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### Writing and reading queerly: Foucault's aesthetics of existence and queer self-making

#### Abstract:

Michel Foucault advocated an ongoing assembly and disassembly of subjectivity that constituted a kind of self-bricolage; a making and re-making of subjectivity that he saw as an aesthetic struggle towards an artistic ideal. Foucault described this process as an *ethics of the self*. The purpose of this transformative self-bricolage is to make philosophy a 'way of life'. 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. This article explores the ways that writing informed by Queer Theory can be used as a technique in a Foucauldian ethics of the self, especially within the context of the teacher-student relationship in the discipline of creative writing. It further argues that creative 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. Furthermore, the paper discusses the way that queer readings of literary texts can also be part of an ethics of the self or queer self-making.

#### Biographical note:

Dr Dallas J Baker is an academic in the School of Arts and Communication at University of Southern Queensland. His study and research intersect with a number of disciplines: creative writing, publishing, media and cultural studies. Dallas is also a writer with creative work published in a number of journals and anthologies. His current research interests are memoir and memory, scriptwriting, publishing and 'self-making' in cultural practices such as creative writing, reading and popular music consumption.

#### Keywords:

Creative writing – Queer writing – Ethics of the self – Foucault – Self-making

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

## Introduction

Michel Foucault argues that who one is emerges out of the problems with which one struggles. He 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 (1997). Foucault also describes this process as an ethics of the self (1986). 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 (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 1997, see also Thompson 2003: 123).

It could be said that creative works emerge from this struggle as well. In fact, 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, so called, ‘self transformation’. 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, creative writing can be seen as an appropriate site for interventions in subjectivity and for explorations of how specific philosophies or theories might be applied as a way of life.

One of the principal examples Foucault (1997) gives of a technique used in such an ethics of the self – implemented to produce a desired or altered/transformed subject – is reflective writing. This type of 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 are a practice involved in the production and maintenance of the self. As Faust (1988) argues, 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. This is a direct reversal of the dominant model of the writer whose ‘inherent genius’ produces creative texts that are a direct reflection of that writer’s identity (Weisberg 1993). In this Foucauldian 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).

David Adair (2002) argues that Queer Theory developed, in part, as a Foucauldian-influenced practice of self-formation; an aesthetico-ethical practice that made use of

reading and writing. Given this, a clear argument can be made that creative writing, as distinct from reflective or critical writing, can be used as a technique in a Foucauldian ethics of the self (or self-bricolage) when it is informed by Queer Theory. Furthermore, creative writing as a practice can be an 'ethical intervention' into subjectivity and used to explore how philosophy, in this case Queer Theory, can be applied as a way of life in which new forms of subjectivity are investigated and produced.

### **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 sees freedom as a prerequisite for the practice of ethics and sees 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 conceived as perpetually reforming itself, capitalising on its own mutability and discursiveness. This is a subjectivity particular to individual persons that unfolds or is constituted differently depending on the locations, practices and specialised techniques at play. In Foucault's model, an individual's ethics are not formed solely by conforming to an external moral or social code. Instead, a person's ethics are formed around the subject's relationship with him- or herself with conscious reference to selected external codes (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), which is a practice acquired in specific (sometimes institutional) settings and is often mediated through texts (Adair 2002). 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). Importantly, the motivation for engaging in this kind of critique does not need to be an external force or code but can be from an internal desire to derive satisfaction and

pleasure from the process. In this sense, critique as part of an ethics of the self has similar motivations to other arts.

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 the contribution to our own being – especially with regards to its constitution – of others. Kevin Thompson 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 craftsperson shaping new forms of existence, always comparing what we’ve made for its fidelity to the project and activity of self-formation itself (2003: 125).

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. In creative writing, his socially embedded practice occurs within the context of the discipline and within a teacher-student relationship. 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). The critical and creative practice that Foucault sees as the principal field of this ethical activity, this aesthetics of existence, is reflective writing.

### **Queer writing: an exemplar of an aesthetics of existence**

Creative writing as a discipline 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, as 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.

