

Creative Writing Praxis as Queer Becoming

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Introduction

This paper was inspired, in part, by the following quote by Michel Foucault:

The self is something to write about, a theme or object (subject) of writing activity
(cited in Martin et al 1988: 27).

Starting from this point of inspiration, the paper discusses how Queer Theory and Michel Foucault's re-conceptualisation of ethics as a technique of the self can inform writing practice and re-conceive it as a tool in a process of *queer becoming*.

The paper examines how writing practice and engagement with textual artefacts (literature) can trigger and inform queer self-making. The paper also discusses how the queer subject and subjectivity are constructed in the production and reception of queer texts. In other words, it explores how queer subjects are constituted by the processes and practices of reading and writing. In proposing a distinct way of conceiving Queer Writing, my focus is not on formulating a writing practice that brings Queer sensibility into the mainstream, although that might be a side effect, but rather proposes an approach to writing that foregrounds, rather than elides, non-normative conceptions of the self and subjectivity, especially in relation to sexuality and gender.

The representation (or writing) of sexual and/or gender difference is significant because sexuality and gender are often perceived as the most significant "norms" or components of subjectivity (Butler 1990). It could be said that gender and sexual norms, because they are often subject to normalizing discourses and oppressive mechanisms of power, offer the

most potential for textual and discursive resistance. This paper proposes that the way we construct our own subjectivity influences how we understand (or read) our own and others sexuality and gender. It will also be demonstrated that a reverse process, whereby cultural artefacts and the practice of writing itself act as triggers for a rewriting of the self—a reconstruction, or radical deconstruction, of sexuality and gender—are also at play in queer engagement with cultural artefacts and the practice of writing.

These deconstructions and reconstructions of subjectivity can have considerable potency, particularly in relation to culturally or textually inspired queer self-making. Judith Butler has argued that exposure to alternative and non-normative forms of gender and sexual subjectivity can ‘undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one’ (2004: 1). In other words, an experience of a text or discourse featuring a non-normative gender or sexual subjectivity can—to use Butler’s terminology—“undo” one’s personhood and facilitate the emergence of a new subjectivity.

Butler’s notion of the “undo” echoes earlier ideas from Michel Foucault. Foucault also described a process by which new subjectivities are formed through the ‘appropriation, the unification, of a fragmentary and selected already said’ (cited in Rabinow 1997: 209). The “already said” that Foucault is referring to here is all of the discourse currently in circulation to which the subject can be or has been exposed. Thus, the discursive subjectivities at the heart of queer cultural artefacts (novels, poems, scripts) can be seen as inspiring and facilitating the ongoing *becoming* of the queer subjectivities of actual individuals.

To reiterate, a Queer becoming is conceived as having two aspects. On the one hand, it is a Queer (re)positioning of textual subjectivities in discourse as an intervention into power relations, around sexual and gender identities, that is a practice of liberty (Foucault 1978).

On the other hand, a Queer becoming is a practice and/or process through which queer subjects intervene in their identities or subjectivities and remake themselves; also as a resistant practice, a practice of liberty.

The “Q” Word

Before moving on, it is important to understand what is meant by the word “queer”.

Surprisingly, some seventeen years after its deployment as a critical term (de Lauretis 1991), it is still difficult to define. I will discuss Queer Theory in more detail later, as it is still unfamiliar to some and misunderstood by others, but at the outset it is prudent to note that this word/term does not have a single or stable meaning. Having said that, it is used most often in two somewhat contradictory ways. In Queer Theory, the term refers to a set of anti-essentialist arguments/ideas that, at their heart, use sexuality and gender to illustrate the unreliability, and normative tendency, of identity categories of all kinds. In Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) politics on the other hand, it is used as an umbrella term that encompasses all non-heteronormative sexualities and genders.

Unfortunately, these two uses have led to a confusion in some quarters in which queer is used as an identity category in itself, which runs contrary to the whole project of Queer Theory. As Judith Butler notes: ‘I worry when “queer” becomes an identity. It was always a critique of identity. I think if it ceases to be a critique of identity, it’s lost its critical edge’ (2008: 32). In this paper then, queer (with a lowercase “q”) is used as an umbrella term; but not in the way a word like “European” is used as an umbrella term, to describe diverse national identities that have some commonalities, but in the way the term “alternative” might be used to describe subjects or groups who may (or may not) share some attitudes or practices.

Thus, queer (with a lowercase “q”) refers to a diverse range of subjects who may share certain social, cultural and sexual practices or attitudes. Queer, with a capital “Q”, is used to refer to the anti-essentialist conceptions of identity and subjectivity proposed by Queer Theory. Thus, a queer subject is a person who claims belonging to the LGBT communities, whereas Queer subjectivity refers to a specific critical position about the unreliability of identity categories (more about this later).

Queer Becoming

My notion of a Queer becoming (or Queer self-bricolage) is adapted from that of Deleuze and Guattari (1987), for whom the process (or perhaps practice) of becoming is generative and not one solely of imitation or comparison. Having said that, for Deleuze and Guattari, becoming is directly related to the concept of *repetition* (1987). This insistence on repetition as core to becoming seems, at first glance, to undermine any possibility of the truly new, of a truly new subjectivity or gender formation. In fact, as far as Deleuze and Guattari are concerned, the opposite is the case. Indeed, Deleuze argues with regards to repetition and becoming that—far from denying the possibility of the constitution of something new—the truly new can *only* emerge through the process of repetition (Zizek 2003). Here Deleuze seems to be thinking of repetition in the way we might think of replication. Take as an example the replication of genes. Each time a gene replicates, based on DNA code, there is a possibility of mutation, of change, of the emergence of something significantly new.

