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Writing as *curatus*: archival practices, encounter and response

Abstract:

Armistead Maupin once said of the art of storytelling: ‘I think that instinct, that storytelling instinct, rescued me most of my life’ (2006). So too, I propose, can curation. At its simplest, curation is the act of organising and maintaining a collection of works or artefacts. Etymologically the word *curation* comes from the Latin *curatus* from *cura* ‘spiritual charge of souls’ or *cura* meaning to take care of, the act of healing. When it comes to writing and researching and being the curator of your own practice the challenge is to get a bird’s-eye-view, to think of your work as a whole, to find story threads embedded naturally in the work, even when individual projects seem distinct and unrelated at first glance, in order to allow the essential qualities of the work to come into focus, to resonate. The idea of curation is not necessarily new – that we are curating our own writing and research practice, telling stories about our work. But to name it as such clarifies the approach.

This paper sets out some preliminary thoughts on how one might conceive of a body of practice in creative writing as both writing and research. In so doing, I propose three different approaches to archival practice (encounter and response) as a suggested form of *curatus*. I will draw on my own work to exemplify what I am proposing, namely: archive as ‘first place’ – those ‘embodiments of mind and psyche that belong to the first experience and first mapping’ (Malouf 1985: 10); archive as residue, as a way of ‘working through’ in order to compose new work that is creative and generative; and archive as experience, a way of exploring the possibilities and limitations of the imagination.

Biographical note:

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The genesis of this beginning research was very simple. I had come to an impasse in my work and didn't know what to do next; I couldn't even work out what it was that kept my thinking together. There was nothing coherent to fall back on except individual, disparate pieces of work. I wanted to conceive of everything that I had done as a whole, a single piece of cloth, if you like, in order to think through how the various parts might fit in. But there didn't seem anything obvious that was binding it together except subject matter here and there.

The trigger for thinking about how I might conceptualise a body of work, and the organising principle I have developed in relation to this thinking came through an invitation to talk at a seminar on archives. At first I didn't think I had anything useful to contribute to the subject but I couldn't let the opportunity slip. These sorts of invitations are often the best way to clarify thoughts by being under pressure, by being pressed to contribute to a topic someone else has thought up, by having to take notes to give a talk, or, for that matter, by writing a paper. Sometimes the better thinking comes where there is the most resistance. 'Writing as curation', one of the tags for this conference, helped shape this idea further.

This idea of curation is not necessarily new – that we are telling stories about our work, finding stories within story – although to name it as such, helps to focus what is being suggested. A curating friend of mine said to me the other day (curator by job description), you know that curation is all about storytelling, don't you?

'You assemble set elements, you work within certain building blocks or frameworks,' she said, 'and you tell a story. It's a fine art, she added, but you can do it.'

I am on solid ground here, as far as stories go, as are all creative writers and teachers of creative writing. We know that to tell a story you need voice and language, point of view, character or a narrator, and you need something to say about something. Sometimes you need to borrow from other places too. Importantly you must prepare yourself for the cutting floor, not everything will belong to every story. Above all, you need imagination (and skill) to illuminate, enrich, transform:

How it sends forth now in ripples.

Out and out.

In growing reverberation

On and on. (Morris Lurie 2000: 8)

There will always be an audience, even if you are your own first audience. And for every listener or reader or observer, there will be as many interpretations. Every story told is unstable, dynamic and mutable. The art of storytelling can rescue you as Armistead Maupin once said in an interview: 'I think that instinct, that storytelling instinct, rescued me most of my life' (2006)). So too, I propose, can curation.

At its simplest, curation is the act of organising and maintaining a collection of works or artefacts. Etymologically the word *curation* comes from the Latin *curatus* from *cura* 'spiritual charge of souls' or *cura* meaning care, healing. Visual artists use the term when exhibiting their work – in fact we think of it as a term belonging to this field – to denote the sifting and sorting of pieces to fit some sort of hanging space, a

gallery usually, or the ordering and naming, the deciding about what to include and what to leave out, and the ‘conversation’ individual work has with other work, whether from the same artist or from different artists when brought into close proximity. It is a delicate art; as the director of the Casula Powerhouse once told me ‘when it works, it’s great’.¹

When it comes to writing and researching and being the curator of your own practice – assembling, sifting, ordering, preparing for exhibition and/or publication – the challenge is to get a bird’s-eye-view, to think of your work over time as a whole, to find story threads embedded naturally in the work, even when individual projects seem distinct and unrelated at first glance, in order to allow the essential qualities of the work to come slowly into focus, to resonate. Just like writing any new individual piece of work, the step you take in daring to conceive of the work as a whole *allows* it to *become* a whole. (Think of when you first dared to call that collection of loose bits of paper and ill-arranged thoughts ‘a book’. You take control. You centre the work on one clear idea, one axis. You give yourself agency in the naming.) If we are able to think of our writing and researching *as curation* we will subject each newly written word in the future to our tuned-in curatorial – our storytelling – eye.

