

Federation University

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We might as well call it a boat

Biographical note:

Threasa Meads has moved out of the house mentioned below, and is now based in Gippsland, VIC. She is the author of two liminal autobiographies, *Nobody* and *Mothsong* (Rare Bird Books, 2016), and a visual artist with a PhD in creative writing from Flinders University. *Nobody* was previously shortlisted for The Australian/Vogel's Literary Award in 2008 and awarded a Varuna Fellowship in 2009. In 2012 she was emerging writer in residence at the KSP Writers' Centre. Her writing crosses genres and has been published in local and international journals including, *apt*, *Still Point Arts Quarterly*, *LiNQ*, and *Double Dialogues*. Threasa nurtures writers and builds creative communities, and is following her bliss in her new position as Lecturer in Writing at Federation University.

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We are in the epoch of simultaneity: we are in the epoch of juxtaposition, the epoch of the near and far, of the side-by-side, of the dispersed. We are at a moment, I believe, when our experience of the world is less that of a long life developing through time than that of a network that connects points and intersects with its own skein. (Foucault 1984)

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I'm sitting in my new, second-hand, unfamiliar lounge room. I suppose the woodpanelling across the wall in front of me is there to add warmth. I'm hoping the bricks behind it add actual warmth this winter: it will be a small concession. Even with all the merits of our last home – eleven fruit trees, roses in the cottage garden, new kitchen, new bathroom, giant bathtub – the walls were too thin. Everything travelled through them: the neighbours' yelling, the icy wind. The house was porous, like me. I often identify with the spaces I inhabit. They become an extension of me, or perhaps it's the reverse. Perhaps I adapt to my surroundings. I do believe a place changes you. Maybe these sturdy brick walls will help me have a thicker skin.

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... we do not live in a kind of void, inside of which we could place individuals and things. ... we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another. (Foucault 1984)

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The opening credits of *The Walking Dead* roll across the screen. Carol and Maggie have been taken prisoner.

Paula, the leader of their captors, tapes Carol's legs together and says to Carol, 'You're wonderin' if there's a way out of this. There isn't. Not unless I say so.' Her tone doesn't convey hope.

As one of their captors drags a dead zombie (walker) past Carol, and Paula's attention is diverted by the group out in the corridor calling for her, a rosary belonging to the walker hooks around Carol's boot.

Before Paula leaves she says, 'I want to kill you both right now. It's taking all I have not to. So go ahead, I dare you. Try something; just see what happens.'

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I'm having a picnic in a park compared to them. I suppose that's why we watch shows like this: if they can survive in a constant state of crisis, *if they can actually live*, so can we.

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... I am interested in certain [sites] that have the curious property of being in relation with all the other sites, but in such a way as to suspect, neutralize, or invert the set of relations that they happen to designate, mirror, or reflect. (Foucault 1984)

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I often have dreams where I'm on the run from danger – nightmares really – where my world is being destroyed by some kind of apocalypse. When my PhD was being examined, I had many of these dreams. In one, I had a chest infection and could barely breathe, and I was still trying to finish my PhD. After days of seeking refuge, my husband and I stumbled upon a great mansion. We knocked on the large secure door. It was opened by Nicki Minaj; she welcomed us in, and became my patron. The modern day goddess set us up in luxury to support my writing career. This was (obviously) one of my better dreams.

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[Heterotopias exist as] real and effective spaces which are outlined in the very institution of society, but which constitute a sort of counter-arrangement, of effectively realized utopia, in which all the real arrangements, all the other real arrangements that can be found within society, are at one and the same time represented, challenged and overturned: a sort of place that lies outside all places and yet is actually localizable. (Foucault 1997: 352)

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Carol pushes the rosary into her pocket, and pauses for a moment, as though she has an idea. She doesn't look troubled; Carol is very good at being unreadable.

Now she's started gasping for breath. Maggie looks confused. Carol never loses her cool.

When the captors return – oblivious to Carol's hyperventilating – they argue amongst themselves. Paula helps the male in the group by adjusting the tourniquet on his arm to stem the bleeding. She tells Carol to shut up, and continues talking with her group. Granted, the conversation is serious: the guy's concerned he'll bleed to death.

Finally, an older woman in the group removes Carol's gag, and says, 'She is a nervous little bird, ain't she.'

A younger woman in the group aims her gun at Carol; she looks disgusted as she says, 'Look at you. Bitch, how did you make it this far?'

The older woman kindly instructs Carol to, 'take some yoga breaths and calm your ass down.' She notices Carol reaching for something: the rosary. She passes it to her.

