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Discoursing Love: The writer and X
A fictional response to Roland Barthes

Abstract:

Discoursing Love —The Writer and X offers a series of microfictions written in response to Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1990 [1978]). In *A Lover's Discourse* Barthes seeks to 'stage an utterance not an analysis ... amorously confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak' (3). Likewise I have written short pieces—outbursts, ripostes, manoeuvres—each less than seven hundred words and connected by meditations on love as experienced by a writer towards her lover. Questions include: How does love confront us? Can the emotional complexity of love, and of the loved Other, find voice in language? I have also experimented with structure, using Barthes' text to frame each story. This project, conceived in collaboration with Dr Shady Cosgrove, is the first stage of an ongoing work concerned with the interplay of theory and creative writing.

Biographical note:

Dr Catherine McKinnon, a novelist, playwright and theatre director, lectures at the University of Wollongong. Her plays, *Immaculate Deceptions*, *A Rose by Any Other Name* (Tantrum Press), *Road To Mindanao* and *Eye of Another*, were produced by the Red Shed Theatre Company and Adelaide Festival. In 2008 Penguin Viking published her novel, *The Nearly Happy Family*. In 2010 her play *Tilt* was selected for the National Playwriting Festival and her play *As I Lay Dreaming* won the Mitch Matthews Award. Her short stories and articles have appeared in *Transnational Literature*, *Text Journal*, *RealTime* and (forthcoming) *Narrative*.

Keywords:

Love – Desire – Roland Barthes – *A Lover's Discourse* – Micro-fiction

Love's Obscenity

obscène / obscene

Discredited by modern opinion, love's sentimentality must be assumed by the amorous subject as a powerful transgression which leaves him alone and exposed; by a reversal of values, then, it is this sentimentality which today constitutes love's obscenity. (1990 [1978]:175)

The rooftop is high above the city. A gusting wind surges through the crowd of writers. A great whoah! Then everyone huddles closer arguing with intoxicated fervor about events that never happened. Y returns with our beers. I'm her new best friend, or so she said after our first panel session where we both agreed that narrative unreliability is the new reliability.

'Catwoman or Batgirl?' she asks.

The last session had been titled, Superheroes in Popular and Literary Fiction.

'Don't want to be a paraplegic,' I say, 'even if I have superpowers.'

She rubs my head, like I'm a little girl.

'Okay Catwoman,' she says, 'tonight we get you a fuck.'

'Don't want one.' I'm annoyed with her get-everyone-named-and-sorted obsession, or maybe annoyed that she's picked me (incorrectly) as someone in need of direction.

I zip up the thin jacket, borrowed from Y who came prepared for all weather.

'That one there!' Y points to a guy with tall man stoop.

'Already had him.'

Y laughs. She likes blunt derisive talk even if it's not true. She likes everyone to drink and fuck and smoke and then gossip about it obsessively. Sex as conversation long ago lost its indecent branding. Sentimentality is the new obscene. If I wanted to be morally suspect I'd only have to say, 'hey guys, I really like *Love Actually*.'

'I need a cigarette,' I say to Y. We've both given up smoking.

'A fuck and a cigarette,' Y says. She swigs on her beer, scans the crowd.

'Not with anyone I know,' I say, as if strangers are my secret obsession.

Was that the thing between the Scandinavian politician and the Spanish cleaner? Our conference session this morning had spilled over into gossip about that incident. Everyone up in arms about the power inequity, the clear abuse, but was there any chance they were both attracted to each other, fleetingly maybe, because they were strangers? Is that being sentimental? Could it be a half-truth if not a whole truth? Because desire is confusing.

‘Hey X!’ Y calls out to a girl with her back to us. ‘Can we bludge a couple of ciggies?’

X turns. Long knotted hair and a grey hoody that looks like it’s knitted with rough wool. But I’m not sure now if X is a he or a she. Y nudges me, too obviously. X strolls over and unhurriedly opens a cigarette pack, smiles shyly. Eyes white-blue. The blue of snowdrifts and climatic shifts. Y plucks a cigarette from the pack, slips it between her lips, waits for a light.

