be compared to a bird’s life: the constant alteration between perching and flight. The perchings are the present moments. The flights are the spaces between moments of consciousness and are part of the present moments. These flights are inaccessible and ungraspable (p. 43).

On the meeting/perch of the present moment, where the past is present, during the perchings and between flights, implicit knowing lays down the memory. Chunking comes later.

Perhaps those white-knuckled moments – of gripping hard as the gust blows through intensely – could be perceived, and thus experienced, differently? To be seen as an opportunity to shift
perception, as a way to grasp the whole experience of perching, shocks and all? Could it be experienced as exhilaration rather than as life-threatening dread?

Chunking shocks. Woolfian moments of being when the perch must be gripped, hard. From the clutching feet the moment chunks itself in the body before flying off.

Philosopher Henri Bergson—a contemporary of William James—offers ideas on time that have the capacity to reorient perspective. To do so, Bergson twists Stern’s present moments—like folding a flat piece of paper into a Mobius strip—into what he calls “durations.” Perching and flights are to be experienced simultaneously, contingent upon the capacity to be attentive to the personal experience of process, that is, duration. Intuition, according to Bergson, as a method, is the personal experience of unity.

Not intuition as usually understood, as a more ‘feminine’ attribute led by gauzy apprehension and oozing feeling. Soft intuition pitched against the hard edges of reason, of rational analysis, and the valoured quest for provable—that is, measurable—facts.

Time, for most, has become an obsession.
Time management.
Time out.
Time’s up.
It’s about time.
Time is running out.
Time to say goodbye.
Time as master to our slave. But the tick-tock march of clock-time is aloof and indifferent to actual experience.

Whereas Bergson’s time—he of course acknowledges that clock-time is necessary—opens up a paradox: that we should not try to manage time, but to let time manage us. That the only escape from time is in submission to time. The tyranny of quantifiable clock-time misses the beat of actual, lived experience. Using the method of intuition, says Bergson, durations are grasped whole. While immersed and flowing along in process, awareness of time disappears. While immersed and flowing along in process, awareness of clock-time disappears. “It is not a question of getting outside of time (we are already there); on the contrary,” says Bergson (1946), “one must get back into duration and recapture reality in the very mobility which is its essence” (p. 30).
To describe this unity in process, Bergson uses the example of listening to music: “When we listen to a melody we have the purest impression of succession we could possibly have and yet it is the very continuity of the melody and the impossibility of breaking it up which makes that impression on us.” To analyse the individual notes—the “spatial images”—that make up the melody scatters the duration, and the whole experience is lost. “In space, and only in space, is there a clear-cut distinction between external parts.” Bergson continues (1934): “Moreover, I am aware that we normally place ourselves in spatialised time. We have no interest in listening to the uninterrupted humming of life’s depths. And yet, that is where real duration abides” (as cited by Foley, 2013, p. 27).

Perched, open, ready. Intuition as a method for experiencing real duration, actual time: sugar dissolving in coffee, a sandcastle collapsing, blood sloshing in capillary beds. Grasped whole outside of clock-time as a sort of melody. To listen to the melody – its swaying rhythms or discordant beats – as present moment perchings. Away from the redundant drone of habit and conditioning, attuned to the uninterrupted humming of life’s depths.

To be spatially knocked off my perch, and welcome the exuberance of disorientation? How will I find my way without space to orient me? Swept up into the timeless up-draughts of grief, spinning round and round in its turbulent vortex? Surrender to lightening jolts, to sledgehammer blows?

Orderly coherence, even if illusory, is a way to grab control: pare back and prune off intruders. Manage.

Perhaps I can learn to allow my body to move, uninterrupted, in real time.

I glance over and tune in: the tremor has settled into barely a quiver. Nearly there.

I get up and move towards the treatment cart for another needle.

“I’m going to add one more. On the top of your head,” I say as I stand over him. His eyes have settled. Less bugged out.

Probing his head’s crown, my investigating finger finds the spot: a slight depression under the taut skin of his scalp.

“Is this spot tender?” I ask.

“Yes, I think so,” he answers back.

I tap in the needle. Instantly, his body melts, from his
head down to his feet. He drops into parasympathetic bliss, a physiological state where time is managing him. I’ll let him perch there another 10 minutes. That will be long enough.

The clock on the wall’s tick-tocking becomes a soft rhythmic prattle in the background, barely noticeable.

Present moments are experienced as “infinitesimal instants,” said Charles Sanders Peirce, a philosopher, mathematician and logician, also a contemporary of Bergson and James. “The instant of time is its mean velocity during an infinitesimal instant in which that time is contained. Just so my immediate feeling is my feeling through an infinitesimal duration containing the present instant” (as cited by Houser & Kloesel, 1992, p. 322).

But, unlike Bergson, Peirce extends time by stepping out into space: “Since space is continuous, it follows that there must be an immediate community of feeling between parts of mind infinitesimally near together” (Houser & Kloesel, 1992, p. 325). Like lots of present moment birds perching together on threads of real time. Or like the continuity of the affective smear of grief, and the convergence of old shocks with the new. “As an idea spreads, its power of affecting other ideas gets rapidly reduced; but its intrinsic quality remains nearly unchanged” (Houser & Kloesel, 1992, p. 325), could be interpreted as Peirce’s way of saying, similarly to William James, that flights off the perch carry with them feelings, an unchanged affective resonance.

William James, who became Bergson’s close friend as well as a philosophical kindred spirit, reminds us that “personal histories are processes of change in time, and the change itself is one of the things immediately experienced” (1912, p. 26). Similar to a bird’s life, full of sudden flights, with brief perchings made in between. Rest on a perch, such as the treatment table, and allow the shock to dissipate. The treatment is a resting place that gives his body the duration to settle, take the affective pressure out of his body-glass. And far from passive: the movements during the perching, all the thousands of physiological systems and trillions of cells, in their unfathomable complexity, settle, lean together into a calm. Back to a fluidy flux, or autonomic dynamism. Waves and particles stick and move together.
My thoughts wander further afield towards notions of reversibility. Of irreversibility. Of tipping points when matter and energy twirl together in space and time, creating both turbulent gusts and soft breezes. How a skateboarder, in constant movement, chases the moment in the air when gravity is suspended. Or a surfer in a wave’s curl. Or the shift between catabolic and anabolic metabolism. Or the infinitesimal moment in a capillary bed when circulation stops, completely, during the gaseous exchange. How those mystical processes are constantly at work, right now, in my body. In his body.

I wonder about tipping points and the body’s capacity to reverse pathologies. Of the cruel indifference of pathological tipping points once tipped, when cellular changes are beyond the grab of functional rescue. Or when energetic potentials are stronger than dark pathologies, of the shadowy cellular etchings of irreversibility, and can still arm-wrestle a win. Something that acupuncture is so good at: discretely retrieving the unfathomable multiplicities and leading the attention of the trillions of cells back towards dynamic homeostasis, or autonomic flexibility. Unified, the body rests in Bergsonian real time. A chilled-out simultaneity. Humming in flux.

I wonder about the forces at work and play: Genetics? Lifestyle? Environment? Poverty? Temperament? Chance? Chronic stress? Ageing – that can lure the body back towards the dark forces of pathologies. How the forces are a multiple intermingling, an unfathomably complex simultaneity of factors swirling together. But all too often we are on the hunt for a single causative factor to track down and snuff out. Fixed. Return to normal.

But there can only be a new normal. The river keeps flowing, changing. You really can’t step in the same place twice.

I wonder about that tendon thickening in my left hand and if it will keep thickening and turn my hand into a claw. I wonder about the sinister dark forces, such as motor neurone disease, that twiddle their noses at efforts to retrieve physiological function. I wonder about a person leading a squeaky-clean life: years of daily yoga and meditation and fermented foods and embedded wholesome rituals with clean thoughts who gets a sudden advanced pancreatic cancer diagnosis and is dead in six weeks.

Is there a physiological straw that breaks the camel’s back?
Philosopher and artist Erin Manning, who *thinks with* Stern, Bergson, James and Peirce, among many other philosophers of process and change, has invented the concept of the “minor gesture” as a variation on Bergson’s real duration of time. Drawing on her work (2015) with autistic people as well as from the momentum gathering in the neuro-diversity movement (where neuro-*typicals*, which is most of us, are preoccupied with managing time), the minor gesture “is the gestural force that opens experience to its potential variation. It does this within experience itself, activating a shift in tone, a difference in quality” (p. 5). Autistic people are unable to *chunk* present moments into meaningful and manageable bits. Instead, they perceive the *entire field* – that thing we are constantly moving through and is always in our midst – as a smear of stimulation. Autistic people are out of sync with clock-time but nonetheless “rhythmically invent their own pulse” (Manning, 2015). Manning is suggesting that for neuro-typicals to perceive time differently, such as learning to linger in Bergsonian real durations or express more minor than major gestures, much can be gleaned from autistic perception:

> It means that the tendencies of pastness contribute to how the current event unfolds. [...] Feeling here is the force, in the event, that lures experience into a tendency-to-form. This tendency-to-form is not back-traceable to something that could be easily encapsulated as ‘the past’ fully-formed: pastness is a current that runs through it” (2015, p. 162).

Like autistic perception, the Bergsonian duration, or the intuition of real time, “does not hurry towards form” (Manning, 2015, p. 163).

I’m recalling how grief’s tenacious force – for my brother’s death (a scuba diver in Alaska who got sucked into a drainage pipe) had the power to yank my mother and I out of our strained relationship. The shock blew us onto a fresh trajectory. We immediately settled into a ritual of an hour-long phone call once a week that connects us across opposite ends of the globe. At first we stuttered in vivid images that played over and over, fixed in a loop, in the grip of shock, timeless in their durations. For the first time in a very long time we shared the ongoing, ordinary details of our lives, and soon dropped into the rhythms of story-telling: attentive, gripped, listening to the melody created by the other.
I stand, place my fingers on his wrists, press in, and listen. All pulse positions are even, an internal reflection of calm. Of autonomic flexibility. Of oscillating flux.

“How are you feeling?” I ask.

“Good,” he responds without hesitation.

There is a wiry quality to his pulse that bounces back at unpredictable spots against my fingertips.

“I’ve just been thinking how stressful things have been this year. Constant meetings. I had to lay off a bunch of people. Not much time to get to the gym,” he tells me.

I let go of his wrists and lean against the edge of the desk.

“I never underestimate the effects of chronic stress,” I say back. “Like the frog in hot water. Do you know the parable about the frog in hot water?”

“A frog?”

“Yes. If you put a frog in hot water, it registers the danger and jumps out. It’s too hot and its reflexes work. But if you put a frog in water that’s room temperature and slowly turn up the heat, it can’t tell the difference and boils to death.”

“Stress is insidious,” I add. Like starfish legs that are dissolving due to ocean acidification, I think to myself. Like the one I saw not long ago washed up on the beach. Its five legs reduced to little nubs. Another casualty of climate change.

“We think we are adjusting,” I go on, “but are actually slowly boiling. Physiologically our body does have limits. But we keep pushing past them.”

He looks away.

“We get in the habit of ignoring our body’s signals. And don’t listen,” I press on.

“Makes sense,” he says to the ceiling.

We have the ability to make the past present, Bergson says (1910), because we are a “qualitative multiplicity” (p. 105). Like the affective smear of sticky grief in all its qualitative differences, “folding in past tonalities into present events” (Manning, 2015, p. 163). It is the knowledge of duration that Bergson calls intuition. Intuition is the perception, the vision, of duration.

Looping, repeated. The interiority of time generating its own pulse from fresh tellings, new details. Several weeks after her heart event, my mother settled into a retelling of the defibrillation
sequences—the major electrical zap with paddles regularly done on TV shows—over the phone: “I think my eyes were open. There was a red flash then white then it all went black. I’m pretty sure I was on the floor. They were standing over me holding hands like they were playing a game. Then I felt mule’s hoof kick me in the middle of my back. I heard someone say 200 joules. That’s a lot of power!”

Perhaps dementia is a form of falling off a perch, into no-time. A neuro-diverse state of no form, out of space. Or perhaps a means of succumbing to disorientation.

French philosopher Gilles Deleuze retrieved Bergson’s philosophy from obscurity in the 1980s and spun Bergson’s thinking into his own concepts. Deleuze (1997), as well as thinking-with Kant, layers time as though nestled, like gyrating babushka dolls:

It is not time that is interior to us, or at least it is not specifically interior to us; it is we who are interior to time, and for this reason time always separates us from what determines us by affecting it. Interiority constantly hollows us out splits us in two doubles us, even though our unity subsists. But because time has no end, this doubling never reaches its limit: time is constituted by a vertigo or oscillation, just as unlimited space is constituted by a sliding or floating. (p. 31, italics mine)

Could Mom’s vertigo—idiopathic, without a clinical cause, according to her cardiologist—be a sign of a discordant melody? Scattering her memory, like a centrifuge, but keeping her whole, unified? An interiority constituted by thoughts generating little vortices that hollows her out, and splits her in two?

Deleuze’s twist in time (1997) requires “the discord of all the faculties”—such as the struggle between imagination and reason, and between understanding and inner sense—leading to the “emancipation of dissonance, the discordant discord” just as for “Rimbaud the disorder of all the senses would define the poetry of the future. A new music as discord, and as discord and accord, the source of time” (p. 35). The new music is constituted from vertigo, says Deleuze, and comes from the uninterrupted humming of life’s depths, which is the source of real time.

Perhaps my mother is learning, at the end of her life, to lean into the paradox and allow time to manage her. And allow herself to be interior to time. As Manning points out, autistic people become the field as they move through it, indeterminately. Continually
inventing their own pulse by folding themselves interior to time.

Here rests an irony of vertigo as a stabiliser: from the relative stasis of being to the untameable wilds of becoming. What if I opened up Woolf’s moments of being into moments of becoming, always incomplete yet continuously growing? Or durations of becoming, always multiple yet unified? As a potential, not yet happened, but always on the cusp of almost-happening. Of memory as becoming, its states always intermingling, never solidified, fixed.

Knowledge of duration intuited, on the fly, off the perch. Out of space.

My mother’s heart defibrillation also knocked loose snippets of memories, told and retold, alighting on the phone’s airways. Such as her love of reading as a young girl and the time she took over the abandoned old Ford, a Model T, behind the barn. How she somehow lured inside the old car her dog Dotty, cat Nicky (named so because it got the end of its tail nicked by the hay thrasher) and goat Ginger. How she would read to her captive audience. Or when, after the Great Depression forced them from the farm in Oregon to Los Angeles, she would roller skate around the MGM studio lot, round and round its high green fence.

Or the moment my brother, as a toddler, came crashing to his knees when he discovered his new red tricycle under the Christmas tree. With each retelling he crashes to his knees, in a Peircean infinitesimal instant. A looped image, told over and over. The crash. The un-wordable delight.

I wonder: during the tellings and retellings, does my mother’s vertigo vanish?

I remove the needles. The tremor has disappeared. For now.

He slides off the table, slips into his shoes, and swings on his jacket.

“Take care of your frogs!” I blurt out as he heads out the door.

To perch in durations is to allow time to manage me as I to yield to the suction of story. Joy and wonder seep through as I relive the details with each of her retellings, intermingling with my own imaginings: The slow rake of metal as she closes the car door. The goat’s alien iris-eye as it sits awkwardly on its haunches, chewing. The smell of hot summer and hay. I can hear her skates push-scrape-clank-whiz past the fence, and feel her eight-year-old curiosity yearn to see what is happening on the other side of the monumental green
fence where Hollywood was being made. I feel the ache surrounding my mother’s unfathomable pain from losing my brother.

Fact or fiction? Does it really matter?

Yes, for an accurate Western medical diagnosis it does. **Diastolic heart failure. Motor neurone disease.** As the components that occur in clock-time and are measured, calculated and analysed according to the rules of an accepted diagnostic method. But the truthiness of actual time rests outside of clock-time, experienced as timeless durations and apprehended as intuition.

“The lifespan of a fact is shrinking,” claims lyric essayist John D’Agata (1997). David Shields appropriates D’Agata’s words to flag an artistic movement that is taking form, where there is “a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure of the blur of the real” (Shields, 2010, p. 5).

A passage from nonfiction writer Pam Houston leans towards D’Agata’s shrinking fact and Shields’ blur of the real:

When was it decided (when again, and by whom) that we were all supposed to choose between fiction and nonfiction, what was not taken into account was that for some of us truth can never be an absolute, that there can at best, be only less true and more true and sometimes those two collapse inside each other like a Turducken. Given the failure of memory. Given the failure of language to mean. Given metaphor. Given metonymy. Given the ever-shifting junction of code and context. Given the twenty-five people who saw the same car accident. Given our denial. Given our longings. (from Talbot, 2012, p. xiv)

Houston, D’Agata and Shields share an allegiance and think-with each other: the lure of the blur of the real and the collapse of the less true and the more true into each other. Mash, smear, blend. Experienced as the real duration of timeless memory: the cannonball, a mule’s hoof, atrial flutter, a toddler’s crash all collapse into each other. As minor gestures that are plump with potential becomings. The now-and-then blurring of the real and the collapse of the less true and the more together as the fact’s lifespan shrinks. As our bodies continue to accumulate happenings, how we tell those happenings is up to us. Truthiness is in the telling, and the teller is free to use a different set of details each time, in what ever way necessary to best capture a whole experience—in an affective tone—with each retelling.
Story-telling is like a game of tag: now you're it, so you go and take my truthiness and imagine and spin your own. Carry the tone and the tune, but make it your own. That river keeps flowing. Moments irreversible but timeless in their tellings when the current of the past runs through them. A truthiness that in-forms language on the think-move-making. The mash of memory, and the making of the past as indistinguishable from the present.

Knowledge-making on the fly.
Linger in the sugar-dissolving moment, or slosh in a capillary bed.
Or linger in the melody,
swaying,
whole.
More-than Personification

Our only intelligible notion of an object *in itself* is that it should be an object *for itself*, and this lands us in panpsychism and a belief that our physical perceptions are effects on us as ‘psychical’ realities. *Principles of Psychology*, William James (1905, p. 84)

The thing spoke itself.
*Roxana*, Daniel Defoe (1724)

As I wait for coffee to brew one morning at a friend’s house, I pick up a folded copy of *The Guardian* from the corner of the kitchen bench. Buried in the back I come across a short article: *New Zealand river granted same legal rights as human*. For 140 years, a tribe on the north island had been fighting for recognition of the river as an ancestor. And they finally won.

“Representatives of the Whanganui tribe wept with joy when their bid to have their kin awarded legal status as a living entity was passed into law,” says the tribe’s lead negotiator, adding:
“The new status of the river means if someone abused or harmed it the law now sees no differentiation between harming the tribe or harming the river because they are one and the same.

_One and the same_. The Maori do not merely personify the river by bringing it to life as an object outside of them. As kin, the river’s health and wellbeing is inseparable from human welfare. The river has a life of its own, as an object—like William James’ perspective—existing _for itself_.

With coffee in hand, I consider rivers:
- Rivers that are icy cold with glacial runoff the colour of blue milk.
- As muddy river bottoms dry, they curl into mosaic patterns.
- How you really _can’t_ step into the same place in a river twice.
- Change is constant.
- Hidden rivers that course underneath thick, weighty slabs of melting Antarctic ice.
- How Mark Twain’s mighty Mississippi ain’t so mighty no more.

And I recall a catchy colloquial folksong we primary schoolers, at Garden Home Elementary School, were taught to belt out with regional pride. The massive Bonneville hydroelectric power station—a technological feat of its age—straddled the Columbia River’s wide girth to suck out its fierce flow and turn it into electricity. The lulling melody lamented the river’s sacrifice (as though it had a choice), intimating that the river existed _for itself_. We sang the song in rounds, lyrics folding over in consoling harmonies. Adulation swelled as the chorus rallied the river to _roll on!_ … so we humans can have the electricity needed to forge our way forward:

_Your power is turning our darkness to dawn,
So roll on, Columbia,
Roll on!_

The lyrics made no mention of what happened to the First Nations people (the Umatilla, Warm Springs, Yakima and the Nez Perce further upstream) who lived along the Columbia: how the river’s lifeblood ran in their blood, _one and the same_. How the Chinook salmon were no longer able to return to their spawning grounds up-river. The Bonneville dam blocked their way. And it also blocked
the indigenous people from catching the Chinook, their livelihood that has run wild in their lifeblood for centuries.

