# Ghosts of Leigh:Scripting the Monstrous Effeminate

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## Biographical Note

Dr. Dallas Baker is a Senior Lecturer in writing, editing and publishing at the School of Arts and Communication at the University of Southern Queensland. He has published dozens of scholarly articles and creative works, including a book of travel writing, *America Divine: Travels in the Hidden South* (2011), and, under the pen name D.J. McPhee, two fantasy fiction novels, *Waycaller* (2016) and *Keysong* (2017). Dallas has also published a number of short scripts*.* Dallas’ study and research intersect with a number of disciplines: creative writing, publishing and cultural studies. His current research interests are scriptwriting, publishing and ‘self-making’ in cultural practices such as creative writing, reading and popular music consumption.

## Abstract

This article describes how a practice-led research methodology used to produce a creative writing artefact, a short play aimed at a high school audience, had a transformative impact on a number of levels: on the artefact, on the writing practice itself and on the author’s own self-knowledge in terms of gender identity and subjectivity. The creative writing artefact in question is a short stage play entitled *Ghosts of Leigh*, an exploration of the gender-bending club culture of the 1980s. The play is set in regional Queensland, Australia, which, at that time, was a strongly homosocial and homophobic environment. The script and this article explore the notion of effeminacy as a monstrous masculinity of considerable discursive potency that simultaneously disrupts both masculinity and femininity. The article also discusses how the practice-led research methodology itself facilitated the development of fresh understandings around effeminacy and how these new understandings interacted with the author’s lived gender and embodied subjectivity.

## Keywords

Effeminacy, monstrosity, Leigh Bowery, self-making, creative writing

## Introduction

What we know transforms us. When we write, we write from what we know. We come to know through investigation, discovery and reflection, which is research. Just as often, we come to know a thing more deeply as we write about it. Writing is its own research method, its own form of inquiry … Thus, writing transforms us. (Baker 2017, n.pag.).

*Ghosts of Leigh* (Baker 2017b, n.pag.) is a one act play that explores effeminacy through the gender-bending performance of fashion designer and 1980s nightclub denizen Leigh Bowery. The play’s target audience is high school students. The script was produced using a practice-led research (PLR) methodology. This methodology had a transformative impact on the artefact, on the writing practice itself and on my own gender identity or subjectivity. A significant feature of the script is its celebration of flamboyant effeminacy, as the following excerpt demonstrates:

A darkened bedroom. Just barely visible is a single bed. In the bed sleeps a young man, DANDELION JONES. He is wearing a pair of striped pyjama bottoms. In his sleep he has kicked most of the white bedding off the end of the bed. His legs are partially covered by a sheet. His hand rests on his bare belly as he breathes slowly and deeply.

A movement to the side and a rustling sound reveals another figure in the room, a tall figure who is slowly twirling on the spot. The darkness of the room lessens a little to further reveal this twirling figure, who is bizarrely dressed. Even so, it isn’t possible in the dim light to identify this person as male or female.

The rustling sound of the person’s twirling wakes Dandelion, who sits bolt upright in his bed. The room is no longer dark. Dandelion takes in the twirling figure and blinks, unbelieving. It is LEIGH BOWERY, not that Dandelion recognises him. To Dandelion, Leigh is just an outrageously dressed young drag queen.

Dandelion

Who, who are you?

Leigh

I’m Leigh, of course.

Dandelion

Are, are you a ghost or a dream?

leigh

A dreamy ghost, a ghostly dream, take your pick.

Dandelion

wha… what are you doing?

Leigh

Twirling.

Dandelion

Wh… Why?

Leigh

(still twirling)

Ugh, I *hate* “why” questions. There doesn’t always have to be a reason for everything, you know.

Dandelion blinks some more, unsure of what he’s seeing, then scratches his scalp, further tussling his already scruffy bed hair.

Dandelion

What on earth are you wearing?

leigh

(stops twirling)

I was wondering when you’d come to that! Everyone comes to it eventually.

Leigh adopts a catwalk pose, with one stockinged leg cocked forward and both hands on hips.

leigh

This outfit is one of my autumn predictions. It’s a frock coat kind of thing made from a silk fabric with a floral print in reds, purples and blues. As you can see by its naughty shimmer, it has a scattering of rather indiscreet little sequins here and there. It’s lined with a lovely watermelon satin. I’ve teamed this outfit with sequin gloves *and* sequin tights. And of course a pair of devilishly high-heeled boots.

This article can be seen as an exegetical exercise but might be more aptly understood as mirroring the creative artefact (the script) in its exploration of a specific theme. The theme in question is the notion of effeminacy as a monstrous masculinity ‘of considerable discursive potency that simultaneously disrupts both masculinity and femininity, as they are traditionally defined’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.). As distinct from the creative artefact, this article discusses how the practice-led research methodology itself facilitated the development of fresh understandings around effeminacy and how these new understandings interacted with my own lived gender and embodied subjectivity. The ways that my creative practice (writing) inform and alter my subjectivity has been the focus of much of my research since 2008 (Baker 2012 & 2017).