Repetition is also at the heart of a queer sense of subjectivity, as has been articulated most keenly by Michel Foucault’s (1997) and Judith Butler’s (1990) notion of the subject and subjectivity as a repetitive or performed practice. In a queer becoming, the subject does not merely imitate or conform to another or external subjectivity or mode of being. Queer becoming is a generative process, the constitution of a new subjectivity altogether.

Becoming is a new way of being (a new way of practicing subjectivity or identity) that is the outflow of social and cultural influences rather than a display of mere “resemblances” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). The process is one of altering or ceasing current practices (or functions to use the Deleuzian term) of identity and constituting or constructing new ones through repetition or replication. The constitution of new identity practices is inspired and facilitated by engagement with discourse; with, among other things, textual artefacts.

Becoming is, of course, fundamentally about subjectivity, about our sense of ourselves as beings. It is also a performative process, a process which (by the doing) in itself constitutes subjectivity. Becoming is the act of disparate social, cultural and cognitive practices coalescing into being.

Engagement with the notion of Queer becoming in the act of producing creative texts can lead to new understandings of the relations between subjectivity, gender and sexuality and the practice of writing itself. In addition, the creative texts arising from this (Queer) practice can demonstrate how gender and sexual subjectivity can be *rewritten* in ways that foreground alternative notions of sexuality, gender and subjectivity and that facilitate more open narrative trajectories. These rewritings provide opportunities for ongoing engagement in the act of Queer self-making or becoming. More to the point, they replicate non-normative subjectivities and, as a kind of template or model or discursive code, encourage further replication and inevitable mutation.

It may not be fruitful to take the mutation analogy too far however, as a basic understanding of genetics tells us that many mutations are ill-adapted or monstrous. The same can be said of discursive replications. Even so, this is not necessarily a problem for Queer Writing or a Queer becoming. The possibility of a monstrous text was first signalled by Jacques Derrida (cited in Weber 1995), who saw such mutant texts as powerfully non-normative and

therefore desirable. Indeed, Queer Theorists have had a long romance with monsters, pointing out early on in Queer Theory's development the strong associations in heteronormative discourse between the Queer and the monstrous (Case 1997). In some ways, the very idea of a Queer subjectivity is monstrous to heteronormative discourse. In this light, the emergence from the replicating system of a monstrous text is one of the (ironic) advantages of such a system.

In the process of mutation or repetition that is Queer becoming, subjectivities can be discursively mobilized within texts in ways that disturb normative notions of what the self is or can become. That is, a Queer becoming disrupts the notion of the self as fixed, stable and unitary and replaces it with a conception of the self and subjectivity as fluid, mutable and ephemeral. This is the total displacement of the idea or belief that specific identities adhere lastingly to certain subjects (or persons) in favour of the Queer notion that subjects (and identities) are the passing effects (and affects) of practices and discourses (Butler 1990). Thus, a Queer becoming is not a process or practice by which a secure normative identity is substituted with a secure queer one, but rather a process in which the very notion of abiding identities is troubled.

Refiguring the Writer

It has been proposed that writing practice can be seen as an engaged performativity (Baker 2011). Understanding writing practice as a performative act triggers a re-thinking of the writing subject (the writer). Through the lens of performativity (Butler 1993), it is possible to refigure the writer as a mutable discursive position (or writing position) that can be occupied and vacated rather than as a stable personality or identity. In this way, the writer is seen as capable of occupying an array of social, cultural and ideological positions. Within this perspective, the writer is no longer expected to abide within a limited, fixed position

ascribed to a specific personality. This places the constitution of subjectivity at the centre of any discussion of Queer Writing.

Michel Foucault advocated an ongoing assembly and disassembly of subjectivity that constituted a kind of self-bricolage (Rabinow 1997). Foucault described this making and re-making of subjectivity as an aesthetic struggle towards an artistic ideal (1997). Foucault describes this process as an *ethics of the self* (1986b). The purpose of this transformative self-bricolage is to make philosophy a “way of life”.

Clearly, the notion of self-bricolage or self-making relies on a certain understanding of how the subject (or self) and subjectivity is formed and thus how it might be altered. It’s worthwhile taking a brief deviation here to discuss this conception of subjectivity. Jacques Derrida has argued that the ‘question of the subject and the living “who” is at the heart of the most pressing concerns of modern societies’ (1991: 115). Echoing this sentiment, Nick Mansfield (2000: 1) has written that the ‘focus on the self as the centre both of lived experience and of discernible meaning has become one of the—if not *the*—defining issues of modern and postmodern cultures’ (original emphasis).

There are many different models of subjectivity and many meanings associated with the term (Zahavi 2006). As Mansfield (2000: 5) has suggested:

The theorisation of subjectivity in the twentieth century has produced a range of different models and approaches. It is not even agreed with any certainty what the subject itself is. Different theories follow different paths to different ends.