Nothing was taught about how the river—and the First Nations people of the Columbia River basin—were violated and abused. How the river was—and still is—their kin.

In this recollection, I see how young children are indoctrinated through the joy of song to take pride in progress. Taught to believe that the rivers are ours to take from. That taking—to stake, claim, possess, own, exploit—is human privilege. Generally, white Anglo-Saxon privilege.

Personification, as a rhetorical device, is commonly defined as attributing human qualities and characteristics to nonhuman entities: animals, inanimate objects, or abstract notions. Gary Johnson, a scholar devoted to resuscitating allegory, considers personification, like allegory, as “belonging to the extended family of tropes.” Johnson (2012) lists synecdoche, metonymy, simile and metaphor as the major tropes, and “each of these figures of speech asks readers to understand or to see one thing in the terms of another; they are all substitutive in nature” (p. 4).

Pausing over Johnson’s words, I consider their implication: To substitute is to stand in for something. Nonliteral figures of speech—such as a turn of phrase or expression—represent the something rather than allowing the something to stand up for itself. Figures of speech, like the rivers that surround us, are often taken for granted. They’re just there. To be substitutive is in direct opposition to one and the same. The reader, says Johnson, is asked to accept the thing substituted as seen through the terms of another: the maker of the figure of speech. Personification is the representation of a thing or abstraction in the form of a person. The thing itself is mute.

Johnson (2012) also reminds us to pay heed to the root meaning of the term trope: “to turn,” that is, “the author’s intention to transform something (turn something) into something else” (p. 4). To do it well persuades the reader into believing the figure is an artful dead ringer for the thing itself. This is the function of a rhetorical device, of which there are dozens.

4. In redrafting this essay, my initial intention was to untangle the dense and knotted string of quotes (which begins with Johnson) and tactfully braid them together by intervening with my voice. But I decided against any such ameliorating efforts. Instead, the string of quotes stay as a reminder that knowledge acquisition regarding personification—and indeed all the tropes—has predominantly been performed by white male literary scholars.
For literary critic Hayden White, the four master tropes are metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche and irony, and are considered “the basic rhetorical structures by which we make sense of experience” (in Culler, 1997, p. 72).

James Paxson (1994), in his seminal scholarly work *The Poetics of Personification*, calls personification a “strange device” that has “come to enjoy theoretical primacy over irony and metaphor” (p. 1).

Paul DeMan (1986) proclaims personification (or more accurately, *prosoporeia*, personification’s fraternal twin sister in the extended family of tropes) to be “the master trope of poetic discourse” (p. 48).

For Roman Jakobson, metaphor and metonymy are the prototypes out of which all other tropes arise (in Paxson, 1994, p. 174).

Paxson is quick to point out how personification is automatically equated with allegory, and that “personificational allegory was thought of as wooden, tedious, obvious, simple and juvenile” (p. 1). He adds that “the subject calls out for rigorous taxonomy” (1994, p. 3) and goes on to do so by showing how personification is used as an essential component for driving narrative discourse, not just a simplistic rhetorical device.

Despite these variations in tropological favouritism, all would likely agree with Jonathan Culler’s (1997) definition of a rhetorical figure as “an alternation of or swerve from ‘ordinary’ language” (p. 70). All are also likely to agree that the aim of rhetoric, the ancient art of persuasion, makes use of the tropes as structures to make language from a variety of discourses. That all rhetorical devices, regardless of its taxonomic standing, share the same juicy, vital fluid: figurative language. Culler (1997) links rhetoric to poetry, in the sense that “poetry is language that makes abundant use of figures of speech and language that aims to be powerfully persuasive” (p. 69).

Perhaps the above mention personification-ating experts would find the following metaphor persuasive: a trope is an ocean of rhetoric, briny deep with artful persuasion. It is seven seas of figurative language. Into the seas flow big rivers, such as synecdoche, metonymy, simile, metaphor and irony. Within many smaller tributaries flows personification, allegory, alliteration, hyperbole, onomatopoeia, allusion, assonance, oxymoron, among

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5. I imagine the literary scholars all dressed in khaki as they go out and colonise figurative language. Each stakes a claim to taxonomic orders and speciation in different corners of the globe.
others. The tributaries spill over with persuasive possibilities, making their way eventually into the sea of tropes. And, since rivers change course over time, the tributaries can turn into rivers, and rivers can become tributaries.

The high seas, rivers, springs, streams, brooks, creeks, and rivulets are one and the same: to exist, they all need to flow into each other.

Melion and Ramaker (2015), in their recent compilation of scholarly works, agree: “As a communication device [personification] is either taken for granted or dismissed as mere convention” (p. 1). They leave the trampled trope-path left by their predecessors, and settle into the personification tributary for a considered probe.

Instead of over-simplifying the rhetorical device, Melion and Ramaker point out that personification is dynamic and complex, as it “operates in multiple registers—sensory and spiritual, visible and invisible, concrete and abstract—and it deals in facts, opinions, and beliefs.”

One register plumbs “the invisible, processes of thinking; feeling and experiencing [were] bodied forth by means of personifications that revealed how these modi operandi were constituted” (p. 1). To “body forth” suggests action internally generated as it comes to be. That personification as a rhetorical tool is not only capable of embodying its subject, but also bodies forth their means of constitution.

This more contemplated view tilts personification away from the static definition (attributing human qualities to nonhuman entities) and opens up a possibility of conceiving personification as acting for itself, outside of human agency. It is a refreshing view that hints at personification’s ability to act, autonomously, for itself.

I recall a period of time when, as a young child, I had a deep concern for the pickles that lived in a jar placed on the top shelf at the back of the refrigerator. I was convinced that without breathing holes in the lid that they would suffocate. In my world, the pickles and I were one and the same. The pickles not only embodied breathing, they also, as far as I was concerned, weren’t able to breathe. The slime that grew around their bodies was proof to me that they were dying.

6. I wonder: how would a scholar from an indigenous background approach the study of personification? What routes—usually hidden to nonindigenous people—would be taken? Perhaps the indigenous scholar would use different methods, such as first walking a mile in personification’s moccasins? Or perhaps listen closely to the thing itself for its own turn of phrase.
In *The Things Things Say*, Jonathan Lamb focuses his examination on things that existed in early 18th century literature. This was an economically tumultuous period marked by an explosive burst in commerce as it moved—albeit slowly, by ships—onto a global scale. “This book explores the difference between objects that serve human purposes and things that don’t,” Lamb begins (2011). “The properties of objects of most interest to us are their mobility in the world of exchange, expressed as commercial and symbolic value, and their interpretability as specimens and curiosities, expressed as knowledge. We are interested in their contribution to the circulation of information, goods, and money because of the importance it imparts to us, the owners of them” (p. xi). Included in this commercial burst was human trade: African slavery.

“Things, on the other hand,” Lamb continues, “are obstinately solitary, superficial, and self-evident, sometimes in flight but not in our direction; they communicate directly only with themselves, and have no value in the market that they reckon” (p. xi). It is the unyielding nature of things, and their capacity to be loose, free agents—that is, as personifications for themselves—that Lamb highlights throughout his investigation.

It was a period when “autobiographies of inanimate things proliferated—of coins, ornaments, utensils, land, clothing, vehicles, and furniture—and of animate ones too, such as dogs, horses, insects, and body parts” (2011, p. xvi). Things tend to talk amongst themselves, and, adds Lamb (2011), “What makes them so sinister or implacable is their irrelevance to any human system of value, even though humans once made, bought, and wore them. The transformation from object into thing tends to be final and irreversible, not dialectical” (2011, p. xi). Things, says Lamb, developed a genre called an *it*-narrative, where things spin yarns free of human interference.

Once unmoored from their object status, that is, as fixed possessions, things are permanently cast away from humans. As an example, Lamb (2011) points out the three hats, one cap, and two-non-matching shoes Swift’s Robinson Crusoe sees lying on the beach after the shipwreck. “To be sure, many a thing has been an object until it was changed” [...] “Once having made the change, things do not return as anthropomorphized items in the systems of exchange and symbolic labor” (p. xi). As another example, Lamb
cites the children’s literary nonsense poetry of Edward Lear: “When they ride away on their speckled horses, Edward Lear’s sugar tongs and nutcrackers have gone for good: ‘They faded away, and they never came back’” (p. xi). Even dancing in the light of the moon didn’t convince them to come back.

As a cringing counterpoint to the freewheeling genre of it-narratives are slave-narratives. Lamb (2011) considers the makers of both it-narratives and slave-narratives to be “authors owning nothing” (p. 230) but for opposite reasons. Things, once emancipated, “are positioned starkly in opposition to objects that represent other objects, or descriptive facts that serve as metaphors, or sheer surfaces that advertise hidden meanings” (Lamb, 2011, p. xi). Things speak freely among themselves and have no need for author-ity. Whereas, in sharp contrast, “a sinister knot ties […] the law to the feat of commercial imagination that transformed a human into an object” (Lamb, 2011, p. 231). I can imagine slave-narratives beginning as rhythmic whispers passed within the holds of slave ships, keeping time with the choreographed slap and pull of oars.

Lamb (2011) also points out—due to the shortcomings of language other than his fluent tongue in mathematics—that even Isaac Newton succumbed to personification’s forceful lure: “Lacking in Latin or English a language that collapsed the distinction between agents and instruments, Newton was haunted by figures, especially personifications. He resorted to the short passive mood as the one least liable to be mistaken, here the effects of forces can be described without specifying an agent such as gravity, which, if so specified, is inevitably personified as Gravity” (p. 132). Newton himself needed the power of personification to convey the invisible yet palpable grand force he so famously identified in the natural world. A sort of proof, perhaps, that the rise of Rationalism in the 18th century had not entirely snuffed out Vitalism: the belief that we are so much more than the sum of our (mechanised) parts.

A friend, four and a half years old at the time, posed three questions to me in quick succession:

Do trees have muscles?
Can water swim?
Where does metal live?
Instead of trying to imagine an answer, I gently tossed back each of her carefully considered questions: Did you ask the trees? And water? Can metal tell you where it lives? How about we go out and ask them?

We went for a walk and a wonder. A wonder walk. I figured she still has direct access to the things themselves, so I tagged along to find out what each had to say.

Lamb (2011) expands on the autonomy of things: “Things acquire powers of moving us when they emerge from a system of human representation into a zone of experience which as it were self-organising” (p. 22). This zone of experience that Lamb refers to reminds me of William James’ philosophic zone: pan psychism. Within this zone the boundary between object and subject evaporates; the zone where all (pan) intelligence (psychic) exists for itself. Everything has a sort of consciousness, for itself.

As a writer, the practice of moving from the zone of experience—where all matter has an autonomous voice—to the static world of representation, generates a fluency in toggling between registers, and toggling between perspectives. Neither is right nor wrong, but requires flexibility and a willingness to shift orientation. From a human system of representation, as Johnson noted earlier, figures of speech are substitutive in nature. They represent the thing represented, usually with human qualities and attributes.

But in the zone of experience, figures can self-organise. And, like things, figures can speak up for themselves.

Due to this dextrous ability for perspectives to toggle, it seems to me that personification is not only a rhetorical device for artful persuasion, but also has the capacity to become a conduit for the thing itself to directly express itself, for itself.

I wonder: when free of human gaze and grasp, where do all the disowned objects and things go? The gazillions of ‘transitional objects’ (blind teddy bears, bald dolls, threadbare baby blankets) and imaginary friends that young people abandon (through the coercive forces of institutional learning, competition, playground politics, as well as the powerful conversion tools of mockery, shame and humiliation), as they are inducted, gradually, into Rationalism? I can easily imagine a vast undulating iridescent field, like stepping into the shimmering curtains of the aurora borealis that exists in a dimension inaccessible to humans (that is, predominantly non-
indigenous neuro-typicals, and those over the age of five). Where they all cavort and frolic, free of sticky and grabby fingers, having a great time. For no one except for themselves.

My thoughts dart around restlessly and become a chaotic parade of phantoms, animals, climatic conditions, abstractions, ideas, smells, pieces of furniture: all things that exist for themselves in the “mind” that is everywhere. Could it be that what I perceive is a result of the act of personifying? As my “mind” intermingles with and seeps into my milieu’s “mind”: that vast field where self-organising things and I share a zone of experience?

I wonder: how do concepts behave?
What do they do when we’re not thinking?
Personify themselves, as themselves? Like Newton’s gravity?
Can concepts inhabit a zone of experience, free from representation?

Maybe there is a dimension out there where concepts frolic and cavort and collide, with glee.
If it is possible for concepts to can personify other concepts, how about words?

How do words behave?
Words that exist, for themselves.
Words that are intrinsic, that pushes out from within.
Pushy words, sticky words, words that flock.
Words that spill over.
Soft word bodies that feel the force of thought, in-forming.
Alliterations stick similar-sounding soft word-bodies together.
Onomatopoeic sound-body words swish their sounds as they do what they are.

Words as pan (everywhere) psychic (intelligence): words, for themselves, that have their own kind of consciousness.
And the practice of creative writing—the craft of figuring language—personifies their bodying forth.

Poet Donald Davie, in his F. W. Bateson Memorial Lecture in 1981, argues for the impossibility of detaching a “figure” or rhetorical device from poetry. Extending Bateson’s treatment of personification, Davie (1981) claims that “personification is inherent in the very grammatical structure of our [English] language, hence that we ‘personify when we’re not aware of doing anything of the
sort”’ (p. 92). For Davie (and Bateson), since poetry is inextricably linked with grammar, personification cannot be avoided: Poetry and personification are one and the same.

In my ordinary mental meanderings and free-falling daydreams—before the act and effort of turning my internal thoughts and ideas into words—all the objects in my field of physical perception are there for themselves, in that Jamesian pan psychic way. Like James suggests my sensate perceptions (smell, see, hear, touch, taste, intuit) is my “psychical reality”. I am not personifying—that is, imposing my perceptions onto the nonhuman world—but that all of my experience is a seamless extension of all “minds” everywhere.

How to reorient the reader’s attention away from anthropocentrism towards the perspective of an abstraction, such as the more-than human?

Could it be that figurative language is alive, for itself? And that personification personifies itself, for itself, as a more-than human force?

As I continue to toggle between and twist around these questions and possibilities, I steady my attention on a pithy statement made by Lamb (2011): “Personification is a critical index of where things have got to in the relation of humans to things” (p. 24). As a critical index, personification is our contemporary literary canary in a global coalmine. As such, it needs our urgent care and treatment in our shared zone of experience.

If we take personification seriously—not just as a mere rhetorical convention but also as some thing capable of operating on multiple registers—many more complex relations and possibilities open up. If we consider personification to be alive, for itself, then the very nature of human–thing relationships shifts.

The power base dissolves.
Agency becomes mutual, shared.
Ownership—of knowledge, of possessions, of any thing—becomes trite.

Personification is not separate from us. It moves within the zone of experience with us. It does not need a substitute or a stand-in figure to express for it. It is always directly expressing, for itself. It is a super-trope: always in our midst, ready to insinuate itself into imaginations, into language. As Davie and Bateson have said, personification is grammatically ingrained within the tissue of the English language. Like our skin it cannot be detached. (Just ask skin).
Personification steers clear of identity politics. It cannot become anything other than what it is, for itself. As an it, like Lamb’s things, it cannot be owned, claimed, staked. Or made into a representation. Or have its wings pinned down as “knowledge”. It is air and fluids and forces and wings, all at once, undifferentiated. When using the English language, personification spills out everywhere, inseparable from the words we use.

Personification has a persistent way of insinuating itself into thinking, and into the creation of language. With silent stealth it seeps across porous membranes into interiors about to burst with figures, expressions and turns of phrase. Images conjure ideas – ideas conjure images. A figure of speech is so reflexive that my fingertips cannot distinguish the thought from the word-images that they tap out. And I’ve always had a preference for the subtext, for that interstitial-land that resides between this one and another place.

The whispers, faint traces, sudden up-draughts and hauntings.
Isn’t that the place where all figurative language is birthed?
And isn’t that the zone of experience where the unreachable itch to create resides?
It is the tree’s muscles.
It is water swimming.
It makes a home for metal, hidden deep in the earth, below the rivers and seas.
III.
A Discovery
The Splinter

Something has been troubling the heel of my hand. More of an annoyance than a pain; something I’ve ignored despite its persistence. Now, as I head towards the home stretch of my PhD, it’s got my full attention. I twist my hand around to have a closer look. A splinter. It’s barely visible. Glass? A fish bone? A shard from a clear plastic toy?

Whatever it is, it’s embedded deep at an oblique angle. I’m surprised it hasn’t been more of a bother. A shard of something bigger, something once whole, now fragmented, broken off and stuck in the heel of my busiest hand. Come to think of it, it has been there for a very long time, probably since the start of my research. Yes! My downward-dogs have been distracted for some time now. My body hasn’t been fully free to hang, to stretch and release its weight onto the heel of that hand. Could be why I’ve backed off from doing them. Shoulders, hips, neck, legs contracting under the constraints that demand definitions and production. To tally up word counts. The restrictive nature of the institution, of registration boards, of
academia, is a part of the splinter's distraction: Define the lyric essay. Generate a literature review. Contribute new knowledge. Make your methodology more explicit. Find your rationale. The shard's echo has also annoyed my dogs, chasing them away. They want to roam, frolic, sniff other dogs, head for the unexplored hills. Uncaged, and free of the pressure to generate research outputs. Free to sniff out betweening spaces, rolling in raunchy smells of more-than qualities. Be with those things that can never be measured or pinned down.

This splinter must come out. I want my dogs back. I can't hold this awkward twisted position much longer, and I can no longer ignore its presence. As I run a free finger lightly over the skinned surface, I feel an edge of the splinter protrude, just. There's just enough of something for the tweezers to bite and pull out. The more I feel the edge's flick against my finger pad, the more determined I become to extract it. But I can't risk the edge snapping off and leaving the splinter to fester. Or grow into my hand's heel to become a part of me. This thought brings claustrophobic panic: it must come out, now! I'm very practised at removing energetic debris from bodies: if I can twirl, I can tweeze. And I'm gaining practice at twirling together the creative with the critical. Together they're getting more fluid, ambidextrous. Rigorous. The momentum of a method of making defines as it moves. The process is the output. My body as a site of knowing knows it is time to get it out. Rid my body of impingements, and get back to the fully weighted possibilities experienced in a downward-dog. Back to what a full stretch can potentiate, discover.

As a hybrid—lyric and essay—comes with defining obligations. What do they make, together? Says who? As I lightly flick the splinter's edge, I marvel at its quiet piggybacking all these months. And I wonder: what would happen if Essay were able to take on a full stretch, unencumbered by troubling Lyric? What if Essay could wander without Lyric's Eeyore of an identity crisis whining in its ear? Essay wants to—needs to—roll along as an emergent thinking process—on its own—free of the distracting obligation to define. Free to declare what it is, as it moves and meanders, immanently. Its shape—the form it comes to be—is determined by the flotsam and jetsam it collects along the way. Those random encounters stick as it essays its body, indeterminately. Essay wants to follow its innate nature to seek (versuch) and attempt (essai), unburdened by genre expectation and pressure. My left index finger flicks over the splinter's edge one
more time before I reach for the tweezers. There is a satisfaction in the
flick, in troubling the edge, in the sharp contrast, but it is no longer
enough. Essay needs to be free to form its unwelt: what is particular to
its lived expression. I place the tweezer’s metal mouth around the edge
and close in on it hard, and pull out the splinter.

   It comes out willingly, with ease.

   My whole body is suddenly flooded with a warm gush of
relief. A vast, spacious feeling seeps across the horizon. The response is
global and unanimous: Gazillions of capillary beds heave sighs and the
sucked-in tight spaces in joints let go. Muscles lounge. Lungs enjoy an
exaggerated exhalation. The dogs turn around and come home. Essay
opens up its stride. And, surprisingly, Lyric revels in its newfound
potency as a more-than tendency. As a potential force that can tip the
essay’s body into expressing more-than the sum of its parts.