As with other scripts I have written, staged and published (Baker 2012 & 2017), this script was researched and written simultaneously with an academic paper, the result of which is this published article. The script and this article were produced as ‘research outputs of equal value and as two aspects of a single research objective’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.). This is my normal creative and research process (Baker 2017 & 2012). The two parts of the project are unified in that they both produce knowledge around gender and sexual difference and the ways that effeminate subjectivities are constructed. For me, critical research and creative practice are intertwined and mutually inform each other in ways that enrich both processes. Creative practice and traditional research methods are ways of approaching a subject from multiple angles. They are distinct yet deeply interconnected. Creative practice is an experiential or affective way of knowing (Baker 2012), whereas traditional research produces more theoretical knowledge. Together, these two kinds of knowledge, two distinct ways of knowing, combine to form a much deeper understanding of the topic being explored. The script can be characterised as a non-traditional “performative research” output (Haseman 2006) which presents the project hypothesis (that monstrous effeminacy is a potent and subversive masculinity) in narrative form.

*Ghosts of Leigh*, and indeed many of my scripts, explores notions of subjectivity, in particular how subjectivities can be seen to be performative (Butler 1990, 1993) and produced in and through (and indeed despite) rule bound discourse (Butler 1990, 184). The script discusses these ideas in an accessible way and disseminates narrative expressions of effeminate masculinity, in the context of 1980s gender-bending culture. Reflections on the process of writing the script are used in this article to discuss the ways that the writing practice and attendant research acted as part of a self-writing (Foucault 1997) or *self-bricolage* (Rabinow 1994).

## The Monstrous

Before proceeding, a discussion of notions of monstrosity and effeminacy is necessary. The quote below, from Jacques Derrida, suggests that the monstrous has the effect of revealing and illuminating societal norms:

Faced with a monster, one may become aware of what the norm is and when this norm has a history – which is the case with discursive norms, philosophical norms, socio-cultural norms, they have a history – any appearance of monstrosity in this domain allows an analysis of the history of the norms. But to do that, one must conduct not only a theoretical analysis; one must produce what in fact looks like a discursive monster so that the analysis will be a practical effect, so that people will be forced to become aware of the history of normality (cited in Weber 1995, 385).

Derrida is calling for the production of a ‘discursive monster’, a text or discourse that—by defying expectations and refusing authority and conventional standards—revels in the unfamiliar, the uncanny, the absurd and the horrific. Specifically, Derrida is calling for a text that will facilitate a practical effect; that is, an *experiential* understanding of what the monstrous *is*, and how norms have operated in defining the abnormal.

The most significant norms, those that are at once both the most oppressive and offer the most potential for resistance, are those associated with gender and sexuality (Butler 1990 & 2004). As the norm of hegemonic masculinity is still routinely constructed in dominant discourse as natural and fixed in a way that post-feminist constructions of femininity are not (Halberstam 1998), it is one requiring ongoing deconstruction and reformulation. Hegemonic masculinity is still largely perceived as naturally adhering to a male body whereas femininity has been severed from its referent (the female body) and is now widely perceived as artifice; as a masquerade or performance (Halberstam 1998). For these reasons, ‘masculinity continues to offer potential for a deconstruction that produces a significant impact’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.), and certainly was in the period that Leigh Bowery was producing his boundary-crossing works.

In terms of sexuality, gender and identity/subjectivity, the direct experience of the disruptive impact of the monstrous on restrictive norms—which in this context is an experience of an alternate and monstrous male gender—can be said to have an illuminating impact/effect in that, to borrow from Judith Butler, it can ‘undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one’ (2004, 1). In other words, an experience of the disruptive impact of a monstrous discourse or text on a restrictive gender/sex norm can, to use Butler’s terminology, ‘undo’ one’s personhood and facilitate the emergence of a new subjectivity. The emergence of a new subjectivity (a new masculinity) could certainly be described as a practical effect. But, what precisely is required to produce this practical effect? What kinds of discourses/monsters fit Derrida’s schema?

When Derrida writes of ‘practical effect’ and the monstrous in the same sentence, Julia Kristeva’s conception of the ‘abject Other’—and the experience of horror or disgust at the abject, at that which must be expelled—comes into focus. For Kristeva (1982), that which must be expelled is bodily waste—urine, faeces, blood, pus, and, the ultimate abjection, the corpse—but also discourse that exists at the border of law and/or dominant discourse (scripture).. For Kristeva (1982), ‘scripture’, or what Judith Butler (1990) might call ‘rule bound discourse’, mediates transgression and simultaneously describes and proscribes the abject. It is possible to infer from Kristeva’s work that any discourse which attempts to resist scripture (dominant discourse) is therefore already abject, monstrous.

Kristeva argues that abjection—that which is horrific/monstrous and must be expelled or destroyed—is inscribed on individuals who commit 'crimes' against established systems, laws, borders or order, particularly crimes that highlight, or draw attention to, the fragility of those systems, borders and laws (1982, 4). For Kristeva, these 'borders' are those between categories which are considered ‘norms’, categories associated with a Self, or the dominant subjectivity of a discourse, and terms considered abnormal, terms somehow Other to dominant discourse (1982, 4).

The presumed Self in dominant discourse is most often heterosexual, most often male, and this presumption is considered somehow normal or natural. The Other therefore is constructed as female, or queer, indeed unnatural (Baker 2010). Barbara Creed’s (1993) notion of the *monstrous feminine*, which draws heavily on Kristeva’s work, describes the processes of abjection as it is ascribed to certain kinds of transgressive bodies and sexual behaviours; bodies (of either sex) that carry certain monstrous marks commonly associated with the feminine. These bodies bleed and sweat, they are soft rather than hard, they excrete bodily fluids, they are pale and weak and, perhaps most abject of all, they express an ‘unnatural’ desire for their own gender/sex (1993, 118).