Having said that however, there is a ‘consensus amongst theorists that the subject is *constructed*, made within the world, not born into it already formed’ (Mansfield 2000: 11, original emphasis). There is also a consensus in approaches to subjectivity that ‘the sexual has always been a defining issue’ and that ‘the era of the subject is the era of sexuality’

(Mansfield 2000: 117). For Mansfield at least, ‘it is impossible to imagine a theorisation of subjectivity’ (2000: 117) without addressing socio-cultural discourses on sexuality.

The term “subjectivity” encompasses the notion of identity and, as it also encompasses consciousness and self-awareness, it can be seen to encompass the term “Self” (Hall 2004: 134). With respect to the discipline of psychology, the terms “personality” and “self-perception” can be encompassed by the term subjectivity as well (Weiten 2007). There is a significant body of research, mainly in the domains of psychology, Poststructuralism and Queer Theory, that argues that subjectivity is better conceived as a set of *performed* and repetitive behaviours, including thought patterns, which rely heavily on socio-cultural and group conditions (Weiten 2007; Mansfield 2000; Butler 1990). This is made clear when it is taken into account that the major components of subjectivity—such as gender, sexuality and culture—have already been shown to be situational, temporary and themselves reliant on repetition and performance for their constitution (Butler 2004 & 1990).

In this light, subjectivity can be seen as something that can adapt and change with the only limiting factors being temporary constraints within the subject’s field of socio-cultural conditions and/or any constraints imposed by physiology (Baker 2008). In this sense, subjectivity or identity can be seen to be ‘largely constituted by the repetition of performed behaviours and practices within a field of socio-culturally established possibilities and limitations (within the context of a specific physicality) rather than something that is natural or inherent to a specific person or group’ (Baker 2008: 350).

Judith Butler (1990: 184) has argued that the subject and subjectivity are the “resulting effect” of discourse. Butler argues that ‘to understand identity as a *practice*, and as a signifying practice, is to understand culturally intelligible subjects as the resulting effect of a rule-bound discourse that inserts itself in the pervasive and mundane signifying acts of

linguistic life' (1990: 184, original emphasis). Butler's conceptualisation of the subject and subjectivity fits within what Dan Zahavi (Zahavi 2006: 8) describes as the narrative concept of subjectivity or self. The narrative concept of subjectivity foregrounds socio-cultural conditioning and language as the progenitors of subjectivity and the subject (Zahavi 2006). This is most clearly articulated by Michel Foucault (cited in Bailey 2005: 122) in the quote below:

[T]he subject is not so much a substance as a form, and subjects can occupy a variety of positions both "subject to" discipline and capable of "self-constitution"; albeit within the resources offered by his/her culture, society and social group.

Madan Sarup (1996: 14) keenly illustrates the narrative conception of subjectivity when he writes that identity/subjectivity is 'fabricated, constructed, in process'. This fabrication or construction of subjectivity has a direct relation to discourse and, therefore, is rather ephemeral in nature (Davies 2000). Subjectivity is constituted through the discourses with which the subject engages and, as these discourses shift and change, sometimes directly opposing each other, it is therefore markedly contradictory (Davies 2000: 57). Furthermore, Sarup argues that, when conceiving of identity, 'we have to consider both psychological and sociological factors' and remember that identities are 'fragmented, full of contradictions and ambiguities' (1996: 14). A large number of other theorists have also argued that identity is produced through/by discourse in relation to socio-cultural, economic and material conditions (Mansfield 2000).

Furthermore, subjectivity is an experience of being embodied and conscious. As Mansfield notes:

Subjectivity is primarily an experience, and remains permanently open to inconsistency, contradiction and unself-consciousness. Our experience of ourselves remains forever prone to surprising disjunctions that only the fierce light of ideology

or theoretical dogma convinces us can be homogenised into a single consistent thing (2000: 6).

Given all the above, it seems apparent that there is little to justify belief in a stable, fixed or essential self/subjectivity that comes into being or exists independently from discourse. Moreover, as discourse is a core component of social and cultural relations—be it in the form of cinema, literature or television—the place of reading/viewing and writing in discussions around the formation of subjectivity, and its transformation in an ethics of the self, is therefore significant.

One of the examples Foucault gave of a technique used in such an ethics of the self—implemented to produce a desired or altered/transformed subject—was reflective writing (1986). To put it simply, for Foucault certain kinds of writing are a practice involved in the production and maintenance of the self. This can be said to be more so when that writing is informed or organised by a philosophy of some kind that is applied as a way of life (Faust 1988).

With the above in mind, we can consider writing that is informed by Queer Theory as a technique in a Foucauldian ethics of the self. I would further suggest that Queer Writing is an appropriate site for “ethical interventions” into subjectivity and for explorations into how philosophy, in this case Queer Theory, can be applied as a way of life in which new forms of subjectivity are explored and produced.

Before we proceed any further, we need to engage in some necessary reorientations and displacements. Firstly, we need to reorient ourselves from thinking about research, practice and pedagogy as discrete undertakings to thinking about them as interconnected (and performative) components in a reflexive creative and critical praxis. This reorientation is inspired and informed by Queer Theory which undermines the notion of discrete entities

and practices (Baker 2010). This reorientation also re-conceptualises Queer Writing as a creative and critical praxis which embeds theory, research, creative practice and pedagogy in a non-hierarchical and interpenetrated process.

