

University of Western Sydney

Anna Gibbs

Introduction

From there to here and then to now: a very rough guide

The project represented by this collection of work was conceived in 2009, by Moya Costello who pushed the other editors to act on our previous discussions, as a ‘landmark anthology’ of Australian women’s experimental writing in the vein of the maps made by collections of the 1970s and 1980s: *Mother, I’m rooted* (edited by Kate Jennings, 1975) which was the first collection of poetry by Australian women, and *F(r)ictions* (edited by Anna Gibbs and Alison Tilson, 1982)¹. To our dismay, the current state of print publishing in Australia made such an enterprise impossible, as our proposal was rejected everywhere we sent it, mostly it seems because such collections have gone out of favour, at least with publishers. In the face of these refusals, we decided to opt for a journal publication, and this journal, *TEXT*, the journal of the Association of Australasian Writing Programs, was an obvious choice, since it has a wide – and growing – readership both in (and outside) universities, and, when it comes to experimental writing, teachers are always seeking examples for use in class. Publishing in a journal, however, meant we had to cull all the work which had been previously published, and this means that many writers whose work would otherwise have been part of this collection are not represented here, including some of the major figures in Australian experimental writing (Alexis Wright and Marion May Campbell, to name just two). This collection also has a strong bias towards work from Sydney, Adelaide and Melbourne, mostly by virtue of the locations and histories of its editors, but also because we had almost no response to our call from elsewhere in Australia. Nor is there the avowedly Aboriginal work we had hoped for: again, our own connections were perhaps one limitation, but it is also likely that these writers have other priorities than experimentation (sovereignty and justice, for example) or anthology projects such as this one. The work included here is not blind refereed, but every piece was read and discussed by all four editors, and editorial work of one sort or another was performed on most of the contributions.

What we have produced here, then, is a ‘mud map’: an informal, incomplete, limited-life guide to a much more complex terrain that could in any case never be comprehensively charted, even if more useful maps for the longer term do eventually become available through new economic models enabled by e-publishing and print-on-demand. It is telling, I think, that collections of experimental writing since the early ’eighties have been: more local affairs, often from Perth (which feels itself to be

– and is, by virtue of distance and time difference – relatively isolated from the rest of the country, but which also, for the same reason, has the Fremantle Arts Centre Press to facilitate local publishing); sometimes focused on a particular genre and not necessarily entirely experimentally focused nor entirely women-only collections – for example, *Telling ways: Australian women's experimental writing* (edited by Anna Couani and Sneja Gunew, 1988), *No substitute* (edited by Terri-ann White, Anna Gibbs, Wendy Jenkins and Noel King, 1990), *Second degree tampering* (edited and published by Sybylla Feminist Press, 1992), *...but never by chance...* (edited by Linda Marie Walker, 1992); *Risks* (edited by Brenda Walker, 1996), and *The space between: Australian Women's fictocritical writing* (edited by Heather Kerr and Amanda Nettelbeck, 1998).

The mud map I sketched by hand on the basis of connections roughly worked out by the editorial group shows that there are overlapping writing networks that persist, shifting and mutating over time, and growing as new writers emerge and new publications appear. The connections sketched are those created through publications, reading venues and university writing programs (some of which are linked to writing groups spawned by them). These are often 'weak links,' to use a term from network theory (Ganovetter 1973). Some of the strongest connections would be friendships, which are not represented on this map. But weak links have a paradoxical strength, since profound shifts in the status quo can occur where unexpected contact and exchange takes place between groups and individuals previously isolated from each other. So this mud map (and the collection itself) represents nothing so fixed as a community, nor a hierarchy of influence (as from teachers to students), but a rhizomatic, dynamic network of enabling connections creating a shifting terrain which will look like a completely different landscape in another ten – or even five – years.