Carol clutches the rosary to her lips as though it will help her breathe, and the older woman says, 'Oh! You're one of those.'

Maggie is even more confused: she knows Carol isn't *one of those*.

Paula says, 'What are you so afraid of?'

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My first world problems:

- We were evicted on short notice (after five years of tenancy): the landlord wanted to sell. We chose the best from the worst rentals, and spent Christmas packing.
- This place has no bathtub; the carpets stink; there's a slime-filled spa in the backyard; the stove door comes off when you open it briskly.
- My new year began with my publisher going defunct (three months before the release-date of my first two books). Luckily, a new publisher caught my fall.
- My husband's been in terrible pain with a kidney stone.
- I need a holiday: the stress of finishing a PhD, moving, and everything has taken its toll.
- I think I'm getting sick.
- I live with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). It's not as bad as before, but it can still be triggered unexpectedly.

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[Heterotopias can be loosely grouped in two categories:] crisis heterotopias [and] heterotopias of deviation ... (Foucault 1984)

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Paula says to Carol, 'Are you actually afraid to die?' She huffs. 'All this' – she gestures around her – 'and you're scared of getting your ticket punched.'

Carol meekly replies, 'It doesn't matter what happens to me. Just don't hurt Maggie. Don't hurt the baby.'

Oh, the realisation rippling through the group now: there's a pregnant woman in the room! The chick with the gun aimed at Carol now shifts to Maggie. It's so ridiculous to be holding a gun on them: they're tied up. It's clearly a show of power. The tension in the room escalates as Paula mocks Maggie, saying she must like 'making bite-size snacks for the walkers to chow down on.'

Paula and her group visibly relax; an air of cockiness laces Paula's voice and her body language. They think they've got these two sussed: Carol and Maggie are weak and stupid. If only they knew ...

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Heterotopias are sites of otherness, and derive their otherness only in their relational difference to all the other spaces. Their difference is heightened by them being sites of deviance (sites of non-conformance), or crisis (sacred and forbidden places): a heterotopia is 'absolutely *other* with respect to all the arrangements that it reflects' (Foucault 1997: 352). Kevin Hetherington (1997) says this otherness derives from the alternate social ordering of the heterotopic space: 'Heterotopia organize a bit of the social world in a way different to that which surrounds them. That alternate ordering marks them out as Other and allows them to be an example of an alternative way of doing things' (viii).

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Maggie's been taken away for interrogation.

The young woman with the gun says, 'You have nice clothes, time to make babies. You must be holed-up somewhere good. Tell me where.'

What Maggie doesn't say: 'Oh yeah, Alexandria! It's kind-of the most perfect gated community around. It was a bit touch-and-go there for a while when we were invaded by walkers, but I think we've fortified it again. We have all the modern conveniences, like plumbing and electricity, and we have veggie patches and flowers, and even a little lake in the middle. Carol's really good at making biscuits in her oven. We have a stash of guns, and we take shifts for patrolling the perimeter to keep the place secure at all times. It's a really great place; you want me to draw you a map of how to get there?'

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*Heterotopias are the potentially transformative spaces of society from which meaningful forms of resistance can be mounted. These are the places capable of a certain kind of social commentary, those sites where social commentary may, in a sense, be **written into** the arrangements and relations of space. (Hook 2007: 185, emphasis in original)*

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Carol is injured; there was a scuffle before Maggie was taken away: the guy in the group kicked the crap out of Carol, then he hit Paula in the head, and then Paula knocked him out with the butt of her gun.

As the older woman tends to Paula's head injury, she says to her, 'He gotcha good, kid.'

Paula replies, 'He is in pain. Guys can't handle pain.' And the older woman smiles.

Carol says meekly, flatly, 'Excuse me?'

Paula huffs in annoyance and they both turn to her.

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Foucault is interested in the way writing that breaks with convention upsets textual discourse (Hetherington 1997: 8), and I'm thinking that the lyric essay form may have piqued his interest.

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Carol continues, 'I just wanted to say thank you for helping Maggie ... for helping me.' Carol's voice and body language is of a vulnerable, defeated, child. Her tone is soft and flat, with an upward inflection at the end of each utterance. She is portraying herself as weak, resigned, small and eager to earn their approval.

Carol says, 'My husband, Ed ... he used to—'

Paula interjects: 'Oh yeah! I don't care if your old man used to ring your bell.' Paula tilts her head and continues, 'I can see exactly who you are, Carol. I know. You're pathetic.'