Creed describes this border between the natural and the unnatural, between culture and its monstrous Other, when she states that the monster exists at the border which ‘separates those who take up their proper gender roles from those who do not...’ or where ‘the border is between normal and abnormal desire’ (1993, 11). By abnormal desire, Creed means non-heterosexual desire. In other words, the monstrous is queer and the queer is monstrous. As Sue Ellen Case argues: ‘The queer is the taboo-breaker, the monstrous, the uncanny’ (1997, 383). To occupy a position of “abnormal” desire that also refuses traditional gender norms is to be doubly monstrous. The effeminate male occupies that position. As Creed notes, ‘it seems clear that in the process of being constructed as monstrous the male is feminised’ (1993, 121).

Given all the above, a clear contender for classification as a monstrous text is the outrageous effeminate male as embodied in the gender-bending queer artist Leigh Bowery, who emerged from queer club culture in the 1980s. Bowery’s gender-bending body art produced and enacted an effeminacy that abraded the borders between the normal and abnormal; between male/female, masculine/feminine and between human and animal. In crucial ways the gender performances of Leigh Bowery achieve Derrida’s practical effect. Bowery’s performance art exposes the limits of gender norms, of masculinity and femininity themselves, and forces those experiencing it to ‘become aware of the history of normality’ (Derrida cited in Weber 1995, 385).



Figure 1 Leigh Bowery © Fergus Greer

## Effeminacy

Effeminacy is defined as gender inappropriate traits in a male individual that are associated with stereotypical femininity; usually concerning modes of speech, behaviour, mannerisms or style of clothing (Bergling 2001; Sinfield 1994).Basically, effeminate males ‘are seen to be inappropriately enacting or *performing* feminine gender roles’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.). The word “performing” is important to the definition of effeminacy, for the effeminate male is seen as “acting out” feminine behaviours or roles rather than expressing their “true” gender. Unlike masculinity and femininity, effeminacy is not seen in dominant discourse as a natural expression of biological sex or an inner identity but rather as artifice (Baker 2017). Most often effeminacy is perceived as ‘a staged display; as an effect of deliberate non-conformity or psychological disturbance’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.). It is no coincidence that effeminate mannerisms are described as “affected”.

Effeminacy is not only a monstrous masculinity but a gender expression that attracts derision and disgust from both heterosexual and homosexual men (Bergling 2001; Sinfield 1994; Parker 1989). Heterosexual and homosexual men revile the effeminate male for different though connected reasons. To the heterosexual man, the effeminate is synonymous with the homosexual and thus an object of disgust and fear (Sinfield 1994). In heteronormative discourse there is no room for the possibility that any effeminate male might be heterosexually oriented. The reasons why homosexual men revile the effeminate male are a little more complex. One reason is the fact that many gay men see effeminacy as a negative stereotype that has historically been used to marginalise homosexuals (Bergling 2001; Sinfield 1994). Therefore, any person who behaves in an effeminate fashion is perceived as something of an embarrassment to the contemporary gay male community, which reveres the “straight-acting” man, the gay man who is indistinguishable from heterosexual men.

There is also a strong current of misogyny in the dislike of effeminacy, it is rooted in a dislike of the feminine in general (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1992). Moreover, hatred of effeminacy, what might be called *effemiphobia*, has its beginnings in a deep fear of gender ambiguity. Many gay men are just as socially-conditioned and normative in terms of gender as their straight male counterparts. The effeminate man troubles this (normative) sense of appropriate gender. Perhaps most significant however is that the queer effeminate male *is* distinguishable from heterosexual males. Effeminacy obliterates the sexual invisibility that the straight-acting schema produces (Baker 2017). The effeminate male is highly visible and utterly destroys the “closet” and along with it the illusion of safety that the closet sometimes provides. Thus, the effeminate male provokes in straight-acting and/or closeted homosexual men feelings of shame, disgust and fear. In this sense, ‘sissyphobia’ or effemiphobia is no different from homophobia.

In the Christian tradition, effeminacy is identified with evil and sin (Mahon 2004, 257). Strong arguments have been made that effeminacy or gender non-conformity is the true target of homophobic violence against males (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1994). Thus, effeminacy is positioned at the extreme limit of acceptable gender, as Alan Sinfield (1994, 4) has noted:

In all the current preoccupation with concepts of manliness and masculinity, effeminacy is rarely addressed head-on; yet it defines, crucially, the generally acceptable limits of gender and sexual expression.

Given this, it can be said that effeminacy is designated in much socio-cultural discourse as the ultimate abject gender (Baker 2017), an *unintelligible* gender (Butler 2004) that cannot be understood as anything other than monstrous, or a sickness. For Butler (1990), the unintelligible is that which does not cohere with the logic of compulsory/compulsive heteronormativity. It is that gender or sexuality which, because it cannot be understood within a heteronormative and naturalizing system, is perceived as somehow unreal; somehow artificial and unnatural. An unintelligible gender is any gender that is perceived as not being “naturally” attached to, or arising from, natural sex (Butler 1990). Such genders are considered a kind of ungraspable deception. As Judith Butler elucidates:

The moment in which one’s staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question. When such categories come into question, the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be “real”, what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality (1990, xxiii, original emphasis).

An encounter with effeminacy, however, is not always one in which gender is impossible to ascertain (Baker 2017). There is no sense that all effeminate males cannot be ascribed a gender. Effeminacy is not a gender which *utterly* confuses, but rather, as Butler puts it, questions both categories of gender, ‘putting them both into crisis’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.). Effeminacy is often perceptible as a form of masculinity, but a masculinity that is insubordinate and subversive. This kind of effeminacy is a visible and distinguishable refusal of heteronormative gender logic (Baker 2017). It is this deliberate refusal which makes effeminacy incomprehensible and unintelligible. As such, effeminacy simultaneously disrupts notions of masculinity and femininity and is a threat to both.