   With the collective relief at the splinters removal comes a
clear realisation:

   *I am not a lyric essayist!*

   Lyric seizes the moment and slips into the splinter’s hollow.
IV.
more-than (lyric) essay
The White Coat

Knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is made; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time.

*A World of Pure Experience*, William James

I arrive at New York City’s Penn Station the evening of the day Donald Trump is inaugurated as the 45th President of the United States. Besides plans to catch up with friends and do New Yorky things, my four-day immersion coincides with two noteworthy happenings: the women’s protest march, and a grand rounds seminar with my most influential acupuncture teacher. I haven’t studied with Kiiko since my apprenticeship—as her *moxa girl*—in her Boston clinic more than 25 years ago. And I haven’t returned to New York for about the same amount of time. As I step off the train from Montreal into Penn Station’s low, rumbling belly, a waft of diesel fumes mixes with stale piss—and other familiar yet ineffable scents. Ineffable and familiar as,
say, a mouthful of blueberries: impossible to describe without the *experience* of tasting blueberries. In that first nostril flare, the long gap since my last visit vanishes. This instant olfactory recognition is followed by a wave of adoration for this wildly restrained city.

Yes, *that’s* the smell of New York.

Once above ground, as I wait for my Uber ride, I notice the street sweat from invisible asphalt pores. Even from several blocks up, the glare from Times Square makes its presence felt.

The term “grand rounds” conjures an image of a clump of white-coated, naïve medical students who are lead in and out of hospital rooms by an attending senior physician. The main job of the chief white coat is to hone and sharpen the knowledge and clinical skills of the green practitioners.

They hover at the end of a populated bed, the thin curtain pulled around behind them. The patient is usually silent and wide-eyed as the clump discusses the pertinent clinical details—the *data*—of the case before them.

Rarely does anyone in the attending group actually *touch* the person in the bed.

A diagnosis is deduced from details gleaned from various clinical tests that have already been performed. The interpretations of the test results are discussed, and a treatment plan is devised based on an accurate diagnosis. The chief white coat ensures accuracy. All the different particulars combine into a whole diagnosis. This is considered a *rational* approach to making knowledge, when there is a distinct separation between the Knower and what is Known. In the rational approach, Knowledge becomes *fixed* because it is deduced from what is already Known, from the past. This can be considered *dead* knowledge.

Meanwhile, since the tests, blood flow has long since moved on, very much alive.

In this rational approach to knowledge, the parts and systems of the body are separated and don’t touch each other. This separation is necessary. The gap created by the separation is ignored, and considered irrelevant.

As the group discusses the recorded information and the time arrives for decisive clinical action, answers from the group emerge. The senior physician mocks one student; another is lauded. Knowledge has been bestowed, and it is time to move on to the next case.
In the sudden leaving, the privacy curtain is scraped open by the senior physician.

The person in the hospital bed is left feeling like a lump of raw meat.

Early the next afternoon, my friend and I step into the protest march on 5th Avenue, not far from Rockefeller Center. It is already well underway. The march began at a spot close to the United Nations building on the East River and is supposed to finish at the Trump Towers on 5th Avenue, a few blocks short of Central Park.

The march has grown into a slowly moving snake of people about five kilometres long, everyone pinned in solidarity as one gigantic, barely moving body. Impatient with the snake’s slow pace, we pull out of the crowd to find out why the body isn’t moving any faster. The reason: the freshly sworn-in President’s New York residence has been barricaded and made impenetrable with cement pilings and SWAT teams. There is little room for the snaking body to stretch out and disperse at the end of the march. As we walk through the vacant side streets, we notice empty buses that police have placed at awkward angles to block the possibility of rogue elements from ploughing into the soft, fleshy flank of the resistance.

As we once again merge with the snake, I’m puzzled by a low hum in the distance. A helicopter hovers above but this sound is coming from the ground. Downstream, a distant sound-shape is rising from the throngs of thousands. The hum gradually grows in intensity and quickly arrives to our position in the snake, and passes through as my neighbours raise their voices and let out a banshee scream. As local breaths run out, the singular scream ripples on as those further up the snake join into the flowing voice. Every 10 minutes or so the hum returns in the distance then wells up and crashes through as a united scream.

The immanently choreographed sound-pulsations add an affective vitality to our shuffle of shock and disbelief. The more-than-human rhythmic pulse also carries the deep hum of defiance, as the United States—the country of my birth—unravels.

Brother to novelist Henry James, William James trained to be a physician but soon decided to become a metaphysician, a philosopher. In the later part of the 1800s he left New York to teach and write at Harvard in Boston.
In the early 20th century, around when James was writing a collection of essays on his philosophy, New York’s “Tenderloin”—slick with corruption and crime and home to the city’s red light district—was snuffed out and razed to make way for Penn Station.

For William James (1924), “Philosophy has always turned on grammatical particles. With, near, next, like, from, towards, against, because, for, through, my – these words designate types of conjunctive relation arranged in a roughly ascending order of intimacy and inclusiveness” (p. 24).

My friend and I decide to peel away from the still pulsing defiant body, and make our way down the Lower East Side. To our left, I feel Queens and Brooklyn press in across their watery cushion of the East River. Behind us, I’m also aware of Harlem leaning into Manhattan across 125th Street, and the Bronx leaning across the Harlem River. And I sense New Jersey—way over on the other side of the Hudson—feeling excluded from all the edgy fanfare. And I imagine Long Island’s smug and uppity indifference stretch all the way out to Fire Island at its fingertip.

At the heart of James’ philosophy of “radical empiricism” is his notion of pure experience, which must be directly felt. For James, experience includes both the particulars and the relations between the particulars. In a way, James’ philosophy (1912) takes place in the gap that is ignored—and dismissed—by rationalists, which “emphasizes universals and makes wholes prior to parts in the order of logic” (p. 22). James’ postulate—posed around the same time that Penn Station opened as well as when Einstein’s theory of relativity was bending scientific understanding of the physical universe—emphasises the relational, whereas “transcendental idealism is inclining to let the world wag incomprehensibly, in spite of its Absolute Subject and his unity of purpose” (p. 21). Ordinary empiricism has a tendency to “do away with the connections of things, and to insist most on the disjunctions” (James, 1912, p. 23). James takes another swipe at general empiricism and its “general pulverization of all Experience”, instead favouring radical empiricism, as it “does full justice to conjunctive relations,” he emphasises (p. 23).

Direct lived experience, and all that comes with it, is all that matters for James. Nothing is left out, as parts—not the whole—continue to lead the way forward, indeterminately.
As in the fleshy body, nerves and blood vessels, muscles, bones, lymph and gooey connective tissue, and all the organs are in a conjunctive relationship: it’s all in there together.

The live body makes its way forward, indeterminately.

Manhattan stretches a length of around 20 kilometres, and its girth is a lean four kilometres. Its surface is pockmarked with subway portals, their discrete openings marked by different coloured dots; one colour is assigned to a line of tubular vessels moving underneath. Movement pours in and out of cracks. Taxi drivers squeeze into opportunistic gaps and are jerked forward by the pulsing congestion. Sudden updraughts swirl with the movement across the surfaces. Spindly-legged water towers on rooftops—continually sucking water up into their wooden bellies—aren’t just clichéd props for the cityscape, but are useful, and give up their water when needed by the scurrying humans below.

On my first day as Kiiko’s moxa girl—in July 1991 after I graduated from The New England School of Acupuncture in Boston—she immediately had me perform a clinical technique called tonetskyu, translated from Japanese as ‘penetrating’ moxibustion. It was done on the first patient of the day, a woman recovering from a stroke. The technique is fiddly and requires a lot of practice. Tiny bits of pure moxa wool are rolled between the thumb and index finger into a thread sized shape, and placed—precariously—on the bottom inside corner of the skin next to the patient’s great toenail. The top of the thread is lit by an incense stick and snubbed out just as it burns down to the skin. The patient should feel a tiny prick of heat. This is done in succession about 10 times on the same spot. Kiiko told our class how she would practise repeatedly as she rode on the Tokyo subway until she was able to roll the moxa into perfect forms.

This style of moxibustion directs the heat into the body. To demonstrate its penetrating effects, a group of Japanese researchers performed the technique—in the 1920s—on a watermelon. After burning bits of moxa numerous times on the same spot on the watermelon’s skin, they cut open the melon. Inside, a brown sliver ran all the way through the watermelon’s flesh.

With sweaty palms and Kiiko hovering over me, I performed the task. When I finished, she grunted and walked away. She kept me for the next six months on as her apprentice moxa girl.
New York’s different voices press into the throbbing sensorium. The tetchy honks of the taxi drivers jam with the long irritated honks of impatient commuters. Emergency vehicles have their range of voices: an ambulance’s cough and insistent throttle; a fire truck’s undulating tenor mixes with a police vehicle’s staccato and sneaky rasp. Beats, sounds, rhythms combine into an incessant background din. There’s a high-pitched quality in the silences between: even when the city tries to sleep, an echoing ring lingers. New York is a city with tinnitus. Then another colicky wail that rouses it up from the brink of sleep.

Overall, the undulating rattles soothe.

James (1912) elaborates on the problem of knowledge, singling out the importance of felt transitions:

So the notion of a knowledge still *in transitu* and on its way joins hands here with that notion of a “pure experience” […] The instant field of the present is always experience in its ‘pure’ state, plain unqualified actuality, a simple *that*, as yet undifferentiated into a thing and a thought, and only virtually classifiable as objective fact or as some one’s opinion about fact (p. 39).

That *instant field of the present* that often arrives as a sudden, unexpected surprise. Over and over, it is experienced as a simple *that*.

Walking around the city’s lower end, I catch glimpses of my favourite building, the “Jenga tower”. It got its name from the children’s game, where structures are made with small rectangular wooden blocks, balanced precariously as it grows. I’d play Jenga with my nephews when they were little, who would squeal with delight the moment the structure teetered and came down with a crash. From several perspectives—the Bowery, Chinatown, not far from Ground Zero—as I round a corner, there it is: a skyscraper precariously standing upright. With each singular sighting, and every surprised corner-turn, I squeal with delight.

In Japan, the practitioner learns ‘Kampo’ or ‘traditional’ medicine through direct experience. Students commit hundreds of hours, observing thousands of treatments in their teacher’s clinics.

One of Kiiko Matsumoto’s most influential teachers was Kiyoshi Nagano, a blind acupuncturist.
Not far from New York’s acupuncture school in Chelsea—the venue for the grand rounds session—is the High Line. It is an elevated greenway, about two and a half kilometres long, and acts to aerate the street level congestion below. When William James was young, this area along the Hudson shuttled meat carcasses, fresh produce and the rag trade onto the street-level trains. Due to many accidental deaths at the rail crossings, the area was dubbed “Death Avenue.” The “West Side Cowboys” arrived to ride horses and wave flags at the trains in an effort to bring safety to the bloody chaos. Their brave intents did little to curb the accidents, so an elevated line was built. It was designed to go through the centre of buildings—and connect directly with warehouses and factories—and allow trains to load and unload their cargo inside the buildings without disturbing traffic below. As interstate trucking grew in the 1950s, rail traffic waned. The High Line was abandoned and soon became ripe pickings for developers. A grassroots organisation was able to snatch it from developers and repurpose it into an urban linear park.

Walking south along the promenade, picking up my pace to get to the grand rounds on time, I glimpse the distinct outline of the Statue of Liberty. It hovers over the water.

Or is it a mirage?

I’m able to score a front-row seat, positioned between two students, both elbow-deep in notes and reference books. The room—on the building’s 13th floor—is packed with 50 or so buzzy acupuncturists with varying degrees of experience, who are anticipating Kiiko’s entrance. The treatment table is placed in the centre of the long rectangular room. The atmospheric surroundings are a mix between a live cooking demonstration and a magician’s clinical sideshow. Instead of a mirror over the treatment table, a digital camera will home in on the master’s manoeuvres, and project the live image onto a large screen positioned for both sides of the room to see.

The grand rounds at New York’s acupuncture school is a chance for students to bring in their recalcitrant “cases” and observe Kiiko-sensai at work, unwinding stubborn pain out of stuck bodies.

The first client is waiting, supine, on the treatment table, eager for relief.

Kiiko enters. Her greying jet-black hair is carelessly camouflaged with brunette dye.
She must be at least 70 now.
Thick socks push into purple shower shoes.
She's still as unadorned as I remember her.
Although sighted, Kiiko has the singular focus of an unsighted person: as she begins to ask the woman on the table questions, her probing hands listen for answers, as though reading Braille.
Just as single-minded as all those years ago. A comet. Someone in class called her a comet.
I notice tobacco stains on her fingers.
She still smokes.
She wears a puffy grey sweater under an oversized white lab coat.
The room hushes as she gets to work.

“The first great pitfall from which such a radical standing by experience will save us,” says James (1912), “is an artificial conception of the relations between knower and known” (p. 23).
Kiiko’s treatment style—which she first learned through Master Nagano, who was considered by most of his contemporaries to be a renegade—is performed through direct palpation, and through the conduit of relationality. With acutely tuned hands, the patient is directly palpated to determine what is going on and what to do about it. Treatment possibilities are tested, immediately, and the body answers, immediately. Either the palpated reflexes—the spots of pressure-pain on the body—get better, or not. A needle is inserted into the effective releasing spot. A bit of time passes. The needle is tweaked. The painful reflex spot is checked again. No more pain. The needle is removed. The spot is re-palpated. The pain moves, deliberately blind to the durational rhythms and forces that capture the needle.

Using Kiiko–Nagano’s techniques, the treatment—the event—performs the diagnosis. A priori; all is just an assumption. Theoretical guesswork is minimised. There is no need to wait and wonder if the treatment is making itself felt in practice. The body gives a direct response, now, in the experience.

“In this continuing and corroborating, taken in no transcendental sense, but denoting definitely felt transitions, lies all that the knowing of a percept by an idea can possibly contain or signify,” James (1912) emphasises. From a Jamesian philosophic perspective, the acupuncture treatment is very much alive, as knowledge is made in its
felt transitions. James continues: “Wherever such transitions are felt, the first experience knows the last” (p. 30). The effect of the needles twirled is an aggregate of knowledge, layered in its felt transitions.

There is no gap between the treatment and the diagnosis. Nor is there an Outside Knower bestowing what is known. “Knowledge of sensible realities thus comes to life inside the tissue of experience. It is made; and made by relations that unroll themselves in time” (James, 1912, p. 30).

The needle’s tweak inside the tissue of experience makes knowledge in the tweaking instant.

From my front-row seat, what appears to be a sleight-of-hand performance—or a séance on the Ouija body-board—in reality is Kiiko’s attention that stays in the Jamesian instant field of the present. “Even so my experiences and yours float and dangle, terminating, it is true, in a nucleus of common perception, but for the most part out of sight and irrelevant and unimaginable to one another” says James (1912, p. 25). No magical thinking is involved, only the rigour of attending to transitions—as pure experience—and staying at the point of emergent knowledge.

A treatment must be lived. Experienced.

Acupuncture does its works on the dimension of the ineffables: between thresholds, in the transitions, as the body levitates, reorients. A treatment is co-composed in the field of possibilities, in the conjunctive relations.

Where knowledge is made, usefully, on the spot.

For years Kiiko would return every summer to study with Nagano in Tokyo until his death. Each immersive period of study with her master thickened the layer of the treatment strategies, growing denser with possibilities. As with the living tissue of experience, “The universe continually grows in quantity by new experiences that graft themselves upon the older mass; but these very new experiences often help the mass to a more consolidated form” (James, 1912, p. 47). Kiiko develops ideas that have been layered over, and collaged into, Nagano’s ideas. Ideas that spread out like bamboo shoots as treatment possibilities to be put to use directly as living treatment options.

James’ philosophic orientation is based on “My description of things [that start] with the parts and [make] of the whole a
being of the second order. It is essentially a mosaic philosophy, a philosophy of plural facts” (p. 22).

Like James’ mosaic philosophy, Kiiko spreads a living mosaic of treatment possibilities. Her hand is suffused in a body, amidst the layers of possibilities to test out: as a practitioner amidst change rather than on the Knowing Outside. Contiguous bodies are within their tissued conjunctive relations, as the more-than tendencies—in the transitions—relay the pulse of things, in the instant.

Kiiko Matsumoto thinks with her fingers, and uses touch as a rudder to steer her thoughts. Concepts are circulated through a body, and are echoed back by the body: does this spot do its work? If the body says no, she moves onto another potential strategy. Layers of treatment possibilities are put to the test, immediately. A theory is immediately tested, and the body judges the usefulness of the theory. Informed touch is the rudder that steers ideas into willing flesh.

Movements of thoughts—directly testing ideas, possibilities—cleave a way forward, leaving ripples of felt transitions in their wake.

Knowledge-in-the-making, on the fly, by the seat of a needler’s pants.

The practice of acupuncture as an operational philosophy: A needle is nothing without a body. Contiguous bodies: as the therapist thinks forward amid the grain of things testing the usefulness of her ideas. The acupuncturist is among the forces at work and play, not on the Knowing Outside.

The body wears the white coat of pure experience.

Back on the ground after the grand rounds, and just as I turn a corner making my way to the subway, there it is again. The Jenga tower. Teetering. Just.

I feel another squeal as fresh as the first.
I have no idea what New York’s body is going to do next.
Slobber

“The body is ours, and we are an activity within our body.”
Alfred North Whitehead

Slobber.
I say the word in my head and it echoes off internal walls.
As a sound-word, it needs to be said aloud.
Break the silence: sss leads the way then my tongue pushes forward the laa, and the berr reverberates from my lips. Slobber.
But no slobber comes out. As a sound-word-body, slobber needs a stimulus to come to life.

Brazilian painter, sculptor and performance artist Lygia Clark was interested in ways of showing—through direct, lived experience or vivencia—how the body’s insides are on the outside. She dedicated herself intensely to activating body experiments, mostly through the use of “sensorial objects”, including one called Slobber Threads.
that she performed numerous times in the 1970s with her students at the Sorbonne in Paris. *Slobber Threads* continues to be re-enacted globally by artists, therapists and others keen to embody a collectively experienced singular body.

The experiment involves about 10 participants, nine of who stand together in a tight circle, facing in. In the middle, one person lies prone, sparsely clothed, on the floor. Each standing person is given a small wooden spindle of cotton thread of a different colour and is instructed to hold the spindle in their mouths, close their eyes and use their tongues to gradually unspool the thread onto the person below.

The presence of the spindle in the people’s mouths, combined with the unspooling action, stimulates saliva production. The muffled “clackclackclack clack clackclack” of wooden spools against teeth can be heard as saliva-saturated tongues push out slobber-soaked threads. Layers of unfurled thread grow into a multicoloured mesh of second skin on the person below. For Clark, the act of pushing the thread out of one’s mouth draws attention to the act of bringing something from the inside to the outside. Then, according to Clark (as cited in Butler, 2014), “they begin to perceive that they are pulling their very guts out.”

Once all the thread has unspooled, the standing participants open their eyes, crouch down, and with physical effort—for the protein in saliva hardens as it dries—tear apart the thread-web that has covered the person on the floor. The prone person often reports a sense of claustrophobia that lifts as soon as the skin-mesh gets ripped apart (Butler, 2014, p. 296).

*Slobber*. The word spills over, in excess of itself.

As Lygia Clark simulates the feeling of pulling out one’s guts, process philosopher Alfred North Whitehead (1938) steers our attention to an obvious yet neglected fact: “No one ever says, ‘Here am I, and I have brought my body with me’” (p. 114). So habituated are we to the Cartesian split—of the mind as separate from the body, and the assumption that cognition trumps physical perception—that Whitehead’s sensible, logical twist disorients us, momentarily.

Whitehead’s simple statement jars us from our mind and back into bodily common sense: *Of course* I am my body.