The point of this cartographic exercise is less to represent and codify what already exists, than to orient the vibrant energies of the present towards a 'something else,' an open possibility unable to be specified in advance. Cartography in the Deleuzian sense of the term as elaborated by feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti (2005) is always a political practice which does not simply visualise, but rather *envisages* potentials and in doing so, increases or modulates intensity, produces conductivity or resistance, speeds up or retards processes: in other words, it organizes (and in the process, actually dynamises) an energetics rather than provides a picture. We hope that the very existence of this collection will provoke more discussion about the possibilities for Australian experimental writing – and Australian women writers – today, both in and beyond the universities.

In the introduction to *F(r)ictions*, an anthology of experimental writing published by Sybylla Feminist Press in 1982, Alison Tilson and I, as editors, wrote that we wanted to do more than redress a balance: we wanted to change the economy. What I at least meant by that was that we wanted not simply to elevate writing by women into some already existing canon (system of value), but rather to change the terms in which questions about women's writing were posed in ways that might challenge our assumptions about the nature of writing itself – how it is both thought about and

valued, and what it might mean for women specifically to engage in a self-conscious *practice* of writing.

Above all, this seems to me to mean rethinking what is meant by experimentalism. This term is often used (as we initially did in our call for submissions to this collection) in relation to particular traditions of writing. On the one hand, those traditions might be thought in relation to the history of modernist avant-gardes and the practices – such as cut up, collage, appropriation, automatic writing, writing under constraint or according to procedure – associated with them. On the other, in contemporary transnational discussions and theory, it refers more specifically to a loosely affiliated body of contemporary work that derives largely from North American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E traditions, though of course these also look backward and learn from the overlooked aspects of work by writers like Gertrude Stein, and from the procedures of Surrealist writers or the generative writing out of constraint of the OULIPO. More recently, the term ‘conceptualism’ has been borrowed from the visual arts and used to refer to contemporary writing in which the driving idea (and the means of production) is arguably as important as the resulting material work, on the model of the ‘conceptual art’ of the 1960s and 1970s (for example, work of the British group Art & Language which made ‘visual’ art using language as their primary medium, seeing as secondary the material means of its presentation). This kind of work could also be seen as a means of liberating expression from subjectivity (rather than being simply ‘against expression’, as the title of a new anthology of conceptual writing edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (2011) has it), as well as a means of experimenting with ideas, and especially ideas about language itself.

While working on *F(r)ictions*, I had in mind another possibility about the ways in which experimentalism had come to be defined: that some women’s work was not recognised as experimental because women were not credited with that particular kind of intelligence or ambition (being seen as writing only autobiography, however disguised), or because the forms they invented were understood not as innovations but as failed attempts to do something already done in the masculinist mainstream. Instead, their work was seen as clumsy, as lacking structure and recognisable form (much as Christina Stead’s novels and stories were regarded as maladroit and shapeless, before they were read in the light of the feminist criticism of Susan Sheridan and others). What would happen, then, if we took work by women to define the experimental – if the idea of experimentalism was generated from the work itself rather than any particular pre-given image of the experimental? This also raises the problem of what was once novel but has now become generic in women’s writing: a focus on relationships with their mothers, and the death of the mother might serve as examples here. New ways to explore these themes need to be found, ways which focus on the writing, on the *how* that actually transforms the *what*.

At numerous stages in the course of the editing process, we engaged in debates with writers who submitted work, and with each other, about what was experimental and what was not. Writing that simply refuses to fit the known categories of Australian literature (such as Aboriginal writing, migrant writing, some queer writing) might be

thought of as experimental in that it breaks new ground not only for its constitutive communities, but for all writing, in as much as it represents a minority practice, a becoming-minor of English which pluralises it, or renders it strange and thereby expands its possibilities. In this context, perhaps the fact that so much avowedly Aboriginal writing is autobiographical and in the genre of testimony might seem to run counter to an experimentalism which is usually defined in terms of a complex critical relationship to Western literary traditions, as writing that seems deliberately and knowingly to break with generic conventions, and often to interrogate explicitly its own practice. It may be, however, that Aboriginal autobiographical writing can, under some conditions, be read as experimental, and can open new formal possibilities in and beyond the autobiographical genre despite the fact that it was not written for that purpose, nor intended to be read in that light. While at least two writers (that we know of) in this collection can claim (although perhaps do not necessarily want to do so in every context) Aboriginal heritage, it is not necessarily obvious in what we publish here, and it is possible that some other contributors in the collection are from Aboriginal backgrounds and we are unaware of this.