I do what I’ve done so often before —done whenever I get that feeling of what? of attraction? of lust? of obscene love-at-first-sight-in-a-post-sentimental-world? Done whenever I get a feeling that could just be, no, is scientifically proven to be, pheromones in my system jumping up and down like a sprinter before a race, pheromones that cause heart splurges and a certain lightness of mind—I get up and leave.

The Other’s Body

corps / body

Any thought, any feeling, any interest aroused in the amorous subject by the loved body. (71)

X is lying on the narrow monastic motel bed. A shapely body that is curiouser and curiouser. Nature’s fairytale.

And there are little explosions of light all around us.

Unknowable

inconnaissable / unknowable

Efforts of the amorous subject to understand and define the loved being ‘in itself,’ by some standard of character type, psychological or neurotic personality, independent of the particular data of the amorous relation. (134)

My flatmate’s party is out of control when X calls my mobile. I run upstairs into my room, shut the door. X says God something blah blah, then Spirituality something something blah blah. This pulls me up sharply, like the TV advert, where the man riding a magic carpet comes to abrupt halt mid-air, eyes wide with surprise.

Is X a fundamentalist Christian?

Just two hours earlier an old school friend popped in for a cup of proselytizing tea, told me how God stopped her taking drugs. X had a horrific addiction, once. God and addiction are a natural match, aren’t they? And maybe all that confusion with XY and XX chromosomes (am I a he or a she or both?) would send you to God. Because God explains the unexplainable. Religion names and classifies, makes people feel safe. God is our collective imagining of a taxonomist.

X talks about nature: birds and things, feathers and bower nests and little quick-flapping wings.

‘Very Francis of Assisi,’ I say.

X laughs, like I’m joking.

Could I live with a fundamentalist?

Is that possible as an atheist?

Who is X really?

‘All the delights of the earth’

comblement / fulfillment

The subject insistently posits the desire and the possibility of a complete satisfaction of the desire implicated in the amorous relation and of a perfect and virtually eternal success of this relation: paradisiac image of the Sovereign Good, to be given and to be received. (54)

‘There are no rules,’ X says, ‘we are who we are.’

Being with X, is like a forever falling.

One sensation—beginning, middle and end.

Landing, bumps and bruises—events of another story.

Waiting

attente / waiting

Tumult of anxiety provoked by waiting for the loved being, subject to trivial delays (rendezvous, letters, telephone calls, returns). (37)

I lean against the doorjamb, watch the rain. Frangipani petals, some brown and bruised, wind-scattered on the tiled verandah. I’m waiting. Waiting for X. What time did I say? Did I even say a time? Yes, I said a time. Definitely a time and it is, it has to be said, now well past, long past that time. And I have a life. I have other things I could be doing and waiting is not one of them. If X for one minute thinks—but then, what if—because with the rain and the roads and the traffic, because that’s how accidents happen, rushing when you’re late.

Or maybe X just never set out. Never walked out the front door onto the street. Maybe X decided not to come. Because the other night I said, oh yes, I did say it, but then was it, yes, was it wise to say it? Announce it like that?

In a breaking-up scene, in a movie or a book, or in the cheap 1960's romance comics Y is obsessed with, it's always rainy or icy or thunderclapping and stormy because no one gets dumped on a hot sunny day. Though clearly that's not true. Think of all those lovers in Casablanca or Alice Springs. But imagined reality is never a mirror to the outer world. It's more visceral than that. And anyway, this is not a breaking-up scene.

I hear the squeak of the iron gate.

I take X by the hand: skin rough like a man, nails long, like a woman.

The Uncertainty of Signs

signes / signs

Whether he seeks to prove his love, or to discover if the other loves him, the amorous subject has no system of sure signs at his disposal. (214)

X brings me hot tea in my favourite cracked cup and lemon butter on toast. It's a bribe. I push back the sheet.

'If I wake up here, I have to walk through traffic and pollution to get home. It's the wrong start to a writing day.'

There's no question of me writing at X's place, a warehouse on a busy road. Too many petrol fumes.