In my own practice I am doing this, but back to front. Having been asked to contribute to a seminar on archives and jumping at the opportunity even though I didn’t know what it was I was going to offer – wondering what I had to say about archives that might be useful because I had never considered the topic before per se – I began to think more laterally about what it was I was attempting to do in my writing and research. I asked myself how could I thread together seemingly unconnected pieces of work and interest in order for them to become something bigger, something more. And if I did think of my work as a whole, what sort of whole would it be; what would it look like, how would I describe it, and where would it lead me to next? Could I send it forth with some of Lurie’s suggested *in growing reverberation*?

1. Archive as ‘first place’

If we think of what we usually mean when we talk about the archive, we probably think of a repository of sorts, drawers and cupboards of found papers, filing cabinets of letters and correspondence, newspaper reports and transcripts in libraries, and objects thought to be collectable and accessible, for view in a public place. The traditional definition of an archive housing memorabilia and collectibles of the past, draws its value in most senses from the ‘public needing to know’. This standard view is what art curator Okwui Enwezor calls ‘an inert repository of historical artifacts’ as apposed to the archive as ‘an active, regulatory discursive system’ (2008: 11).

The word *archive* comes from the Latin *archivum* and the Greek *ta arkheia* meaning ‘public record’, *arkheion* meaning town hall, *arkhe* or government. Literally, the word *archive* means beginning, origin, or ‘first place’. For me, this literal derivation is a more useful starting point, for it takes me out of the obvious public domain (in particular, the fact of others determining what constitutes ‘history’) and into a more organic, intimate space made up of different topographies, play and shared visceral experiences, of the kind Enwezor identifies.

In particular, ‘first place’ takes me back to Brisbane, as it does the writer David Malouf, who, like me, grew up in the capital of Queensland. Malouf says Brisbane is the only place he knows ‘from the inside, from my body outwards’ (1985: 3). Malouf thinks of place as an example of how we might ‘begin to speak accurately of where and what we are [...] how the elements of a place and our inner lives cross and illuminate one another, how we interpret space, and in doing so make our first maps of reality’ (1985: 3). The important point here is that this sense of place outlines for the writer ‘the contours of their sensibility’: that is, a view of their inner life, the thinking and meditation, orientation and voice necessary to compose (1985: 10). Malouf argues in doing this, his body becomes an archive of visceral and sensory memory, stored over a lifetime.

He begins this mapping in the most obvious of ways, with topography.

Like him, having grown up in Brisbane also, I have always been interested in topography. How could I not? Brisbane is a place of outdoors, a physical place, a place of hills and more and more hills. Vistas too. How could I forget doing a handbrake hill-start for my driver’s-licence test on a 30 per cent slope in Paddington, on one of Brisbane’s steepest hills? It is not just a way of looking, rather a way of feeling – the feeling of falling, the ache of the Achilles heel when climbing upwards in thongs (when I had to get out of the car to change drivers), the always-sweating skin, and that sharp painful intake of breath as you gasp for some heat-heavy air.

If we think of this approach to archival practice and ‘first place’ (in the way I am suggesting) as ‘writing topography’ – from the Greek *topographia*, *topos* meaning ‘place’ and *graphia* meaning writing – we can think of it as a way of mapping the self, mapping story, mapping the body and sensibilities. In Malouf’s terms this is how we might ‘trace back to topography of the place and the physical conditions it imposes on the body, to ways of seeing it imposes on the eye, and at some less conscious level, to embodiments of mind and psyche that belong to the first experience and first mapping’ (1985: 10).

Topography is the study of surfaces and features, the demonstration or showing of the relationships among or between its components. The critical thing here is the idea of *relationships between* the different features, ornamentations, snags and disruptions, both as encounter and response. It is the same way we experience the world, how we read and write also, as John Berger famously argued:

The relationship between what we see and what we know is never settled [...] Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are [...] We never look at just one thing, we are always looking at the relation between things and ourselves (1972: 7, 9).

Continually holding things in a circle.