Ironically, this unintelligible gender is often exposed through speech acts (Baker 2017). The effeminate male is constructed as speaking in an overtly and exaggeratedly feminine way (Sinfield 1994; Parker 1989). A number of early psychological studies linked effeminacy (and transgender identification) with verbal aptitude (Money & Block 1971, Money & Epstein 1967), a gift for conversation as it were. An early psychological diagnostic tool—proposed for use in definitively identifying suspect effeminates—listed feminine modes of speech as a key indicator (Schatzberg et al 1975). This propensity of effeminates for conversation has been noted with regards to Oscar Wilde (Waldrep 2004; Sinfield 1994) and Truman Capote (Hill 1957), both of whom are constructed in dominant discourse as the ultimate effeminate homosexual. Capote went so far as to place conversation ahead of writing in terms of significance when he said “conversation will always come first with me” (quoted in Hill 1957).

It must be said however that this effeminate mode of speech is also simultaneously seen as not at all feminine; as a strange masquerade of femininity that is neither authentic nor natural (Baker 2017). Indeed, it is inauthentic and unnatural, which is how effeminacy itself is defined. Thus, a circular logic dominates in which an effeminate is identified as a male individual who speaks (and behaves and dresses) effeminately. An effeminate is he who performs effeminacy. To paraphrase that famous notion of Judith Butler’s (1990, 25), effeminacy has no ontological status.

*Ghosts of Leigh* appropriates these discourses of the verbally-gifted effeminate and constructs one of the main characters, Leigh Bowery, as a gender rebel with a noted propensity for adjectives. This reflects my own lived experience. As a child I was informed by a rather disapproving male classmate that I used words that other boys didn’t use. The implication was that they were words that boys *shouldn’t* use. When I begged for clarification as to which words were not appropriate for boys, my classmate replied: ‘Words like *cute* and *nice*, words like *pretty* and *adorable*, words like that, poofter words’ (Baker 2011, 10). With this statement, my classmate had identified the verbal aptitude which marked me as effeminate, and as homosexual. All of the ‘queer words’ he had identified were adjectives. The scenes in *Ghosts of Leigh* in which this adjective-heavy dialogue appears act to foreground the connection in homophobic discourse between “female speech” and cultural anxiety about effeminacy (Parker 1989).

This verbal aptitude, much derided as effeminate, eventually led to my becoming a writer. My writing is largely concerned with exploring the very difference signified by this, and other, aberrant characteristics (Baker 2017). In a sense then, my writing practice is profoundly entwined with effeminacy, in both generative and thematic ways. As a nod to the connection made in dominant discourse between verbal-aptitude or conversational skill and effeminacy, ‘much of my writing foregrounds speech and is liberally sprinkled with adjectives’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.). *Ghosts of Leigh* in particular is deliberately endowed with more than its fair share of dialogue and descriptive words.

## Writing the Effeminate Subject

Germinal to many of my research/writing projects is ‘my own wish to explore and describe gender and sexual difference’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.). As I have written elsewhere:

For me, the wish to engage with difference both preceded and inspired the intention to write. Additionally, my research interests flowed from a personal wish to discuss and understand my own difference and to contextualise the expression and discussion of that difference in my own creative writing. In other words, the research and creative practice developed out of my own experience of difference as an effeminate male and a need to theorise and express that difference (Baker 2017, n.pag.).

Lived experience is core to the constitution of subjectivity. Scott (1991) argues that subjects are constituted through experience. This makes experience central to the understanding and expression of subjectivity. In order to draw on the specificity of my individual experience, I determined that—although the script is an imagined scenario and not truly autobiographical in the strict sense of the word—it was important to draw on my own life experiences in a circumscribed way by using them to construct one of the principal characters. Thus, although the stage play is fictional, a semi-autobiographical process was used to construct the character of Dandelion Jones. This character is semi-autobiographical specifically in that it draws on my own experience with gender and sexual non-conformity (Baker 2017). The way I wrote Dandelion’s experience of and reaction to Leigh Bowery’s gender-bending performance was based on research but also just as much on my lived experience as an effeminate youth who participated in the gender-bending culture of underground (and illegal) clubs in 1980s Queensland.

*Ghosts of Leigh* is a depiction of the significantly *homosocial* cultural milieu of regional Queensland. The term “homosocial” connotes a form of male bonding often accompanied by a fear or hatred of homosexuality (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1992). The script is an exploration of this and also a performative exploration of the construction of both discursive effeminacy and my own effeminate masculinity.

This semi-autobiographical approach to character construction best enabled an informed (as in based on experience) discussion of the issues at hand — monstrous gender, sexuality and identity. This approach to the constitution of Dandelion’s discursive subjectivity also enabled me to reflect on my own experiences as an effeminate male in the 1980s. Stewart (2007) argues that such autobiographical methods enable “a personal investigation of the self: self-research, self-portrait, self-narrative” (129). Stewart explains this in more detail when she writes that autobiography provides:

…ways to incorporate and map a deep sense of the intricate relationships of the meaning and actions of artistic practice and its embeddedness in cultural influences, personal experience and aspirations (2001, 129).