'Your bed is too small,' X complains. 'My feet hang over the edge.'

Where to spend our nights. This is our bone of contention.

I'm staring at a book on the side-table. I can't read the title. The letters jump around like they have a life of their own. Hangover or some strange pressure on my brain?

'We should move in together,' I say to X.

'Mm,' X murmurs, and clambers out the window and onto the rooftop, wanting to draw the sky.

I believe in portents. In randomness having meaning. In dreams being more than the re-workings of a tired mind. But some signs are hard to figure. The letters of the book slide back together—Abracadabra, a book of magic.

‘How blue the sky was’

rencontre / encounter

The figure refers to the happy interval immediately following the first ravishment, before the difficulties of the amorous relationship begin. (197)

Weeks pass. X and I see each other now and then.

‘Why do you want to live together?’ Y says. ‘It’s so forever.’

She’s arrived with expensive Polish vodka in the stumpy skull-like bottle.

I pour two shots. I’m thinking of the night I sat with X, our legs dangling over the edge of the jetty, shucking oysters and drinking cheap old-barrel whiskey. Such pleasure in taste and salty air. Alcohol tells me a lot about the future, even as it clouds it.

‘X drinks whiskey,’ I say, as though that explains everything.

The Last Leaf

magie / magic

Magic consultations, secret rites, and votive actions are not absent from the amorous subject’s life, whatever culture he belongs to. (162)

X insists on house-sitting with me. My brother’s place in the country. A surprise since we’ve had a breaking-up scene, not once but twice. We drive all night and most of the day. Arrive at dusk. Bushland and a long verandah. Kangaroos out the front, picking at grass shoots. We collect wood, build a fire. Fall asleep in front of it. On our early morning bushwalk, a herd of deer appear from the mist. An eagle dangles on air currents. There’s a dead cow near the dam, maggots crawling from its brain.

I write, sitting at the long table. X draws, dots and squiggles running rampant. There are daisies by the back door. I have never in my life plucked daisy petals and murmured, loves me, loves me not, and I don’t do it now. But I notice that I don’t. The history of

love includes an unravelling of commercial gestures. Love's actions invade us even when we refuse to act.

We cook eggplant and pasta and then traipse outside to lie on the darkened lawn, under a shimmering Milky Way. Moths make kamikaze flights towards the single verandah globe. The owl in the tree cries boobook, boobook. Later, we plunder the kids' bookcases for fairytales and read them slouched on the couch.

'Abracadabra,' I say, throwing sticks onto the fire.

'We should live somewhere like this,' X says.

The Heart

coeur / heart

This word refers to all kinds of movements and desires, but what is constant is that the heart is constituted into a gift-object—whether ignored or rejected. (52)

I drive along the highway, late for work. The fuel gauge is on the red bit of dial but the signal hasn't started flashing. My heart goes tut, tut, tut, tut, tut, tut, whoosh. Irregular. Fast. This is not emotion-driven, or if it is, indirectly so. I pull over to the side of the road, on the bridge above Mullet Creek. X once took me to see a nineteenth century painting of the scene below. It showed light slicing through a rainforest canopy revealing a tall red cedar growing by clear water. Now, not a tree in sight. Instead, empty bottles stranded on caked mud, lapped at by murky water. I take the phone from my backpack and call X. Before I left, X shouted, why don't you understand? I shouted back, why don't *you* understand? If I die now I don't want to die with everything between us razed.

'I have an Other-ache'

compassion / compassion

The subject experiences a sentiment of violent compassion with regard to the loved object each time he sees, feels, or knows the loved object is unhappy or in danger, for whatever reason external to the amorous relation itself. (57)

Rain gunning down. I'm on the bed, next to X, my knees pulled to my chest, the doona piled around, a fortress of warmth. X lies, staring up at the tin ceiling.

'I was four,' X says. 'Dog went under the house. I crawled in after and stayed there for the day.'

X hasn't talked for three days. Hasn't moved from the bed. And now this story.

'My aunt kept saying, come out, Dog wants to die alone.'