This is the case not just at the time of experiencing it but also at the time of recall (or re-reading) and point of intervention and/or reinvention (depending on our response). This is what writers do. It is not just about locating, naming, acknowledging and

theorising these traces (the residual, fragmentary, the unstable), it is what we make of it, how we create a body of work by working within the limits and possibilities of what has come before. Susan Hiller refers to this practice as ‘*working through*’ (adapting this method from one of Freud’s concepts when she was making work for an installation in the Freud Museum in London in 1994). It is a way of locating creative energy and heat, *thinking through* contradictions, slips, opacity to locate the spark for new thinking in order to ‘to finish the piece of work that had begun long ago in my mind and which I thought might go on forever’ (2006: 41).

For me, thinking about ‘first place’, my Brisbane of younger years – those valleys and vistas I was so partial to – any ‘working through’ takes me back to the nascent, tentative and raw. Buried deep in my notebooks is a ‘found-again’ poem entitled ‘A game: from puzzles of childhood’. Reading this poem afresh slips me again into its topography, a physical as well as psychic space, to reliving the two worlds that had to be inhabited ‘to keep parents soulhappy’:

1966 and she points your face up the road the air dripheavy with heat and
flowerscent and she leaves you to find your very own way milelong to that
place for conversions she says on your very first day

you’d not been to school before

[...] for you know something is wrong there’s a
difference and you start to play a game one you never knew existed you
you don’t know how to name and nobody’s told you the rules so you flounder
as you make it all up [...] (Rendle-Short 1995: 51).

Absorbing the experience of this poem as well as its place in the body of my work allows me to revisit that memory of being a primary school girl again, reinstates confidence in my material ‘from the inside, from my body outwards’, prepares the ground once more for the making of new work as part of my own ‘active, regulatory discursive system’. It also amplifies how much I have grown and developed. Reliving the language and poetics of the poem is a way of locating that original first voice, the particular quality of resistance I enjoyed writing with at that time, as I still do; and now too, the reading of that reading of this text as I write it out again to recall ‘first voice’, echoing something Alison Bartlett once said of reading: ‘The body who touches me and against whom I rest my page has now become my text’ (1998: 96).

2. Archive as residue

My second approach to archival practice as a suggested form of *curatus* is that of archive-as-residue as it relates to writing the father and uneasy relations – and here I am thinking of the partial and fragmentary, the trace that remains of what once was, and what to make of it in new compositions. Again, adopting Freud’s method of ‘working through’ as Susan Hiller did (working through resistances as a process of remembering and repeating – and remembering and repeating, and so on) I have

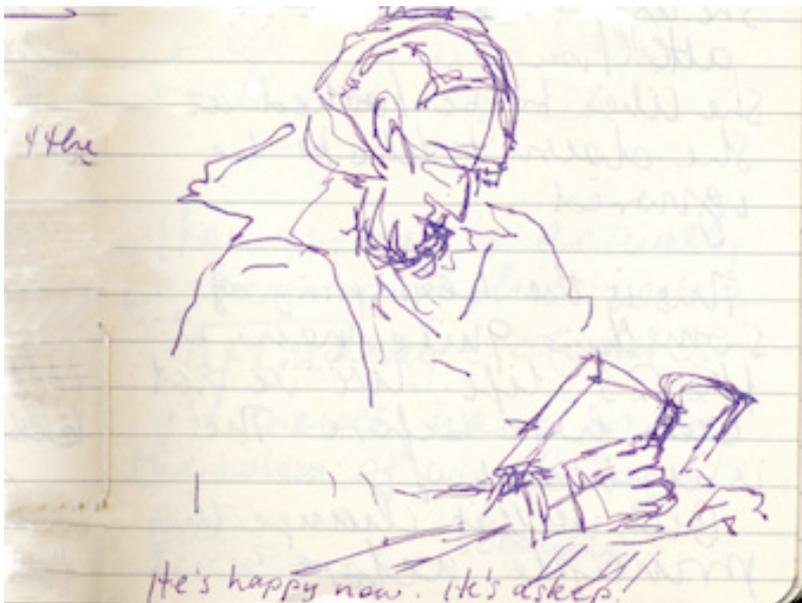
called my particular ‘working through’, loosely: ‘not having conversations with my father’. As with the first approach, it is critical to be open to both limitations and possibilities – to enjoy being ‘condensed and constrained’ – but not fixed or fixated (which is a different thing altogether) (Hiller 2006: 41).

I begin with a photograph I took when I was a teenager – an image I come back to again and again, reading and reading its language – of my father typing on the verandah at home long ago, his typewriter balanced precariously on his knee.



