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## Becoming more than it never (actually) was: Expressive writing as research-creation

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### ABSTRACT

In this article the author combines Chinese literary theory and new materialism with her ongoing research into creative writing. In the opening section, the author discusses how language and writing can be approached using new materialist theories. She then enters into a creative non-fiction “research-creation” piece that explores how creative writing can be a more-than-representational practice, and how words can heighten and/or dampen affective production. The creative non-fiction story experiments with sub-text, format, and sensorial evocations. Finally, the author considers the potentialities and caveats of teaching creative-non fiction writing to high school students.

The memory of the event remains: not as image or recollection, but as kind of field of virtual potential that never quite exhausts itself in the process of becoming more than it never (actually) was. (McCormack, 2008, p. 8)

In Chinese literary theory, the concept *wenqi* (文气), coined by 1st century literary theorist Cao Pi, describes the “inborn talent of a writer as manifested in his [sic] writing” (Gu, 2009, p. 23). In the 2,000 years since Cao Pi’s death, the concept has taken on myriad meanings including the aesthetic merit of a piece of writing, the author’s inspiration, and literary momentum of the words (Gu, 2009). Pushing these ideas further, Owen (1992) discusses *wenqi* as “... that by which all other elements which contribute to the formation of a poem—talent, learning, personality, the affections—are animated” (Owen, 1992, p. 67). I believe the notion of *wenqi* intersects well with new materialist theories by conceptualizing writing as a vital process that is not solely author centred but includes the author’s environment and a multitude of other factors that combine in the writing act: everything that combines when the pen scratches the paper and the pigment bleeds, the ensuing affects those sharp black lines produce and “the interstices between them” (Massumi, 2015, p. 63). The writer, the reader, the pen, the ink, the paper, the social-economic milieu, are all part of the “apparatus,” as Barad (2007) would say that

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produces a piece of writing. In such a view, the author is decentered and replaced by what Manning (2013) might call a “field of relations,” or a “force taking form rather than simply a form” (p. 31).

Once we cease viewing writers as pre-formed subjects with distinct authorial intentions represented in unambiguous texts, a new materialist informed conception of writing also allows us to consider the emergent qualities of language expression. As Hayles (2012) states, “Materiality is unlike physicality in being an emergent property. It cannot be specified in advance, as though it existed ontologically as a discrete entity” (p. 91). In this view, language and language-use become part of a horizontal ontology emerging alongside other social-material forces, instead of merely a medium for representing them.

So while I agree with many ongoing critiques of the linguistic turn, and believe it’s time language was relieved from what MacLure (2013) poetically calls its “imperial position as mediator of the world,” (p. 663) in this article, and my writing practice I do not (obviously can not) exclude language, or linguistic theorizing from the materiality of my research practice. I maintain that language operates as a material force and material event, but advise that it is not superior to other material forces or events, and is subject to the same emergent properties. Similarly, Massumi (2002) when discussing affect, notes that although affects differ from emotions in that they are pre-linguistic, or as he says, “the skin is faster than the word,” (p. 25) language can amplify or dampen the intensity of an affect through articulation or writing. Such a viewpoint does not reduce linguistic communication to a *representation* of affective experiences, but allows words into the affective encounter as another part of the event from which a new material experience arises. This perspective allows us to move away from the conception of language as purely representational and experiment with language’s material potential through creative writing.

I am interested in how words mix with, amplify, or dampen the intensity of an affect as part of a larger apparatus of thinking–feeling, and I’m also interested in the material influences that affect word-usage and reception. I explore these interests through my creative writing practice as well as with high school English students’ writings as part of my larger research. Parikka (2011) argues that along with recognizing theory as situated practice, we should consider, “... practice as theory. Practices are in themselves theoretical excavations into the world of ‘things,’ objects of (cultural) research conducted in a manner that makes the two inseparable” (p. 34). I contextualize my writing practice using research-creation.