But this is not quite enough. As Foucault's assertion that the self is something to write about suggests, our creative and critical engagement with writing might be enriched if our praxis were to go beyond textual production and hermeneutic or methodological musings.

Foucault encourages us to use writing as a technology to explore subjectivity, to engage with ourselves as writing subjects. Elsewhere, Foucault (1997) proposes that writing might be used as a tool in an ethics of the self, a re-making of the self into an ethical subject. To accomplish this ethical praxis, we also need to displace the primary object of our research and practice from the production of creative artefacts and/or research outputs to the ethical (re)production of our subjectivities in a Queer Theory informed self-making.

Queer Ethics of the Self

Michel Foucault argues that who one is emerges out of the problems with which one struggles (Foucault 1997). As briefly mentioned earlier, Foucault advocates an ongoing investigation or struggle with the self—an ongoing assembly and disassembly of subjectivity—that constitutes a kind of self-bricolage; a making and re-making of subjectivity that can be seen as an aesthetic struggle towards an artistic ideal (Foucault 1997). Foucault describes this process as an ethics of the self (Foucault 1986b). He illuminates the purpose of this process when he writes:

...the intent is not to pursue the unspeakable, nor to reveal the hidden, nor to say the unsaid, but on the contrary to capture the already-said, to collect what one has managed to hear or read, and for a purpose that is nothing less than the shaping of the self (Foucault 1997: 208).

The purpose of this creative self-bricolage is to make philosophy a “way of life”, and an aesthetics. In this sense, ‘subjectivity itself can be seen as an aesthetic practice; the making of the self is an art. Foucault refers to this process, this ethics of the self, as an *aesthetics of existence* (Foucault 1996, Thompson 2003: 123). It could be said that the creative artefact emerges from this struggle as well.

Much of the work of self-(re)making has traditionally occurred in the creative arts which have historically been a domain of self-enquiry, self-exploration and “self transformation” (Baker 2011). Indeed, the Foucauldian subject and creative texts share fundamental characteristics: they are both discursive, they both pursue aesthetic goals and, perhaps most significantly, they are both creative not only in form but also in the ways that they are constituted. Given this, Queer Writing is certainly an appropriate site for *interventions* in subjectivity and for explorations into how specific philosophies or theories might be applied as a way of life.

One of the principal examples Foucault gives of a technique used in such an ethics of the self— implemented to produce a desired or altered/transformed subject—is reflective writing (Foucault 1997). This reflective writing produces the desired subject through a process of self-analysis or reflexivity, of questioning the condition and conduct of the self in order to construct a subjectivity in line with one’s ethics (Ambrosio 2008). To put it simply, for Foucault certain kinds of writing, those organised by a philosophy of some kind that is applied as a way of life, are a practice involved in the production and maintenance of the self.

This is a direct reversal of the dominant model of the writer whose “genius” produces creative texts that are a direct reflection of that writer’s identity (Weisberg 1993). Queer Writing does not frame the creative text as an expression of the internal identity of the

author (Stephens 2009). Instead, the queer (or homoerotic) content of a creative text is seen as a discursive sexual non-normativity mobilized within the text to disrupt heteronormativity rather than as the (autobiographical) reflection of the author's sexuality or identity/subjectivity (Stephens 2009). Elizabeth Stephens makes this point clearly, in her analysis of the writing practices of Jean Genet, when she posits that queer writing:

...reframes its homoeroticism so that this is no longer seen as the expression of a queer exteriority—of a perverse author whose intentions determine the meaning of the text—but rather as a dynamic mobilised within that text (2009: 19).

Stephens goes on to state that Queer Writing 'provides a way to maintain the centrality of sex and eroticism to the narrative without positioning these as the coherent expression of a stable sexual identity' (2009: 19) and that 'queer writing need neither naturalize nor negate the role (or queerness) of the writer' (2009: 20). In other words, the writing of Queer subjectivities into literature is not seen as a reflection of a writer's identity, a representation of some imagined "internal" self, but rather as a deliberate inscription and dissemination of non-normative discursive subjectivities.

Thus, Queer Writing disrupts 'the notion that discursive subjectivities appearing within literary texts are representations of the internal, stable identity of the creator' (Baker 2011: 8). Instead, Queer Writing foregrounds the appearance of subjectivities within texts as a *deployment* or intervention into discourse for a critical or creative purpose. In this Foucault inspired model, it is the practice of writing, and the reading of texts and discourse, that produce the writer's subjectivity; a subjectivity that reflects not an essential, inner identity but rather the discourses with which it has engaged (or struggled). To put it another way, emergent Queer subjectivities can be seen as reflections of Queer Writing and discourse rather than the other way around. In some ways, it is texts, or writing, not identities or subjectivities that have the more stable existence.

The Aesthetics of Existence: A Productive Ethics

Ramos (1994) argues that, in Foucauldian thought, there is a clear distinction between moral and social codes (rules and precepts) and the practice of ethics. For Foucault, ethics is concerned with the kind of relationship one has to oneself, how one constitutes oneself as an ethical subject (Foucault 1997, Rabinow 1997). Thompson (2003) argues that Foucault saw freedom as a prerequisite for the practice of ethics and saw the practice of ethics as constituting a kind of freedom. By freedom, Foucault means simply the ability to choose one action or direction over another (Thompson 2003). In this context, freedom is the ability to choose between one subjectivity and/or life trajectory over another.