What is happening to us? To X? One day we're ecstatic, and it's all oranges and summer and growing things in the garden with cows mooing in the paddocks nearby, and the next day, ghosts are haunting X and we're trapped in this memory place. I have nothing to say about an event that happened thirty years ago.

X continues with the story. 'It was my uncle who rescued me from under the house. He lay flat on the ground and called out, 'Dog hasn't gone off to be alone. See, he's found a spot in the corner where he can feel us moving about in the kitchen above.'

X looks at me, wants me to say something maybe. Wants me to understand the significance of the uncle's words.

'I think it's the first time I understood death,' X says. 'A few months later my uncle was playing footy. He had a heart attack as he was marking the ball. Died before he got to hospital.'

I curl in next to X. 'They told me it was nothing but a heart murmur,' I say. 'And a heart murmur is not worth three days in bed.' But I tuck the doona around us, remembering how X's father died of a heart bypass, after he'd returned from the war. A jungle virus, X once said. The rain slows. The tink, tink of raindrops plopping down from the gutters.

Making Scenes

scène / scene

The figure comprehends every ‘scene’ (in the household sense of the term) as an exchange of reciprocal contestations. (204)

X reads the draft, the sheet folded around us. I stare out at tree shadows that dance with the breeze. There’s a yellow half-moon balanced on a branch and a catbird screeching.

‘You said this was a love scene?’ X says.

‘Yeah.’

‘No love here.’

The manuscript slips to the floor and I scramble across the bed to retrieve it. ‘I’m working on the happy bit first,’ I say.

X laughs. ‘No happy either.’

‘It’s not *not* happy.’

‘It *is* not happy,’ X says. ‘If you want to write about something happy, write about nature.’

In the morning, pale light through the trees, I go outside to write about nature. Lovely nature. Happy nature. The first thing I see is a dead pigeon lying on the cement. I squat next to her. The cicadas start a Mexican wave. She’s a forest pigeon. Feathers, honey brown with flecks of green. Wing tips deeper, darker. Her tail fanned. Her neck bent, as though bowing down. One red claw reaches up towards her head.

It’s the reflective windows that kill. Birds see only forest ahead, keep flying and bang! Hit the glass at full speed. The illusion is shattered. Some survive. Sit on the cement concussed for hours, then fly off. The cicadas do another round, like hundreds of flat tinny bells, and beneath them the quark, quark of crickets.

X stands watching as I bury the bird.

‘I’m not writing about love,’ I say.

X's shadow darkens the glass and the forest disappears.

'But you are,' X says. 'You always are.'

'In the loving calm of your arms.'

étreinte / embrace

The gesture of the amorous embrace seems to fulfill, for a time, the subject's dream of total union with the loved being. (104)

We drink chamomile tea, resting in against each other. The chamomile is meant to help X's insomnia but it doesn't, not really. What X worries about —squiggles and dots mostly, but also about me, and a daughter that grew up too fast, and a planet that is destroying itself. Soon X will get up, pace the verandahs, stoke the fire, read by its glow. I'll be out like a light. Disappeared into the world of dreams. If X sleeps at all it's on the daybed in the lounge room, dreaming of dark cellars with flying dragons, fantastical worlds, or like last night, when X was lying on a crocodile's back as it crept along a muddy bank. The tea smells musty, like boredom. We talk of small things. Calamity might be waiting but right now is the crib-rock of time.

'I am engulfed, I succumb ...'

s'abîmer / to be engulfed

Outburst of annihilation which affects the amorous subject in despair or fulfillment.(10)

I try to move my mouth. Can't. I'm not frightened, yet. It's still a puzzle. Because I've no ability to form words. I stare at X. The world dissolves. I hold my arms out for balance or for flight—fingers piano-play the air. X thinks I'm falling and steps forward to catch me. Drops a whiskey glass. It clatters on the wooden floor, doesn't break. I stay unsteadily upright, like a baby taking its first steps. It occurs to me that wildness and gentleness are made of the same stuff, that beauty, man-made or natural, is often bloody, and that love is air or water but never both.