In other words, as I wrote the character of Dandelion I found myself understanding the deep relationships between artistic practice (writing) and the socio-cultural situation and individual positionality and contextuality in which it was embedded. The similarities between some of Dandelion’s character traits and my own produced other insights as well – such as an understanding that my own youthful gender performance was a direct rebellion against the gender conformity of rural Queensland at that time.



Figure 2: The Author as Young Effeminate

From the outset, the play’s narrative was conceived as a discourse that would foreground the mutable and fluid qualities of sexual and gender subjectivity as well as the potential for productive resistance arising out of the act of creative self-construction. The key themes of the work—that of the shifting and ‘shifty’ quality of identity categories, the self-constructability of subjectivity and the constraints and possibilities in the performance of effeminate masculinity—all lent themselves to ambiguity. This ambiguity, I felt, was best emphasised by a text that included a character largely modelled on myself but in a totally fictional story. Given this, I felt that some aspects of *Ghosts of Leigh* resisted (and frustrated) easy categorisation, much as desires and identities resist over-simple definitions. *Ghosts of Leigh* is fictional, yes, but Dandelion as a character owes much to my own history and experience. For me, this blurring of the boundaries between the effeminate character and myself as an effeminate subject ‘foregrounds the performative aspect of the act of writing and the performative and reflexive quality of narratives’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.).

## Queer Writing as Performative Self-Making

As signalled above, my creative practice emerged (and was embedded with) my own intention to discuss and write about my own and others’ gender and sexual difference. Central to how this sexual and gender difference is explored in practice and expressed in narrative form is the notion of *performativity* (Butler 1990).

### Performativity

Judith Butler’s theory of performativity could be said to be one of the most influential ideas of Queer Theory (Jagose 1996, 83). Certainly, Butler’s notion of the performativity of genders has had a wide-reaching impact on both the creative and critical practice at the heart of this project. Performativity is central to how the project explored sexual and gender difference through, and in, practice and how knowledge garnered from that exploration was then expressed (or disseminated) in creative form in *Ghosts of Leigh*.

Judith Butler first presented the notion of *performativity* in her ground-breaking work *Gender Trouble:* *Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler frames the notion of performativity in relation to gender and norms of heterosexuality (1990, 1993). Butler argues that gender is a performance without ontological status when she writes: ‘There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; …identity is performatively constituted by the very ‘expressions’ that are said to be its results’ (1990, 25). For Butler, performativity describes how what might be assumed to be an internal essence to something such as gender is ‘manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body’ (2004, 94). Therefore, it can be argued that genders, sexualities and identities are all equally performative; manufactured through a sustained set of acts (some of them cognitive) enacted through the racial, gendered and sexual stylization of bodies (Baker 2017). Butler’s theory of performativity draws on and aligns with Post structural conceptions of identity in which identity/subjectivity is seen as multiple, changing and fragmented (Sarup 1996). In this way, performativity re-conceives gendered subjectivity as plural, varying, fragmented and produced in, by and through discourse.

For Butler, performativity is not total “voluntarism” (2004). We do not freely choose how to enact gender or sexuality without constraint (Butler 2004). Our genders, sexualities and subjectivities are not freely chosen but rather “compelled and sanctioned by the norms of compulsory heterosexuality (*heteronormativity*), and the subject has no choice but to exist within… norms and conventions of nature” such as binary sex difference (Pratt 2009b). Performative subjectivities are also socio-culturally and historically embedded; they are “citational chains” and their effects depend on social conventions (Pratt 2009). According to Butler, gender and sexual norms and subjectivities are produced, disseminated and reinforced through repetitions of an ideal such as the ideal of “woman” or “man” (Pratt 2009b). As the heteronormative ideal is a fiction, and thereby unachievable or “uninhabitable”, there is room for disidentification (or counter identification) and human agency and resistance (Pratt 2009b).

Moreover, it can be said that performativity is an analytical tool and a process of enactment; it is a way of thinking about something and a way of doing something (Baker 2017). Such a framework is appropriate for application to the reflective practice of writing. In other words, creative practices like writing can be seen as performative. If we accept that the act of writing itself is performative—in that it produces discourse and is a process through which subjectivities are constructed and disseminated—then writing can be seen to be a highly appropriate methodology for exploring genders, sexualities and identities, especially in the context of writing as a practice of self-making (Baker 2017).

Performativity figured deeply not only in the writing of *Ghosts of Leigh* but also in how I was able to *risk* who I was (Ambrosio 2008) and move towards constituting a new subjectivity. This new or emergent subjectivity was inspired by and is more in accordance with the fluid subjectivities and genders proposed by Queer Theory. This queer notion of performativity impacted on the project in many other ways as well. The completed creative artefact can be seen as a performative research output (Haseman 2006) which produces discourse in which performative subjectivities are explored. Indeed, the artefact can be seen to be exploring the notion of subjectivity *through* writing. In effect, the artefact constituted or produced textual subjectivities, specifically gender subjectivities, and explored how they operated with and against each other; including how the discursive subjectivities interacted with my own embodied identity.

This exploration of difference occurred “through and in” (Nelson 2008) writing practice and highlighted the ways in which my intention to explore effeminacy was met in that practice (writing). New personal understandings, around the performative nature of sexual and gender difference and effeminacy, were produced through reflexivity and (simultaneously) in the process/performance of writing.

The creative text is basically the story of an effeminate man learning to accept himself as he is and to navigate the perils (and possibilities) of homosocial culture and queer desire as it manifested in regional Queensland in the 1980s. The main character, Dandelion Jones, is based on my own experience but is not a factual rendering of myself. Dandelion is and is not me at the same time. The effeminate character of the script is an amalgam, a composite. In this sense, though the action may be totally fictional, the ways that Dandelion responds to that action are based on my own character traits, embodied gender and lived experience.