Research-creation can be thought of as “... the complex intersection of art, theory, and research” (Truman & Springgay, 2015, p. 152). The description I just gave of research-creation could be used to describe most forms of arts-based research. However, unlike some arts-based approaches to research that attempt to use artistic media as ways of disseminating or representing qualitative research findings, research-creation is concerned with what Manning and Massumi (2014) call a “... mutual interpenetration of processes rather than a communication of

*product*” (p. 88–89, italics mine). In research-creation, rather than representing research “data” through art/writing, the process of art/writing is the research and theorizing. Parikka states, “Practices point towards the promise of the experiment as a formation inseparable from theory” (Parikka, 2011, p. 34).

The story below—*Episodes with Eloise*—experiments with the mutual interpenetrating material processes of thinking–feeling–writing. The story is an account of some events in my past that have affective potential, and an experiment in what happens if those events are re-configured through apertures of language and narrative and ink and paper. It’s not a reporting of events but a creation.

Accordingly, research-creation varies from the phenomenological focus of some arts-based approaches which jagodzinski and Wallin (2013) critique for being solely “... located within lived experience or composed from personal memory” (p. 167). Now you might say that of course personal memories are present in autobiographical writing. And I agree that memories are part of the ensemble, or *wenqi* that any writing emerges from, however I concur with McCormack (2008) that memories of past events *remain* not as definite images, rather as a “field of virtual potential that never quite exhausts itself in the process of becoming more than it never (actually) was” (McCormack, 2008, p. 8). This hints toward how both research-creation’s more-than-representational approach, and creative writing’s differential potential, have the ability to bring new events into being rather than merely report on them.

The following research-creation is an experiment in writing practice. The text is in past-tense, employs a frame-narrative, and direct and indirect discourse. I wrote this story in conjunction with my *qigong* practice (a standing meditation practice). It draws from hazy journal notes, many cups of tea, and a lovely view of the Niagara Escarpment out the window. Although none of the previous two sentences’ elements are *in* the story, they are part of the apparatus from which the story emerged.

### ***Episodes with Eloise***

I ate sushi for the first time in Berkeley California. I was 19, I had just hitchhiked from Lake Louise Alberta, and I was high on LSD.

“Just try a piece,” Eloise said. The chopsticks, wooden spindles, clutched the squiggling sushi. Infinite eyes attended.

“It’s moving. It’s alive.”

“It’s vegetarian, it never moved! And you shouldn’t take drinks from strangers.”

“It was orange juice. Why would I suspect LSD in orange juice?”

“We’re in Berkeley, that’s what people do here.”

The colors of the cosmos shone on the sushi. It breathed magnificent, spiraled ocean of emptiness.

“What’s that sound?”

“You’re just tripping. There’s no sound.”

I heard the crystals of eternity grinding, grinding down into myriad things.

“Are you going to try the sushi or not?”

I sipped the sake. The altar of mouth communed and the cathedral of nostril perfumed and the catacomb of gut warmed. My hand would soon pass through the cup—fluid. The Kirin painted on the cup in ink blue winked. I see you, it said. I know you. The mythical beast that lives on wind knew me.

“I am a cathedral of consciousness. The Kirin knows me. I am the Kirin!”

“You’re high.” Eloise leaned across the table and took my hand. “Try the sushi—you’ll like it!”

I was high, I had never tried sushi, but most importantly on that hazy evening, Eloise was speaking to me. She had ignored me for the previous three days. Two days of hitchhiking south, and one day in People’s Park and she hadn’t spoken a word to me except to tell me I was stupid.

Eloise was four years older than I. We met at a lodge in the Rocky Mountains. She had recently graduated from Queens’ University and had moved to Alberta to work. I had finished my first year at University of Toronto and went to Alberta to work for the summer. Every night after my shift in the café at Moraine Lake Lodge, we’d paddle a yellow canoe onto the aqua marine lake, smoke, and watch the sun vanish behind Wenkchemna Glacier. On weekends we’d hike into the mountains and camp among larch trees and crystal creeks. We encountered a grizzly bear one evening as we switch-backed into Paradise Valley.