Queer Theory has a similar genealogy to Poststructuralism (Jagose 1996) and employs a number of Poststructuralism’s key ideas (Spargo 1999). As Spargo 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' (1999: 41). Having said that, Queer Theory cannot be reduced to its intellectual components. It is an aesthetic-ethical practice that makes and contests truth statements for the purpose of experiencing oneself and the world anew (Adair 2002). Queer Theory's principal focus is the denaturalisation of truth statements in the form of categories/norms (Sullivan 2003, Jagose 1996, de Lauretis 1991) and abrading the borders between binary terms like male/female, natural/unnatural, normal/abnormal, heterosexual/homosexual, white/black and 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 behaviors (Butler 1993). They are also performative (Butler 1993), in that they have no ontological basis and are constituted, and come to mean something, to be intelligible, only in the doing

Queer Writing, then, is a writing practice that foregrounds the performativity of subjectivities (especially in regard to genders and sexualities) and that produces texts which also foreground the performative whilst simultaneously denaturalizing categories or norms and abrading the borders between binary terms. Significantly, 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).

I have previously argued that Queer Writing also displaces the entrenched and essentialist model of creative genius whilst simultaneously 'disrupting 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 (Baker 2011). Thus, 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' (Baker 2011: 8).

As mentioned in the introduction above, Foucault uses reflective writing as an exemplar of a *technique of the self* implemented to produce a desired non-normative

subjectivity (1997). Foucault 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 (1986). This self-analysis, or critique, aligns the self with one's ethics that are in turn formed in response to, and 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 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. 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 (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.

According to Foucault, 'there is no sovereign, founding subject, a universal form of subject to be found everywhere' 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' (1996: 452). There is no 'authentic, foundational or necessary self waiting to be discovered and liberated' (Ambrosio 2008: 253). 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). Furthermore, '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' (Foucault ctd in Bailey 2005: 122). 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. As I have written elsewhere, 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 writes 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) (emphasis original). Subjectivity, like creative writing, is a practice that is dynamic, reflective and creative. Butler further argues that an experience of an alternate or different 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 non-normative subjectivity in discourse or a creative text can, to use Butler's terminology, 'undo' one's personhood and facilitate the emergence of a new subjectivity. Foucault described a similar process by which new subjectivities formed through the 'appropriation, the unification, of a fragmentary and selected already said' (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 John Ambrosio, 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 (2008: 255, emphasis original)

This exposure to new subjectivities or discourses (the ‘already said’) can occur at the point of reception (or reading) but also, significantly, in the performative moment of production or writing. 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*.

It can be extrapolated, then, that a ‘queering of the self’ – facilitated by exposure to Queer Theory within a teacher-student relationship in the creative writing discipline as part of a conscious aesthetics of existence – can enrich and inform writing practice and research; in effect bringing them into operation as a mutually interconnected self-bricolage. This queering of the self/subjectivity is in effect a *denaturalising* of the self – a decoupling of identity from notions of the natural. In other words, 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. 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 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 (ctd in Martin et al. 1988: 28).

A queered aesthetics of existence can also provide writer-researchers with tools to explore notions of sexual and gender difference in ways that produce more than a theoretical understanding. As Foucault argues in his ground-breaking text *The History of Sexuality*, any strategy aimed at resisting the discursive mechanisms of power that are engaged in the deployment of a narrowly defined sexuality, including mechanisms of repression, must involve a transgression of laws, a dismantling of prohibition and an ‘irruption of speech’ (1978: 5). Therefore, Foucault writes, ‘one cannot hope to obtain the desired results simply from ... a theoretical discourse, however rigorously

pursued' (1978: 5). Thus, it is apparent that using non-theoretical ways of exploring and communicating the knowledges produced in writing research and practice are appropriate and, furthermore, a means of equipping queer writer-researchers with 'technologies of the self' (Ramos 1994: 21) that resist heteronormative discourse and normative models of subjectivity.

### **Self-making through reading queerly**

The experience of reading literary texts through the prism of queer theory can also be understood as a component in an ethics of the self that can inform (re)constitutions of subjectivity as part of an ongoing queer self-making (or self-bricolage). The act of reading produces a range of affective experiences, which can be understood as non-theoretical ways of understanding the topic at hand. Literary texts disseminate knowledge as narratives or stories which readers directly experience, thus providing an alternative (and affective) way of coming to understand the themes or issues investigated in those narratives.