In any event, writing from non-Anglo traditions and perspectives may throw a new light on what counts as innovation in the Australian context. In 1982, when considering the order of contents for *F(r)ictions*, it was important to me to open with what was then called ‘migrant writing’, that is, with a non-normative voice, but also one that knowingly questioned assumptions about what counted as Australian, one that refused to take for granted a colonial, Anglo-oriented heritage. Almost thirty years later, in 2011 at a Writing and Society (UWS) research seminar, during discussion of Antigone Kefala’s work, Ivor Indyk wondered why it was that the ‘migrant writers’ of the 1980s – like Kefala herself, Ania Walwicz and Anna Couani (all of whose work the critical writings of Sneja Gunew (eg 1988, 1994) in particular had done so much to bring to a wider readership) – seemed not to be read and talked about any more. This struck me as a strange remark from the publisher of Giramondo Books and the editor of *HEAT*, Giramondo having published Antigone Kefala’s *Sydney journals: reflections 1970-2000* (2008) and *HEAT* having serialised Anna Couani’s novel, *The western horizon* (now available online), from 1996 to 2000. (Ania Walwicz, meanwhile, has had four plays produced, exhibits as a visual artist, and continues to publish, most recently in *Cordite* poetry review). There are no simple answers to what was in any case an impression, but my own equally subjective feeling is that while the category of ‘migrant writing’ opened a small window for experimental work in the 1980s, the emergence of a new generation of non-Anglo writers has arguably seen a move away from Australian particularities both to a more internationalist style and subject matter (as in the work of Nam Le), while writers like William Yang and Tony Ayres have made performance and film respectively their medium of choice, and, in addition to his writing, Brian Castro holds a university chair. It may also be that writers of European backgrounds can no longer represent the category of migrant in the mainstream: that task now falls to Iraqis, Iranians, Afghans and Sudanese, and the term ‘migrant’ as a site of anxiety and interest has been replaced by ‘refugee’.

Moreover, the lack of the kind of critical context that would support the kind of work done by these writers – and indeed all those women who contributed to the anthologies of the 1980s and 1990s – presents another problem. The paucity of places for reviewing and discussion of Australian writing in general (never mind experimental writing) has been frequently remarked on. Equally, though, university departments of Australian Literature have by and large been slow to respond to developments in contemporary writing. Philip Mead has argued that critical writing on Australian poetry has not caught up with the innovations of contemporary poetry writing (see, 2009), and the same, it seems to me, is true of writing about prose poetics, if the lack of serious critical attention to prose writers like Gerald Murnane or Marion May Campbell is any indication. But nor have Australian writers (unlike their North American or European counterparts), made it a priority to engage in the explicit formulation of their own poetics or in wider debates about the politics of aesthetics. Possibly such reticence is one more manifestation of the diffidence, discomfort, and awkwardness – all those low level states of shame – identified by Ivor Indyk (for example, 2013, in a recent review of *The voyage* by Murray Bail) as a noticeable current in Australian writing? On the other hand, there is plenty of talk in what seems to be a growing number of writers’ festivals and in media interviews of various kinds: there is just not much serious discussion of poetics. Perhaps this is because writers and publishers alike assume audiences will not be interested in it or won’t understand such discussion, and/or it will not ‘sell’ because it is not entertainment. There is also the ubiquitous fear of ‘theory-driven’ work, which means that engagement with contemporary thought is often characterised as ‘out of touch’, ‘up itself’ and certainly less authentic than other kinds of work believed to have a more immediate relationship with the real. Perhaps, too, the anti-narrative, anti-pleasure ethos of much experimental filmmaking in the 1980s and 1990s has conditioned a reflex association of the experimental with joyless intellectual rigour. More likely, the Howard decade, which saw routine public references to intellectuals as ‘latte-sipping elites’ and which dramatically intensified the corporatisation of the universities and the instrumentalisation of education, entrenching a focus on economics, commercial ‘realities’ and consumerism in every domain of life, fed a vein of already existing anti-intellectualism that perfectly suited the dominant neoliberal ethos.