An ambulance arrives and gallops me to hospital. X follows in the car. The paramedic says I'm too young for a stroke. My speech gradually returns: a word, followed by a great yawning of nothing, then another word. By the time we pull up at Emergency I can again utter whole sentences.

I mistrust the hospital smells. Disinfectant, dust, and death swirling together. There's an old man in the bed next to me reading a comic book version of the bible. Don't like the mixed ward, everyone sharing a bathroom. White stockings hang over a shower cubicle that has grimy tiles. Don't like the doctor either. His brisk manner. I say only what is necessary, each word carefully placed, because a word can sometimes shatter if said too loud or too fast. X watches in noisy silence. I want to go home but the doctor holds up his hand. Like road signs, he has no need of words.

That night, the hospital dark engulfs me. Walls groan. Light-flashes. The tink tink of machines. As if the building is a threshold from one world to another, through which spirits, great heaving forces, constantly pass. I imagine X sitting in the orange kitchen chair, light flickering, spilt whiskey still sticky on the floor.

I call to X—this is a dream now—we stumble in a dark tunnel. I'm ahead, X trailing, like Orpheus following Eurydice, except Orpheus is more girl than boy. We come to a halt. Voices whispering. X tries to hold my hand but I'm melting. There's a decision to be made, apparently. But it's me not X who bargains for my return.

As we leave, X ahead, I call out, 'don't look back.'

'No,' X replies, and walks on steadily.

I wake, disappointed. I get wheeled away for a series of scans. A chatty nurse asks me to draw a clock from twelve backwards. Then the time, a quarter to ten. She gives me three words to remember, book, car and plate, and talks about sushi, which I find confusing and that's the point.

Later, she asks, 'what were those words?'

I remember book and plate but not car. She wants me to recite the months of the year backwards, which I do easily. Doctor Brisk arrives, announces it was the stroke you have when you don't have a stroke. But he refuses to release me as I need to be

observed. The old man from the bed alongside stretches out his arm—in his palm a coffee lolly, wrapping twirled at each end—asks if I want to read his bible.

X arrives late, a traffic accident on the freeway, four dead.

‘I need to evacuate,’ I say. ‘Can you go pressure the doctor to sign the release forms?’

The nurse overhears, says I’ll need a wheelchair when I leave. X orders one, goes in search of my villain, but returns wanting to hit something. The doctor said no.

‘Let’s just disappear,’ I say.

X helps me down from the bed and into the wheelchair. No nurses in sight. As X pushes me out of the ward I wave goodbye to the old man. He waves back then takes out his teeth and puts them in a glass.

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Research Statement

Research background

Many writers have utilized, appropriated, incorporated, or responded to Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1990 [1978]), both critical—Eric Meljac (2011)—and creative—Derek Tsang and Jimmy Wan's film, *Lover's Discourse* (2010), Jeffrey Eugenides' novel, *The Marriage Plot* (2011), Deborah Levy's *Amorous Discourse in the Suburbs of Hell* (1990). This research is interested in how Barthes' work can inform the structure of a creative text, specifically as a series of microfictions. Barthes' *A Lovers Discourse* is particularly relevant within this context as he explicitly addresses the self-aware romantic subject, and this in turn serves as a metaphor for the self-aware author.

Research contribution

McKinnon's collection of microfictions 'Discoursing Love – The Writer and X' uses Roland Barthes' *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments* (1990 [1978]) to inform the structure of the creative work. Each microfiction is based on one of Barthes' entries so the theoretical is fused into the storytelling at a structural level. McKinnon uses specific titles from Barthes' fragments to title her microfictions and provide the impetus for story. In so doing, she further questions the boundaries between the theoretical and the creative. McKinnon also uses levels of metafiction to draw attention to the writing of a creative work—as the 'I' of the story is a writer who uses love as her subject matter—thus raising questions about the relationship between fiction and reality.

Research significance

The significance of this research is that it functions as an independent creative work while also reflecting on creative practice, and on the relationship between theory and practice. Its value is evidenced by its inclusion in the double-refereed stream of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs' 18th annual conference.

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