A Foucauldian ethics of the self is a ‘direct political response to normalization’s effect of blocking us from asserting an identity, a self, and a future of our own making’ (Infinito 2003: 160). Infinito argues that underlying a Foucauldian ethics is the fact that the ‘discursive construction of identity as internal and enduring serves to perpetuate existing power structures’ (2003: 163). Therefore, Foucault proposed an ethical practice that was a reworking of subjectivity. This subjectivity was one that was perpetually reforming itself and that capitalised on its own mutability and discursiveness. To put it another way, Foucault proposed a subject that was in an ongoing state of becoming.

As indicated above, Foucault’s model of ethics is not focussed on an external moral or social code but rather on subjects’ relationship with themselves (Rabinow 1997). This relationship has at its heart how subjects conduct themselves (Thompson 2003) and critically contemplate their own and others’ lives (Infinito 2003). In Foucauldian ethics, the subjects’ attention to conduct and contemplation or reflection on life is linked to the notion of *critique* (Thompson 2003). Foucault posits that the purpose of critique is ‘to promote

new forms of subjectivity through the refusal of the type of individuality that has been imposed on us for several centuries' (cited in Thompson 2003: 122). This critique is harnessed to a process of self-formation, or self-bricolage (Rabinow 1997), in which subjects fashion for themselves 'a mode of being' that emerges from their own history and their own 'critical and creative thinking and action' (Infinito 2003:160).

Although Foucauldian ethics rejects external moral codes (Thompson 2003), and therefore is not extrinsic in character, it is not wholly internalised or obsessively introspective either. A Foucauldian "care for the self" does not exclude a concern and acknowledgement of others' contribution to our own being, especially with regards to its constitution (Baker 2011c). Thompson (2003: 125) illustrates this point when he writes:

An "aesthetics of existence" means then that just as any technician, artisan, or artist, always crafts a new work under the guidance of critical scrutiny, examining what has been achieved thus far, recalling the rules of the art itself, and comparing the former against the latter, working under the direction of critical inspection, reminding ourselves constantly of the fundamental rule of this unique art, the principle of autonomy, not, of course, as a judge, assessing guilt, but as a craftsman shaping new forms of existence, always comparing what we've made for its fidelity to the project and activity of self-formation itself.

In other words, an ethics of the self is a socially embedded creative practice that, though without an overarching moral trajectory, does have some aspects of "normalization" (Thompson 2003), though a normalization harnessed to the autonomy of self-formation. Thus, Infinito argues, 'the locus of ethical activity is not in the solitary mind, nor even the will, but rather in the critical and creative capacities brought forth in praxis' (Infinito 2003: 160). As already noted, the critical and creative practice that Foucault saw as the principal field of this ethical activity, this aesthetics of existence, was reflective writing.

Queer Writing: An Exemplar of an Aesthetics of Existence

Queer Writing as a sub-discipline of Creative Writing offers a clear example of the relationship between discourse and writing and the constitution of subjectivities in a Foucauldian ethics of the self. John Ambrosio, citing Faust, describes how writing acts on and with subjectivity when he argues:

As a form of reflection and experimentation, writing is a technology of ethical self-formation that views the subject as a work of art and the self as an artefact, as an ongoing work in progress. When conjoined with a philosophical “attitude of resistance that incites new ways of thinking about the forms of experience”, writing enables individuals to begin to “question and modify those systems which make only particular kinds of action possible” (2008:264).

Queer Theory is such a ‘philosophical attitude of resistance’ that ‘incites new ways of thinking about... forms of experience’ (Faust 1988: 188) and which makes a wider range of actions and performativities possible. A discussion of the core ideas of Queer Theory is pertinent here as it is still unfamiliar to some and, more importantly, largely misunderstood by others.

Queer Theory has its origins in Poststructuralism (Jagose 1996) and employs a number of Poststructuralism’s key ideas (Spargo 1999). As Spargo (1999: 41) argues, Queer Theory employs:

Lacan’s psychoanalytic models of decentred, unstable identity, Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction of binary conceptual and linguistic structures, and... Foucault’s model of discourse, knowledge and power.

At the most basic level, Queer Theory is a set of theories based on the central idea that identities are not fixed and closed off from outside influences but rather fluid and permeable. Queer Theory is also based on the idea that our gender and sexual identities are

not determined by biological sex (Jagose 1996). Queer Theory proposes that it is meaningless to try to understand gender and sexuality (or indeed race or class) through limiting identity categories such as “man” or “woman” or “heterosexual” or “homosexual” (Jagose 1996). This is because subjectivity and identity are not simplistic but complex and consist of numerous elements, many of them in contradiction to each other. This complexity, and in-built fragmentation of subjectivity and identity, means that it is reductive to assume that individuals can be understood collectively on the basis of a shared characteristic such as gender or sexuality (Jagose 1996).

The logical extension of this critique of sexual and gender categories or identities is a deconstruction of and challenge to all notions of subjectivity and identity categories as fixed, lasting and unified (or without ambivalence). In this way, the boundaries between other categories, such as race and class, can also be interrogated. Rather than fixed identities or categories, Queer Theorists such as Judith Butler (1990) suggest instead a subjectivity that is fluid, ephemeral, complex and ambivalent (as was noted earlier).