Affective experiences are not merely ways of experiencing but also ways of knowing. To put it simply, affect is a form of knowledge. Brad Haseman and Daniel Mafe suggest that the acknowledgement of affect as knowledge 'begins to shift what we consider knowledge to actually be and has epistemological implications for each study and the field. Affect is now actively brought into the equation and with it the indeterminacy of interpretation' (2009: 220). Affect is both a kind of experience and a kind of knowledge; it is also performative. In the moment of experience, the reader of a literary text simultaneously understands or knows something about that experience. Accommodating that affect is both an experience and a kind of performative knowledge radically changes the way that we think about how we come to understand and know (or how we perform research). As Grayson Cooke has articulated about the experience of cinema or theatre:

If research is the production of 'new knowledge,' and if we can accept that knowledge may be able to be figured as affect... as something that happens in the mind of an audience member, then it is not 'contained' in the work, it occurs only in performance, and the 'research' does not precede the work's public performance or dissemination but happens concurrently with it. Research in this sense is a process, a doing, an event, it is not something static that can be contained as such (2011: 60).

Likewise, affective knowledge acquired through reading is something that happens in the mind (and body) of the reader. It is not contained in the literary work but occurs in the act of reading and, perhaps, in later reflection. The 'research' in this context does not precede the act of reading but happens simultaneously with it. Knowing through reading, then, is 'a process, a doing, an event, it is not something static' (Cooke 2011: 60), much as the self or subjectivity is a doing, an event, a process.

It is not difficult to conceive that these twin processes, that of knowing and that of subject or identity formation, might mutually inform each other in the act of reading; that in the act of reading they might both be transformed by the affective states triggered or produced by the narrative. Certainly, there is a wealth of anecdotal



evidence (mostly found in queer coming-of-age stories) that a proto-queer's formative years, the time when they are becoming aware of their own burgeoning sexual and gender difference, is one in which they seek out (and sometimes find) reflections of that difference in literary texts. Take as examples James Baldwin's *Giovanni's Room* (1956) and Edmund White's *A Boy's Own Story* (1982), which were perhaps the first 'coming out' novels to become a source of solace and knowledge for young gay men (Woods 1998). Texts like these provide a means for reflection on sexual difference in a way that has meant, to this day, many of the reference points for how Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and Queer (LGBTIQ) individuals understand their own sexuality and gender are taken from texts they encountered when young.

These textual or discursive representations of non-heteronormative subjectivities can be seen to inform queer subject-formation among globally dispersed LGBTIQ communities who read Queer Writing. As we have seen, both Foucault (1997) and Butler (2004) have indicated that exposure to non-normative subjectivities and genders within such cultural artefacts can facilitate the emergence of new subjectivities. These emergent queer subjectivities constitute acts of power or 'reverse discourse' (Foucault 1988: 50–1) that resist heteronormative discourses around gender and sexuality. Thus, discursive representations of the queer (queer characters in literature) can inform and influence queer subject-formation among queer individuals in a globalized LGBTIQ community. In this sense, self-bricolage through the reading experience is a Foucauldian practice of the self (Rabinow 1997) that, as an aspect of the queer cultural environment as manifest in literary texts and surrounding acts and events, informs and alters the way subjects actively constitute themselves. In other words, reading queer writing within the student-teacher relationship provides *models* of gender and sexual subjectivity that strongly influence the on-going self-formation of queer subjectivities within that context. These models are deployed or supplied by the teacher for the student, and often vice-versa.

This exposure to new subjectivities or discourses (Foucault's 'already said') occurs at the point of reading which can be conceived as a performative moment of *transtextual* connection between discursive subjectivities and the embodied subjectivity of the reader. This performative *transtextual* moment does not end with the final scenes of the narrative but rather continues as the subject/viewer recalls the text and reflects on its narrative and on their own reading experience. Thus, the interconnected practices of reading, reflection and narrative-inspired experimentation 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 self-making. Therefore, the moment of reading, and later reflection on, 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.

