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New York, New York

Abstract:

Gaston Bachelard in his seminal work, *The Poetics of Space*, writes of the influence of the physical environment on our physiological being. *New York, New York* is an emergent work arising from a recent visit to New York. As writers we often draw on personal experiences and embed them in our creative work. *New York, New York* explores my sense of self within this physical and cultural environment, the triggered memories and reinterpretations of the past. All have influenced the creation of the new.

Six locations are the focus of the six part text. In each section the dialogic interplay of memoir and fiction explores the relevance of the experiential to the writing process. First and third-person voices are also used in the intertwining of the imagined and autobiographical which acts as a frame tale for the third-person fictional sections of the text. This auto-ethnographic approach seeks to reveal the small fissures through which the new emerges and give the reader insight into the creative process, particularly the role of the experiential in the imagined trajectories the writer follows. The intertwining of the two voices also reflects the intertwining of the imagined and researched in the creative-practice research.

Biographical note:

My interest in writerly identity and the role of personal experience, memory and their place in my experience of the present are being more fully explored in my writing. Recent short stories have focused on this exploration within the context of the professional and private lives of women.

Keywords:

Writerly identity – Psycho-geography – Auto-ethnography – Memoir – Fiction – Auto-ethnographic research

Tender Buttons

Walking against banks of people. ‘Walk on the right side,’ I muttered to myself. They drive on the right. I hesitated at the lights, uncertain about the direction of the traffic, reluctant to play dodgem cars. Any movement was a jostling for position. Like drivers in the jams of cars, I needed to negotiate the flow.

I turned left at 62nd St. Tender Buttons was just around the corner, a quiet haven that dispatched my discomfort with the pedestrian bustle. It was an accidental find. Facing it, across the street, is a drycleaners, much needed by my partner who needed clean shirts. Led by his ongoing search for leather buttons to replace the two missing from his sport’s jacket — at home in Melbourne — he crossed the street and entered the shop.

When have buttons not been important? Those little idiosyncratic features that distinguish garments, and mark generational styles, have yet to be superseded by Velcro. Buttons, threads, fabrics, patterns, the whirr of a sewing machine echoes. My mother designed and sewed: dresses for her daughters, bead-encrusted silk for the gentry, lingerie in her factory, costumes for the local theatre company and the ABC. The smells of fabric dust and sewing-machine oil permeate my blood.

Lucy lingers outside the shop and resists the urge to enter. The buttons in the window are arranged in pairs — blue, red and brown. A discrete, gold band runs diagonally across each channelling the nautical sophisticates she has seen in preppy American films. She is torn. She thought she had drawn a line under her past.

The shop is narrow, probably no more than four metres wide. Its two long walls are devoted to display and storage. Buttons adorn the banks of drawers. She notes the whites, the greys and blacks and follows the spectrum of colours and textures to the end of the wall. Fabric, clay, bone, leather, seashell, silver, gold, porcelain, enamel, cloisonné, plastic, vellum, wood, Bakelite and steel, the choice is overwhelming. She returns to the reds and feels the softness of silk buttoned against her skin and the large red button that spoke to Gabriel of who she was.

Her eyes fall on the eighteenth-century buttons illustrating how children should behave then drift to the bric-a-brac of associated history — scissors, photographs and cotton reels. Are they as important to the owners as the seventy-five year old reels of cotton — eau de Nil and apricot — on the shelf in her grandmother’s sewing room?

Lucy reads that Gertrude Stein’s puzzling work, *Tender Buttons*, is the origin of the shop’s name. She had found Stein’s emphasis on sound, and rhythm difficult to understand. A web of anxiety tightens around her throat. As she tries to loosen it by rewinding her scarf, the memory of her mother unrolling the gauze needed to secure her baby brother’s umbilical cord unravels. Tradition demanded it be bound until it dried and fell away. The belly button must be encouraged to be flat. Her mother is spreading the baby blanket, folding its corners across her brother, wrapping him like a papoose. The web re-tightens.

She puts her hand across her stomach and steps outside into a budding spring of unfurling leaves and open tulips. In spite of the man-made towers of concrete and glass soaring into the blue sky, the soil beneath is warm and nurturing.