The quote below from Annamarie Jagose (1996: 3) comprehensively describes the core concerns of Queer Theory:

Broadly speaking, queer describes those gestures or analytical models which dramatise incoherencies in the allegedly stable relations between chromosomal sex, gender and sexual desire. Resisting that model of stability--which claims heterosexuality as its origin, when it is more properly its effect--queer focuses on mismatches between sex, gender and desire. Institutionally, queer has been associated most prominently with lesbian and gay subjects, but its analytic framework also includes such topics as cross-dressing, hermaphroditism, gender ambiguity and gender-corrective surgery. Whether as transvestite performance or academic deconstruction, queer locates and exploits the incoherencies in those three terms which stabilise heterosexuality. Demonstrating the impossibility of any “natural”

sexuality, it calls into question even such apparently unproblematic terms as “man” and “woman”.

Thus, Queer Theory’s principal focus is the denaturalisation of categories/norms (Sullivan 2003, Jagose 1996, de Lauretis 1991, Butler 1990) and abrading the borders between “infamous” binary terms like male/female, natural/unnatural, normal/abnormal, heterosexual/homosexual, white/black, self/other.

The work of Queer Theory is one of deconstruction (Spargo 1999, Jagose 1996); to dissect and alter how we think about and *live* core aspects of human subjectivity such as identity, sex/gender, race and sexuality. This work is undertaken in the context of a culture steeped in heteronormativity — the discourse and practice of presumed and privileged heterosexuality (Butler 1990: 106). Queer Theory works to undermine the privileged position of heteronormativity by exposing the ways in which sexualities and genders are produced in/by discourse and the ways in which non-normative genders and sexualities resist, transcend and trouble normative notions of sex, gender and sexuality categories that would otherwise be widely (mis)understood as somehow natural, essential or incontestable. From a Queer Theory perspective, genders and sexualities (and subjectivities) are fluid, permeable, mutable and largely the result of repeatedly performed utterances, rituals and behaviours; or *performativity* (Butler 1993).

Most importantly, Queer Theory does not propose a stable queer identity in opposition to heteronormative constructions of the self. As noted earlier, Queer Theory suggests a total abandonment of any notion of a lasting unitary subject or subjectivity in favour of a conception of subjectivity as the momentary effect of discourse; as a complex of processes (including cognitive ones), practises and affects (feelings) all triggered by texts and/or discourse.

The deconstruction and denaturalization of categories and norms of identity and subjectivity—and the abrasion of the borders between binary terms in order to undermine heteronormativity—is also the project of Queer Writing. Queer Writing does this by foregrounding the appearance of Queer subjectivities within texts as a deployment or intervention into discourse for a critical or creative purpose. I would further propose that Queer Writing is a practice which directly intervenes in subject formation that leads to the constitution of altogether new subjectivities for the writers themselves.

In Foucault's (1986) discussion of reflective writing as an exemplar of a *technique of the self* implemented to produce a desired non-normative subjectivity, he demonstrates how certain forms of reflective writing produce the subject through a process of critical self-analysis of one's conduct and of one's historical and social position. This self-analysis, or critique, aligns the self with one's ethics that are themselves formed in response to, or indeed in resistance to, dominant forms and norms of subjectivity (Ambrosio 2008, Thompson 2003, Martin et al 1988). This critique is undertaken principally in the act of writing. One's analysis or critique of oneself is 'written down, reflected over, and these writings are then used in the refinement of the self; in the production and maintenance of a new ethical subjectivity' (Baker 2011c: 5). Foucault demonstrates how this writing as self-formation has historically been tied to a philosophical or moral tradition in which the desired subjectivity was one in line with specific moral or philosophical tenets (Foucault 1986). This being the case, a reflective writing informed by Queer Theory can also be used in the process of self-formation, as a *Queered aesthetics of existence* applied as a way of life, in order to constitute new (and radical) Queer subjectivities. Queer Writing is just such a practice.

It is important to remember that, according to Foucault (1996: 452), there is no abiding, sovereign subject but rather the subject/subjectivity is ‘constituted through practices of subjection, or, in a more autonomous way, through practices of liberation, of liberty... on the basis, of course, of a number of rules, styles, inventions to be found in the cultural environment’. Additionally, subjectivity (in particular gender and sexual subjectivity) is constituted in the interplay and correlation between ‘types of understanding, forms of normativity and modes of relation to oneself and others’ (Foucault 1986: 4).

In this sense, self-bricolage through writing is a practice of liberty or practice of the self that, as an aspect of the queer cultural environment, informs and alters the way subjects actively constitute themselves. In other words, creative and critical texts arising out of a Queered aesthetics of existence ‘are “models” that strongly influence the ongoing *becoming* of Queer subjectivities’ (Baker 2011: 11).

Drawing on Foucault, Judith Butler (1990: 184) reconceived subjectivity as a practice that is ‘the resulting effect of a rule-bound discourse’. Subjectivity, like creative writing, is a practice that is dynamic, reflective and creative. In fact, this dynamic quality of subjectivity is the result of, and triggered by, engagement with or exposure to discourse; that is, texts and creative artefacts.

