

University of Canberra

Jen Webb and Paul Hetherington

Convergence

Biographical notes:

Jen Webb is Distinguished Professor of Creative Practice and Director of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research at the University of Canberra. Her research focuses on the relationship between art and society; she is currently working, with Kevin Brophy, Michael Biggs and Paul Magee, on an ARC-funded project that investigates creativity through a case study of contemporary poetry. Jen publishes work on cultural theory and creative research; she also writes poetry, and produces artists' books for exhibition.

Paul Hetherington is Associate Professor of Writing and head of the International Poetry Studies Institute (IPSI) at the University of Canberra. He edited three volumes of the National Library of Australia's four-volume edition of the diaries of the artist Donald Friend and, with Jen Webb, is founding co-editor of the international online journal *Axon: Creative Explorations*. He has published eight full-length poetry collections, most recently *Six different windows* (UWA Publishing), which won the 2014 Western Australian Premier's Prize for Poetry.

Keywords:

Creative writing – convergence – collaboration – ribbons – light – seeing

1.

Furniture flattens
in swathes of ribboned light,
afternoon
in disorderly elongation;
a straddle
and undulation
obliterating shape,
light carousing
a drowned room.

It slides past
ropes of conversation,
through gaps
where words
have failed,
dissolving arrangements
of seating and knowing.

And this might be
remembering
because yesterday,
and last year,
light was also torn
between such
unpossessable things,
briefly, ineluctably
burnishing them.

2.

Marking every place
with a signature
finger-drumming
staccato,
even where it never falls.

You can see it
from the moon,
bigger than
Singapore;
snaking
right down
the west. Lake
Moore – we call it
‘lake’ but its water
turns to salt, its
skin to sand.

Halfway down
the borders bulge;
lake as open palm
facing the sun
holding light.

It has forgotten
its past, and
small fish that
swam in
its shallows,
eels lurking
in the dark parts
above its heart –
how
things change

now
only light
remains.

The weather
roils, clouds thicken
and fade, winds
come and go,
careless.

Even there,
where it's only
a susurrating
rumour,
still 'rain' is conjured
like a visiting linguist's
implausible word.
And, after all,
once rain fell
in the unutterable desert –
when a market
sprawled beneath
sways
of blue canvas.

North or
south, it's all the same.
It comes, it goes
more or less the same.
Between movements, I
wait for
one moment
that will make
waiting
worthwhile.

Vendors unseated
gathering, small pools
with up-thrust broomsticks,
and a humpback
gestured
at flushing spills
of dark tomatoes –
every place gouged,
and every language,
by water.

In places
it barely needs speaking,
so insistent it is,
like knifing
cold ribbons,
or collapsing belief
flooding
and eroding –
weather that drones
with no-clear-utterance
on tiles and tin,
over wattle
and daub.

After it passes
everything's altered –
not because smeared

by mud
or conjecture
but because
joined
in damp abrasions
of an unshiny past.

3.

These words
are not worms,
or strings
of gut,
or scarves
of discussion,
but thought
falling
like blood-
dyed rain.

They insinuate
a love
that climbed
away from
its moment;
an explorer
who abandoned
secure supplies.

They were never
exclamations
but were names
that stretched
towards endings –
'house' and 'attic';
a cache
of rotting letters;
a scribbled
expostulation.

The small plane
scrolls along the sky
stretching out its line
breathing out
those words,
it's writing my desire.

I meet you
on the bike path;
reach out to
say hello, feet
on the ground
eyes
on the sky:

'read the signs'
it spells
'and not' – we
hold our breath,
as it turns, catches
its own breath –
'the time'

the propeller
blades edit
the letters, the
wisdom blurs –
step off
the path, follow
lines of
your own desire.

4.

It is not an animal
waking
with something torn
in its paw –
this sense
of bright-seeing alacrity –
but being and becoming
ribboned by evening.

The blood-colour reminds
that thought follows
worn steps
of avened afternoon
where a young woman
holds herself carefully
with crimsoned hand.

She turns into a street
where houses lean
like a family
towards gossip.
'I am', she begins
but the traffic
absorbs her words.
'I am', she states
as someone pushes
a shuttered window,
beckoning her in.

It's this thing we'd
almost forgotten
A splinter
nudged up against
the bone. It had
been there so long.
No matter –
is anything
what it seems? Birds
outside, shouting
for food, would
turn us to dust
if they could;
the lizards
recall
when they were
dinosaurs and we
were mud. Don't
look down, don't
look back

Keep walking.

5.

Through square-
seeming minutes
awkward notions
swoop and lift,
leaving swathes
of dissolving
colour.
Through afternoons
of failing sunlight,
sloping like
ungainly birds,

An old man
outside at midnight
taking the air
and a cigarette
before bed,
he saw me
threading my way
through ribboned streets
and called out
'Look at the moon'.

they follow flat
horizons of light.

They are words
we never said
in time –
a loved one
waiting
as the burden
of a responsibility
closed
our hands.
We knew it
as we failed –
that sometimes
they weigh
implacably
in our throats.

Waning,
propping its pared edge
against the night

its thin beams
felt their way
toward us,
reaching
the town,
touching
the street.

Research statement

Research background

All writers ‘steal’: even the most original writers rarely invent, but creatively use, the language they have been finding all their lives. This project is part of a larger work investigating the ethics of literary appropriation; in this instance, the appropriation is both our ‘borrowing’ of each other’s ideas and commentary, and the repurposing of poems we initially wrote for exhibition, rather than publication.

Research contribution

Many writers have discussed this issue: Sterne speaks of the dullness of reiteration; Eliot distinguishes literary borrowing from theft; Brophy warns poets against other poets;¹ and Brady sees the writer as bowerbird. What all point to is that the individual never creates art simply as an individual separate from the zeitgeist. We address this issue, and reconsider the poetic practices of collaborative creativity, re-purposing and homage.

Research significance

In exploring and asserting the abiding significance of independent creation in a context of mutuality and reciprocity, we suggest approaches to collaboration that involve genuine reliance on and appropriation of each other’s practice, knowledge and thinking. We aim to identify ways, beyond influence, plagiarism or citation, in which original creative thought is stimulated by another writer’s work.

Endnote

1. Apropos of other poets, Brophy advises: ‘Tell them nothing. They steal everything. / They are thugs and desperately / short of ideas, even words’ (‘Advice to poets’ in *Portrait in Skin* 2002)

Works cited

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