*Slobber* is a word with a body.
But instead of the body’s insides on the outside, performed as a supra-sensorial collective experience of embodiment as with Clark’s collection of slobberers, Whitehead (1938) firmly places the body as the source of all experience: “All sense perception is merely one outcome of the dependence of our experience upon bodily functionings” (p. 159). And although Whitehead shares Clark’s preference for foregrounding the body, he does so for a different reason: rather than embody the process (of, say, generating slobber), for Whitehead, the process itself embodies as it moves along. Clark’s aim to embody—to have the experience of pulling out one’s guts—is aligned with phenomenology, placing the subject at the centre of experience; Whitehead’s philosophy outruns the subject by placing movement—process—at the center of experience. Inside–outside, subject–object, mind–body binaries do not exist in Whitehead’s world because “We are in the world and the world is in us” (1938, p. 165). There is only a seamless becoming of continuity, of reality always in process. Always immanently generated, like living within the forces of a Mobius strip: moving, changing, becoming, the past contiguous with the future–present: “There is a rhythm of process whereby creation produces natural pulsation, each pulsation forming a natural unit of historic fact” (Whitehead, 1938, p. 89).

From this perspective, there will always be eternal possibilities for slobber-ing. Until we die, and even then another pulsating process takes over: decomposition.

*Slobber* drags the past with it as it moves on.

My brother, when he was alive, liked to use the word slobber.

As kids we would taunt our beloved dogs with food and watch the globs of slobber gather and grow in rows along their long lips.

“Look at all of Rufie’s *slobber!*” Craig would exclaim, amazed. His wonder at the dog’s biological capacity as directly expressed: the internal process of salivation making visible strings of saliva. My wonder at my older brother’s wonder. Our amazement at how quickly the saliva would form. How the dog’s eyes and body would freeze, fixed in restraint, with a barely perceptible quiver of hopeful anticipation. How it seemed as though we could control the amount of saliva secreted, as if on tap.

A dog’s sensations worn on the outside; senses porous as the environment (potential food held by its taunters) does its work on
the dog’s body. The wonder doing its work on us. Slobber as a direct expression of a dog’s desires, appetites, wants. Unlike most of us humans, who tend keep our desires hidden by swallowing our saliva.

More amazement: gravity eventually drags the strings of saliva, the dominoes to the floor: Our cue to toss the food.

_Slobber:_ When I use the word it brings my brother back to life for the duration of the word’s slobbering lifespan.

With all of his copious conceptual secretions, perhaps Whitehead’s slobber was never allowed to fully express itself. He was born into Britain’s Victorian era when all expressions of desire—its smell and messiness—were swallowed, suppressed, secreted away under clinched waistcoats and strict morality. Pages were kept dry, free of dribble and spit. Yet Whitehead’s thinking (1938) secretes juicy abstract propositions that place us as a happening within our bodies: _the whole body thinks._ “The body is ours, and we are an activity _within_ our body” (p. 165, my emphasis).

In other words, what we are is what our body _does._

_Slobber_ is what it does.

Patti Smith, aging punk-poet, _does_ slobber, a lot. She says she cannot help it and makes no effort to swallow, to suppress, to turn her saliva back inside.

Patti’s waistcoat is torn, open, so her diaphragm—and her swagger across the stage—is free to release wild slobber. Strands of her grey hair are moist with spit. Her mouth, her words, her music, secrete copious amounts of slobber. Like Lygia Clark, for Patti Smith, the inside–outside is porous, indivisible. Her compositions are carried by slobber, and slobber is a conduit for expression.

Slobber sprays the audience: molecules of Patti are vaporised in the air for all to take in.
Stand close and inhale—swallow—bits of Patti.
As her whole body sings.

* Slobber: feel its secretions, its viscous weight hanging on, just. 

*Onomatopoeia* is the Latinised Greek term for ‘word-making.’
That is, simply, words that sound like what they describe.
The body as a resounding chamber: words that use the air from our lungs and the position of our teeth, lips and tongue to form audible words.

*Hoick.* Mucus needs the throat’s surface—and a force—to push it up and out.

Words related to the voice that comes from the back of the throat:

gigle growl grunt gurgle

Words related to the voice that comes from the lips:
murmur mumble belch blurt

Words related to air that don’t need to be pushed through the lungs and throat:

*whisper*

Words related to water:

*splash, spray, squirt, drizzle, drip.*

Words related to soft bodies hitting the ground:

*splat, splatter*

*Slobber:* the word signifies nothing more than the sound it makes. It *is* what its sound-body *does.*

*Plub* is a Gaelic term used by the fishermen on the Mull of Kintyre on the southwest coast of Scotland. It is the sound a single herring-body makes when it jumps out of the water and lands, making a tiny splash:

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Many Scottish herring fishermen still shun high-tech devices used to locate shoals of fish. Instead, they use their bodies to feel herring deep in the water under their boats. To do so they use a feeling-wire. The wire—made of twine and sometimes, piano wire—is dropped into the water’s depths with a weight on the descending end, and the other end held between the thumb and forefinger on deck. The vibrations through the boat’s metal hull become a part of the feeling-wire. When the man wiring ‘feels them thick’, he calls the skipper and the crew springs into action. Practised through generations of fishermen, the wire is still used to estimate the depth and density of a shoal of herring, and can even distinguish between the different species of fish.

Finger–thumb–wire–belly–hull–seawater–herring bodies fuse together as they attune—and become—the vibrations underneath. As their whole bodies think.

Whitehead was a mathematician who turned his thinking into his “Philosophy of Organism” later in his life. He delivered his seminal work *Process and Reality* as a series of lectures at Harvard in the 1920s.

Whitehead’s language is that of a mathematician: free from figurative textures, intensities and flows that afford aesthetic and affective delights. Whitehead’s abstract propositions are saturated with notions of the body as immanent; full of indeterminate possibilities, of becomings.

Regarding the act of composing language, Whitehead (as cited in Price, 1954) curiously omits the body as the source of composition:

[…] people compose either in words directly, the words satisfying their ideas of things, or they compose in concepts and then try to find words into which those concepts can be translated. I may add that my own method is the second.

Could it be that Whitehead was himself ironically disembodied, tending to ignore his body, fixed in his head? Like a plumber’s leaky faucet at home, or a doctor’s hypochondria, or a preacher’s lack of faith, did Whitehead’s blind spot—his body—became the primary focus for his ideas? Whitehead’s language, saturated with abstractions—of creativity’s potential, and the body as the source of thinking—doesn’t express his own secretions, or catch his own slobber’s metonymic drips.

I wonder: since I am an activity within my body, and thoughts are also an activity, do ideas therefore have bodies? Do
concepts form first as an abstract blob from which words fuse with sound to form language, in the form of a word-sound-body? Does writing hold the affective vitality smeared through the sound—and feel—of words?

My body is a porous membrane attuned to the field, connecting to the rhythms and forces at work and play, always in my midst.

As my whole body thinks.

Slößer: The sound reverbs off my fingers, poised over the keyboard, ready to catch every vital, juicy drip.
Spinoza’s Body Politic

Postulate I.*  The human Body is composed of a great many individuals of different natures, each of which is highly composite.

Deep within Gut, something is amiss.
Vagus nerve, also known as the Wanderer, rushes to collect information onsite and assess the severity of the situation.

*Look at me! Look at moi!
Everyone heaves an exasperated sigh. There it goes again.
Irritable Bowel.
Wanderer relays a message up Parasympathetic nerve to Brain: Situation not urgent. It’s just Irritable Bowel, again.
Intestines continue to whine: I can’t take it any more! I can’t take the pressure!
Stomach leans down, terse: You think you’ve got problems, you should’ve seen what I had to deal with last night: that new kind of Tim-Tams!
Gallbladder contracts at the memory.

At midnight! Stomach adds.

Jaw pipes in: Yeah, well I had to chew them.

Hang on there, Jaw. We did it together, barges in Teeth.

Tongue recalls the pleasurable yet complex swirl of dark chocolate and caramel and mocha, and decides to stay out of it.

Yeah, I suppose you’re right. After a short pause, Jaw adds, directed at Teeth: But do you have to gnash all night? I’d like to get some rest once in a while.

Hey don’t blame us. That’s coming from her head! snaps back Teeth.

Several other Individuals grumble in agreement.

Amidst all the epigastric commotion, Brain remains quiet.

From a distance, Great Toes speak up: Hey, we’d like a rest at night too but for some weird reason she rubs us against the sheets when she sleeps. So don’t forget about us down here.

Hear, hear! chime in the other toes.

Brain is still quiet, playing possum. Many of the Individuals are getting impatient and irate. They think Brain is holding out on them, taking advantage of its lofty status and not contributing its full capacity. Someone needs to finally deal with Irritable Bowels, and the consensus is that Brain should take the initiative.

There are whispers of mutiny.

Rogue cells in Pancreas are waiting for their cue to turn cancerous.

Postulate II. Some of the individuals comprising the human Body are fluid, some soft, others hard.

Heart steps in to make its presence felt by turning up the pressure. Muscles lining the major arteries flex, bulge. Blood rushes faster, squeezing through Vessels as they suddenly narrow. Pupils dilate, encouraging more light in case it’s an emergency. Pores open and release a mist of sweat.

Heart pounds faster, insistent. It needs to express something, but needs Brain to at least take an interest.

For a moment, the Body is still and attentive. When the Heart pounds, tissues listen. Wanderer zips around to pass the message that constricting Vessels have turned up the heat. Strong
sensations grip Intestines. Anus shirks at the relentless feeling of pressure, of having to hold it all in. It desperately wants to let loose. Heart understands, and feels compassionate towards the unreasonable pressures put on both Anus and Rectum. Brain remains silent. Uncommunicative.

Postulate III. The individuals comprising the human Body, and consequently the human Body itself, are affected by external bodies in very many ways.

Lungs billow, and try to fill their long cavity with air. Millions of Alveoli—teeny air sacs—stretch to make space for fresh oxygen. But Diaphragm is stubborn, and refuses to let Lungs completely stretch their porous legs. Around back, Mid-Thoracic Vertebrae crowd together, colluding with Diaphragm. Facet joints on Ribs are also belligerent, refusing to give. Lungs have no choice but to concede to their unfriendly structural neighbours. They’re too delicate and ethereal to sustain a struggle against the hard thuggery of bones.

Due to the cramped conditions, Bronchi let out a barely audible wheeze. Scalene muscle, deep in the Neck, strains to help Lungs with breathing.

Lungs know if they could fill their entire space—on a regular, rhythmic basis—so Parasympathetic nerve would have a chance to soothe Irritable Bowel.

The Wanderer zips up Vagus nerve—Parasympathetic’s fraternal twin—through Cranial nerves to deliver its report to the hindbrain, where the Respiration Centre is located. *Crowded Torso, Lungs Struggle.* But the Neo-Cortex—the Boss Brain up front—disregards the report.

*This is not an emergency. Just some discomfort,* Brain ascertains, and withholds it from the other Individuals.

Brain seems preoccupied and dismisses the plight of Lungs. Parasympathetic’s needs—that is, mostly, not to be oppressed by Sympathetic nerve, which gets busy during emergencies, including the more frequent false alarms—are also dismissed. Sure enough, Parasympathetic is teamed well with Wanderer, but not allowed to
develop its full collaborative capacity with Lungs. Even though not deemed an emergency, their restricted motion can have profound long-term implications.

Ribs and Diaphragm gloat.

Just as quickly as it started, Heart settles again.

Vessels dilate and Blood pools. Pupils relax. Pressure recedes from walls. Pores close, just as a chill tries to sneak in.

Anus is still tense. Due to its proximal proximity to Irritable Bowel, it rarely gets a respite.

I really really need you to notice me, pleads Intestine.

Stomach rolls its eyes. There you go again! Eeyore. Ee-yore. Look at me, look at me, says Stomach in a mocking tone to its neighbour below.

You really give me the shits. I’m so sick and tired of your bellyaching. Can’t you feel Heart has something to say? Why do you always make it about YOU?

Heart pains at their bickering and aches to get a message through to them. But for the message to be effective, Brain needs to get involved. And Parasympathetic needs to be taken more seriously.

Postulate IV. To be preserved, the human Body requires a great many other bodies, by which it is, as it were, continually regenerated.

With no warning, Knees buckle. A shearing pain blasts the Body.

Ears shudder as they turn up the volume. Something just happened! The reverberation of the sound of something happening skids across Interstitial Fluid and reaches the limbic centre of Brain. That ancient place the human Body still carries, inherited from its reptilian ancestors.

Faster than a lightning strike, Wanderer makes a beeline for the Amygdala tucked deep inside the Hypothalamus, Brain’s belly.

Incoming danger! alerts the Limbic system. This isn’t a drill.

Wanderer goes into overdrive, a reflex conditioned over thousands of years. With all that practice it knows what to do. The message has been delivered to all Individuals: Gut battens down the hatch and shuts down. Stomach at first churns than goes quiet. Intestines freeze and go mute. Mouth goes dry. Heart pounds with
such fury that everyone realises this is no Chicken Little moment. Muscles tense, ready for action. And, like a stealth missile moving under the radar, Adrenal Glands deliver their juice at once to the Brain and through the composite Body. A generous squeeze goes to the Muscles, who prepare to fight. Or take flight. Or freeze. Or possibly faint.**

All of the trillions of Cells are instantly tuned to each other. Even the gazillions of microbes lining Gut’s walls—all of those useful freeloaders—turn their heads, in unison.

An injury! Life-threatening noise!
A flood of various neurochemicals and hormones are dispatched to regulate the Body.

Among the gush are inflammatory chemicals that rush to surround the surface of the right Knee.

The composite Body holds its collective breath: Waiting, waiting...

The Neo-cortex—cognition’s executive centre—gives the all clear.

*False alarm! Not life-threatening.*
Everyone heaves relief.
Ears pipe up, having had time to assimilate the happening:

*We heard a car backfiring!*  
*Then the dog tripped her!* Eyes add.
Gluteal muscles unclench. All the other muscles follow their lead and relax.

Postulate V. When a fluid part of the human Body is determined by an external body so that it frequently thrusts against a soft part [of the Body], it changes its surface and, as it were, impresses on [the soft part] certain traces of the external body striking against the fluid part.

A throb takes over Right Knee.

For years now, Brain has been dismissing the sensations delivered by the Wanderer from Intestine. And Stomach has become *such* a sour puss. Their bickering has become an annoyance for the rest of the Individuals. Eyes are weary, as are their neighbouring
Optic Nerves, who are getting frayed, worn at the edges.
All that staring she does into that glowing screen, way into the wee hours.
Her habit of insomnia.
We all need a good rest. Especially Parasympathetic.
And more fresh, wholesome food.
We need to move more. Joints are stiff. Tendons are shortening.

The reliable Wanderer delivers messages but is also frazzled, worn down. Everyone feels the strain. Bone tired. Heart doesn’t feel heard. Feelings tend to get shunted to the Gut. Intestines get a lot of the blame but why don’t the others share some of the responsibility? Don’t blame it all on irritable bowel. It gives a lot. It could well turn into the Boy Who Cried Wolf, after all. Perhaps the real threat is that Gut is not taken seriously.

Could it be that Gut senses something everyone else dismisses as unimportant, especially Brain? Perhaps Intestines are going through evolving pain. And maybe Heart’s aching throbs are trying to say something as well. Seems to be more insistent lately. Heart’s pressure surges are almost daily.

The rogue Pancreas cells tug at the opportunity. And more rogue cells have started to gather downstream in Rectum’s folds. If the Brain won’t listen and insist on making change, there could certainly be cancerous anarchy. They’ll wall themselves off and set up a tumour factory with its own blood supply. Tim-Tams will feed their insatiable need to grow, proliferate out of control.

With another emergency averted, the Body settles back down. The Individuals resume their duties. All is quiet, briefly. Some gas is passed. The Duodenum accepts what Stomach has broken down, its Lumen secreting enzymes with ease. The metabolic wheels move, feeding energy to the Mitochondria, each Cell’s powerhouse. Waste is sent downstream, and for a while the bowel graciously attends to its job. More gas is gently passed.

All is harmoniously humming on the physiological farm. Adrenals enjoy a much-deserved rest. Wanderer uses long even strides, grateful that everyone is getting along. Diaphragm has relaxed as well, allowing Ribs their freedom to move. Pelvic floor lounges, and Bladder is void of need. Eyelids shutter Eyes. Nose
relishes a break from tending to noxious smells. Lungs expand into their full length, over and over, in tempo with Heart.
Parasympathetic Nerve purrs.

Postulate VI. The human Body can move and dispose external bodies in a great many ways.

Tongue fiddles with something and Brain has a little bleep of recognition.

A poppy seed.
Thank you, Tongue.
Sure thing Brain, any time.
All is humming, peaceful. Amiable.

Out of nowhere, Clitoris stirs, chirps:
Hey, what about me?

* Postulates 1–1V are from the Second Part of the Ethics: On the Nature and Origin of the Mind (Spinoza, 1985, p. 462)

** In the old days, an emergency was usually an emergency. Imminent death was not uncommon. This is why fainting is useful: if death is about to happen, it is best to be unconscious. It was a time when the Body’s senses—more than perceptions—were needed to provide vital clues to act on during life-threatening situations. Such as when tigers lurked in the shadows or, later, when the Inquisition—rather than tigers—lurked in the shadows.
V.
The Middle
Thinking in the Middle

Any local agitation shakes the whole universe. The distant effects are minute, but they are there

*Alfred North Whitehead*

Early on in acupuncture school—about 30 years ago—one of my teachers paused during his lecture and made an offhand comment. Looking back, it was a timely comment that seeded a radical shift in the way that I perceive the world, and how I orient to experience.

He said, as a casual aside: “You know, acupuncture is all about the *multiplicity of phenomena occurring simultaneously.*” He then relocated his place in his lecture notes, and turned to the blackboard.

As I rushed to scribble down the pithy sentence, the ontological ground beneath me began to quake: To think like an acupuncturist means I need to learn to place myself within the *multiplicity of phenomena occurring simultaneously.* As I began to digest the sentence, and consider the complexity of its implication, I got my first semiconscious glimpse of pluralism. A major trajectory shift was
in motion. I could never fully return to the comfortable habits and exclusivity of binary thinking. From now on, I realised, I’ll attempt to make pluralism my ontological operative and try to place it at the nexus of my everyday experience. To do so, I’ll need to learn how to keep one perceptual foot grounded in the plurals, in the multiplicity of the fluxes. And somehow learn to move—with puny acupuncture needles—this elusive stuff called \textit{qi}, which travels amidst the multiplicities.

In that pivotal moment, the teacher’s comment spoke to a long-standing intuition: that it is impossible to step into the same place in a river twice. Change is constant. Reality is always in process. The comment also supported my ongoing sense of the human body as unfathomably complex: all the thousands of systems, trillions of cells, busy going about their businesses, whether we know it or not. And the philosophic question about the tree falling in the woods: does it need human ears to make a sound? Does direct observation—to feel, hear, sense, smell, touch—need to take place for something to be real? And maybe the Zen riddle, of the sound of one hand clapping, has no “right” answer. Nobody has it all figured out.

\textit{(more-than): A Hyphen}

Hyphen. Late Latin for the Greek \textit{huphen} (“together”): \textit{hupo} (“under”) + \textit{hen} (“one”)

A hyphen is a punctuation mark used to join two words, or parts of words, together. Hyphens join word-parts to indicate a combined meaning.

As a form, the hyphen appears as a single flat line—a mark—placed in the middle, between the word-parts.

The concept of the more-than-human—carrying its full hyphenation—had its incipient meaning as an urgent ecological canary cry in David Abram’s 1996 book, \textit{The Spell of the Sensuous: Perception and Language in a More-Than-Human World}.

Abram—having had profound immersive experiences with indigenous shamans in far-flung places—returned to his native United States with his sensing body—and an animistic perspective—leading the way. “It is all too easy for us to forget our carnal inheritance in a more-than-human matrix of sensations and sensibilities,” Abram (1996) declared, alarmed by the connections
his studies made between accelerated species extinction and the excesses of industrialised society. “We are human only in contact, and conviviality, with what is nonhuman” (p. 22), he urges, suggesting a consanguinity of the human with the world it inhabits, as expressed through his use of hyphens.

It seems to me that Abram’s *more-than-human* hyphenation conspicuously does not name the animate dimension he is so urgently attempting to foreground. His use of the more-than-human insinuates something more, but still pivots around and is tethered to the human.

