(Re)Scripting the Self:
Creative Writing, Effeminacy and the Art of Subjectivity

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Biographical Note
Dr. Dallas Baker is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Arts and Communication at the University of Southern Queensland. He has published dozens of scholarly articles and creative works, including a book of travel writing, *America Divine: Travels in the Hidden South* (2011), and a fantasy fiction serial, *Waycaller* (2016), under the pen name D.J. McPhee. Dallas has also published a number of short scripts, notably two in *TEXT: Journal of Writing and Writing Courses*, a peak journal in the Creative Writing discipline*.* Dallas' study and research intersect with a number of disciplines: creative writing, publishing, media and cultural studies. 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.

Abstract
This paper describes how a practice-led research methodology used to produce a creative writing artefact, a script, had a transformative impact on a number of levels: on the artefact, on the writing practice itself and on my own self-knowledge, my gender identity or subjectivity. The creative writing artefact in question is a television miniseries script entitled *The Tree*. The script and this paper explore the notion of effeminacy as a liminal masculinity of considerable discursive potency that simultaneously disrupts both masculinity and femininity. The paper also discusses how the practice-led research methodology itself facilitated the development of fresh understandings around the liminal masculinity of effeminacy and how these new understandings interacted with my own lived gender and embodied subjectivity.

Keywords
Creative writing, Self-making, effeminacy, performativity, scriptwriting

Introduction

What we know transforms us. When we write, we write from what we know. We come to know through investigation, discovery and reflection, which is research. Just as often, we come to know a thing more deeply as we write about it. Writing is its own research method, its own form of inquiry (Richardson & St Pierre 2005). Thus, writing transforms us.

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Percival, whose eyes are shielded by his round sunglasses, is
wearing a pair of loose linen trousers, a bright red short-sleeved
shirt and a red and white kerchief around his neck. With his other
hand he holds aloft a bright red oriental parasol.

As Alison and Percival make their way across an open field, we
get the impression of a grand procession.

Alison looks up at the oriental parasol a few times and then asks:

                        ALISON
            Percy, why do you like them "China" things so
            much?

                        PERCIVAL
            China things? Oh, you mean my oriental décor and
            accessories?

Alison nods.

                        PERCICAL (CONT'D)
            Well, I suppose it all started when I read about
            the Buddha philosophy. I read in this book that
            we can change our destiny, just by changing
            ourselves. When you change yourself, the whole
            world around you changes; and then, well,
            anything is possible…. That idea inspired me so
            much, and changed me. It gave me a real sense of
            hope. All my oriental things, even this here
            parasol, remind me that I can be anything I set
            my mind to be.
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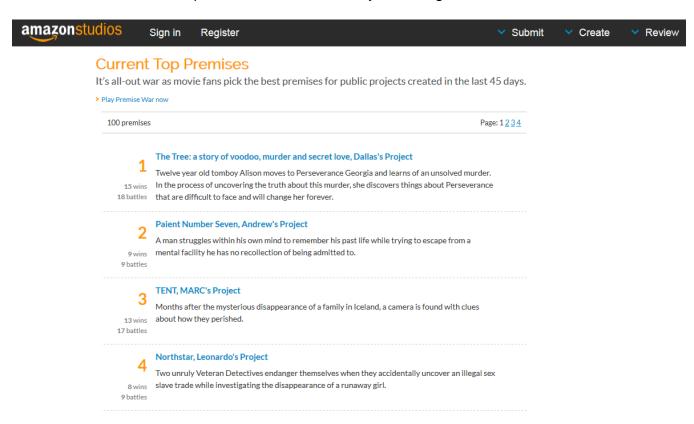
The excerpt above is from a script for a television miniseries entitled *The Tree* (Baker 2016: 78). The Tree is a Civil Rights Era coming-of-age tale set in the American South. The script was produced using a practice-led research (PLR) methodology. This methodology had a transformative impact on the artefact, on the writing practice itself and on my gender identity or subjectivity. This paper can be seen as an exegetical exercise but might be more aptly understood as mirroring the creative artefact (the script) in its exploration of a specific theme. The theme in question is the notion of effeminacy as a liminal masculinity of considerable discursive potency that simultaneously disrupts both masculinity and femininity, as they are traditionally defined. As distinct from the creative artefact, this paper discusses how the practice-led research methodology itself facilitated the development of fresh understandings around the liminal masculinity of effeminacy and how these new understandings interacted with my own lived gender and embodied subjectivity.