From Guggenheim to the Metropolitan Museum of Art

Walking up the snail of the Guggenheim evoked the spiritual as I left behind the hurly-burly of the ground floor wearing its only trace — a clip-on button verifying my entry. In the quiet alcoves of the spiral, the works of Gutai, a Japanese collective intent on breaking traditional artistic boundaries, are displayed: a dress of strung light globes, the mechanical, plexiglass *Bisexual Flower*, an enormous topless and bottomless box suspended from the ceiling. I followed the children ducking beneath its lower edge to stand in its interior and discovered the delight of being surrounded by red fabric walls.

Leaning over the internal side wall of the spiral allowed me to see the fall of light spilling from the atrium's ceiling to the ground floor. The building wrapped itself around me like the Aboriginal possum-skin cloak I once had the privilege of wearing and I felt yet another cultural history being inscribed.

This was not how I felt in the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Palatial from the outside, cavernous inside, stuffed with a confusing profusion of the old and new, it was an alienating foreign country.

Who had the vision to place cultural artefacts centre stage? Lorenzo de Medici's collection was called a *museum*. In the 17th century the word still referred to a collection rather than a building. In this museum both the building and the collection were overwhelming. Religious relics were once the life blood in negotiations of guilt and status but I was struggling with one of the hoards of Western civilization. 'Admire them,' I said to myself, 'understand them but don't question their acquisition.' However, the guilt still niggled.

The Egyptian tombs remind Lucy of the remnant structures marking the pilgrim's walk to Mont Saint-Michel, but on this pilgrimage, through a labyrinth of dimly lit halls and chambers, the glaring light of the sun is the enemy. Only the clay and stone Egyptian and Greek relics can withstand the natural light.

She tries to forge a connection with the athletic figures running across the surface of a Greek amphora. If only she could hold it, to feel its weight, caress its surface. A funerary plaque with mourning women circling the laid out figure of a man catches her eye. Here is something she understands; death. The annotation notes that pillows were used to ensure against the mouth hanging open. She wishes she had known. Such a simple act would have left her with a less-jading memory of her grandfather. Instead of tearing at their hair, the women in her family sat in stoical silence, holding his cooling, stilled hand until the nursing staff asked them to leave. His death bed was needed.

As she walks through the Japanese section, her mood lifts. Unable to read Kanji, she is left with the aesthetic. It's a relief to linger on the filaments of orange silk chrysanthemums, to imagine a petal of pink cherry blossom tumbling beyond a quiet tea-house. She feels calm as she retraces her steps past the closed Egyptian temple to the entrance where Gabriel should be waiting.

No Gabriel. She re-opens her map. It's an Aladdin's cave of treasure and they've only opened two chests. Where is he? She quells her irritation with a muttered, 'He can't

be long.’ As she puts the map back into her pocket she notices the tortoiseshell button of her jacket is working loose. Rolling the end of the thread between her finger and thumb, she circles it around the button’s shank.

‘There you are,’ she hears, as if he’s been waiting for her.

It’s not until they step into the green haze of Central Park that she’s able to tolerate Gabriel’s chatter about the wood in the Manuel Ramirez guitar he’s seen. Sunlight is streaming through the unfurling leaves whose shadows are shuffling on the broad path.

‘The Japanese,’ she says, ‘reflect on loss and impermanence by drawing on nature.’ Gabriel looks at her without comment.

‘That’s Gabriel,’ Lucy thinks, abandoning the sense of rebirth she had hoped for between them.

The Metropolitan Opera House

New York. Its monumentality is measured step by step. By day two I knew my shoes were inadequate to the task so I bought a pair of walking shoes. We had also bought tickets to see *Die Walküre* at the Metropolitan Opera House but I decided to wear the dressier shoes I had packed. Although the walk through Central Park to the Lincoln Center was not long, my heels were sore when we arrived.

I had expectations. The promotional material suggested the production was the one I had seen in the film of *Das Rheingold* at the Cinema Nova in Melbourne. The introduction had shown how a complex series of rotating planks — the feature of the production — worked. I wanted to see them in action.