This further highlights the significance of text to the constitution of the self, and even more so the importance of Queer Writing and reading queerly to LGBTIQ subjectivity. Queer writing and the practice of reading queerly are generative of queer subjectivities. Without queer writing and the practice of queer reading, LGBTIQ

subjectivities must always emerge in response to, or in reaction against, heteronormative writing and an uncritical or normative reading. Although queer subjectivities have successfully emerged in environments practically devoid of queer writing and among individuals unaware of the notion of queer readings, it is not an ideal situation given that heteronormative writing is often hostile to the very notion of queer identity. At this point, it is prudent to undertake a discussion of what it means to read queerly and why it is necessary.

### *Queer reading*

One of the ways that Queer Theory has informed LGBTIQ creative writing and writing research is by bringing into discussion the notion of queer readings of canonical and other texts (Klages 2006). This has occurred by the inclusion of Queer Theory in the compliment of theories used to interpret or analyse texts, especially in the context of ‘resistant readings’, or ‘reading against the grain’ (Klages 2006, Fetterley 1977). This is significant for a number of reasons. It is generally acknowledged that, in dominant or heteronormative discourse, the queer is subsumed and subjugated to heteronormative sexual hierarchies, marginalised, demonised and marked as abject (Hawke and Offord 2011, Hanson 1991, Case 1997). The readings or understandings available to queer people (and Queer Theorists) of such discriminatory discourses and texts are limited.

The question of representation becomes significant when depictions of the queer in dominant discourse meet with a violent or unpleasant end at the close of the narrative in which they appear. Sadly, this is not an uncommon way for texts featuring queer characters to end. In an earlier work I have argued that this moment of narrative closure is the point at which the queer is constrained, punished or even killed (Baker 2010). The queer character – as a figure of discourse who disturbs and denies culturally prescribed norms – is one whose story often culminates with death or exclusion. The final scene of a heteronormative narrative is the moment at which the queer character, ‘who has threatened to destabilise the narrative order, is sadistically dealt with, excised, exterminated’ (Baker 2010: 85). Discussing monstrous depictions of the queer in fairy tales, I have written that:

Such extermination, entrapment or enfoldment at the moment of closure limits the reading possibilities for non-heteronormative individuals and encourages a kind of masochistic reading for queer-identified readers who are constructed as alike the monster (the Monstrous Queer) of the narrative. The execution or punishment of the Monstrous Queer routinely precedes a heterosexual union or reunion (often in the form of a wedding) and thus this punishment can be seen as a necessary precursor to heterosexual fulfilment. To put it bluntly, the death of the Monstrous Queer is precisely what constitutes a heteronormative happy ending. This moment of closure then, becomes a site of contestation between cultural norms and those outside them; those whose sexuality, gender, or physicality resist conformity to such norms (2010: 86).

As a queer reader, one must either identify with such representations fully – and experience the disappointment of the queer character being subjugated, marginalised and demonised and thereby experiencing, vicariously, their own subjugation – or one

can resist these privileged readings. Although resistance is certainly not futile, it is difficult, especially given Queer individuals' affinity with the queer figure of these discourses which, more often than not, is constructed as abject and/or somehow monstrous.

It seems too obvious to point out that many LGBTIQ readers sympathise with the abject queer character, even when they are constructed as monstrous, criminal or murderous (Case 1997). This is because LGBTIQ readers understand the process of subjugation and demonization (which is part of presumed and compulsory heterosexuality) only too well. The process of marginalisation and demonization, of constructing the queer as abject and the abject as queer, is often the very (familiar) thing that draws the queer reader into the narrative. Queer readers, as cultural outsiders, often revel in the rebellious and deviant characteristics of dominant representations of queer discursive figures within literary texts (Case 1997). The same reader might simultaneously empathise with the abject and have a wish to see the abject destroyed. The widespread affection felt for Doctor Frankfurter, the cross-dressing abject queer at the centre of the musical *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1975), is a case in point. It is hard to imagine a more widely admired fictional queer in any discourse. This admiration is of course problematic, given that Frankfurter is a grave robber, murderer and cannibal.