In this context, while some university creative writing programs have deliberately focussed on conventional genres and on ‘publishable’ work, others have attempted, not always successfully, to continue to encourage active engagement with experimental traditions and poetics. For a time, women in full-time academic positions in Writing programs were able to design curricula, supervise postgraduate students, and also provide casual teaching to both them and other writers, for whom they were also able to apply for funding to support residencies. Under these conditions mentoring relationships often flourished, and the production of publications like the UTS annual anthologies (1982 and ongoing) or the much shorter lived *W/edge* (a journal of new writing produced in collaboration with visual artists, 1995–98) at the UWS played an important role in the formation of local writing communities. But just how tenuous even ‘permanent’ positions actually were has been made brutally clear by the cuts of the last few years, notably at Melbourne University,

but also La Trobe University and the University of Western Sydney. Moreover, the expansion of the non-traditional PhD and the DCA made it possible for writers to win scholarships that not only bought three years' time to read and write, but also provided a serious intellectual context, and support, for the development of that work. Anecdotally, it seems that the award of scholarships increasingly favours writers working in conventional genres as competition between programs means commercially publishable and potentially prize-winning work (which will raise the public profile of the program) is sought. Moreover, at the time of writing it seems that cuts proposed by both major political parties in the form of a so-called 'efficiency dividend' as well as increased impost on students themselves, will mean that in those universities heavily dependent on teacher trainees for their Humanities intake, creative writing (which is not a compulsory part of the secondary curriculum in all states) will be less well supported by university managers than English (which is). Elsewhere, university creative writing might continue to subsidise English departments, but cutting of programs in the less well-funded institutions will entail a narrowing of curricula, and will almost certainly strengthen the tendency to emphasise conventional genres.

The precarious place of protection found by experimental writing in undergraduate courses in university writing programs over the last few decades has, however, come at a cost: experimental poetics are increasingly taught as mere techniques, strategies for production rather than investigations into the workings of language. Poet Chris Andrews, the translator of experimental writers Roberto Bolaño and Cesar Aira, has commented on the way in which all too often experimental practices (the use of Oulipean constraints, for example) have come to serve simply as a repertoire of techniques enabling students to write without having read (11 Nov 2011). This situation underlines the need for publication of work which can serve as a contemporary model for the kinds of things students are interested in writing, and which might aid in stimulating a desire to establish an active dialogue with traditions both of the immediate, and through that, the distant past.

Finally, then, why another anthology of experimental work by *women*? One might especially ask this question when it is not clear that the anthologising between 1975 and 1995 (the period charted by Louise Poland's paper 'From *Mother I'm rooted* to *Angels of power*: a collective history of feminist anthologies', which was presented to the Australasian Association for Literature Conference in 2009) actually resulted in the gaining of more Australia Council grants, more residencies or more opportunities for publication by women writers. What did ultimately make a difference in this respect, though, was the existence of feminist presses. The website for the Stella Prize claims as a 'huge improvement' the fact that books whose publication has been subsidised by the Australia Council (they do not mention over what period) comprise 52 per cent authored by men, and 48 per cent authored by women. Significantly, they comment that the 'report on these figures mentioned that Spinifex (which distributes via online ordering) played a large role in improving numbers of books by women that are published' (Stella Prize 2013). The statistics cited for prizes and for reviewing of books by women, however, tell a different story, as do those related to gender distribution in the publishing industry: publishing, it seems, 'is a predominantly

female industry (62 per cent) yet most senior positions are held by men. According to The Bloom Report in 2007, 68 per cent of men who work in the industry earn more than \$100,000 as opposed to 32 per cent of the women' (ctd, Stella Prize website).