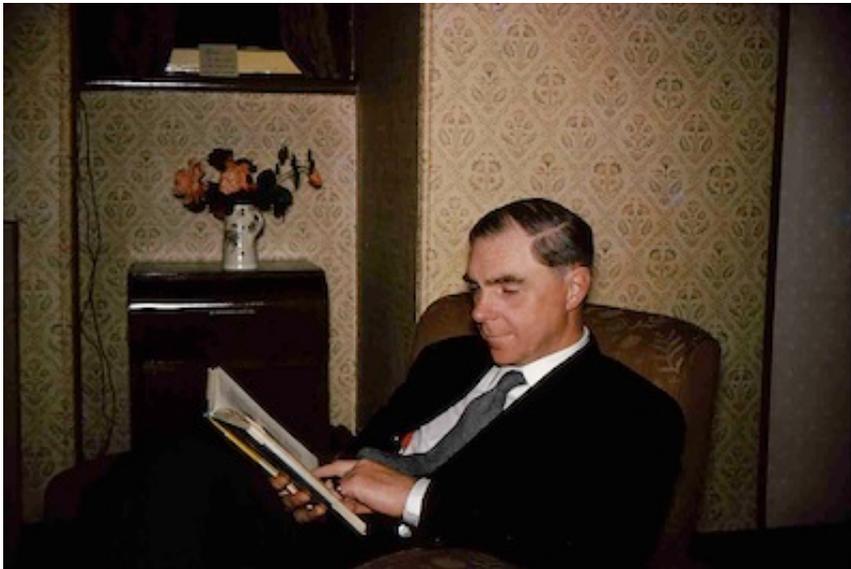
I recall the sound of writing and thinking – two fingers pressing the keys against paper, the push-and-click of the carriage at the end of each line; I remember the warmth of the room and the uncomfortable feel of the wool carpet under my toes; and I smell his particular father-smell of soap and dandruff, the smell of concentration and exclusion. I would have made sure that he didn’t know I was there.

More than 30 years later I draw a picture of my father in my notebook, and write – ‘He’s happy now. He’s asleep.’



Reading in his chair, it had been a long day. His wife, my mother, was dying. I didn't know what to say to him, there was nothing to say. He only knew how to relate to his children through absence, through silence. I decided then I didn't like my father, I didn't like him at all.

Much later still, a photograph of my father turns up in my inbox. H sent it to me. My father reading. And look, he is sitting the other way around in his chair. My sister and I date this photograph back to 1958 or 1959, before we were both born. It was definitely taken in England – you can tell that by the wallpaper (the fact that there is wallpaper) and its yellowing character, and the furniture holding a vase of orange roses from the garden. His hair is too black to be Australian, his face too smooth and unlined. His tiny smile gives away a feeling of satisfaction; he does look proud. Could it have been taken at the point of his decision to leave England and his family of origin for good – his mother and sister – to migrate to Brisbane, a place he knew only as a speck on a map, but a speck nonetheless full of unresolved desire?



It is my father all right, but before I was there; I was not known, neither of us was. Together H and I trace lines of thinking crisscrossing over and back across his body, such a familiar shape and design, studying the topography of this body we know so well, punctuating each other's response with our own call – echo and response in a self-reflexive way as if one voice (in the way only sisters can sing, that obsessive, compulsive way that they have with each other). We move quickly from wrist to temple to little finger to corner of his mouth to inclination of the hand to texture of the skin wanting to gobble him up with our thinking in order to make sense of what it is we are looking at, responding to what Roland Barthes' *shooting out like an arrow, and piercing* (2000: 26). Our conversation via text messages and email across two hemispheres and 17000 kilometres goes something like this:

H = It is a very lovely picture of Dad...for me the *punctum* is the small piece of white in the sleeve that is the handkerchief...mmmm...I'm not so sure...it is rather something about the inclination of the hand

F = For me it's perhaps the way he holds his hands, the single forefinger of his left hand and the three fingers on his right. He's cradled books in his hands like this for years

H = no...I think it is the way the little finger is curled around the ring...

F = and perhaps the tiny tiny smile, that tiny lift of the corner of his mouth

H = yes, the smile and the small creases by the eye.

'From a real body, which was there,' writes Barthes, 'proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here [...] A sort of umbilical cord links the body of the photographed thing to my gaze: light, though impalpable, is here a carnal medium.' (2000: 81).

A sort of umbilical chord.

A carnal medium.

Things in a circle around itself. – to recall Berger (1972: 7, 9)

Outcomes of this research are still embryonic. As I write, I am conceiving of the collaborative work I am making with H with the title 'What do you want of me?' to be shown in the exhibition *Non* as part of the NonfictioNow Conference in Melbourne in November 2012 (Rendle-Short 2012).