The Tree has not yet been produced as a TV miniseries, however episode one of the miniseries received a staged reading as part of its development. The full miniseries script was also entered in Amazon Studios' "Premise Wars" competition. While active in the competition it ranked number one out of hundreds of other scripts (see screenshot below). Amazon Studios has gone on to produce films and TV series such as *Transparent*, starring Jeffrey Tambor and *Alpha House*, starring John Goodman. *The Tree* was published in book form by LineWright in 2016.

The script and this paper were produced as research outputs of equal value and as two aspects of a single research objective. The two parts of the project are unified in that they both produce knowledge around gender and sexual difference and the ways that effeminate subjectivities are constructed. The script can be characterised as a non-traditional "performative research" output (Haseman 2006) which presents the project hypothesis (that effeminacy is a potent liminal masculinity) in narrative form.

The screenplay explores notions of subjectivity, in particular how subjectivities can be seen to be performative (Butler 1990, 1993) and produced in and through (and indeed despite) rule bound discourse (Butler 1990: 184). The script discusses these ideas in an accessible way and disseminates narrative expressions of liminal masculinity, specifically expressions of effeminacy, in the context of the rural South of the USA. Reflections on the process of writing the script are used in this paper to discuss the ways that the writing practice and attendant research acted as part of a self-writing (Foucault 1997) or *self-bricolage* (Rabinow 1994).

Liminal Genders and Queer Self-Making
The miniseries script *The Tree* examines, among other things, representations of non-normative or liminal genders as discursive artefacts that trigger an ongoing queer rewriting of the self. That is, the practice component of this project both explores and demonstrates how the gendered subject and subjectivity are constructed in certain discourse and writing and how representations of normative masculinities might be written differently (or *re*written). An emphasis is placed on those constructions of gender that are characterised by an aspect of gender variance or *gender insubordination* (Butler 1993b) and/or sexual difference. As noted, the project specifically focuses on the liminal masculinity of effeminacy.

The representation (or writing) of sexual and/or gender difference is significant because sexuality and gender are often perceived as the most significant "norms" or components of subjectivity (Butler 1991). It could be said that gender and sexual norms, because they are often subject to normalizing discourses and oppressive mechanisms of power, offer the most potential for textual and discursive resistance (Baker 2010). In particular, I would argue that the way writers construct their own subjectivity influences how they understand (or read) liminal genders and how they then construct (or radically deconstruct) those genders in the practice of writing. Furthermore, I would add that a reverse process, whereby cultural artefacts and the practice of writing itself act as triggers for a rewriting of the self, are also at play. These deconstructions and reconstructions of subjectivity can have considerable potency, particularly in relation to culturally or textually inspired queer self-making. Judith Butler has argued that exposure to alternative and non-normative forms of gender and sexual subjectivity can "undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one" (2004: 1). In other words, an experience of a text or discourse featuring a non-normative gender or sexual subjectivity can—to use Butler's terminology—"undo" one's personhood and facilitate the emergence of a new subjectivity. I would suggest that the experience of producing a text, of researching and writing about non-normative genders, also triggers this undoing of personhood. Butler's notion of the "undo" echoes earlier ideas from Michel Foucault, who described a process by which new subjectivities are formed through the "appropriation, the unification, of a fragmentary and selected already said" in a kind of *self-bricolage* (cited in Rabinow 1997: 209). The "already said" that Foucault is referring to here is the discourse currently in circulation to which the subject can be or has been exposed. It is this "already said" from which writers write. Thus, the discursive subjectivities at the heart of queer cultural artefacts (novels, poems, scripts) can be seen as inspiring and facilitating the ongoing *remaking* of the queer subjectivities of actual individuals. This queer remaking occurs at the moment of production (writing) as much as at the moment of consumption (reading).