I crossed the Josie Robertson Plaza with excitement and joined the long queue inside — there was a security search. It surprised me until I realized that it had been mandatory in all the galleries and museums we had visited — yet another trace of the after-effects of 9/11. I was also surprised that standing room tickets entitled one to a chest high space at the back of the auditorium where one could lean on one’s elbows. I was glad to be sitting down. Finally, the crystal chandeliers were raised, the house lights dimmed and when the curtains finally opened, I was pleased to see the planks.

Dusk is fading into night as Lucy and Gabriel walk towards the welcoming columns and arches of the MET. Lucy grips Gabriel’s arm more tightly as they circle the fountain in the centre of the plaza and stride with the crowd towards the doors.

After the security check, they mount the steps to the first floor. Gabriel takes their drinks to the outdoor balcony and Lucy follows, eager to watch the flow of people below. Many, like her, have chosen to dress-up for the evening and donned the ill-fitting evening dress and awkward shoes reserved for special occasions. Amongst the crowd there are many Brünnhildes but it’s the woman with the stainless-steel helmet and blue fluorescent horns who stands out.

A tremor runs the length of Lucy’s body as the music flows, but the production is awkward. She is distracted by the mammoth set which forces the characters to step gingerly across the sloping planks and for the first time she is irritated by Wotan. How dare he demand that Brünnhilde cement his power by killing Siegmund? How dare he,

when she refuses his bidding, castigate and punish her? At the second interval, her sense of revulsion at seeing a child sacrificed to a father's enslavement to power rises. She abhors Brünnhilde's designated fate, that she must become human and face the tasks of everywoman — to be at her husband's hearth. Who wants to do that?

She tries to explain this to Gabriel, but all he hears is an old agenda and turns his back. Looking over the internal balcony, she sees a parade of devotees in a temple of pleasure, dressed for a bedtime story that has little moral insight or sense of human redemption. 'What am I doing here?' suspends itself mid-torso. Tears brim with the recognition that she has been seduced by the pleasure palace and rent by her identification with Brünnhilde.

'Brünnhilde did the right thing,' she shouts over the edge of the balcony. 'Wotan is a selfish beast.'

The woman with the fluorescent horns looks up. 'Brünnhilde was the child of a god. The expectations are different,' she calls back as she raises her trident.

'Would you desist? You're making a spectacle of yourself, and me,' Gabriel hisses as he grips her elbow and draws her back to the table where he has placed their drinks.

'This,' she says, gesturing towards the crowd, 'is the spectacle and I want to play a part.'

'The champagne's gone to your head. We're not in Times Square lining up to wave to ourselves on a screen.'

Lucy picks up her glass and salutes the nearby group who are staring at her, 'Apparently, I have spectacle envy,' she says to them.

'You're an embarrassment. I wish I hadn't come,' Gabriel mutters.

Lucy wishes she wasn't so emotional and repeats to herself, 'Keep your mouth shut, keep your mouth SHUT.'

She finds it difficult to focus on the performances or the music of the final act. It's not until the planks have served their multiples purposes — a cottage roof, tree trunks in a forest, a floor to a palace — and are reconfigured into a cross from which Brünnhilde hangs upside down, that she forsakes her moral stance and any wish to be sensible about the story. She is physically overwhelmed by the emolliating image of Brünnhilde surrounded by protective flames. She gasps and feels a warming flood of pleasure.

National Museum of the American Indian

The rain became torrential as I walked from the Staten Island ferry to the National Museum of the American Indian. My visit included the display room at the far end of the oval rotunda at its heart. The artefacts opened an empty pit of concern especially after listening to an atonal description of the effects of a massacre. Massacre, to me, is an onomatopoeic word suggesting smashed bones in acres of blood. Its sense was confirmed.

I don't understand my interest in the American Indian. Is it the too-many-watched Westerns which, like the current flood of cooking and crime programmes, once filled

our television screens? The Indian clothes displayed at the museum are beautifully embroidered and beaded, especially those with porcupine quills. Of course, they are stitched by hand. Perhaps this explains my interest.