3. Archive as experience

I think of the notebooks where this material of text and image came from as an archive, a cupboard full of journals and notebooks spanning more than 25 years of writing, as 'permanent memory-traces', to use a Freudian term (1925: 208). In any case, it is some sort of record of the mark of writing, as well as being my approach to writing as an archival practice. I cannot throw them away. Of course being in the possession of notebooks and traces written on paper and in different inks and different hands over time is unremarkable. After all, I am writer, and like many writers, having a notepad with me at all times is a natural part of my writing practice; it is part of the 'toolkit' of writing. But like any archive it is residual, fragmentary, and unstable. These notes are partial, cursory and incomplete, traces of what I have thought, what I was thinking at the time of writing, what I was making up: constructions and fictions, notations and speculations.

Another way of tapping into 'permanent memory-traces' is through oral histories. It is an established method of gathering information about individuals, families, important events, or everyday life, and like the archive of notes, these histories are residual, fragmentary, and unstable.

An experiment I am involved in at the moment is a project on the history of the pineapple told through recollections from women who worked at the Northgate Cannery in Brisbane. The aim of this project is to record and document the stories and experiences of former cannery workers in order to supplement and contextualise a wider history of the pineapple in Queensland. Importantly, *Cannery Tales*, as the

project is called, concentrates on the sensory and visceral experiences of working in a cannery and with pineapples.²

Cannery Tales is a research project that returns to ‘first place’, locating the experience of place in the body of others. Here, working with material that comes from something that looks like a traditional archive on the surface – the oral histories of cannery women – but thinking of the material in playful ways, generates a lateral view about what might be found, what is left out; what remains secret and unsaid. It allows for the makings of some sort of counter-archive, an expression of voice where traditionally there has been silence. It gives a private view, of the visceral and the sensory experience of being a canner on the conveyor belt. And in making work (or art) out of these histories, it might be possible to do what Hiller did: ‘carve out a space in which something else is happening, to make some kind of intervention’ (2006: 45).

Carving out



Some of the knives the ‘Pineapple Girls’ showed us that first day of interviews from their private collection of family memorabilia had been sharpened so many times over the years on the cannery floor the blades were no bigger than the smallest finger. These pineapple knives were lethal. One cannery worker talked about how if the girls on the conveyor belts weren’t careful, these knives would cut up their hands, and even if they were careful too. Pineapple juice seeped into the cuts, she said, excoriated the skin, and caused multiple infections. Rubber gloves were poor protection. Pineapple rashes were soothed with pink calamine lotion.

The knives themselves and photographs of these knives, as well as the stories of toil and the passage of work in these workingwomen’s lives, re-enact their histories into a shared encounter. It forces us to think through another person’s experiences without overlaying the encounter with our own assumptions and experience. Even so, when I saw the set of knives one Pineapple Girl laid out harmlessly enough on the kitchen table for display, I remembered my own sisters’ poor excoriated hands – for they too

had worked on the factory floor at Northgate as casual workers over summer during university. These knives brought back their stories of ‘pineapple hair’ when they stank out the train coming home, tales of hosing down plastic aprons, about how they never knew from one shift to the next whether there would be a place for them the next day or not, and the Scary Supervisor who shouted at them because they were too slow for the conveyor belt. Some unlucky canners, they said, lost their fingers because of the sharpness of the blades. University students, as casual workers, were the lucky ones, they could come and go as they pleased; work like this would always be short term.

Telling stories. Growing reverberation on and on.

This Cannery Tales research is in its early stages. I can only guess at what some of the outcomes might be. But what better catalyst is there to excite the imagination (possibilities and limits) than the pineapple: experience as archive. As Wallace Stevens, the great modernist American poet, once wrote about this peculiar fruit in his poem ‘Someone puts a pineapple together:’

[...] the sum of its complications, seen

And unseen (1947: 35)³

This idea of writing as *curatus* as a form of practice is still evolving for this writer. Invitations and encounters, and ‘thinking through’ – *working through* – enable a way of articulating practice and giving expression to a process that is organic, unformed and oftentimes messy. The key is to welcome rupture, to invite disruption into a practice because then there is a chance to respond to what emerges in living, imaginative and generative ways; allow the work to ‘send forth’ in ripples, to hark back to Morris Lurie, ‘out and out / in growing reverberation / on and on’ (2000: 8).

Email correspondence with permission. All images by the author, except the last photograph, ‘Father reading’, photographer unknown.

Endnotes

1. Correspondence with Con Gouriotis, Director of the Casual Powerhouse Arts Centre, Sydney (Rendle-Short 1999–2000: 15).
2. Cannery Tales is a joint project with Dr Marion Stell, Project Coordinator, School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, University of Queensland.
3. See an evocation of the pineapple in the *Queensland historical atlas* (Rendle-Short 2010).

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