The sleeping quarters of the lodge we worked at were decrepit, musky, and damp so we slept huddled in the same bed on cold nights. In August we decided to hitchhike to California for a trip before I had to return to university.

“Here, I’ll take a piece of sushi apart so you can see what’s in it. You have to eat something. Look: avocado, rice, sesame seeds, and nori, that’s all!”

“What’s nori?”

“Seaweed.”

Winnowing, winding seaweed swirled in the sushi quiet.

It took us more than a week to hitchhike from Lake Louise to Berkeley. We made it through the Rockies to Victoria and boarded a ferry to Port Angeles. We danced at a Pow Wow on Bainbridge Island. We hitched rides with families, hippies, librarians, and a hunchback. We slept beneath the stars in Oregon’s sand dunes. A meteor shower tumbled across the long vista. Eloise zipped our sleeping bags together into one.

“Are you trying to seduce me?” I asked.

“We both have boyfriends,” she said.

“I know. I was only kidding.”

The stars burned.

The following morning, I wandered ahead of Eloise toward the highway. She somehow got lost on her way out of the sand dunes. Her face streamed with tears when she finally found me.

“Where were you? Where were you?” I offered her water. She flicked the bottle away.

“You don’t understand the gravity of this situation,” she said.

Eloise stopped speaking to me. We hitchhiked south in silence, speaking only to our rides, never to each other. We slept in the Red Woods in California. Their towering columns blocked out the night sky. A man called Ed drove us across the Golden Gate Bridge, toured us around San Francisco and then over to Berkeley in his shiny-beige Dodge Dart. Ed wore a terrycloth one-piece suit, and guzzled Wild Spirit “Paddle Your Own Canoe” alcohol as he drove. He promised that his father, a professor at Berkeley, would let us camp in his backyard. His dad disagreed and slammed the door on us. We slept in the forest near People’s Park instead.

I woke up early and decided to go to a shop and buy some juice. Eloise awoke to find my sleeping bag empty just as Ed arrived with breakfast. Eloise decided that Ed must have kidnapped me, and called the police. I returned to our campsite to find Eloise missing and the bags gone. I wandered out of the forest into a swarm of police cars, Ed in the back of the cruiser and Eloise in tears.

Eloise told me I was stupid and then walked away.

I spent the day playing basketball in People’s Park. I ate lunch with the Hare Krishnas. After lunch some guy gave me a glass of orange juice laced with LSD. Eloise found me playing basketball and insisted I join her for dinner. I had hoped she would find me.

“Maybe I’ll just order some noodles.”

“No. You’ll try sushi,” she said. My hands wiggled and fidgeted. The sushi breathed. Effervescent sapphires of punctured space shattered the silence and rested on my eyelids blue.

“Punctured space.”

“You are a loon.”

The following winter, Eloise and I worked at a ski resort in Alberta. We lived in Sunshine Village on the side of a mountain in a room buried beneath the ski run. Two ferrets made a home in the snow well outside of our window. At night, the light would spill from our room and illumine the ferret’s snow cave. They watched us and we watched them. Eloise and I drank Tom Collins or cheap wine every evening and skied every day. I mailed my essays to Toronto and somehow finished my second year of university.

Eloise reassembled the roll of sushi, dipped it in the wasabi and tamari paste and popped it into her mouth.

“Have you considered the process involved in bringing that combination of ingredients into your mouth?”

“I don’t think half as much as you do in general. It’s a rule of mine,” Eloise said. Her eyes like oceans green. I almost asked her why she had stopped speaking to me. But I worried that she might get angry again.

After Sunshine Village shut down for the season, Eloise and I hitchhiked to Lake Louise. We met a warden from Lake Louise’s ski hill and he let us stay in his chalet

for a week. His deck overlooked Saddleback, Temple, and other jagged mountains in Banff National Park. We listened to Joni Mitchell, Pulp, and Brian Eno, smoked and drew pictures. One day we decided to canoe from Lake Louise to Banff. We brought a case of beer, no life jackets, and let the current pull us downstream.