We’ve already seen how Butler (2004: 1) argues that an experience of an alternate or different subjectivity in discourse can “undo” our conception of who we are—our idea of ourselves, our subjectivities and identities—and inaugurate or constitute new ones. In other words, an experience of a non-normative subjectivity in discourse or creative text can trigger a dynamic shift in subjectivity or the emergence of completely new subjectivities. This “undoing” is perhaps better framed as a re-doing, or re-making with a different Queer emphasis. This notion of Butler’s draws on Foucault’s description of how new subjectivities

form through an engagement with a selected “already said” (Foucault 1997: 209). In the context of Queer Theory, this process of undoing and/or (re)constituting subjectivities is an act of resistance against heteronormativity. This resistance, this re-making of identity, is not without limits or challenges; it is not total voluntarism (Butler 2004). As Ambrosio (2008: 255), pointing to some of these challenges and constraints, argues:

We cannot transform ourselves through a simple act of knowing, through critical reason or reflection alone, but only by *risking* who we are, by... seeking out and testing ourselves in situations that illuminate the contours of our subjectivity, that destabilize our certainties.... Transforming the self requires that we act with personal courage and develop a tolerance for uncertainty and vulnerability (emphasis original).

This exposure to new subjectivities or discourses (Foucault’s “already said”) can occur at the point of reception but also, significantly, in the performative moment of production. The practice of writing can provide ‘a means by which individuals... transform themselves, reconstitute themselves as ethical subjects through reading, ...reflection, and practical experimentation’ (Ambrosio 2008: 265). This process of “undoing” in which new subjectivities emerge can be described as a “Queering of the self”, or a Queer becoming.

It can be extrapolated then that a Queering of the self—facilitated by exposure to Queer Theory in the context of an aesthetics of existence—can enrich and inform writing practice and research; in effect bringing them into operation as a mutually interconnected self-bricolage or Queer self-making. Exposure to discursive representations of non-normative gender and sexual subjectivities can also be seen to inform Queer subject-formation. As we have seen, both Foucault (1997) and Butler (2004) have indicated that exposure to non-normative subjectivities and genders within cultural artefacts (texts) can facilitate the emergence of new subjectivities. These emergent Queer subjectivities constitute acts of power or ‘reverse discourse’ (Foucault 1988: 50-51) that resist heteronormative discourses

around gender and sexuality. Thus, discursive representations of Queer subjectivities can inform and influence the Queer subject-formation of queer individuals in a globalized Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender community.

In this sense, self-bricolage (Rabinow 1997) through the reading experience is a Foucauldian “practice of the self” that, as an aspect of the queer cultural environment, informs and alters the way subjects actively constitute themselves. In other words, literature provides “models” of gender and sexual subjectivity that strongly influence the on-going *becoming* of Queer subjectivities.

This exposure to new subjectivities or discourses (Foucault’s “already said”) occurs at the point of reception which can be conceived as a performative moment of inter-subjective connection between discursive subjectivities and the embodied subjectivity of the reader. This performative moment does not end with the final moments of the narrative but rather continues as the subject recalls the text and reflects on its narrative and on their own reading experience. The interconnected practices of reading, reflection and narrative-inspired experimentation can provide a means by which subjects reconstitute themselves as part of a self-bricolage or ethics of the self. This process of “undoing” in which new subjectivities emerge can be described as a “Queering of the self” or as a Queer becoming. Thus, the moment of reception or reading, and later reflection on or engagement with discursive (textual) models of gender and sexual subjectivities, can be seen as a set of entwined practices in a self-bricolage that both explores and produces performative genders and sexualities and facilitates the emergence of non-normative subjectivities.

The constitution of new identity practices is clearly inspired and facilitated by engagement with discourse—with, among other things, cultural artefacts—but I would suggest that the potential for dynamic shifts in subjectivity can also be triggered or activated by the

production of discourse, by the act of writing. This is because writing is also reading and reflexivity; a simultaneous production, engagement, analysis, and modification of discourse that directly feeds into the constitution of the self. Writing is a practice of Queer becoming.

In a Queer becoming, the subject does not merely imitate or conform to a subjectivity or mode of being found in discourse. As I noted at the outset of this paper, becoming is a generative process, the constitution of a new subjectivity altogether that is the outflow of social and cultural engagement and reflexivity rather than a display of mere “resemblances” (Deleuze & Guattari 1987). The process is one of altering or ceasing current performative practices of identity and constituting or constructing new ones through replication. And remember that replication holds within it the possibility of mutation, of the emergence of something significantly different or new.

There is a paradox in this Queer becoming. Subjectivity is constituted through engagement with discourse, constrained by specific acts of power, but that discourse is, of course, constituted by the subject. This circular process destroys any possibility of finding an original or authentic subjectivity (either discursive or embodied in an individual). Despite this, each emergent subjectivity is somehow “new”. This is deeply Derridean, in the sense that Derrida deposed the notion of the original and replaced it with the notion of an endless chain of reproductions, which are all of equal value (Derrida 1982 & 1967).