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The heterotopia is capable of juxtaposing in a single real place several spaces, several sites that are in themselves incompatible. (Foucault 1984)

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Dear Carol,

We are both survivors of domestic violence. I see that you are still in survivor mode though, in a heightened state of vigilance, constantly evaluating other peoples' power positions to find your safe spot. How could you even begin healing in such a state of crisis as a zombie apocalypse?

I think you are an extraordinary woman of great resourcefulness and resilience. You appeared to be a vulnerable and seemingly weak person when you were with your abusive husband, Ed, at the start of the series, and a simple reading of your personal growth trajectory would have you finding confidence after being liberated from the tyranny of your husband six seasons ago. But I think there is so much more going on here. Look at your ability to summon a nuanced performance of weakness, to not appear as a threat, your ability to read a situation and shift, so flawlessly, to a vocal register, a physical and narrative performance that best suits the situation.

I know first-hand how this skill gets developed. Out of self-preservation, we become strategic. We get really good at acting submissive, non-threatening when faced with someone violent. We get really good at compartmentalising our pain and controlling how we perform ourselves to others. Learning to stop crying in an instant, because I've been threatened with being punched in the face again, is one of the ways I learned this skill.

I've managed to turn this skill into something life-affirming through the years, though. When I give lectures, read my work, perform in public in any capacity, I draw on this well-honed skill, but it's not all fairy-floss and rainbows. There's still an uncomfortable tension after I've performed. The residue of the past lingers in my bones.

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Heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that both isolates them and makes them penetrable. ... not freely accessible ... Either the entry is compulsory ... or else the individual has to submit to rites and purifications. To get in one must have a certain permission and make certain gestures. ... There are others, on the contrary, that seem to be pure and simple openings, but that generally hide curious exclusions. (Foucault 1984)

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When I read a lyric essay, I surrender to its intuitive leaps, immerse in its fragmented accretion, and emerge from unexpected exits to comprehend it only after standing back and viewing it as a whole. I can't really draw you a map of a lyric essay. It's for you to discover for yourself.

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Wow, Carol is good: she's made Paula feel so in control that she's opening up about her past! She was a secretary for a dude who sounds like an arsehole. She looked at inspirational emails, a lot, to boost her low self-esteem. Paula was downtrodden, and now she's ruthlessly done anything to get by (mirror to Carol, much?).

Paula finishes sharing her personal life, and Carol says flatly, 'You're the one who's afraid to die. And you're going to. You will die. It's what's gonna happen, if you don't work this out.'

Paula's tone is like a condescending preschool teacher as she replies, 'Are you going to kill me?'

Carol says, 'I hope not.'

Up to this point, I haven't really noticed the mood-enhancing soundtrack. Right now it sounds as though a stovetop kettle is whistling furiously in background.

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Foucault's heterotopias are sites where time is either eternal, such as the cemetery and the museum, or the opposite, sites such as the festival which are 'flowing, transitory ... absolutely temporal' (Foucault 1984).

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How to deal with a flesh-and-blood flashback:

Keep-teaching-the-class—you-are-aged-nine-ten-eleven-twelve-thirteen-fourteen-fifteen-and-forty-two—**keep-teaching**—observe-how-this-person's-body-language-their-voice-their-appearance-so-perfectly-matches-a perpetrator-of-violence-from-your-childhood-how-it's-like-they've-stepped-through-a-portal-from-your-past-into-your-present-reality—**keep-teaching**—feel-multitudes-of-moments-of-fear-and-pain-jostle-for-recognition-in-your-body—**keep-teaching**—feel-both-strong-and-capable-and-terrified-that-you're-gonna-be-hit-at-any-moment—**keep-teaching**—hear-that-double-voicedness-that-sometimes-happens-when-an-anxiety-attack-is-coming-on—**keep-teaching**—lock-that-inner-voice-in-and-keep-it-safe-and-tell-her-you-will-get-through-this—**when-the-class-finishes-and-the-students-leave-sit-for-a-little-while-taking-long-steady-deep-breaths-and-compose-yourself**—ask-your-topic-coordinator-if-another-tutor-might-better-meet-this-student's-needs—**know-that-this-student-is-an-innocent-catalyst**—feel-the-shaking-and-thrashing-that's-locked-inside—**get-home-shut-out-the-world-with-these-thick-bricks-and-breathe-and-try-to-let-your-own-walls-start-to-seep**—watch-TV-for-a-distraction-only-to-find-that-there-is-no-escape-as-the-news-is-all-about-the-trauma-of-domestic-violence-and-child-sexual-abuse—**you-are-aged-nine-ten-eleven-twelve-thirteen-fourteen-fifteen-and-terrified-you're-gonna-be-hit**—let-your-partner-comfort-you-and-hold-you-and-kiss-your-tears—**agonise-and-rage-at-how-wrong-it-is-that-anyone-should-ever-be-abused**—keep crying-and-breathe—**know-that-you-are-safe**—no-one-can-hurt-you-like-that-anymore—**be-proud-of-yourself-for-not-crying-on-campus-that-you-kept-teaching-that-you-asked-for-help-that-you-are-in-a**