The process of writing and reflection illuminated the fact that all of the statements about the character Dandelion Jones above could be made about myself. I am an amalgam, a hybrid. I embody characteristics from many of those I have known. I am modelled on others, though I have creatively adapted and refined myself to become the sort of person I can appreciate. This juxtaposition between Dandelion Jones and myself reflected the complexities of subject positions, of identity; it revealed ‘the reciprocal ways in which subjectivity, practice and discourse informed and constituted each other’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.). It also blurred (or queered) the lines between what was real or intelligible about my own and Dandelion’s story and what wasn’t. I came to conceptualise this blurring of lines between the fictive and the “real” in the character of Dandelion as a kind of deliberate unintelligibility. In a sense, the character of Dandelion is a discursive example of an uninhabitable body (Butler 1993). It is not only his (latent) effeminacy that makes him unintelligible but his abrasion of the borders between the real and the unreal. Webb and Brien (2011, 197) make an interesting point about this kind of merging of fact and fiction when they write:

…juxtapositioning of memoir and fiction both explores and draws attention to contemporary debates about whether literature can represent the complexities of life with any accuracy, and what it means to “tell the truth” in a period when the idea of any absolute truth is outmoded and discarded.

Producing subjectivities within text, whilst engaging in an ongoing reflexivity, proved to be an acute and experiential method for highlighting the constructed nature of subjectivity. The act of producing (writing) Dandelion required reflection on my own history as an effeminate man. These reflections were themselves informed by research into the performativity of gender and sexuality. As the writing proceeded, and Dandelion emerged from the syntax, I began to see how my own subjectivity had also been produced within a complex matrix of discourses; including my own internal discourses about who I was and, perhaps more significantly, who I wanted to be. This experience echoes Sarup’s (1996) argument that identities are narrative constructions adapted through self-talk. Our identities are the products of our own self-telling (Baker 2017).

Dandelion wants to be more open about who he is but does not have the courage to face the consequences of living as himself, the hostility and violence that is often the price paid for being effeminate in an effemiphobic culture. Instead, Dandelion hides who he is, going so far as to conceal his few, favoured possession because they are “non-masculine”. The excerpt below (Baker 2017b, n.pag.) illustrates this tendency to hide not only his possessions, but his true passions and preferred gender presentation:

Leigh (cont’D)

I’m right! You’re like me! *Exactly* like me!

dandelion

No, no, not exactly like you. Not at all. I just, I just like pink and love hearts and things and sometimes I wear eyeliner, just here in my room, and, well, there’s also this—

Dandelion reaches under the bed, searching for something.

Leigh

If that’s a dildo, leave it there. I do not want to see it.

Leigh has an eager look on his face that belies his words.

dandelion

It’s not a dildo. It’s, it’s *this*…

He pulls out a Barbie doll. She has long, shining blonde hair and is dressed all in pink.

Leigh

Aaagh – put it away, put it away!

dandelion

I like to comb her hair. It comforts me.

Apart from his many “camouflaging” behaviours, Dandelion’s primary goal in life is to survive and to forestall what he fears is an inevitable violent confrontation with local youths and men. The strategy he employs to endure the fear he feels is to isolate himself from himself, and to act as his enemies do towards effeminates, to internalise sissyphobia and torment other boys presenting as effeminate (Baker 2017b, n.pag.):

Leigh

So that’s why you bully those kids? Because you’re envious, because you’re too weak to be yourself in public and you resent that they can be?

dandelion

I suppose so.

Leigh

That’s, that’s just wrong.

dandelion

I know. I’m ashamed of myself.

Dandelion’s desire to camouflage who he is and masquerade as normatively male is unfortunate yet understandable given that 1980s Queensland was a culture both homophobic and homosocial. The term “homosocial” connotes a form of male bonding often accompanied by a fear or hatred of homosexuality (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1992). This male bonding often expresses itself as an equally virulent objectification of women and vilification and subjugation of effeminate or homosexual males. In many instances, homosocial relations have an erotic quality. This eroticism between men in homosocial relationships is routinely repressed and disguised as a mutual identification over heterosexual desire and activity (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1992).

For Kosofsky-Sedgwick (1992), homosociality is a form of male bonding with a distinctive triangular structure. In this structure, men have avid but non-sexual bonds with other men, and women function as the conduits through which the passionate feelings aroused by these bonds are acted out, sometimes as shared heterosexual identification, sometimes as competition for women’s attention and sexual favours (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1992). Kosofsky-Sedgwick further argues that “such a triangle may disguise as rivalry what is actually an attraction between men” (1992, 21). The feelings aroused by bonds between heterosexual men are often a kind of eroticism sublimated as aggression and physical competition. As this excerpt from *Ghosts of Leigh* (Baker 2017b, n.pag.) illustrates:

leigh

Why are you so afraid to be yourself?

dandelion

Because then I’d be the one getting tortured. All the local guys, they’d beat the shit out of me. And when they weren’t beating me up, they’d be climbing in my window at night and wanting—

Leigh

I know what guys like that want.

dandelion

It’s confusing. They act like they hate fags, never stop going on about how much they hate them, but the minute there’s no witnesses they’re hitting on me.

Leigh

It’s the price we pay for being pretty.

Dandelion looks askance at Leigh, who winks back at him.