In this project, engagement with the notion of self-making in the act of producing an original text (script) led to a new personal understanding of the relations between subjectivity, gender and sexuality and the practice of writing itself. In addition, the completed script demonstrates how liminal genders can be *re*written in a way that foregrounds alternative notions of sexual and gender subjectivity and that facilitates more open narrative trajectories. These rewritings provide opportunities for ongoing engagement in the act of queer self-making or becoming. More to the point, the script replicates and disseminates the liminal gender of effeminacy and, as a kind of template, model or discursive code, encourages further self-remaking by others.

Another Southern Rebellion: Gender Insubordination in the American South

At this juncture, an outline of the plot of the creative artefact (miniseries script) is prudent. *The Tree* is set in the rural South of the USA, against the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement. At the centre of the narrative is a strong friendship that forms between two unlikely characters. One is a twelve year old tomboy, Alison Mayflower, recently orphaned by the death of her father. The other, Percival Huckstep, is a man whose eccentricity puts him at odds with the inhabitants of his small hometown, Perseverance, Georgia. After her father's death, Alison is sent to live with her only surviving relative, Verna Hobb, her maternal grandmother. Alison discovers, much to her surprise, that her grandmother, and her mother who died in childbirth, are African-American. This turns Alison's world upside down. One minute she is a Southern white girl and the next she is a pale skinned "coloured" girl and living on the "black side of the tracks" in a deeply conservative Georgian town.

Percival, though a grown man, is also an orphan of sorts, having been left to fend for himself, a task for which he is dramatically ill equipped, after the passing of his doting mother. Percival is a man out of time and place. He effects old style Southern gentility and has an all-consuming passion for the Orient, in particular the Far East. Percival imagines that the Orient is a paradise in which he might freely be himself. He is the town misfit, the village sissy, and has endured a lifetime of insults and mistreatment at the hands of the townspeople. He is to gender what Boo Radley of Harper Lee's (1960) *To Kill a Mockingbird* is to mental capacity. He also, much to the annoyance of those on the white side of the tracks, resists racist discourse and is conscious of his privileged position as a white man.

The tree in the title refers to a crepe myrtle that is planted over Percival's mother's grave. The crepe myrtle, because it was his mother's favourite plant, has become a symbol for Percival of his loneliness, but more so, of his yearning for friendship and family that, despite the odds, he has faith will manifest in the future. Alison, also an orphan and feeling isolated, adopts the tree as a symbol for her yearning for acceptance. It seems only natural that these two misfits, Alison and Percival, would find friendship in each other. However, they must first overcome barriers of race, age, gender and class imposed by the society in which they live and the disapproval of the townspeople, white *and* black. Much to their credit, they transcend these barriers and lay the foundations of a true friendship.

The Tree is a story about friendship against the odds, about the unlikely bonds formed between a Southern tomboy and a Southern eccentric, and the forging of an unconventional family in a time dictated by harsh convention. It speaks of a time and place not so distant in time but receding in memory, a time in which the price paid for being different was great and, conversely, the rewards for living one's life according to one's heart were even greater.

The script features a number of characters whose subjectivity, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality, are non-normative and/or fluid. As noted above, the Percival character is an "un-reconstructed sissy" (effeminate male) who is treated as an outcast. The other main character, Alison, a twelve-year-old tomboy whose subjectivity shifts in terms of her perception of both her gender difference and her race. At narrative opening, Alison believes she is white but soon discovers that she

is African-American *passing* as white. One of the secondary characters, Nate Bowman, is perceived as heterosexual at narrative beginning but this perception shifts into a more ambiguous sexual position at narrative close. In a sense, these three characters are all experiencing a transformation of themselves from one gender position to another. They are remaking themselves. For the sake of brevity, this paper will focus primarily on the ways that the liminal masculinity of effeminacy was written (or rewritten) and understood within the project and how that informed the ongoing constitution of my own queer subjectivity.