It struck me as incongruous that the lives of American Indians are celebrated in the Alexander Hamilton U.S. Custom House, a building initially devoted to commerce, the probable cause of their loss of land and life. I laughed as we walked through the rotunda. This elegant space, with its deep, oval skylight was littered with buckets. It seems the passion for preserving doesn't extend to protecting the interior from the rain.

Lucy's passion for restoration leads to stiff fingers. It takes two full days to restore the stitching across the shoulders of the deer-hide dress. She admires the skilled use of the irregular sections of the hide which form the undulating hem and edges of the sleeves. As she repairs a broken quill she imagines a life making such garments, a life governed by animal totems and seasonal upheavals, one unimaginable in the concrete woods of Manhattan.

Her decision to live on Staaten Eylandt, as it was once called, is vindicated daily when she catches the ferry to and from work. The trip across Upper New York Bay brings with it a sense of freedom which she refuses to attribute to the Statue of Liberty. The distant crowd of skyscrapers looks like an untidy Lego build. Up close she finds the density smothering, like Gabriel's influence.

He had been her boyfriend until two months ago when he began to stay over. She wants to think of him as a partner but she has yet to see the cooperation the word suggests. His apartment on the Lower West Side is above his theatre on Canal St. She hates sleeping on his tacky double futon which is squeezed into the alcove beside the living room. Three sets of windows separate the living room from the busy street below. She tolerates the enclosed, airless space by reminding herself that the walkway along the Hudson River is only a few minutes away. Why won't he move to Staten Island?

Partner. Surely partners have resolved sleeping arrangements?

From the nearby corner of Greenwich St she can see the soaring Freedom Tower dwarfing the surrounding buildings.

'Its assertion of power and the implied refusal to succumb to the power of others makes me nervous,' she says to Gabriel.

'Nervous. What are you talking about?'

She is about to reply when he spits out, 'It's a building for God's sake.'

Freedom Tower

What purpose does it serve to place two things next to each other and allow the reader to reflect on their relationship? I want tell you about two related experiences which completely absorbed me although I still struggle to make sense of them.

Chronologically, the first was watching the events of 9/11 unfold on my television screen. The television screen enables us to see things we can't normally see: up-close

detail, aerial views of the world and life beyond our immediate vicinity. In one sense it can be more real on the other hand it is a filtered, two-dimensional rendering of reality. For me, 9/11 was a lived experience. I wanted to see where the twin towers of The World Trade Centre once stood, to have a sense of their absence although I had no direct experience of their presence.

The second was my visit to St Paul's Chapel of Trinity Church twelve years later. Adjacent to Ground Zero, St Paul's Chapel was unaffected physically by the collapse of the twin towers although it was inundated with papers. The Chapel was a retreat during the rescue operations, providing material and psychological support to those searching for the trapped and the dead. The chapel moved me but not the site with its protective hoardings and soaring Freedom Tower.

Lucy is without an umbrella when the drizzle turns to rain. She enters St Paul's Chapel, seeking shelter as had many others following 9/11. In spite of the dark sky, the clearstory windows of the balcony filter a radiating light as do the large, double-hung windows of the ground-floor, two of which frame George Washington's pew where he sat on inauguration day 1789.

She walks slowly, lingers at the overwhelming mound of photographs of those who died. How old was she when she saw the plane crash into the second tower? Nineteen. Her family remained riveted to the screen as the reports of the Pentagon attack unfolded. Then the towers collapsed. She had asked, 'What does it mean?' No one answered. She didn't understand that she was watching bodies fall to the ground. Unlike Brünnhilde there were no rescuers and no protective wall to save those on the upper floors from the flames.

On a nearby stand, multi-coloured plaits hang cheerfully. They are peace cranes, some sent from the victims of Hiroshima. She sits in the pew muddied and scarred from use and senses its enlarged significance.

When the rain stops, she steps outside into the graveyard, brushing away the large drops falling from the overhanging trees. She follows the narrow path leading past the headstones and stops to read one of the more legible: 'In Memory of David McKean who died in this city, of yellow fever, in the midst of his usefulness ... 1795'. Tears well. The headstone encapsulates her father's passing ... so perfectly. If only her family were here.