better-place-in-your-life-than-ever-before—nurse-the-tenderness-that-is-the-aftermath-of-the-worst-PTSD-episode-you’ve-had-in-thirteen-years.

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David Shields sermonises that the novel is dead at NonfictionNow (2012); my friend from the Philippines is distraught at its funeral: in his country it is only beginning to find its feet. John D’Agata, the grandfather of the lyric essay, compares the term ‘lyric essay’ to putting lipstick on a pig in his introduction to his latest book. He says the term has fallen out of favour with all of them, and no one uses it anymore (D’Agata 2015: 6), and I’m wondering what the hell to call what I’m writing.

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Oh no! Carol almost succeeds in getting Paula to agree to a hostage swap, but, just when it looks like it’ll go through, Paula baulks, and decides to leave as soon as more of her crew arrive—and they’re gonna kill Carol and Maggie!

After the door closes, Carol – faced with the reality of their impending death – takes a big deep breath in, releases it, and galvanises a new plan of action. She steels herself, clenches her jaw. Her facial expression: game-on molls.

She sharpens the metal crucifix on the cement, and cuts through her binds.

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In six months from now I will be sitting in my second-hand, slightly-more-familiar lounge room, with the heater cranked up to thirty degrees, recovering from a chest infection so bad that I will barely be able to breathe. I will have just ordered a HEPA air filter after discovering mould growing on all of the windowsills, and cursing this house for being the wettest house I’ve ever lived in. I will find myself yearning for sunshine, like an infant fanging for a feed. Every time it rains outside I will cringe, and I will discover that I am only a pluviophile when I can watch the rain sinking into the earth for trees to drink. My husband and I will agree that this dwelling is temporary, that it feels as though we are in the hull of a boat with the ever-present sloshing of water rocking us to-and-fro, on a journey to somewhere. I will have not (yet) met Nicki Minaj.

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The final confrontation between Carol and Paula ends with Paula getting impaled on a pole through her guts, and a zombie biting chunks from her face. Poor Carol. She looks pretty distraught: she’s not coping well with killing her reflection.

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I wonder if the lyric essay is simultaneously both: a site of crisis and a site of deviance. Perhaps it is a site of deviance because it is a site of crisis, or perhaps it is the reverse.

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D’Agata agrees that ‘the beautiful gangly breadth of this unnameable literary form’ still needs to be called something: ‘We might as well call it the lyric essay ...’ (D’Agata 2015: 9-10).

Meads We might as well call it a boat

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The ship is the heterotopia par excellence. In civilizations without boats, dreams dry up, espionage takes the place of adventure, and the police take the place of pirates. (Foucault 1984)

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And that's pretty much the end of *The Walking Dead* Season 6, Episode 13: 'The Same Boat'.

Research statement

Research Background

Over the last two decades US lyric essayists have defined the lyric essay form (D'Agata & Tall 1997; Miller & Paola 2004; Seneca Review 2007; D'Agata 2015) to the point where the term 'lyric essay' has fallen out of favour (D'Agata 2015); yet, here in Australia, the form has yet to really find its place. By examining the parallels between the established conventions of the lyric essay and Foucault's notion of heterotopia, 'We might as well call it a boat' seeks to demonstrate the complexities of this evolving form from an Australian context.

Research Contribution

'We might as well call it a boat' creatively demonstrates the lyric essay as heterotopia. By adopting the lyric essay form to map itself as a heterotopic site, building on the form's tradition to break with conventional linear structures, blend styles of writing, resist easy interpretation and its history as a vehicle for representing pain and trauma (Mintz 2011), it reveals the conventions and potential of the lyric essay with the intention of encouraging other writers to experiment with the form.

Research Significance

By locating the lyric essay as heterotopia, 'We might as well call it a boat' offers a model of the form as a site of juxtaposition, of otherness, of crisis, of non-conformance, of resistance and of transformation that adds to the still burgeoning discourse on the lyric essay in Australia, making a significant contribution to discourse on the essay in an Asia-Pacific context.

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