Of course, these figures relate to the literary mainstream. The editors of this collection would wager that the situation for experimental writing in Australia is roughly equivalent to what Juliana Spahr and Stephanie Young discovered when they undertook a study of the percentages of women anthologised in 'experimental/postmodern/avant-garde/innovative' poetry collections in the US since the 1980s' (2007: 88). They found that the percentages of women published have increased slightly but not dramatically, in spite of the publication of numerous women-only anthologies since the 1980s. They also found that men were still winning by far the most (and most valuable) prizes in the USA (97). What the experimental scene needs, Spahr and Young assert, is

a more radical feminism; a feminism that begins with an editorial commitment to equitable representation of different genders, races, and classes, but doesn't end there; an editorial practice that might begin with equitable representation in order to think about how feminism is related to something other than itself, in order to make writing that thinks about these things visible (100).

The editors of this collection concur.

What the feminist presses and the anthologising of the 1980s and 1990s in Australia did do was to make women a significant force in literary culture during that period, and women are still the majority readers of fiction. Yet, when it comes to production, it seems clear to us that men have found it easier to establish themselves with book length experimental works than women. Murray Bail, Brian Castro and Gerald Murnane have all succeeded in this, while Marion May Campbell's first two novels were published by Fremantle Arts Centre in Perth but not widely distributed nor reviewed in the eastern states, and women who have previously published books with small presses (Kathleen Fallon, Moya Costello, Barbara Brooks and Robyn Ferrell to mention just a few) now find it more difficult to do so.

This, of course, is a time of massive transition from print to digital publishing. With the exception of the Feminist Bookshop in Balmain, Sydney, feminist bookshops in Australia have mostly closed or gone mainstream, and many other small bookshops are struggling. Digital publishing has not yet opened new possibilities for redressing the gender imbalance in the publication of experimental writing, even though it offers at least the potential for the male domination of publishing in Australia to be brought to an end. Perhaps this begs comparison with the indie music scene, where self-publishing is routine, whereas in the literary scene, which is arguably less commercial and therefore more dependent on processes of authorisation, it still retains a stigma. Yet the digital has opened other kinds of possibility for experimental work. Spineless Wonders e-publishing is an important and exciting beginning to distributing work suited (by length, say) to smart phones and laptops, though they do not yet appear to support works which make use of the full range of capacities – interactivity, animation, and so on – open to digital media. These so-called 'born digital' works of

e-poetry, game-based fiction and locative works all tend to draw on experimental traditions at least as much as they do on the novel and other conventional genres. The digital writing scene has also produced a return to performance involving both live and mediated components, and new connections between writing and the visual arts are also being established, including by writers who work appears in this collection (Virginia Barrett, for example). The growth of digital publishing is also, although more slowly, changing the nature of academic writing as sound and image are integrated into some academic work, and demands to extend audiences beyond the academy itself intensify. Here the processes already set in train by the experimental, often feminist, fictocritical work of the last three decades may well be accelerated.

Yet now more than ever, it seems important to defend experimental writing. With the universities ‘in ruins’ amid the neoliberal processes of corporatisation and casualization in the academy (Reading 1997), the shrinking of the print publishing scene and the death of the romance of the writer (Ferrell 2004) – if not of the desire to write – the experimental seems a mode particularly suited to the present, to shattered subjects, diaspora and displacement, and to the fragmentation of daily life, increasingly composed of interruptions, disconnections and contradictions. And because women, who have never been subjects in the same way as most men have been privileged to be, are on the front line of all these processes, the defence of Australian women’s experimental writing seems all the more necessary.