Cordelia Street Café

It was before dusk when we arrived. The street seemed rather ordinary, but when we emerged four hours later, we stepped into a celebration. The Cordelia Street Café proffered more than expected: poetry, good food, and outstanding jazz in the large cellar beneath the ground-floor restaurant. More also came in the form of an introduction to Found Poetry in which material taken either wholly or partially from other texts is interwoven with the original text of the writer. The found material can also provide a platform for the development of the poem as in the following poem by Pamela Laskin who chose material from book on bonsai by Amy Liang.

Correcting Defects of Roots: A Partially Found Poem

1. Cracked, curled, entangled or vertical roots can be severed or corrected with wires, pebbles or pieces of bamboo.
2. Cut stems short as early as possible to ensure growth of fine roots.
3. Roots can also be created by height layering.
4. Roots will thicken quickly when exposed to sunlight.

If all else fails
give up,
hide your head in the sand
as you have
been doing forever.

You created this mess,
now live with it.

Pamela signed my copy of her book, ‘Keep on growing, Pam’ — supportive words as I struggle with this story. I reflected on my writing process later that night, thinking about her decision to finally discard her thesaurus and write from her own voice. Yes, she faced the uncertainty about the quality of the language but at least the words were hers. There is a risk when we expose the possibility of our banality.

Later that evening Lucy and Gabriel return to the basement to listen to jazz. The intimate audience of the poetry reading has dispersed and jazz crowd has arrived. The allocation of space per individual is now impossibly small: their two-person table must accommodate four.

Lucy can’t help but notice size and space. She carries with her a fear of small spaces, something Gabriel will never understand in his reconstructed theatre-house of many small rooms.

If only Lucy understood that his house is not only his workplace, it’s his life’s work. So, his futon is small. Too small for what, you ask? For me, of course.

When I was four, I was pinned beneath a pile of building timber. I hold this entrapment responsible but on writing this I become aware of alternative explanations. Perhaps it was my lack of supervision as a child, a freedom that allowed me to venture into the bush in search of greenhood orchids and maidenhair. Perhaps it was watching the broody magpies in the upper boughs of the pines outside the Presbyterian Church that led me to feel their monumental presence and a desire to be untethered to the

ground. Looking up at the skyscrapers in New York against the sky rekindles this feeling.

Lucy turns her head towards the stage and focuses on the four piece ensemble. When they start she knows she will be safe. The echoes of the past dissolve in the rhythm and lyricism of each musical voice and I understand it is the same absorption that captures me when I write.

References

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Britannica 2013 at <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/398827/history-of-museums>

Colbert Elizabeth 2013 *New York, New York* is the title of a song written by John Kander and Fred Ebb. However, one might also think of the title as a statement about the city of New York in the state of New York. Either may resonate with the reader.

Laskin, Pam 2013 'Correcting Defects of Roots: A Partially found Poem', in P Laskin *The Bonsai Curator*, W. Sommerville MA: Červaná Barva Press

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Research Statement

Research background: Writerly identity and the writing process in both academic and creative writing are being more fully researched as writing in all genres is researched in academic institutions. Research into creative writing at the masters and doctoral levels often draws on auto-ethnographic research models which allow personal history and the experiential to be embedded in the research process. Such research asks writers to reconceptualise their experience and writing as research. This demands reflection and an understanding of self within the research context. *New York, New York* through memoir and fiction uses the experience of visiting New York as research in the creative-writing process.

Research contribution: *New York, New York* draws on reflected-upon personal experience in a combination of genres: fiction and memoir. By combining both, it explores how auto-ethnographic research can be used in both creative-writing and the research process and proposes that creative-writing genres might be used in the reporting of research.

Research significance: *New York, New York* aims to stimulate reflection on the creative writing process and the writing demanded in the research process. Do the theoretical and creative components of the research degree in creative writing need to be separate? The merging of genres in the concluding sections of the story seeks to question the distinction that is drawn between reportage and creative writing and asks whether the knowledge gained in the research process, as represented in *New York, New York*, could have validity in the larger research context.