A hyphen is a fine detail that can be hidden amongst the camouflaged text. When noticed—*Look! A hyphen!*—it can alter the way we think about the field’s ecology, the text’s milieu. Like Barthes’ notion of a *punctum* that has the effect of piercing the viewer of a photograph. A little off-centre detail that was incidentally captured by the photographer comes as a little sharp shock that takes place outside of language. Much like how an acupuncture needle generates a zing: a sudden felt aberrance, an agitation, an affective twirl that escapes language.

“For me,” says Erin Manning (2016), “the more-than-human is a way of making operative ways of thinking the nonhuman without excising the force of human complicity from these worldings” (p. 233). Whereas, “When I speak of the more-than human,” excising the second hyphen, “I am focusing on the realm of the human, emphasising that the category of the human is always modulated and affected by the more-than” (p. 234).

Contained in such hyphenating play are subtle but profound conceptual tilts in perspective. With the more-than-human, the human subject is hyphened-*in*—tagging behind the more-than. Fully hyphenated, the nonhuman subject shines in the foreground, as the human is close by, but shadowed. There is complicity. In Manning’s understanding, this version is aligned with Abram’s orientation. However, when the human is de-hyphenated, the category of the human loses its moorings from the shadows and is at the mercy of more-than *qualities and forces*. With the pivot removed, subjects—both human and nonhuman—are no longer present.

Hyphens—that little bit of form placed between words—move word-bodies. They aid acceleration, movement. The way an acupuncture needle potentiates as its tip twists microscopic
The concept “vitality affect” grew out of the work of developmental psychologist Daniel Stern in the 1980s, based on his astute observations of the subtle changes that take place during the interplay between infants and their mothers. Stern’s particular blend of “vitality” with “affect” refers to a specific dimension of experience: the progressively persistent interplay between a feeling process is inseparable from the activity within which the feeling arises. He noted that the body’s movement leads the way as the experience—the vitality affect—is entrained as a pattern in the infant’s body-brain.

Kinetic terms such as “surging, exploding, fleeting, fading away, effortful, accelerating, decelerating, bursting” (Stern, 1999, p. 68) convey the dynamic and interactive nature of vitality affect. Another way of putting it could be that vitality affects are the more-than qualities that are carried within their verb-ing intensities.

With such finely crafted critical distinctions and hyphenating care, Manning moves the concept away from the human towards the affective power of impersonal, inanimate forces. From this perspective, the human is no longer sidelined or pinned in a binary—in a self–other relationship—but is amidst the multitude of forces the more-than moves through.

What Manning proposes is that a “vitality affect” is at the centre of experience, not us. She is alerting us to attune to the more-than qualities that many things can have.

Hyphens are just one useful tool among dozens—hundreds—within a writer’s reach. Needles and moxa are amongst an acupuncturist’s many tools they can use to move qi. Nails and hammers are a roofer’s. A moving body is a dancer’s tool.

And a concept is a tool a philosopher can use to develop—and move—her thoughts.

The hyphen smears the division between self and others. In its inclusive operative, the hyphen generates what Alfred North Whitehead (1938) describes as “the vague sense of many, which are one; and of one, which includes the many” (p. 110). Even if I’m not aware of it, everything is always humming, united, as one, which includes the many. My thinking seeks to include as much of the many—which are one—rather than exclude the many and just single out one.

Is it possible to think in duals and plurals, simultaneously?

A needle is tapped into the spot on the top of your head and gently twirled. The twirl elicits a vaguely pleasant sensation: a feeling of warm caramel spreads across your scalp and all the way down to your toes, melting tension along the way. Breathing slows, goes deeper. Stubborn muscular knots begin to unfurl.

7. The concept “vitality affect” grew out of the work of developmental psychologist Daniel Stern in the 1980s, based on his astute observations of the subtle changes that take place during the interplay between infants and their mothers. Stern’s particular blend of “vitality” with “affect” refers to a specific dimension of experience: the progressively persistent interplay between a feeling process is inseparable from the activity within which the feeling arises. He noted that the body’s movement leads the way as the experience—the vitality affect—is entrained as a pattern in the infant’s body-brain.

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The needle’s twirl calls out, and the *one which includes the many* responds.

All in the duration of the twirl’s ebbing tide.

As a way to experience these *two senses of the one* referred to by Whitehead and Manning, I have learned how to look into the “magic eye” diagram, into its flat pixilated smear of colours, and bring it to life. With practice, I have learned how to feel the technique: by holding the image a hair’s breadth from my nose and slowly moving it away, and at the same time allowing my eyes to gently cross, a 3D image suddenly comes into view. An experiential drop into a dimension hidden from ordinary view when the one and the many merge.

After many failed attempts at the magic eye, I discovered that for a successful drop into the one and the many, I must allow my thinking-eye to be vague. When I abandon effort, and stop actively looking for something, the startle appears. As though snorkelling through the details of the shallows when—gasp!—the bottomless depths appear.

As alluded to at the start of this essay, the linguistic roots of hyphen are tangled, under one. To sever a hyphen from its roots would kill it. Out of relationship, a hyphen would be nothing.

When developing her concepts, Manning considers carefully—and strategically—where to place a hyphen, and where to leave it out. So, when a hyphen is omitted from its usual place—such as the more-than—I take it as a clue to be alert for what might be concealed within the concept Manning is exploring. As in the title of Manning’s philosophic inquiry into Simondon’s (2013) concept of individuation—that is, individuals, whether subject or objects, “come to be” (p. x)—*Always More Than One: Individuation’s Dance* that conspicuously omits the hyphen.

Over the three years at acupuncture school, several Taoist parables snaked their way along our long classroom tables as Chinese whispers, punctuating the tedium of our intensive study. I recall their arrival as a welcomed relief—and relevant distraction—to my unsuspecting ears. Parables used to convey the pluralistic philosophies of the Orient—usually through a sage’s super powers—through the lure of storytelling. Their cryptic messages pierced the monotony of rote memorisation: of the actions and
effects of hundreds of acupuncture points, their location on the body, and the theory—both ancient and modern—behind their modulation in practice. Parables that entailed Taoist principles, such as how to find the path of Wu Wei: The Middle Way.

One parable I still keep close. I’ll pull it out when I want to coax other minds away from binary thinking and towards the plurals. The parable mystically intimates what is behind the apparent magic of the ancient needling arts.

It involves a butcher named Ding, who, even after butchering thousands of oxen—slicing with ease through tens of thousands of joints—still has a razor-sharp blade on his knife. It never gets dull. This is possible, says Ding, because he has learned to find the space in between. That is, he learned how to connect with the gap, that empty space that resides between the joints.

In deference to Ding’s masterful ability to work with the yielding middle, our class, upon graduation, called ourselves “The Twenty-seven Dull Needles.”

Consider these hyphenated, declarative word-concepts:

- Post-modern (which is now so post-post).
- Post-Structuralism.
- Post-Human.
- Post-Cartesian.
- Post-Literate.

These are examples of hyphens that mark an ending, a termination. Examples where the hyphen cements a post. Even though the past is grounded within the post, that is where it ends. They have no future. Their capacity to come to be has come to an end.

Whereas—without a post—the More-than Human is generous, free to herald an opening.

Rather than drag with it an ending, telling us what isn’t, the more-than suggests what is.

The more-than affirms. It does not declare, but allows.

Yet, for me, the omission of hyphens in Manning’s title lingers as a ghostly more-than presence as she continues to intricately investigate the philosophic notion of “intensive relationality – a lived experience of affective attunement at its preconscious limit” (Manning, 2013, p. 8).
Perhaps “intensive relationality” is an activity that takes place within the betweening place, that place where the hyphen is situated? And the hyphen, at its preconscious limit, that is, without knowing it, gathers, intensely—the more-than forces situated between? Perhaps it is the affective vitality of a hyphen’s potential—to be at the centre of lived experience—that lingers in its deliberate omission?

Or could it be that the hyphen’s omission is a deliberate eradication? Am I looking for a ghost that doesn’t exist?

To add critical rigour to his more-than-human eco-cry, Abram looks to Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and the philosophy of phenomenology. The fleshy human body—the site for immediate sensate experience—is the very locus of the experiencing subject, or the experiencing “self”.

Now that I have become as astute observer of hyphens—and intensely attuned to their conceptual potential—I notice that the title of Ted Sturgeon’s 1953 science fiction novel More Than Human is also conspicuously without hyphens.

In the novel, it is the more than (hyphen-less) capacities of the characters that drive the story: of mute teleporting twins, a girl (named Janie) who can telekinetically bend things with her thoughts, a malformed Down’s Syndrome baby’s (named Baby) computational intelligence, and an savant capable of controlling another person’s thoughts and intentions through the spinning irises of his eyes.

On their own, each character’s unique power is potent enough, but when pooled into one “body”—through the initiative of the savant named Lone—their combined power is insurmountable. The band of neuro-diverse misfits—existing as the one and the many—has the potential to evolve into a new species of human, Homo Gestalt. The new, evolving whole far exceeds the composite sum of its parts.

The hyphen is the gap, the place where something exceeds the sum of its parts. The gap carries the ineffable quiver of more-than qualities.

Such as a diastema, or tooth-gap. A diastema is caused by an imbalance between the size of the teeth and the jaw. Or it can work the other way: a mismatch between teeth size and the jaw can result in crowded teeth. Either way, something in the relationship is askew, and the askewment creates – for many – a lopsided aesthetic.
Perhaps this dental analogy needs a bridge to close the gap. Ha! Puns! Often mal-aligned with eight-year-old boy toilet humour, puns can also carry more-than-forces in their word-playing effects. Puns exfoliate tension through humour. Such as the physical relief when the micro-confusion—the unexpected twist of meanings—lands a snort. A laugh. Or a guffaw that exceeds the sum of the lopsided pun’s parts.

Unlike Abram’s preoccupation with the subject’s capacity for sentience and sensitivity, Manning makes a practice of dodging the subject–object dichotomy by plunging into the middle, also known as the milieu. The elasticity of the French word—milieu—allows for a simultaneous ‘middle’ and ‘surroundings’: that is, as many enter in one coming together, or “individuation’s dance.” A conceptual cousin to milieu, Manning (2013) creates the concept of fielding, that is, “the formative field is transcendental in the sense that it does not coincide with the being whose becoming it harbors. It outspans it, overspills its limits, and extends ‘beyond’ it” (p. xi).

_Homo Gestalt_ is able do this, says preverbal Baby—articulated through a torrent of infant leg jerks, wriggles and raspberry splutters to Janie, the telekinetic and his interpreter and voice—because of bleshing. This capacity to blesh—an apparent smear of blend into mesh—activates their peculiar bond into an intensive relationality: a combined lived experience of affective attunement at its preconscious limit. Bleshing, as lived experience, extends beyond language.

However, their collaborative power as one body—made exceedingly potent by their capacity to blesh—eventually generates its own speculative destruction.

Consider this: Our nocturnal dreams have no beginning or end. They always take place in the ever-moving middle. In this way, dreams could be considered a mode of thinking that begins with process. Lured towards the ever-moving middle.

As a way to practise process-oriented thinking, Manning steps—without flinching—into contradictions, into paradox where there is no “subject”. To do so, like Whitehead she sidesteps

8. Whitehead (1938) explains: “The reason why the bifurcation of nature is always creeping back into scientific philosophy is the extreme difficulty of exhibiting the perceived redness and warmth of the fire in one system of relations with the agitated molecules of carbon and oxygen, with the radiant energy from them, and with the various functionings of the material body. Unless we produce the all-embracing relations, we are faced with a bifurcated nature; namely, warmth and redness on one side, and molecules, electrons and ether on the other side” (p. 32).
the bifurcation and difference perceived as an exclusionary wedge that splits this from that. Instead, because process has no beginning or end, she is always thinking amidst the inclusive middle, that is, the differential.

Hyphens as agents for *betweening* and *becoming*: so placed—in the middle between words or parts of words—the hyphen draws together more than one thing. It can become another useful *betweening–becoming* device in literary arts practice, along with juxtaposition, fragmentation, alliteration, oxymoron, metaphor and white space, among many others.

I wonder: would the presence of a hyphen within their more than human capacities allow *Homo Gestalt* to move and evolve into limitless possibilities of the anterior *now*? Without any natural external restraints—no *yin* to restrain a blesh’s *yang*, or *yang* to engender a blesh’s *yin*—the new species, *Homo Gestalt*, is doomed to a narrative of a regretful—albeit speculative—posterior.

Or at least doomed to an infinity of unbounded bleshing: without a more-than differential present (such as a hyphen) to disperse their bleshing, they are unable to evolve into a becoming. *Homo Gestalt* can only *be*, and never “individuate, or come to be” (in Manning, 2013, p. x).

William Strunk and E. B. White, in *The Elements of Style* (1979), share an amusing anecdote about how the hyphen “can play tricks on the unwary, as it did in Chattanooga, when two newspapers merged—the *News* and the *Free Press*. Someone introduced a hyphen into the merger, and the paper became the *Chattanooga News–Free Press*, which sounds as though the paper were news-free, or devoid of news” (p. 35).

Or perhaps, from another perspective, the hyphen conceals the power to create fresh meaning. That is, how it is capable of generating a semiotic twist, as does oxymoron, when two disparate meanings combine. But Strunk & White (1979) do not see the hyphen’s hidden potential in the Chattanooga instance. “Obviously,” they conclude, “we ask too much of a hyphen when we ask it to cast a spell over words it does not adjoin” (p. 35).

However, they do consider the long view: “The steady evolution of language seems to favor union: two words eventually become one, usually after a period of hyphenation” (p. 35), a view that could be considered to be in sync with the force of more-than. That
is, as Massumi alludes to, “the wonder [that] remains of the ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one” (Manning, 2013, p. ix).

Perhaps the hyphen, in its capacity to absorb two previously odd-fitting words, is up for the task of casting wonder?

Even a scant few and well-placed hyphens can make possible the proliferation of more-than qualities across thousands of word-bodies. This is a feat not unlike how Jesus fed the multitudes with five loaves and two fishes. And even the fragments—gathered after the mass feeding—were able to keep on feeding more.

Fishy tall-tales? Messianic magic? Wonder casting?

Or possible proof of the powerful lure of the “one and the many”—of Whitehead’s “event”—proliferating.

As the force of creativity cleaves the way forward into infinity.

Manning reiterates the subject-less position in her paper, “Wondering the World Directly – or, How Movement Outruns the Subject”. In it she makes it known that Merleau-Ponty, in the few years before his sudden, untimely death, was teaching Whitehead’s work on nature. In the notes that accompany Merleau-Ponty’s final writing, The Visible and the Invisible, he admits bravely that his seminal work Phenomenology of Perception has led him astray (Manning, 2014, p. 116). The suggestion is that, had Merleau-Ponty more time to develop his thoughts, he too would have made the move away from the philosophy of the flesh and the subject–object dichotomy towards Whitehead’s process, “a mode of thought that begins with process, and never with a ‘subject’ of a process, and which does not privilege the human but works instead from a perspective that decries what Whitehead calls the ‘bifurcation of nature’” (p. 116).

Hyphens, in their doing, break up compound words. They aerate word-soil to allow for fresh meaning-growth to take place.

Hyphens also make compound words. They graft words together, generating the possibility of new meaning.

For Manning, and other process-oriented philosophers, inanimate forces—such as creativity—propel and proliferate process:

One of the most evident ways a process differs from its products (a process in process is its product!) is in the span of its activity. A process brings together the factors that go into bringing about a result by drawing on a different,
always wider, field of activity than the product once arisen will entertain. (Manning, 2013, p. xi)

The creative process—as it goes forward—produces force. Hyphen-ing, as an activity, is sticky. Through the process of stickiness, it gathers.

Massumi, Manning’s frequent co-creator of concepts, says:

Processually speaking, a making is always bigger than the made. The making includes, in germ, the form of what will come to be […] To understand individuation, this more-than of becoming can never be lost from sight. (Manning, 2013, p. xi)

A hyphen includes. And makes possibilities bigger. Dashes are used to separate groups of words, unlike hyphens, which are used to separate parts of words. Strunk & White’s instructions are to “Use a dash to set off an abrupt break or interruption” (2000, p. 9). A dash dashes—light skips—darts—across a sentence. The trace of a water skipper as it “walks” across water. A hyphen separates by generating a sucking action between words. For a dash, there is nothing but surface tension between the dash—water skipper’s legs and the paper—water. As a dash sets off, quick in its movement, a hyphen embeds, and stays in intimate proximity.

Hyphens are one of language’s materials—a kind of glue—placed between two surfaces so that the one and the many can move, together. Particularly in response to chaotic conditions, as “chaotic self-ordering depends,” argues Massumi (2002), “on a sensitivity to initial conditions no matter how far the system [sic word] has drifted from its original terminus” (p. 227). He asks: “Isn’t this enduring sensitivity the connecting thread of affect meandering impersonally through the world?” He replies to his own question with the succinct answer, tucked in with hyphens: “World—affect: life—glue of matter” (2002, p. 237).

Extending Massumi’s logic, I ask: are not hyphens one of affect’s materials? An impersonal method of bringing together the one and the many—the more-than—into selfless self-order?
Again, staying true to its Greek origin, *huphen*, a hyphen’s presence tethers two (or more) words together. As offsprings of hyphenation, the words are no longer separate, but now move together, “under”, “one.”

Without a self, or a subjective “I” to orient to, who or what leads the way into the anterior now? Hyphens are handy, but how can the more-than gain purchase in language without a subject to gain traction, to push off against?

How can knowledge be made if the more-than is ineffable?

(more-than): A Subject

*Subject.* From *sub* (“under,” “below”)  
+ *jacere* (“to throw”).

Literally, to throw under.

“I think it’s just psychological,” you say. This is a common refrain I hear from supine subjects on the treatment table. A reflexive throwaway line that tends to dismiss the soma over the psyche, and suggests that acupuncture cannot penetrate the amorphous mind. The psyche—the psychological subject—is *thrown under* the soma.

The act of splitting the mind from the body is a culturally petulant habit. A kneejerk condition sanctioned by the benign laziness of Cartesian thinking.

By protocols and mouldy models.

By the circumscribed search for a single causative factor.

By methods that have overstayed their tenure.

By a lack of considered, reflective thinking. And lack of imagination.

By an aversion to ambiguity and an intolerance of mess. That compulsion to *resolve* difference. That pesky “or” that lubricates binary thinking and keeps the object/body in opposition to the subject/mind.

And, mostly, by the static, mechanistic model of the human body, where everything is reduced into separate parts. The act of reducing extinguishes more-than potentials.

And with the rusty model comes non-conscious expectations: as though my job is to peer in under the bonnet, check the sparkplugs and fluid levels, kick the tyres, and occasionally do some panel beating.
The culturally implicit expectation is for me to fix things. With my puny needles, when nothing is added or taken away—just moved—through carefully placed and gently executed twirls within the always-changing flow of flesh and fluids.

All the meetings and occurrences that take place within the register of the more-than: as the whole body thinks.

Abram’s phenomenological orientation puts the subject at the centre of experience. Smell, sight, hearing, touch, and taste lead the way forward, with cognition coaxed into the background. There is a constant swivelling that takes place between the mind and the body, between the senses and perception. In phenomenology, the embodied subject is at the centre of the swivel. Or, as Merleau-Ponty (1964) puts it, the subject “goes towards things from, as a starting point, this body to which I myself am fastened” (p. 173).

Process-oriented philosophy, on the other hand, reorients the swivel—from its function as an intermediary in phenomenology—to a processual twist within. Process takes place within movement’s differential: within thoughts; within vessels; within the forces always at work and play (stillness and emptiness are forces!); and within the differential of the swivelling between. Whitehead’s (1938) reality is located within a swivel: “we are an activity within the world, and the world is within us” (p. 227).

A hyphen twists a word-pair into the middle. Far from passive, the nonhuman hyphen takes on agency as a relational activity. And like gooey connective tissue in the body, a hyphen is discrete yet very much active.

Due to their middling presence, both forms respond to movement in their relational twists and articulations.