It is practically impossible for queer readers to ignore the profusion of negative representations of the abject queer, who is their own reflection, a metonym for their whole world. The result is that these negative discourses – that attempt to define and delineate what is proper and improper behaviour, what is proper and improper sex, what is a proper identity or subjectivity – are invited into queer cultural (and mind) spaces. By embracing these narratives of subjugation and marginalisation, queer people are embracing a homophobic discourse. As a result, queer readers have complicated and contrary relationships with many representations of the queer in literary texts – a relationship typified by equal parts of loathing and affection.

The internalisation of homophobic discourse is not, however, a *fate accompli*; especially if queer readers and writers are exposed, as many student writers are, to the notion of queer readings of texts. Queer Theory enables queer readers, and especially queer readers who are also writers, to transform – through analysis, appropriation, through critique, and through the act of *rewriting* of narratives featuring queer character – the discourse around how the queer is represented. The problem of how queer readers might deal with 'negative' representations of the queer is a point of contention. Some theorists have described the attempt to characterise texts as either negative or positive as a kind of 'moralistic politics of representation' (Hanson 1999: 5). Outside of the academy, however, how queer individuals feel about or respond to negative representations of queer characters is a very real concern that shows no signs of going away.

A number of Queer Theorists have focused on possibilities for multiple and pleasurable readings of the monstrous or abject queer character (Halberstam 1995). To support the notion that queer readers can enjoy these characters, most theorists have avoided analysis of the moment of closure at which the monstrous queer is

destroyed, restrained or exiled. Such analyses, by failing to significantly address this key narrative element, fail to imagine other trajectories, other possibilities, for queer characters. By highlighting the sadistic exclusion or excision of the queer character at the moment of narrative closure, it becomes clear that new trajectories, new articulations, of the queer are required if queer readers and writers are to find an unambiguous pleasure in these narrative figurations.

Queer writers have a potent way of dealing with these troublesome characters and texts. As writers, as creators of discourse, it is possible to reconstruct (or *rewrite*) these negative discourses so that they are no longer discriminatory and proscriptive but rather protean, polysemous and plural. The most powerful solution to how queer characters are depicted and how queer individuals are represented is for LGBTIQ writers to create their own queer characters, to represent themselves. In other words, it is possible for queer writers to create resistant discourses and diverse queer characters that disseminate another perspective on sexual and gender subjectivity. This brings us back to where we began, with the notion of Queer Writing as both an intervention into subjectivity, as a kind of performative research or knowing, as an act of self-making, and as a way of countering heteronormative discourse that marginalises the queer.

## Conclusion

When Foucault discussed reflective writing as a technique used in an ethics of the self – implemented to produce a desired or altered/transformed subject – he did not raise the idea that such a practice might be particularly compelling and potent for queer writers in particular. The discussion above shows however, that this is indeed the case. It is clear that a queered aesthetics of existence – a set of entwined practices including research, creative writing, queered reading of literary texts, reflection, engagement with theory and subjectivity – lead to identifiable outcomes including critical and creative artefacts exploring and expressing performative genders and sexualities but also new or emergent subjectivities. This queered aesthetics of existence can be enacted in the context of the student-teacher relationship within the discipline of creative writing.

There are certain limits to positioning subjectivity as a core element to creative practice. As I have noted elsewhere, it is crucial that the model of subjectivity used in a subjectivity-centred creative practice 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 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. These limits aside, deploying a model of subjectivity that destabilizes the notion of identity/subjectivity as unitary, fixed and somehow natural – facilitated by exposure to Queer Theory in the context of an aesthetics of existence enacted within a teacher-student relationship – can enrich and inform writing practice, research and the act of reading; in effect bringing them all into operation as a mutually interconnected Foucauldian self-bricolage, a ‘queering

of the self'. An ethics of the self, or self-bricolage through writing and reading queerly, is a practice of liberty that has the potential to inform and alter the way subjects actively constitute themselves. Furthermore, creative and critical texts or narratives arising out of a queered aesthetics of existence can act as 'models' that strongly influence and/or trigger the constitution, and ethical refinement, of queer subjectivities.

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