Endnote

1. My grateful thanks to Moya Costello, Ros Prosser and Barbara Brooks for their comments on and corrections to this introduction. All existing errors remain my own.

Works cited

- Andrews, Chris 2011 ‘Constraints, poetry and play in Jacques Roubaud’s *Parc sauvage*’, paper presented to the Writing and Society Research Centre (UWS) seminar
- Braidotti, Rosi 2005 ‘A critical cartography of feminist post-postmodernism’, *Australian feminist studies* 20(47), 1-15
- Couani, Anna 1996 to 2000 *The western horizon* http://www.oocities.org/anna_couani/index2.htm (accessed 3 March 2013)
- Couani, Anna and Sneja Gunew eds. *Telling ways: Australian women’s experimental writing*, Australian Feminist Studies Publications, Adelaide
- Dworkin, Craig and Kenneth Goldsmith 2011 *Against expression: an anthology of conceptual writing*, Northwestern UP, Chicago
- Ferrell, Robyn 2004 ‘Paris does not exist’, in R Ferrell *The real desire*, Indra, Briar Hill, Vic.
- Gibbs, Anna and Tilson, Alison 1982 *F(r)ictions: Australian women’s experimental writing*, Sybylla Feminist P, Melbourne
- Granovetter, Mark 1973 ‘The strength of weak ties’, *The American journal of sociology* 78(6): 1360–80
- Gunew, Sneja 1994 *Framing marginality: multicultural literary studies*, Melbourne UP, Melbourne

- Gunew, Sneja and Jan Mahyuddin, eds 1988 *Beyond the echo: multicultural women's writing*, UQP, St Lucia
- Indyk, Ivor 2013 'The provincial and the princess', <http://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/the-provincial-and-the-princess> (accessed 9 March 2013)
- Jennings, Kate 1975 *Mother, I'm rooted*, Outback P, Fitzroy, Vic
- Kefala, Antigone 2008 *Sydney journals: reflections 1970-2000*, Giramondo, Sydney
- Kerr, Heather and Amanda Nettelbeck 1998 *The space between: Australian Women's fictocritical writing*, U Western Australia P, Perth
- Mead, Phillip 2009 *Networked language: culture & history in Australian poetry*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne
- Poland, Louise 2009 'From *Mother I'm rooted* to *Angels of power*: a collective history of feminist anthologies', paper presented to the Australasian Association for Literature Conference, Sydney
- Reading, Bill 1997 *The university in ruins*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, Mass
- Spahr, Juliana, and Young, Stephanie 2007 'Numbers trouble', *Chicago review* 53(2/3): 88-111
- Spineless Wonders 2013, at <http://shortaustralianstories.com.au> (accessed 1 March 2013)
- Stella Prize 2013, at <http://thestellaprize.com.au/news-events/post/stats-and-more-stats> (accessed 1 March 2013)
- Sybylla Feminist Press ed 1992 *Second degree tampering*, Sybylla Feminist P, Melbourne
- Walker, Linda ed. 1992 *...but never by chance...*, EAF, Adelaide
- Walker, Brenda 1996 *Risks*, Fremantle Arts Centre Press, Fremantle
- White, Terri-ann, Anna Gibbs, Wendy Jenkins and Noel King eds 1990 *No substitute*, Fremantle Arts Centre P, Fremantle

Anna Gibbs is Associate Professor in the School of Humanities and Communication Arts and a member of the Writing and Society Research Centre at the University of Western Sydney. She works across the fields of textual, cultural and media studies where affect theory is a central focus, and in creative writing, focusing on fictocriticism and experimental writing. Her current ARC project (with Dr Maria Angel and Prof Joseph Tabbi), 'Creative Nation: writers and writing in the new media culture', builds a database of Australian 'born-digital' poetry, fiction and text-based art, and she is also an experimental writer who often collaborates with visual artists.