Gilbert Herdt notes that ‘the more polarized the gender roles and restrictive the sexual code, the more homosociality one expects to find in a society’ (1999, 152). Certain parts of rural Queensland of the 1980s, where gender and sexual codes were strongly controlled and constrained, can be seen as such a homosocial environment. *Ghosts of Leigh* is set in a homosocial environment in order to highlight the active bullying and persecution of all boys and men who fail to live up to the ideal of “hypermasculinity” (Scheff 2006, Nandy 1983). Hypermasculinity is not just an aggressive form of masculinity, in some societies it is deployed as a way to police effeminate and homosexual males. In other words, hypermasculinity is enacted “as a social system” (Scheff 2006). This was certainly the case in the town and region of my upbringing and seems to have been common in many rural cultures of the recent past. In hypermasculine societies like rural Queensland in the 1980s, hypermasculinity can be seen as something of a totalizing norm. As such, *Ghosts of Leigh* is a critique of a situated, historical and extremely masculinist heteronormativity(Pratt 2009).

### Writing and Performing the Effeminate Self

The writing of *Ghosts of Leigh* revealed that, for me, the performative act of writing and the performance of effeminacy as a gender are creative practices of equal significance to the formation of my subjectivity. I write myself and perform myself (Baker 2017). The creative text refers indirectly to my own and others’ performance of effeminacy and—once joined with knowledge from gender research and understanding garnered through reflection—acts as a formative narrative that informs the ongoing performance and production (in both the construction and theatrical senses) of effeminate subjectivity.

The script, as the creative practice component of a practice-led research project, was the principal means through which notions of effeminacy were explored and expressed. *Ghosts of Leigh* presents effeminacy as a uniquely constituted and performed monstrous gender. The creative writing artefact was envisaged as an example of how critically informed (performative) sexual and gender subjectivities can be articulated in an accessible way for professional, academic and general audiences. Thus, *Ghosts of Leigh* targets audiences of not only LGBTI individuals but also an academic audience and professionals (producers, directors) with an interest in queer theatre. I mention audiences here because it is in the viewing/reading of the creative text that a performative understanding (or knowledge) of the performativity of gender, in particular effeminacy, is produced. This *experiential* understanding occurs as part of what Foucault called an “object-event” (Foucault 2006), in which the text is an event that triggers a chain of further events. A text is consumed by readers/viewers, it inspires commentators to discuss its qualities, and it is the focus of ‘multiple interlocutors who constitute its various discursive contexts’ (Huffer 2009, xii). In this way, a text’s ‘truth effects ripple through the world like rings on water, as the light-bringing rupture of an expansive doubling’ (Huffer 2009, xii).

The “rupture” referred to here is a break in the citational chain (to use a Butlerian term) in which the history of a subject (a viewer/reader) is interrupted and altered (and illuminated) by the intrusion of an alterior discourse. This alterior discourse is the irruption of speech that Foucault (1978) demands of any discourse aimed at destabilising normative ideas of sexuality. In this sense, *Ghosts of Leigh*, as a Foucauldian-style irruption of speech, is a discursive break from normalizing discourses about male gender and sexuality that performatively disseminates understanding about gender (in this instance effeminacy). This understanding of gender is itself performative, as it occurs in the act of reading or viewing, reflection and discussion, and thus produces not only a theoretical understanding, which it does, but also produces knowledge as an affective experience. This is an alternative route to knowing, a different way of coming to understand the themes or issues investigated in creative works. As we engage with cultural artefacts, we experience them in quite an embodied way (Baker 2017). We laugh, we cringe, we cry, we feel good, we feel bad, we sympathise, we identify, we rage. These affective experiences inform us about material realities and lived experiences that we may never have understood otherwise (Baker 2017). To put it simply, affective experiences are another (and a non-theoretical) way of producing knowledge (Haseman & Mafe 2009). The creative artefacts coming out of practice-led research projects can be seen to disseminate knowledge in the context of narratives which readers directly experience, thus providing an alternative (and affective) way of coming to understand the themes or issues investigated in those projects. Affect, as both a kind of research and a kind of knowledge, is also performative (Baker 2017). In the moment of experience we simultaneously understand or know something about that experience. Accepting that affect is both a kind of performative research and a type of performative knowledge ‘radically changes the way that we think about research in the arts’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.). As Grayson Cooke (2011, 60) has articulated:

If research is the production of “new knowledge,” and if we can accept that knowledge may be able to be figured as affect… as something that happens in the mind of an audience member, then it is not “contained” in the work, it occurs only in performance, and the “research” does not precede the work’s public performance or dissemination but happens concurrently with it. Research in this sense is a process, a doing, an event, it is not something static that can be contained as such.

For me, affective experience of the act of writing the stage play ‘caused a rupture in the citational chain of my own identity’ (Baker 2017, n.pag.). This rupture provoked a new understanding of effeminacy as applied to my own subjectivity; an understanding that was itself performative and affective. As it occurred in the practices of writing, re-reading, reflection and re-writing, this understanding produced more than theoretical knowledge. This experiential understanding was informed by research into queer theories around the performativity of gender but was “brought to life” in the creative practice and reflection and in the application of the understanding and/or knowledge to my own subjectivity and its ongoing queer remaking.

The writing of the creative text facilitated a deep exploration of notions of subjectivity, in particular how subjectivities are performative and produced in and through discourse (Butler 1990, 1993). The act of writing, which is in effect the constitution of discursive or textual subjectivities, by its very nature a productive act, both reveals and illuminates the performativity of subjectivity, especially gender and sexual subjectivity (Baker 2017). This brought into sharp relief the ways in which the act of writing not only evidenced performativity but was performative itself. Writing produces subjectivities, tests them out against each other—surveys their boundaries as it were, to see how they might respond in different scenarios—and disseminates them all at once.