This Queering of the self/subjectivity is also, in effect, a *denaturalising* of the self – a decoupling of identity from notions of the natural. In other words, and to return to one of the core ideas of Queer Theory, ‘a Queered self is one in which subjectivity and identity are not conceived as somehow natural and stable but rather understood to be ambiguous, ephemeral, fluid and largely produced by discourse in relationship with socio-cultural factors’ (Baker 2011b: 23). This conception of the self and subjectivity opens up the

possibility of the writer-researcher occupying a wider range of reading and writing positions in ways that enrich both the creative act and research processes. Movement into and out of these reading and writing positions is facilitated by the practice of writing and reflection (on what has been written) which are both techniques of a critique of the self. This practice of reflective writing opens up new possibilities of experience, and facilitates the emergence of new forms of subjectivity, as Foucault (cited in Martin et al 1988: 28) describes with relation to the practice of reflective writing in the Classical era:

A relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing. A whole field of experience opened which earlier was absent.

A Queered aesthetics of existence can also provide queer writer-researchers with tools to explore notions of sexual and gender difference in ways that produce more than a theoretical understanding. Foucault (1978) argued that any strategy aimed at resisting discursive mechanisms of power must involve a transgression of laws, a dismantling of prohibition and an ‘irruption of speech’ (5). Foucault suggested that any disruption of mechanisms of power (especially those around sexuality) could not be effected with a theoretical discourse alone (1978: 5). Thus, ‘the use of non-theoretical ways of exploring and communicating the knowledge produced in writing research and practice are appropriate’ (Baker 2011b: 23). Furthermore, they are a means of equipping queer writer-researchers with ‘technologies of the self’ (Ramos 1994: 21) that resist heteronormative discourse and normative models of subjectivity.

Queer Writing and Queer Becoming

An ethics of the self in the context of Queer Writing is a process by which creative and critical practices are used to inspire and provoke interventions in a Queer self-making or

becoming. Hélène Cixous once wrote about her own writing practice that ‘[i]t is the whole that makes sense. That which cannot be met on one path, and which I cannot say in one of my languages, I seek to say through another form of expression’ (cited in Cixous and Sellers 1994: xvi). If we use this quote to think about Queer self-making then we can conceptualise Queer Writing as a practice by which the bricoleur (or theorist) uses the means or methods at hand, to paraphrase Claude Levi Straus (1966), to constitute new subjectivities; irrespective of the usage to which these means or methods are usually put. In other words, the Queer ‘bricoleur uses heterogeneous forms, such as critical theory, creative fiction, reflexivity and deconstruction, and adapts them in an opportunistic way to meet his/her “needs” (or creative and critical *intent*) in the context of an intervention into subjectivity’, or a Queer becoming (Baker 2011: 15).

Within Queer Writing praxis, the definition of “practice” is broadened to encompass not only creative endeavours but also qualitative research, engagement with critical theory and, most significantly of all, subjectivity. Indeed, research, bricolage and creative practice are contextualized within Queer Writing mainly in relation to the performative nature of sexual and gender subjectivity. The intent in understanding creative practice, research, critical engagement and subjectivity as mutually dependant performative practices is to ‘explore the tensions or cohesions between what one *does* and who one *is*’ (Baker 2011: 21). That is, to breach the gaps between creative and critical research and writing on one hand and subjectivity or identity on the other. It is also to explore how subjectivities inform writing practice without reinforcing the notion of a stable, unified subject or self.

Thus, within this context, the term Queer Writing means a set of entwined practices including research, creative writing, engagement with theory and subjectivity that lead to identifiable outcomes that include critical and creative artefacts but also new or emergent

subjectivities. In this way, Queer Writing praxis can be seen to reframe creative practice and critical research as an ethical intervention into subject formation and knowledge production. This Queering of writing practice and research has the potential to invigorate research in Creative Writing and provide the writer researcher with new tools to enrich creative practice, diversify research pathways and increase points of connection with creative artefacts or products (Baker 2011). A Queer Writing praxis is also envisaged as a dynamic and performative pathway to new knowledge that contributes to the constitution of new subjectivities in a queer becoming.

Conclusion

To summarize, Queer Writing as a Queered aesthetics of existence is a set of entwined practices including research, creative writing, reflexivity, engagement with theory and a critique of subjectivity that lead to identifiable outcomes that include critical and creative artefacts exploring and expressing performative genders and sexualities but also new or emergent subjectivities.

There are certain limits to positioning subjectivity as a core element to creative practice. It is crucial that the model of subjectivity used in a subjectivity-centred creative practice is not one that entrenches rather than disrupts the notion of subjectivity as stable, lasting and unified. For a Queered aesthetics of existence to be effective, the model of subjectivity deployed ‘must be one that destabilizes the notion of identity/subjectivity as unitary, fixed and somehow natural’ (Baker 2011: 15). A subjectivity-centred research approach that views identity as natural and inherent to the subject, and sees the creative artefact as a direct reflection of the creator’s identity, is little more than a return to the essentialist model of the creative genius (Baker 2011).

By deploying a model of subjectivity that destabilizes the notion of identity/subjectivity as unitary, fixed and somehow natural, a Queering of the self—facilitated by exposure to Queer Theory in the context of an aesthetics of existence—can enrich and inform writing practice and research; in effect bringing them into operation as a mutually interconnected Foucauldian self-bricolage.

An ethics of the self, or self-bricolage through writing, is a practice of liberty that has the potential to inform and alter the way Queer subjects actively constitute themselves.

Furthermore, creative and critical texts arising out of a Queered aesthetics of existence can act as “models” that strongly influence the ongoing *becoming*, and ethical refinement, of Queer subjectivities.

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