There is no longer an inside relative to an outside, no subject in relation to other, just vast surfaces relating to other surfaces as they glide, undulate, twist; all unified, especially when chaotic. With a more-than force—a vitality affect—always at the centre of the movement, accessible to all, not just finely attuned otherworldly shamans and seers.

Like the way Butcher Ding instructs through his actions: practise by attuning to the space between and the middle way will yield to the knife-needle-word’s blade.
When I needle, my subjective “I” slips away. I am merely a fleshy quiver in the treatment room, listening with my hands, attuning to the vibrations within your fleshy quivers. As the needle grasps fine microscopic connective tissue, we twist into the differential.

When I write, my fingertips think as they attempt to capture and convey the vibrations—often felt as unexpected wafts of turbulence —arising within my internal milieu, as an activity arising from my instance of writing.

Thoughts twist into the differential. Many cuts and distinctions are made.

As my whole body thinks.

“All sense perception is merely one outcome of the dependence of our experience upon bodily functionings,” says Whitehead (1938), and with one logical swipe, Abram’s phenomenological world—of senses and perception with subject at the centre, albeit a preference for the nonhuman—disintegrates. With the deceptive ease of common sense, Whitehead (1938) states, simply, “I am experiencing and my body is mine” (p. 159). Whitehead is his experience in its doing, and “the world for me is nothing else than how the functionings of my body present it for my experience” (p. 163). To think with Whitehead is to recover a common sense that has been lost in the recesses of the binary wedged between mind and body, between reason and intuition.

Of course we are experiencing and our bodies are ours. This makes good sense. But the habitual tug of the binaries—of splits and bifurcations—is a stubborn and chronic one. The mutual exclusivity of this or that kind of thinking.

How to make a practice of thinking along and amidst the undulating plateaus of plurals? Within the ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one? How to experience our body’s activities as they fluctuate under our noses? That is, how to experience our bodies as forces and flows amidst our sense perceptions? How to simultaneously feel and think, touch and calculate, tease and soothe?

Perhaps borrow from the practice of improvisation, its generative and inclusive response, always: “Yes, and …” that cleaves into the anterior now. Always affirmative, abundant.

And practise sitting in the discomfort of excess. Resist the speed of scissors. Linger in a vibrating dissonance, such as the percussive sweet spot that is slightly off-centre.
And make a practice of thinking into the mutual *inclusivity* (Massumi, 2014, p. 4) of this and that. Such a thinking practice requires lingering in “a changing field of reciprocally presupposing differencings, complexly imbricated with one another all along the line” (pp. 3-4). To invite difference invites mess, pooling in paradox.

“Where does your body want attention, *now?*” is my usual counter-refrain. My question flings you into your body as it presents its [Whiteheadian] functionings for your experience. Into that quivering space where wonder remains, always present to the ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one.

Too often my question is met with a bewildering search of the ceiling. As though experiencing has levitated up into that back corner. As eyes search for an answer, the fleshy curious organ housed between ears gets busy scanning memories for an insult or injury to report as a cause. Seeking out that belligerent single causative factor. Maybe it was that bad night’s sleep. Or last night’s bad curry. Or that fight you had with your neighbour. Or the worry about the ambiguous results from that blood test. Or, a popular reason: too much time spent sitting at the computer, staring at a flat screen.

But more often than not, the causes are multiple, landing as the varying manyness of all that comes as one. That the multiplicity of phenomena occur simultaneously.

Like the experience of dropping into the dimension of the Magic Eye: into the body’s pixelated smear of moving thoughts as it presents its functionings for your experience.

It is my speculation that blesh—a linguistic blend of words, or a portmanteau—does not offer the liberating possibilities that a hyphen can offer. With blesh there is no space allowed for a differential. All activity takes place in a suffocating, undifferentiated smear.

Perhaps Homo Gestalt’s destruction is unleashed because Sturgeon did not allow his characters to hyphenate together. A hyphen’s discrete presence could have allowed for movement—even if just wriggling room—for the affective vitalities of the differential to express itself. Hyphenated—with that wee bit of form inserted between—Homo-Gestalt would have had room to breathe into their differential; they could have expanded into their individuation as they come to be.
My refrain to myself, as a way to etch it within the space between, into my own experiencing: Yes, we are in the world, and the world is within us.

I turn the refrain into a practice that folds the outside into the inside and the inside into the outside, like a Möbius strip. I repeat it over and over as a mantra that propels me forward into my own becoming: I am always in the world, and the world is always within me.

I stifle a frustrated urge to bark at you: “But your whole body thinks! You are an activity within your body!”

Instead, as a response to your efforts to respond to my question, my fingers get busy and listen to the spaces within that call out from under your skin. To meet the call, I respond with a needle’s precise and pointy touch, and give it a twirl. A series of soft zings spread across your internal horizon. Across the fluidly undulating plateau of a multitude of surfaces.

Almost instantly, your eyes glaze over as you drop: into parasympathetic bliss where the more-than activities of the one and the many take place within. Drop into Whitehead’s experiencing, or William James’ pure experience, no longer as white-coated abstractions, but as live, felt experience.

Into and within the ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one.

Let’s meet in the middle, orient to within the hyphenating space where our experiences co-mingle, entwine within the forces of the ever-present anterior-now.

By thinking within the undulating and formless logic of process-oriented philosophy, the epistemological Houdini escapes the subject–object binary straightjacket and vapourises into the incalculable constant of swirling activities and forces.

The subject—what is thrown under—arises, renewed, not as a noun, but as a verb: as a more-than activity—a doing—to be explored and discovered, in direct experience.
“The writer can only imitate a gesture,” says Barthes in *Death of the Author* (1977), “that is always anterior, never original” (p. 68). Barthes insists that an author—the subject doing the writing—does not exist prior to or outside of language, that is, it is *the writing* that is anterior to the author. The identifiable body of the author is only along for the ride.

For Barthes, there is no subject to throw under, nor is there an authority to do the throwing (although, the irony of Barthes’ own death—he succumbed to injuries after he was struck by a laundry van—does not go unnoticed as a subject). Instead, “[The author’s] only power is to mix writings [...] in such a way as never to rest on any one of them” (p. 146).

This is a challenging reorientation: without the author author-ing, how to orient to the text? With no author at the wheel, where will we wind up? And what will it all mean?

The epistemological Houdini, having escaped the binary straightjacket, materialises as a shapeless semiotic force and is present within the swirling mix of text. For Barthes, it is no longer the author with the agency. Instead, agency lies within the indeterminate movement of the mixing of text. And in the movement, new demands are made on the reader: to bring the text to life and into meaning, there must be engagement. Passivity is no longer an option.

Hyphens become a centrifugal force that keep the co-joined word-body intact and prevent it from spraying into smithereens.

With the author dead and no central authority to bestow meaning, a priori, it is the movement and the materiality of language within its own tissues—its own subject—that orients to itself.

The text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture [...] Life never does more than imitate the book, and the book itself is only a tissue of signs, an imitation that is lost, infinitely deferred. (Barthes, 1977, p. 147)

Semiotics, liberated from the definitive borders of Structuralism, is left unmoored. New ideals of textuality begin to form within the anarchic freed space left by *subjectus morticus*. 
As you sink deeper into the treatment table, calm arises. Within the still space you recall how your specialist “pointed the genetic bone” at you; how they made a speculation laced with the voice of authority that set in motion a torrent of fear and anxiety. How, since you carry the marker for the breast cancer gene, there is a strong statistical possibility that you will develop the disease. That, bluntly, in their medical opinion, you should get a “prophylactic mastectomy”.

Word-forms careless in their distinction and harmful in their effect. Words delivered—sealed tight in scientific conjecture—without acknowledging the ambiguity that lurks within their statistical edges. Words that slam shut possibilities. And terrorise.

I seethe: How do they know?

It’s no wonder you arrived scattered into a million pieces. That’s not psychological: that’s your body—your Whiteheadian experiencing—freaking out.

With the removal of the stabilising centre, other critics and theorists get caught up in the Post-Structuralist updraught and attempt to steady—not fix—a fresh conceptual location for the text. The Language Poets, who gathered about a decade after the Death of the Author, also place linguistics and form at the nexus of meaning-making. They are also committed to removing the Lyric “I”—the interior subjectivity of the poet—that has dominated poetry for centuries.

Perhaps Duchamp’s concept of the infrathin is perceived amidst the open, frayed edges of structure. For Duchamp, it is a concept that is necessarily impossible to define, and he can only give examples of it as lived experiences. Such as:

— the warmth of a seat (which has just been left) is infra-thin (no. 4)
— the swirl of cigar smoke is infra-thin
— just touching: while trying to place one plane surface precisely on another plane surface you pass through some infra-thin moments (no. 45)
(cited in Perloff, p. xxvi).

In ancient China, at public hangings, families would rush to the dirt below the dangling feet of their freshly hanged relative and scoop up the dirt. It was believed that at the moment of death the dense
which most closely resembles the soul in Western culture and resides in the liver while living—drops to the ground. At the same time the po—akin to spirit and resides in the more light and ethereal lung tissue—ascends towards the heavens. The collected ancestral hun was then mixed into the soil of the family’s garden plot, where the ginseng roots twist it into their cellulose fibres.

The more-than qualities of the dead relative’s hun live on as the ginseng is steeped into longevity tea.

As you recall out loud the doctor’s words the anxiety surges again, vibrating in its affective dissonance. I twirl a needle in response: the tip tissue-ing as its self-less deed chases out the nocebo—the placebo’s evil twin—bone-pointing effects. The needle’s counter-effect reassures you: it is not happening, now. And there is a very good chance that it will never happen.

We know not what our bodies will do.

As you relax again, gravity pulls you down into another infra-thin layer. The dissonance recedes.

The anxiety dissipates and with it the harmful residue of the pointed bone. The calm widens, seeps into the corners of the room. A resonant hum settles in.

Infra (“within”) hyphenated with thin creates infinite possibilities. We know not what the word-body will do.

Barthes (with Foucault and Derrida), having unpicked the logical seams of Structuralist thought, unleashed a radical critique of human subjectivity. “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing” (1977, p. 147). With Post-Structuralism situating itself within the frayed ends of Structuralism, the Knower–Known relationship is in tatters.

Again, I ask: without a subject to swivel around, and with no omnipotent “voice”, how is meaning made?

Barthes’ (1977) clue: to orient to the form of language itself, to the force of form in-forming: “Writing is that neutral, composite, oblique space where our subject slips away, the negative where all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (p. 142). With the author’s identifiable body gone—no psyche or soma—it is language itself that knows a “subject”: “Linguistically, the author is no more than the instance writing just as I is nothing
other than the instance saying I: language knows a ‘subject,’ not a ‘person.’” (p. 145).

When I twirl a needle, the force of the twirl mixes movement, bringing the forces to impinge upon flesh. On their own, needles are meaningless. They need flesh to twirl, a response to make movement. Just as gravity—without a body to pull against, to shape—is nothing.

For poet-essayist Lyn Hejinian, it is necessary to enter the vast uncharted internal territory that has opened up since the death of the singular subject: “The ‘personal’ is already a plural condition,” Hejinian (1991) says, and goes on to try and locate the more-than condition:

Perhaps one feels that it is located somewhere within, somewhere inside the body – in the stomach? the chest? the genitals? the throat? the head? One can look for it and already one is not oneself, one is several, incomplete, and subject to dispersal” (p. 70).

Like Barthes, Hejinian orients to the form of language itself and to language’s pursuit of knowing a subject, not a person.

Hejinian’s description—of the impossibility of singling out the singular personal—conjures, for me, the experience of being within Whitehead’s body functionings-world: to be amidst the ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one.

The more-than forces cannot perform if wedged between binaries. There is no room for the more-than to move. No play or give. A shift in perspective needs to take place to liberate the more-than forces. When perceived as moving within the affective body’s assemblage of forces—thought and feeling, reason and intuition, flesh and virtual—the more-than generates a generous indeterminate futurity: everything is in mutual inclusion, and moves together, unified. The “ghost in the machine” (Ryle, 1949) is no longer needed. With the ghost gone, what lingers are the more-than traces of the sum of its parts.
(more-than):
Lyric “I”

Lyn Hejinian is amongst the revolutionary band of Language Poets that gathered in the 1970s in counter-response to the subjective excesses of the Lyric “I”. Hejinian examines the liberating role form can play as an organising principle in her essay “The Rejection of Closure”. When creating form, she orients towards the “open” text – “when all the elements of the work are maximally excited” (2000, p. 43). The closed text, according to Hejinian, allows for only a single interpretation. Hejinian’s main concern in the essay concerns the writer’s subject position. She positions it anterior to the author, as “writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them” (p. 51).

It is writing’s form as a dynamic force that Hejinian (2000) foregrounds its potential power:

Writing’s forms are not merely shapes but forces; formal questions are about dynamics—they ask how, where, and why the writing moves, what are the types, directions, number, and velocities of a work’s motion (p. 42).

Amid the unfathomable complexities, the needle’s tip makes distinct twirls as we cleave our way into the anterior beyond.

In a tone of a manifesto—perhaps not for just Language Poets, but for any writer who considers the political implications of the subject position—Hejinian (2000) declares:

What saves this from becoming a vast undifferentiated mass of data and situation is one’s ability to make distinctions. The open text is one that both acknowledges the vastness of the world and is formally differentiating. It is form that provides an opening” (p. 41).

Sustaining the manifesto tone, Hejinian adds: “the conjunction of form with radical openness may be a version of ‘paradise’ for which the poem yearns” (p. 42).

Twenty-something Insta-Poets are currently on the rise in the intra-spaces of cyberspace, using the virtually fixed platform Instagram. Neo-sentimentality is experiencing a virulent spread
amidst the media’s ecosystem. The sharing culture is swooning, in unison, and in droves.

Major affective gushes of sentimentality—not minor gestures—are the rage in contemporary “poetry”.

Such as the cyber-celebrity sensation Atticus, who oozes Insta-epigrams of youthful yearnings: such as love her but leave her wild and she was a broken doll dreaming of a boy with glue. As his followers swoon, many tattoo the words deep under their tender skin.

Atticus insists on wearing a mask during his live performances. It is an attempt, he says, to conceal his identity (his Lyric “I”?) and allow his words—the poetry, the form—to convey its potency without his identifiable face. But the mask—pulled snug over his wild crop of thick hair—is unable to contain his immense and bulging boy-man persona. His white knees shine under meticulously ripped jeans: https://www.instagram.com/atticuspoetry/?hl=en.

Within the matrix is another cyber-celebrity, Insta-Poetess Rupi Kaur. Her epigraphic poems, such as she was music, but he had his ears cut off and the rape will tear you in half, but it will not end you, elicit hundreds of thousands of “heart” emojis and other emphatic responses. Skin-ink follows. The force of mounting emojis and cash sales catapults her book of poetry, Milk and Honey, to the top of the New York Times bestseller list: https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/oct/07/now-its-the-coolest-thing-rise-of-rupi-kaur-helps-boost-poetry-sales

I wonder and worry about a poem’s right to yearn—as Hejinian says—for its paradise. That in order for a poem’s paradise to materialise, the conjecture of form with radical openness is needed.

Is the Lyric “I” back in fashion, even with Atticus’s flimsy mask and failed attempts to conceal his persona-form? I fear the compulsion to tally “likes” and tattoo will out-force the more-than gestures, hidden amidst the infra-thin moments and textures. I also fear that the insidious forces of consumer capitalism—its clever marketing within the somnambulating zeitgeist of cyberspace—will smother lyric’s affective vitality.

Poet Michael Davidson writes:

The ideal of subjectivity itself is not so much the source as the product of specific sociohistorical structures. The subject upon which the lyric impulse is based, rather than
being able to generate its own language of the heart, is also constituted within a world of public discourse. The lyric ‘I’ emerges as a positional relation. Its subjectivity is made possible by a linguistic and ultimately social structure in which ‘I’ speaks (in Perloff, 2004, p. 285).

For the Insta-poets, where is the differential? Perhaps, optimistically, it is present between cyber-surfaces, as infra-thin swirling wisps of cyber-smoke? Or located within the same-same repetition felt as a little Deleuzian difference? Or maybe it is the positional relation of social media, the contemporary social milieu?

It is my guess that the positional relation of Instagram poets and their followers—as products of their specific sociohistorical structures, namely cyberspace as it vibrates digitally within the forces of consumer capitalism—are not attuned to the ineffable forces of the more-than. Instead, their attunement has a different immediacy: to the public pulses and impulses of social media.

But who am I to judge? Me, who belongs with the ageing band of heretics, increasingly critical and cranky.

Who, when twenty-something (around the time the Language Poets banded), was slam-dancing with real punks, all of us sweaty and bruised.

Who now puts real needles in people to make them feel better.

Who worries about toddlers on iPads and their future dexterity.

Who worries about today’s twenty-somethings and their bad tattoos.

Who thinks hard about hyphenation.

Who still rails against the abuse of power, in all of its insidious forms.

And I worry about a poem’s right to yearn, and what is needed to make that possible.

For Hejinian (2000), “the writer relinquishes total control and challenges authority as a principle and control as a motive […] The open text often emphasizes or foregrounds process […] that is, it resists reduction and commodification” (p. 43).

For form to provide an opening for the text, say the Language Poets, there is an “Emphasis on the materiality of the text—its actual language, syntax, use of white space, and typographical elements” (Perloff, 2004, p. xxviii). More specifically, for Hejinian, one set of devices that can open a text includes:
arrangement and rearrangement, repetition, and careful placement of compositional “gaps” in the text which must be filled in by the reader (Perloff, 2004, p. xxviii).

Once the Lyric “I” has been removed, Hejinian says—along with the other New Critical heretics—it “makes it impossible to interpret a given poem; one can only ‘experience’ it” (Perloff, 2004, p. xxviii). This perspective blends well with William James’ (1912) philosophy of radical empiricism, of relational experience leading the way: “Our fields of experience have no more definite boundaries than have our fields of view. Both are fringed forever by a more that continuously develops, and that continuously supersedes them as life proceeds. The relations, generally speaking, are as real here as the terms are” (p. 33).

In the renewed calm, you talk about your sister’s early death due to breast cancer. As you do, I watch the swirl of moxa smoke and think of Duchamp’s moving swirl of cigar smoke as infra-thin. Perhaps some of moxa’s therapeutic effects are found in the infra-thin: how it soothes as it permeates the edges of epigenetic possibilities. You might carry the gene, but still we do not know what a body can do. Junk genes—the indeterminate form that makes up most of our genetic material—are as vast as uncharted galaxies. We—those of us desiring evidence-based scientific proof—do not yet know what junk genes are capable of.

Can the death of subjectus—of authority—in critical thinking, also seep into the static reductionistic model that has dominated our conception of the body?

Can we loosen the grip on fear, and ambiguity? How to venture into our anterior beyond without dragging dozens of suitcases full of fixed beliefs?

Can we negotiate this: at least try and give up the bag containing the Body/Mind, East/West split?  

9. About midway through my candidature, the Chinese Medicine Registration Board performed a random audit. The board rejected my submission of my PhD research towards some of my required annual Continuing Professional Development points, and scoffed at my rationale that “my PhD research investigates how to better communicate, in contemporary terms—through the discipline of Creative Writing—concepts fundamental to the practice of traditional East Asian medicine.” The board issued me a “professional misconduct” warning and required me—as a part of several undertakings—to only use “evidence-based” research, and that any of my publications are to be in significant peer-reviewed journals. It is my serious concern that the rich, complex pluralism at the medicine’s core is under threat of getting squeezed into a reductionist and standardised model, the one used by conventional medicine. Subsequent to the audit and the Board’s warnings, I went on to publish two articles—foregrounding the rich pluralism at the core of this ancient medical art, expressed in lyric language—in a peer-reviewed journal whose editors share my concerns about the future of our medicine.
Within the past 10 years or so, numerous body therapists—such as myotherapists (a kind of masseur who appreciates the dynamic, elastic properties of fascia and connective tissue), osteopaths, chiropractors, and physiotherapists—are performing on their patients what is called “dry needling.” Dry needling uses acupuncture needles. It is called “dry” because nothing wet is injected into the body. Their intention—from a mechanistic view of the body—is to circumvent the pain pathway between a (usually painful) knot that has formed within muscular tissue, or myofascia (muscle entwined with fascia, or connective tissue) and where pain is processed: the brain. The dry needling technique involves inserting an acupuncture needle into the belly of the knot and giving it several major twists. The tip of the needle wraps around connective tissue fibres and relays a strong message to the brain as a way to circumvent a pain message that has been habituated by the body. The brain registers the major twist and backs off from the site of pain in the body: the knot.