If we recall that Butler (2004, 1) argued that exposure to a non-normative (or “new”) subjectivity can ‘undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one’ then we can see that engagement with or exposure to a queer text can have potent effects. An experience of a non-normative subjectivity, such as effeminate masculinity in a discourse or text, can “undo” one’s subjectivity and facilitate the emergence of a new one. As an example of the power of discursive subjectivities to provoke shifts in individual identities, think of the way that Jack Kerouac’s novel *On The Road* (1957) triggered the “rucksack revolution” (Kerouac 1958), the emergence of a counter-culture as individuals remade themselves in accordance with the subjectivities celebrated in Kerouac’s writing. Think of the sudden emergence of a whole generation of young feminists that followed the publication of Germaine Greer’s *The Female Eunuch* (1970). Think also of the proliferation of “gender-benders” in the wake of the popularity of 1980s popstars like Boy George, Pete Burns of Dead or Alive and Marilyn (Peter Robinson), a clear example of how exposure to effeminacy triggers the emergence of more and more effeminate subjects.

This idea of Butler’s was proven accurate by a subtle change to my own subjectivity as I wrote *Ghosts of Leigh*. Before writing the piece, and undertaking the research that preceded it, I had ambivalent (and uncomfortable) feelings about my effeminacy (Baker 2017). This was beginning to shift after the completion of a previous research project and script about effeminacy (*The Tree*, 2016) and came to fruition in the writing of Ghosts of Leigh and its two effeminate characters who refuse to be marginalised because of their gender insubordination. As I wrote Dandelion Jones and the ghost of Leigh Bowery into existence I was able to shift into a new subject position; one which embraced effeminacy as a radical position capable of powerfully disrupting oppressive gender norms. Put simply, the act of writing within a reflexive and theoretically informed PLR process constituted a kind of immersive exposure to an effeminate subjectivity that triggered the emergence of a new, subtly different, gender position. This process was one in which research around queer theorisations of gender, exposure to the discursive effeminacies of narratives set in regional Queensland, and my reflexive writing practice, triggered affective experiences, which then produced new understandings around effeminacy as an embodied gender and lived subjectivity.

During the writing of *Ghosts of Leigh*, critical research and creative practice were intertwined and mutually informed each other in ways that enriched both processes. For me, creative practice and traditional research methods are ways of approaching a subject from multiple angles. They are distinct yet deeply interconnected. Creative practice is an experiential or affective way of knowing (Baker 2012) whereas traditional research produces more theoretical knowledge. This intertwined relationship between research and creative practice was core to the way I undertook the project and was crucial to the development of a deeper knowledge and an iterative understanding of my object of study: the performativity of effeminacy as a unique monstrous gender. In the act of writing, my lived experience of effeminacy coalesced with theoretical knowledge from gender and sexuality research so that my writing practice became a productive, identity-forming act.

*Ghosts of Leigh* is a story about one highly effeminate and rebelliously non-normative figure helping another, less marginal character, to find ways to resist the normative push of the heteronormative and homophobic culture in which he lives. In reflection and in the act of writing, it became apparent that the main characters of *Ghosts of Leigh* were searching for ways to enact a Foucauldian “reverse discourse” (Foucault 1978, 76) through which the uneven power relations inherent to hegemonic masculinity might be ameliorated if not overturned.

Leigh

Seriously, you can’t be afraid to be who you are, and to express that by wearing what you want. Otherwise, you will spend your whole life in disguise, wearing a uniform dictated by other people, dictated by those guys who want to beat you up. Then your every waking moment will be a crushing masquerade. You’ll look “normal” on the outside, yes, but you’ll be dead inside. For people like you and me, eyeliner is *life*, kiddo. Wear as much of it as you can.

Dandelion takes that in and considers it. After a moment, a broad smile transforms his face.

As the excerpt above shows, *Ghosts of Leigh* (Baker 2017b, n.pag.) constructs the effeminate subject in a way that places him at the centre of the narrative, rather than at the margin. It also resists recuperation of marginal characters back into a heteronormative discourse. Instead, the marginal characters of *Ghosts of Leigh* revel in their marginality. The script’s trajectory and conclusion produce a discursive space in which monstrous effeminacy survives despite the aggressive war against effeminate males (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1994) that the narrative resists. Dandelion has embraced gender insubordination to ameliorate, and perhaps even overturn, the uneven power relations of hegemonic masculinity that positions him as an abject figure.

## Conclusion

This article discusses effeminacy as a monstrous gender, in particular how effeminacy was explored in a practice-led research process. This discussion outlined how understandings concerning sexual and gender difference as performance were produced through reflexivity and (simultaneously) in the performative act of writing a short stage play. The article also describes how a practice-led research process produced knowledge concerning effeminacy as a gender that has the potential to disrupt masculinity and femininity simultaneously. These new understandings have been expressed as narrative in the script *Ghosts of Leigh*.

Finally, I discussed how writing, in that it produces discourse, is a process through which subjectivities are constructed and disseminated. Thus, the production of a narrative such as *Ghosts of Leigh*—that presents and describes monstrous effeminacy—is a highly appropriate methodology for exploring the performativity of gender and subjectivity. It was also shown that creative works can act as triggers—for those experiencing them—for an undoing of gender and a remaking of subjectivity within a queer self-making or self-bricolage.

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