Part way through the voyage, we discovered an elk's skeleton caught on a rocky embankment. Eloise suggested we take its skull and tie it to the bow of our canoe. The elk lead the way as we charged down stream, drunk, blithe, and irreverent in the aquamarine water.

We pulled over beneath Castle Mountain and waited for the warden to collect us. Eloise made an altar for the elk on a bolder. I gathered wildflowers and scattered them around the skull.

"Thank you spirit elk," she said.

I collapsed onto the grass. Eloise lay beside me and held my hand. It burned.

"I know you're not hungry now. But you will be. I'm leaving the rest for you," Eloise said. She sipped the sake.

I sipped the sake, my senses afire. Eloise watched.

"We should probably go to San Francisco tomorrow and figure out how we'll get to Toronto," she said.

School started in a week. I didn't want to go back to Toronto. I didn't want to go back to university. I wanted to wander longer.

The last time I ever saw Eloise, she punched me on the dance floor at her MA graduation party. The DJ played Soft Cell's "Tainted Love." Eloise followed me outside, dumped all my schoolbooks onto the road and trampled the flower I had brought her as a graduation present. She raged down the road and I stood beneath a streetlamp rubbing my arm where she'd hit me.

"Just eat the sushi," Eloise said. I gripped the chopsticks in my right hand.

"Be delicate. Delicate but firm."

Deftly, I dipped the sushi in the tamari and wasabi mix and brought the chopsticks to my lips. The wasabi burned up my nose and down my spine. Eloise laughed as I quivered in a prism of taste.

### **Further (to write conclusion might imply that there is one)**

Regarding my non-fiction research-creation *Episodes with Eloise*, in light of the more-than-representational approach I take to writing, I'm not going to use this section to interpret the story and tell you what it *means*. I will claim that after reading through the text again from my current vantage, for me, the story is as much in the *gaps* as the words—by that I mean the story emerges as much through what is not said as much as what is said. A story requires both words and space. I can feel how words, narrative, and the space between words can *amplify* and *dampen* affective experiences instead of merely *representing* those experiences.

Pedagogically, I believe that these material affects of language should be highlighted in schooling beyond lessons in rhetoric, persuasion, and exposition.

Accordingly, writing and re-reading this story has made me reconsider the potential of teaching autobiographical writing in classrooms. The immediacy of writing about a personal event may serve as a flint to ignite writing practice that in turn experiments with language's more than representational ability to become more than it never actually was.

Here's the caveat: while providing immediate access to content for students to begin a writing practice, autobiographical writing in the classroom has the tendency to open what Leggo (2007) calls a "Pandora's Box" wherein the realities of topics such as the death of loved ones, or broken homes, or loneliness are likely to arise in students' writing, potentially making both student and teacher uncomfortable (p. 31). This tension haunts many of us English teachers who want to allow students to experiment with autobiographical writing in schools. If succeeding in school has come to mean achieving specific test results on standardized tests and autobiographical writing has the potential to materialize Pandora's Boxes of issues why would we bother teaching it?

I recently finished a research project in a school wherein one task required students to reflect on and critique something they didn't like about their walks to school and take it as a starting point for a poem. Issues of sexual harassment, racism, and bullying that the students encounter arose in the poems. Reading the student's poems showed me how although these issues were not on the English "curriculum" they are part of the hidden curriculum or public pedagogy those students experience each day, and consequently part of the field of relations or *wenqi* they write from (specifically in those poems but perhaps also in general). However, the poems were *more than* the field of relations they emerged from. The poems were not simply representations of unpleasant experiences rendered in poetic form, but again demonstrated the material potential of a piece of writing for amplifying or dampening experiences of both the writer and reader. This returns us to a hope of research-creation as an approach to creative practice: it requires us to consider *how* writing *does*, rather than only consider *what* writing *means*, and requires us to recognize that that process is ongoing. This is the affective-material function of creative writing/reading—it isn't finished.

### Contributor

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