For acupuncturists, trained to think within the theoretical contexts of East Asian medicine (that is, pluralistically), dry needling only addresses the symptom, not the source of the problem, the source of the knot. Knots don’t suddenly land in muscle tissue. Acupuncturists think relationally, and look for a dynamic within the body’s complex flows that is askew. Where the flow of qi—that ungraspable stuff that travels within the middle space—is blocked, disrupted. Impinged, occluded.

For many acupuncturists, including myself, dry needling is an appropriation of an ancient healing practice that has been taken completely out of the therapeutic context from which it was intended. And the appropriation confuses people. Yet it has become a commercially viable adjunct to these other body modalities: dry needling can get results but it doesn’t treat the source of the problem. Knots come back, so clients come back for more major twists when the knots return.

Dry needling, put simply, is bad acupuncture. And Insta-poets simply write bad poetry.

Acupuncture, done well, orients towards qi, connecting to the more-than forces and flows that are always in our midst. Only then can a treatment become more-than the sum of its parts.
And for poetry to be poetry, the form needs to capture lyric qualities, so the language can carry the more-than forces, tendencies and textures. Only then can a poem express more-than the sum of its word-parts.

For Hejinian, it is the scattered condition of the personal plural—with no gravitational mass of the Lyric “I” at its centre—that allows the form to sustain an opening. And it is the dynamic forces and velocities within the text—such as lyric freed from the “I”—that maintains its orientation towards becoming, another kind of indeterminate opening. The capacity to make distinctions becomes the gravitational glue that keeps the form from scattering into oblivion, into the vast undifferentiated mass of data and situation.

Lyric is the more-than dark matter of literary arts: like junk genes in our genetic material, there is plenty of it, and we know it is there, but it eludes capture. Dark matter in the universe is only theoretically quantifiable. Try to find it, and it vanishes. Its presence is everywhere, despite the impossibility of its real-time measurement. Due to dark matter’s pervasive presence, many cosmologists are in agreement: the old theories no longer work.

When writing is oriented to Hejinian’s “open” text, the text-body is “maximally excited” and quivers with possibilities. It is always in process, amidst the thresholds and intensities and flows, when “Formation is more inclusive than form-and-function,” says Massumi. “The span of a becoming is broader than a being. […] This more-than of becoming is never lost from sight. […] Never losing sight of the ontogenetic differing of process from its products, of constitution from the constituted” (in Manning, 2016, p. xi).

Within the becoming of form(ation), writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them.

The hyphen provides a twist within the differential. The differential is neither here nor there. The differential is where relation resides, in the Jamesian sense, as “a making apparent of a third space opened up for experience in the making” (Manning, 2014, p. 2). Within that third space—within the twist—resides a multitude of associated milieu, which is “active with tendencies, tunings, incipient agitations, each of which are felt before they are known” (2014, p. 3). This is where the minor gesture—and the more-than—dwell, as not-quite-yet-happening possibilities. In the third space “relation folds experience into it such that what emerges is more than the sum of its parts” (Manning, 2014, p. 2).
Into the relational twist: the intensity of feeling gathers forces into a grimace, a wince, a swoon, as they twist into the middle. Minor gestures transmit the more-than of texture, flow, duration, and agitation: all are tendencies on the minor move.

Hyphens carry the quiver in the materiality of language: a little mark made in the interstices that aids a poem’s capacity to yearn.

Since the register of the more-than is ineffable, how to recognise it? Manning, in *The Minor Gesture* (2016), offers one clue which she tucks within William James’ notion of “pure experience”, which is “on the cusp of the virtual and the actual: in the experiential register of the not-quite-yet” (p. 29).

Since the natures of lyric—and of *qi*, and the minor gesture, and the differential and affective vitalities—are elusive, the more-than can never be fully comprehended, nor completely grasped, nor claimed. These forces, these qualities and tendencies, can never be held. Can never be owned.

The more-than will always yearn. Within the not-quite-yet. And, and. And.
Write in the Middle

...and

and,

and feel the force of form,

in-forming

Lean into the generous give—or elastic play—of French words. Pick them up, feel their juicy jouissance, and fold them into the writing:

_Collage._

_Frisson._

_Milieu._

_Collage_ (French for “glue”) writing generates a form that “allows all the elements to be maximally excited” (Hejinian, 2000, p. 43). Edges impinge as overlapping layers press in on each other as infra-thin tension builds. Tiny bits of white space—as miniscule as air sacs in the lungs—allow the pressure to vent, and are felt as a crack lets in fresh whispers of moving air. The form stirs.
With frisson.
(And hyphens tether excitement and keep the form from scattering. Just).

Frisson, a noun, is French for “a brief moment of emotional excitement, shudder, shiver, thrill”.

Such as: That frisson, that exultant moment, or, A needle’s tip twists miniscule strands of flesh, creating frisson. The frisson is felt as a zing.

Frisson is another more-than force.

Massumi looks to the movement that takes place within spider webs—as well as French words—as a way to feel the force of form in-forming: “It is not the actual structure of the web but through the web is a structuring of the milieu” (personal communication, Montreal, 2016).

Milieu is a French term with en deux meanings: “surroundings” and “the middle”.

Massumi explains: “It is by virtue of the associated milieu [that is, those ‘connective forces’] that energy moves: the vibrations here and there allow the spider to perceive what is there and get nourishment [substantial]. Think of movements through it made possible by the compositions of the concrete thing, but is not the concrete thing” (ibid).

This suggests that it is through the method of making—or the process of structuring the associated milieu, such as the jostling dynamism of many-varying literary techniques as they are composed on the page—that moves the language in and through the vibrating web-text structure. Stretching Massumi’s spider web metaphor further, the text comes to be only because of the movements between the compositions of the text, but is not the text itself.

Language Poet and essayist Joan Retallack (2003) shares Massumi’s Francophilia. For example, she considers “the play of intellect and imagination that characterises French prose styles [is] a model of the poiesis of curiosity that constantly flirts with a resistance to authority” (p. 37). The stylised French method of making can offer a model that situates play and curiosity at its nexus and “exists in

10. According to French philosopher Gilbert Simondon (2012), in the process of individuating—that is, the process of coming-to-be, which includes nonhuman agency—the associated milieu acts as a connective force. In the context of thinking through Massumi’s spider web, the associated milieu maintains the solidarity of the forces as the web comes to be within the vast field of relations, within which, our thoughts also move.
the transitional space between individual and tradition, subjective experience and larger reality, as well as that scintillating spectrum of ‘in-between’ that haunts all binaries” (p. 37). The active play between reason and intuition, for example, activates a more-than quality that seeps into the associated milieu, permeating the edges of authority.

Instead of swerving around the troublesome in-between space, Retallack (2003) heads straight for it: “We can learn from playful forms in the humanities, sciences, mathematics, and the arts—scenes of intellectual, imaginative, sensual thought experiments—that we need not get stuck at either end of the dichotomous structures we’re so prone to ritually enact” (p. 36). Perhaps Retallack’s spirited inclination towards play and experimentation with language—and thinking—came from her extensive experience with Language Writing.

The Language Poets consider poetic language to be a mutable material form that can be used as a potential political force for change. Retallack (2003) offers a titillating proposition for a way to reconceive the binaries, and prevent the habitual tendency to get stuck in dichotomised thinking, dominated by that pesky either/or: “The intelligently informed playful imagination makes it possible to experience binaries as magnetic poles which form productive limiting conditions of vast field of cultural energy, i.e. cultural playgrounds” (p. 36). Similar to Massumi’s thought experiment involving spider webs, Retallack’s agile intellect romps within the middle, with the “in-between” as the site of play.

Write in the middle, between the moving poles. Poles greased by the movement of forces and flows and tendencies, and the attractions and repulsions that are always changing, on the move. Vibrations are picked up, slippery surfaces and breezy byways to feel and negotiate a way along and through. Cuts and distinctions are made along the way.

Writing in the middle allows for the binaries and the plurals—the one, which includes the many—to coexist, and potentially, to collaborate.

The text-web feels the forces of form, in-forming. It quivers. The essaying body responds to the cuts and distinctions. The essaying body makes propositions as it moves forward.

To up the ante on the cultural playground, Retallack (2003) adds: “The field of potential within the essay lies in the active zones between believing and doubting” (p. 36). Maybe this includes the
active zone of ambiguity: as an uneasy, more-than feeling-force that swells with restless creative potential. And perhaps the “field of potential” Retallack refers to is the capacity for the binaries and the plurals to coexist simultaneously. The plurals are always poised in-between, in the middle, hovering within Manning’s not-quite-yet, so thinking can never be stuck between dichotomies. Or if it does get stuck, it is easy enough get freed by just stepping back into the moving middle. The binaries, in Retallack’s reimagining, are now just forces and tendencies, no longer squabbling entities on the cultural playground that have the habit of hogging attention and excluding the differential.

The only constraints now are generative, not reductive.

The plurals and the binaries can now, potentially, play together.

Juliana Spahr’s 2005 poem *thisconnectionofeveryonewithlungs* inhabits and moves within the middle space. Since I’m now acutely attuned to Massumi’s spider web as a no form proposition, I notice how Spahr’s words move through the poem’s seven structuring pages. The movement takes place within the duration of several rhythmic inhalations and exhalations. As I read it, my lungs’ gentle billows—slow, even—stay in sync with the poem’s movements. As I experience the poem, the text and I billow together.

The poem begins microscopically at the level of cells—“this is a shape, a shape of blood beating and cells dividing” (p. 3) and, with the steady hand of a slow motion cinematographer, very gradually pulls away from the cellular, noting “outside of this shape is space”—and lands, very briefly, on “the space between hands”. The perspective continues to pull away, “in and out” as an elongated inhalation, all the way out to the mesosphere, as far as the shared breath can go. Pausing at the mesosphere, she notes: “In this everything turning and small being breathed in and out by everyone with lungs during all the moments” (p. 8), then begins a steady and speedy return back down to the space between the hands.

Spahr imbues the middling space with the delicacy of lung tissue – not to be taken for granted by everyone with lungs when microscopic particles of glass, cement and pulverised tissue are literally inhaled by everyone within proximity to the imploded World Trade Center Twin Towers on 9/11. A more-than force is generated and moves through the respiring text. Its middling perspective is able to seep beyond polarised politics and protracted ideological
differences to remind us, simply, “How lovely and how doomed this connection of everyone with lungs” (p. 10).

My body makes knowledge as I needle and write by the seat of my pants, situated in the sloshing middle. Attune to the field of potential as it in-forms: to wafts and updraughts, and to the cushiony gentle eddies within the folds and indurations. Glide over surfaces alert to the more-than in the midst, always within the associated milieu, all within Retallack’s “vast field of cultural energy.”

It is not us who are at the centre of our experience, but a “vitality affect”\(^\text{11}\) that is generative, in surplus.

Relational movement, always in between, is caught—surprise!—in its kinetic verb-ing: as it surges, bursts, collapses, caresses, efforts, fades. In movement something always happens.

And the always inclusive and and and and orbits and dashes, infinitely, within the undulating magnetic field, between the imagined poles of the binaries, within the sloshing, slippery middle.

Investigating fingers and curiosity propels the process of making—that is, the text-body’s celestial \textit{poiesis}—into the field of potential. Propositions are little pockets of potential sitting under the skin, within the paper, eager to be met. The essaying body makes propositions. A finely tuned zing calls out as nerves fire in the gazillions. Within the gooey matrix, the \textit{onewhichincludesthemany} answers back in a flash:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Not there! Over here!}

I listen for which proposition will call out next.

\textit{Yoo hoo! Down here – quick now!}

Within the emergent co-composition, the more-than hovers, lingers as a potential.
\end{quote}

I am not an acupuncturist or a writer on the knowing outside. Instead, I connect to the forces at work and play, always in the midst, where knowledge is made in flashes. Needling and writing

\textit{11.} It is worth reiterating Daniel Stern’s notion of “vitality affect” that refers to a specific dimension of experience: the progressively persistent interplay between a feeling process that is inseparable from the activity within which the feeling arises. An orientation to process—the method of making as processual—moves away from the subjective, away from the Lyric “I”, and places vitality affects at the centre of our experience, not us. This crucial dimensional shift maximises the potential for lyric and more-than qualities and forces to find their way into the incidence of writing, i.e. the body of writing.
are emergent phenomena within the welling event, poised within the scintillating middle.

The organ with a name but no form

While this essay was in its process of coming to be, my supervisor alerted me to a headline in the news—vibrating through the media’s cyber-web—announcing the discovery of a “new organ” in the human body, dubbed “the interstitium” (ABC News/Reuters, 2018, Scientists discover new human organ, a fluid-filled space called the interstitium).

Residing within tissue matrices, the interstitium comprises layers of fluid-filled compartments and are strung together in a web of collagen coated by a flexible protein called elastin. The researchers claim that the interstitium went unnoticed (although they knew something has always been there carrying about 20 per cent of the body’s fluids) mostly because of the way tissue has been studied: dehydrated, stained with a dye, and then compressed between glass slides. That is, they studied dead tissue. A new sort of sophisticated microscope has made the study of live tissue possible, and hence, the discovery.\(^\text{12}\)

Several thousand years ago the ancient Chinese identified “an organ with a name but with no form or shape,” calling it the san jiao, or the Triple Burner. The san jiao resides within the body’s middle to perform its function of regulating the body’s water passages (or, put more imagistically, maintaining its “ditches” by relaxing sphincters and pores, reducing tense muscles around transport tubes, and freeing up space around joints). If the body’s internal ditches are left unattended, the middling spaces could shrivel and dry up, become fungus-infested smelly swamps, clog with waste and debris, or turn into some other ailing state of deregulation.

It is the regulated, smooth movement through the san jiao—the dynamic gooey matrix—that allows a body to maintain

\(^{12}\) The Fascia Research Congress has been studying the fluid dynamic of fascia—including the lattice networks of collagen fibres identified by the current “discovery”—for at least the past two decades. Studies of the mechanics of acupuncture are included in this research. Yet the fascia researchers have been on the fringes of their disciplines and largely ignored by conventional research and mainstream media. How and why did the NYU medical researchers’ “discovery” receive such widespread news? As a creative practice researcher and as a contributor to the knowledge industry, it is important to consider how knowledge is made and where the clout resides.
its hydration, fluidity, and transportation medium for the relay of crucial messages throughout the whole body. The san jiao, (a.k.a. the contemporaneously named “interstitium”) is the associated milieu: regulating the dynamic movement of connective forces and flows as a body grows, changes, and comes to be.

The interstitium is the betweening space, located in the physiological middle, such as the space between the skin and the flesh (where an acupuncture needle performs its work and play).

It is the organwithanamewithnoform that is only observable as an activity as it generates movement between organ-structures.

Its effects within the dimension of the betweening zone is to soothe, open, free and quicken (in Maoshing, Nanjing, “Difficult Issue #31 & #66).

It is poised in the active zone of betweening, amidst ambiguity. Amidst the not-quite-yet of creativity’s potential.

As the tissue bathed by the interstitium comes to be, it is considered pre-lymphatic, that is, not-quite-yet lymph. Fluids slosh and move through the structure’s lacey latticework. As collagen bundles sway, elastin gives, prompting pre-lymph to leave limbo and become lymph.

It has been repeatedly observed: when death is imminent, the body dumps its fluids. The body no longer needs the fluidy energetic activities of connective forces—the body’s gooey associated milieu—to keep it alive.

A mouth drools, eyes water, a nose runs. A bladder voids.

The collagen-supported latticework begins to shrivel, collapse.

Stiffen. Potentially mummify.

Perhaps the medical researchers’ recent microscopic glimpse onto the body’s gooey middle—in vivo: alive and quivering—opens a possibility to shift modes of thinking. That is, to move away from the reductive habit and open up to a more inclusive, pluralistic approach and grant this thing called the interstitium the freedom to be what it is: a vital, differential space located in the middle of tissues. By allowing it to be what it is—just a space—also provides an opening to learn from what the ancient Chinese call an organwithanamewithnoform: an amorphous organ where the ineffables oscillate in our midst and within our tissues, generating possibilities.
Where tides are welling within swellings.
Where dynamic fluids give way to a lunar tug.
Where the one, which includesthemany, circulates within cellular eddies.

A mode of thinking that allows the specific and the general to swim together. Such as when the acupuncture needle’s tip grasps individual strands of fibroblasts—like a fork twirling spaghetti—and the twist instantly swirls the fluid—the juicy bolognaisemi-amidst the interstitium, spreading it throughout the whole body in less time that it takes to blink. I return to Massumi’s conceptual spider web: “Think of movements through it made possible by the compositions of the concrete thing, but is not the concrete thing.”

All is ubiquitous—slick cellular shoulders touch, as we swim together—made possible by the presence of the organ with a name but no form—interstitium.

In the process of writing, thoughts move through the text’s latticework, which contains the poiesis, the process of making. As thoughts sway, the form, felt in the process of its in-forming, gives way.

Maybe, just maybe, the researchers can consider the possibility of simply allowing the interstitium and the san jiao to play unchaperoned, in the interstices and about the poles. To let them move as unsettled propositions, as a kind of knowing that comes to be. For them to be both a space and a place. All at once.

The habit of ownership—of claiming knowledge of fixed things—is a petulant one.

Essay and Lyric as open concepts

Judith Kitchen (2011) says that “the lyric essay generates its meaning by asking its readers to make leaps, to make a kind of narrative sense of the random and chance encounter. It eschews content for method, and then lets method become its content” (p. 116).

What if we parse lyric from essay, and uncouple their method of making? Allow them to roam unattached, untethered to a form’s name? Allow them to stay within earshot and still call out to each other? Or, if not within earshot, instill a fond memory of
the other’s tendencies? Essay can recall Lyric’s penchant for rhythm, form and intimacy. And lyric can recall essay’s long stride towards an aim, or its restless urge to seek.

Lyric and essay, once parsed, can still interact as forces and tendencies. To use the theoretical parlance of Chinese medicine, consider essay’s more yang nature as it relates to lyric’s more yin nature. Yin and yang and yang and yin are always parlez-vous-ing and do-si-do-ing in motion; in dynamic, relational movement. With its yang tendencies, essay can motivate and propel lyric forward; and lyric can hold essay in an intimate embrace and whisper more-than evocations into its ear. Lyric lulls essay, and essay rouses lyric.

Most vital to the essay is lyric’s capacity to carry more-than tendencies, forces and potentials. Without lyric, essay risks a bland existence: ideas without music, aims verging on depression, stagnant pools of abstractions. With lyric present, essay can sing, dance and twirl. Essaying with lyric gestures—arriving as surprises, as poetic punches, indeterminate in their arrivals—is much more fun. The more-than can land, lightly, on lyric’s updraughts.

And essay motivates lyric forward, propels it towards a destination unknown. Essay’s higher metabolic needs—and its pragmatic drive to go some where—can motivate lyric to move more.

As open concepts, essay and lyric are free to explore other ways of relating, unbounded by genre expectation.

Genre-less, they are free to queer their ways into their indeterminate futures, living at the “trans” interface of each other’s forces.

Counter to his book’s title, *Distinguo: Reading Montaigne Differently*, author Steven Rendall looks to Jules Brody’s philological model for reading Montaigne’s *Essais*. Rendall (1992) says, “Brody tries to show that the form of an essay is generated not by a linear development of a philosophical argument […] but rather by the figural potential of language” (p. 8). Rendall goes on to argue that Montaigne—the essay’s inventor nearly five hundred years ago—displaced the subject position, that is, Montaigne’s *self*, and instead aimed for a “multileveled discourse whose internal dynamics depend on maintaining rather than transcending differences” (p. 13).

Like Hejinian’s rejection of closure, the *Essais* open “a decentered, non-hierarchical perspective in which no component of discourse can claim priority or authority over any other” (Rendall, 1992, p. 11). Both Rendall and Brody’s reading of Montaigne undo
the commonly held evolutionary and biographical interpretations of the *Essais*, and go on to suggest that the form—like the Language Poet’s commitment to removing the Lyric ‘I’—was intended by Montaigne, to be without an Author-ity, without a fixed, subjective centre. That essayistic thought, *in the figural form*, aims to seek (*versuch*) as it makes an attempt (*essais*), indeterminately. This suggests that Montaigne, the essayist, is an *incidence of writing*. Into the disorienting relational twist goes the reader. Venture into the middle, into the fray, amidst the more-than forces at work and play.

“Essay” and “lyric” are open concepts. Essayistic thinking, propelled by more-than lyric forces, goes into the fray.

James Miller (2011), another scholar of Montaigne’s work, reminds us that “One recalls Montaigne’s personal motto, *Que sais-je?* (What do I know?), a question that hangs over every pate of the Essays” (p. 180).

When writing is oriented to the “open” text, the text-body is *maximally excited* and quivers with possibilities. It is always in process, within the thresholds and intensities and flows, when “Formation is more inclusive than form-and-function,” says Massumi (in Manning, 2013, p. xi). “The span of a becoming is broader than a being. […] This *more-than* of becoming is never lost from sight. […] Never losing sight of the ontogenetic differing of process from its products, of constitution from the constituted,” he adds.

Within the becoming of form(ation), harking back to Barthes, writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them.

I am reminded now of Jonathan Culler’s distinction (2008, p. 202) between narrative and lyric: that narrative is about what will happen next. And lyric is about what happens *now*.

I feel reassured: I have no idea what will happen next, just that *something* will happen now. And I trust my capacity—and growing ability—to make useful distinctions.

And to do my bit: attempt to unstitch the hem of language and encourage loose ends to fray.

To fling open the door on protocols, formulas, static knowledge. Circulate fresh air on moldy methods. Encourage the sting of icy air on my *incidence of writing*. 
“Montaigne’s style of writing,” says James Miller (2011), “produced a radically open text, one that could be read in multiple ways” (p. 185). Miller also noted that Montaigne was a “deep pluralist; that is, a man keenly aware of the variety, transience, and sheer contingency of all moral and political customs and conventions” (p. 187). Miller’s critique of the essays highlights a differential contained within the Essais’ complex logic, where:

a gap opens up, between inward belief and outward behavior: ‘Whom shall we believe when he talks about himself, in so corrupt an age, seeing that there are few or none whom we can believe when they speak of others, where there is less incentive for lying?’ […] Montaigne forges an oblique new style of writing suited to the world of witch hunts and religious persecution that he actually inhabited”. (Miller, 2011, p. 187)

When we consider the contemporary equivalents to 16th century witch-hunts, rampant corruption and religious persecution, it is a timely reminder to take up Montaigne’s method of expressing deep pluralism: use the essay’s capacity to reside in a gap, a differential. And like in Spahr’s poem, language can lubricate ideological friction.

I am learning to think-with—and to co-compose with—all of the nonhuman agential forces. Manning offers coaching for thinking-with the more-than:

The ineffable felt experience of the more-than is also a kind of thinking, a kind of knowledge in the making, and it changes experience. That it cannot be systematized or hierarchized does not make it less important to the realization of the event. This is the force of radical empiricism: it propels us into the midst, opening the way for an account of study that embraces the value of what must remain ineffable”. (Manning, 2016, p. 31)

I twirl text as I twirl flesh, attuning to the agential forces of the more-than.

As my whole body thinks.
Essaying Bodies, Bodying Essays:  
A Manifesto, of Sorts

Essaying bodies, bodying essays. Carried by more-than forces of lyric.

The text-body* (see Fig.12) of this essay now stretches before me on the library’s laminated Last Supper-length table. Twenty-something A4-size sheets of paper that hold possibilities as print agitates the pages: a Deleuzian undulating plateau of topographical and syntactical multiplicities.

As I pace back and forth along the table—my near six-foot frame hunched, alert, as it does before prone fleshy bodies—the agential forces are restless, eager to interact with my capacity to make cuts and distinctions, to imagine, and attempt to choreograph concepts. My listening finger—and probing eye—think-with the cacophony of text spread out before me.

Agential elements mingle, rub shoulders, dance an imbricating dance, generating patterns that overlap and jiggle in co-composition. No one element takes centre stage. As I am an incidence of writing, and written language is nothing without forces to interact with, no one of us takes centre stage. Figures of speech take turns adding their flare for words and phrases. Lyric hangs in the air and hovers on the edges as a potential, eager to sway the beat with its more-than tones and textures.

We are in the process of hyphenating, of making something, together. Our poesis, our method of making, is done in dynamic relationship, as we attune to the plurals—the onewhichincludesthemany—in our midst. We orient to Whitehead’s notion of body as an activity within our bodies.

Irreducible, always in process.
Always relational.
Languageing is sticky as it moves.

The essai—considering its longevity, flexibility and open mindedness—lends the growing body its bones. The support and protection it needs to grow into whatever shape and form it immanently comes to be.

A plethora of literary devices, alive and ubiquitous, are eager to be taken up and put to work. Each has an innate drive to express. And, like contiguous gooey connective tissue in the human body, each is a
material force that is always responding to the movement of language within the growing elastic flesh of text.

The essaying body before me and my creative practice researcher’s body—all of us with infinite possibilities—recall Spinoza’s dictum: we know not what our bodies will do. The body and its bodying capacities are indeterminate. The only thing certain about immanent process is that something will happen. Language bends to sustain relationships.

These agential literary forces work together in close proximity as many enter in one coming together, or individuation’s dance (Manning, 2013). Their functional contributions to the essaying body—as it comes to be—are plentiful:

*White space* as respiration, billowing between clumps of paragraphs, sentences. Space to pause, consider. Breathe.

*Juxtaposition* and *oxymoron* generate tension and pressure within the text’s vessels. Twist, jerk and puzzle: stimuli necessary for the essay to elicit a reaction or respond. As a response to the stimulus—like a needle’s tweak—the fascia lining the muscular walls of the text lay down fresh fibres. It flexes. The text needs tension and pressure to be able to stretch, grow and essay forward.

Rich *imagery* as non-retinal sight. Images that provide not only contours and depth of perception, but also a focus: patterns and shapes for the mind’s eye to home in on.

*Metaphor*, one of the many figural potentials of language, metabolises. As unlikely word pairs smack against each other energy is released. Fresh meaning is made. While metaphor metabolises, *metonymy* digests. More fresh meaning is taken up and absorbed.

*Synecdoche*—metonymy’s kissing cousin—adds a colloquial chunk as the whole processes the chunk. Such as, *the essay has good bones*. As a synecdoche, bones are only part of the whole but stand in to represent the whole.

*Simile* adds conjunctions into the pulpy word-chyme: *like* or *as* act as a buffer between oddly matched things, such as, *the essay’s guts are like a barrel writhing with irritable sardines*. Unlike simile’s tendency to add more as a point of comparison, metaphor makes singular declarations, such as *the essay has guts*. Either way, the comparisons generate enzymes that break down difference and release a burst of energy: the sentence moves.
Hyperbole emits loud gaseous noises. The paragraph moves. Perhaps all the figures of speech metabolise and digest together? Of course they do. The collective imagery is rich with nutrients, essential for a growing body. It absorbs.

**Perspective** is proprioception, how the text’s body orients to the world. No conscious effort is needed. An imagined world or an idea moves as it is guided by the text’s point of view. Vertigo is sometimes deliberately induced. Such as a disorienting sudden swoon. Or a moment of nauseating dread.

**Rhythm** paces the essay’s pulse: it speeds up when tension builds, and slows to a gentle cadence when the tension recedes. **Syntax** and **grammar** are the essay’s hormones and directly influence the text’s mood and excitability. Unique to each essay body, glandular secretions have a distinct odour and, hopefully, a strong allure.

Periodic **puns** provide intermittent complexity, little challenges for the nervous system: a sudden contraction (mini-confusion) followed by a release (relief in the form of a laugh, groan) when the joke lands. A pun’s twist—like oxymoron and juxtaposition—lays down fresh synapses. The relief-release of the pun’s effect—a jerk, a twist—derails the cow-ruts of expectation, and lays down fresh neurons.

Puns exfoliate, lubricate, extricate. But never placate. **Alliterations** are the essay’s lymphatic tissue: they smooth out turbulent flow and aid secretions within the tissue’s microscopic perfusion. Passageways are maintained as the alliterating interstitial fluid flows freely. Waste is excreted.

**Onomatopoeia**—the word-sounds of the text-body—vibrate with a combination of resonant and dissonant tones. May be a hum or a high-pitched wail. As sound vibrations, the words are what the words do.

Close by, **assonance** clusters soft sounds around, affecting the text’s mood. And tone.

And, of course, **hyphens** are busy as connective tissuing language. Their active presence allows for the possibility of new word concepts to evolve, and become a part of the essay’s emerging genetic makeup. Other between-ing agents, such as **em dashes** and **en dashes**,
are also active in their middling zones. These connective tissuing elements aerate, lubricate and hydrate the language-tissue.

Again, the body responds. And moves.

Importantly, there is no fragmentation: the interstitium (or the organ with a name but no form) or middling space that propels the essaying body forward makes all of the bits contiguous. As each feels the force of form, in-forming, it is folded in. If not needed—or if a bit does not feel the force of form—it shrivels and dies off. Or is deliberately cut away.

Just as Nature abhors a vacuum, the essaying body abhors stagnation. All elements must stay in dynamic relationship, attuned to the field of immanent possibilities.

Forces and intensities propel the essay forward as all of the bits gather to become more-than the sum of its parts. Lyric, in its ineffable style, makes sure of this. Unseen, lyric permeates with its lyre, its hidden music, and is carried by forces and qualities that are freed from the ego-bound slavery of the subjective “I.”

As the whole body thinks.

ESSAYING forward, the body of language moves united, as one, which includes the many. As the multiplicity of phenomenon occur simultaneously. Plurals and duals move together, amicably carrying their differences, within the text’s milieu: both its middle and its surroundings, as one.

As I make cuts and fresh twirls, the body before me responds, inching closer to whatever it comes to be.

We pause and allow the changes within its tissues to settle. We listen for sweet spots, those coalescing places that are just slightly off-centre. Like the Barthesian punctums, or the Duchampian infra-thin moments that carry more-than qualities. The body responds: more white space is needed to breathe. Bits are highlighted then vaporised with the delete button. My pencil slashes sections. The body stirs, stretches into the freed space.

It is the scattered condition of the personal plural—of the ever-varying manyness of all that comes as one—that is at the nexus of our always changing affective body, not me.

That is, an essaying body is a condition of wonder.

Giving my hunched body a rest from its prolonged focus, I sit. Stretch my arms up. Yawn. Look out the window and notice
the wind buffet the trees. I enjoy the long view outside and a break from the immersive demands of all the nonhuman agents clamouring for attention. Their insistent need to make.

Within seconds, I sense the paper on the far right corner of the table squirm. From where I’m sitting I can see that a paragraph is cramped and demands more space. Most likely a knotted passage that can’t move with its neighbouring sentences. It wants to fit in and move with the rest of the text. Several other elements jut up their hands, eager to be useful.

Many enter in one coming together.
I stand up, pick up a sharp pencil, and go to it.

The photograph (below) is an example of a text-body assembled from numerous scraps of scribbled ideas and twirled together with several needles inserted (see ear) to generate movement and flow:
Cauterising loose ends:

* A necessary conclusion

My supervisors tell me it is time. They believe the body is fully formed. I protest; unsure. It all seems too abrupt. But they assure me that in their opinion, the whole body is thinking of itself as a PhD. The next step is to work with a copyeditor who will help me redraft and polish it before it is released into the world, first into the hands of the Examiners.

Its submission date is decided. As a final deadline, it looms. The thinking body is still alive with possibilities. There are infinite potential shapes and forms antsy to be expressed. More-than forces and qualities spill over with the desire to continue the essay forward. Lyric is amongst the strongest. Literary tools wait in the wings, restless and eager to perform. Many conceptual loose ends dangle, keen to be picked up and twirled into rhizomatically emerging essay-bodies.

However, to stem the flow and movement (i.e. complete the PhD), the conceptual loose ends require cauterising. Like an uncontrolled nose-bleed, they need to be staunched. Movements
crimped. Their flows retarded. Not so much as a curative technique—like coagulating a bleeding nose’s micro-vessels—as it is a sedative technique: to stifle the urge to create and generate ideas that will want to keep essaying forward.

The final body is now splayed out before me on the study room’s long table. I’m familiar with many of the loose ends that are scattered throughout its text-tissue. Others hide, just submerged under the skin. Those will need astute attunement, like listening for the kind of vibrations only a spider’s legs can detect. If not attended to, they could wiggle their way through and inspire further writing.

I put down my sharp pencil. The literary tools need to be removed from the table. To leave them out would only stimulate further growth of the loose ends. They are such joyful, close collaborators. I slip the tools into a side pocket of my backpack. From another pocket I take out a packet of acupuncture needles and a lighter. They’ll have to do as the cauterising tool. A thicker gauge of needle is best to hold the heat, to complete the procedure.

As the flame juts up from the lighter, I tip the needle into the flame’s tip, the hottest zone. Around the loose ends I’ll apply short bursts of applied pressure against the text-tissue. One to two seconds is enough for each one. Longer than that could create scar tissue, or risk infection.

I’ll do the obvious ones first.

*Connective tissuing language – interstitial fluid micro-fascia of the text-body – pulses with possibilities.*

*Tsst. Tsst. Tsst. Tsst.*

It takes me a few minutes to cover the whole body, stretched out long across the oblong table.

*Tsst. Tsst.*

Another related conceptual loose end protrudes: *The practice of folding, repeated folds, in-folding, bending text-tissue as connective tissue responds and lays down more reinforcing layers. It stretches. Glides. Twists.*
Tsst.
Eager to move with other folds, reach out for other text-tissue to see what happens in their co-composing.

Tsst. Again, just one-to-two seconds is enough per concept-strand. This is a loose end with many strands.


The connective tissuing language concept goes quiet. The body stiffens. There is a slight contraction.

The needle’s handle is getting hot. I’ll give my hot-needle hand a rest. And pluck a fresh needle from the packet in case the metal is weakening from the repeated dips into the flame. As I pause, I survey the body, attentive to the sunken concepts. Often the quiet ones can discretely generate the most movement.

The transversal movement between language and body generate a dynamic pluralism.

Tsst.

As each essay finds its own content through its emergent form or shape, a dynamic pluralism is activated.

Tsst.

Other loose ends immediately withdraw into the body, like a sea anemone closing in on itself for protection.

My thumb pad is raw from so much repeated flicking of the lighter. I’ll switch hands, share the load. As I do, my attention is drawn to a miserable quality to my right. Oh, yes. Thinking in the Middle. It is agitated, still thinking too much, poor thing. It hasn’t slept well in ages. Its conceptual loose ends are a knotted mess. I’ll give it an extra-long dose, for mercy’s sake.

Tsssst.

And another:
Tsssst.
One more:
*Tsssst.*

The whole body sighs. Relaxes. Stretches out into the opened conceptual space.

Even if *Thinking in the Middle* wants to be revived for future essaying, I’m confident the densely knotted strands can handle the extra sears into its text-tissue. Or, possibly not: the sears may have been too much, resulting in thick scar tissue. It might even develop an infection from the deeper burns.

An uneasy feeling starts to rise in my belly. Even while donning my thickest clinical skin needed for this procedure, I can’t help feeling badly for the body. We spent so much time together, and so much effort trying to think—and write—from the middle. Hyphens tried their best to get our ideas to move together, to potentiate an essaying future. But we tangled too much, perhaps from trying too hard.

After a calming deep breath, I return my attention to the body before me.

*I twirl text as I twirl flesh, attuning to the agential forces of the more-than.*

Yes, I *know* we do.

*Tsst.*

My attention is drawn to a corner high in the room. Lyric, surprisingly, is hovering there as a potential more-than force. Why up there? Are not ceiling corners a place where souls—or whatever—are reported to hover immediately after leaving a dead body? Am I killing the body? I just need to cauterise it, not euthanise it! This frightening possibility becomes a swirl of associations: the moment of death, out of body and ethereal. Translucent like simmering onions. Take them off the stove before they burn.

*Tssst.* I lean the hot needle into the rising idea. Enough of those wild associations! Onions and out-of-body experiences and lyric have nothing to do with each other!

Ah, emerging thoughts are a persistent force.

Focus.
The essays—each shape unique—start to move—and think—as one big body.

I thought I already got that one.

_Tsst._

_Rather than write about process, the writing itself seeks to actively embody process._

I hesitate. That loose end is the body’s main proposition. To stem its flow could do irreparable harm. Truly tip it into a sort of irretrievable death.

The smell of burnt text-tissue permeates the perma-sealed library study room. Some circulating air would be useful to help me complete the procedure, and sustain my focus. The uneasy feeling turns to panic. My skin thins. Tears threaten. This is awful. It feels like murder, aborting potentials that want nothing more than to frolic and play and come to be essays for themselves. This can only happen when the body embodies process, which allows for its immanent emergence. Essays personify process and bring it to life.

Who am I to take away their potential?

I think of a quote from Spinoza, the gist of which is that _all beings endeavor to preserve their being_. All beings strive to stay alive.

Of course the essaying bodies want to preserve their being! Preserve their capacity to come to be. It is their nature to grope. To seek. And endeavor. Just as fleshy bodies do what they need to do to stay alive, to preserve their being. This is my job as an acupuncturist: to use my twirling needles to help preserve a body’s being. To bring on parasympathetic bliss! That state when all the trillions of cells hum, together, as their beings are preserved. That moment when the _onethatincludesthemany_ endeavours to preserve its being.

Another flick of the lighter. One more time I lean the needle into the flame’s top.

_Tsst._

_Tsst._

_Tsssst._
A loose end hangs from the middle. But how to cauterise the middle? This makes no sense: it is the nature of loose ends to have ends not middles. Something there to be picked up. Like a hangnail, or a wayward thread dangling from a hem, or the end of a tether. Or a thought.

What is an antonym of a conceptual loose end? Complete knowledge? Knowledge all tied up? How to tie up a body if it is the site of knowledge-making?

*Tssst.* Quell that thought! This thing needs to end. Come to a conclusion. Tie it all up. The deadline looms. Outputs beckon. It’ll soon be time to engage with moody and unstable online forms. The university needs to get paid. My supervisors have other candidates lining up with raw ideas and projects keen to begin.

I recall something from Deleuze (1993), early in my project: “It is by the middle that things push” (p. 208). How the middle zone holds the potential and pushes things into their becomings. Such as an early essay made with navels and Bodies Without Organs. Another with narwhals, needles and nails: The power of alliteration as it bodies an essay. Another essay that proliferated word-sound-bodies as it slobbered.

*Tssst.*
*Tssst.*
*Tssst.*
*Tssst.*
*Tssst.*

Lyric continues to hover in the corner of the study room. The itch to create—now behind my knee—demands scratching. An emerging essay glimmers within the itch. With great effort, I ignore it.

The body before me goes quiet. I feel horrible.
I’m an essay torturer.
A lyric tease.

*Enough.* The remaining loose ends will need to be ignored. This will have to do. I cannot inflict any more pain onto this miraculous body. A body with which I’ve become so intimate. Our bodies have thought together for more than four years. We know each other’s best and worst dance moves. Shared morning breath.
I slide the clumps of papers—piles of varying depths—across the long table and reassemble it into a coherent pile. Clamp it with an extra-large bull clip.

I put my pencil, needles and lighter into the side pocket of my well-lugged backpack, and zip it closed. After I sling the backpack over my shoulders, I pick up the body and hold it against my chest. The edges of the body acquiesce, thinking quiet thoughts, most likely fearful of receiving more burns. We leave the study room.

As the PhD body gives its weight over to me, a more-than force hums.
References


Grasping


FURTHER READING