Effeminacy
Effeminacy is defined as gender inappropriate traits in a male individual that are associated with stereotypical femininity; usually concerning modes of speech, behaviour, mannerisms or style of clothing (Bergling 2001; Sinfield 1994). Basically, effeminate males are seen to be inappropriately enacting or *performing* feminine gender roles. The word "performing" is important to the definition of effeminacy, for the effeminate male is seen as "acting out" feminine behaviours or roles rather than expressing their "true" gender. Unlike masculinity and femininity, effeminacy is not seen in dominant discourse as a natural expression of biological sex or an inner identity but rather as artifice. Most often effeminacy is perceived as a staged display; as an effect of deliberate non-conformity or psychological disturbance. It is no coincidence that effeminate mannerisms are described as "affected".

Effeminacy is not only a liminal masculinity but a gender expression that attracts derision and disgust from both heterosexual and homosexual men (Bergling 2001; Sinfield 1994; Parker 1989). Heterosexual and homosexual men revile the effeminate male for different though connected reasons. To the heterosexual man, the effeminate is synonymous with the homosexual and thus an object of disgust and fear (Sinfield 1994). In heteronormative discourse there is no room for the possibility that any effeminate male might be heterosexually oriented. The reasons why homosexual men revile the effeminate male are a little more complex. One reason is the fact that many gay men see effeminacy as a negative stereotype that has historically been used to marginalise homosexuals (Bergling 2001; Sinfield 1994). Therefore, any person who behaves in an effeminate fashion is perceived as something of an embarrassment to the contemporary gay male community, which reveres the "straight-acting" man, the gay man who is indistinguishable from heterosexual men.

There is also a strong current of misogyny in the dislike of effeminacy, it is rooted in a dislike of the feminine in general (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1992). Moreover, hatred of effeminacy, what might be called effemiphobia, has its beginnings in a deep fear of gender ambiguity. Many gay men are just as socially-conditioned and normative in terms of gender as their straight male counterparts. The effeminate man troubles this (normative) sense of appropriate gender. Perhaps most significant however is that the queer effeminate male *is* distinguishable from heterosexual males. Effeminacy obliterates the sexual invisibility that the straight-acting schema produces. The effeminate male is highly visible and utterly destroys the "closet" and along with it the illusion of safety that the closet sometimes provides. Thus, the effeminate male provokes in straight-acting and/or closeted homosexual men feelings of shame, disgust and fear. In this sense, "sissyphobia" or effemiphobia is no different from homophobia.

In the Christian tradition, effeminacy is identified with evil and sin (Mahon 2004: 257). Strong arguments have been made that effeminacy or gender non-conformity is the true target of homophobic violence against males (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1994). Thus, effeminacy is positioned at the extreme limit of acceptable gender, as Alan Sinfield (1994: 4) has noted:

> In all the current preoccupation with concepts of manliness and masculinity, effeminacy is rarely addressed head-on; yet it defines, crucially, the generally acceptable limits of gender and sexual expression.

Given this, it can be said that effeminacy is designated in much socio-cultural discourse as the ultimate abject gender, an *unintelligible* gender (Butler 2004) that cannot be understood as anything other than monstrous, or a sickness. For Butler (1990), the unintelligible is that which does not cohere with the logic of compulsory/compulsive heteronormativity. It is that gender or sexuality which, because it cannot be understood within a heteronormative and naturalizing system, is perceived as somehow unreal; somehow artificial and unnatural. An unintelligible gender is any gender that is perceived as not being "naturally" attached to, or arising from, natural sex (Butler 1990). Such genders are considered a kind of ungraspable deception. As Judith Butler elucidates:

> The moment in which one's staid and usual cultural perceptions fail, when one cannot with surety read the body that one sees, is precisely the moment when one is no longer sure whether the body encountered is that of a man or a woman. The vacillation between the categories itself constitutes the experience of the body in question. When such categories come into question, the *reality* of gender is also put into crisis: it becomes unclear how to distinguish the real from the unreal. And this is the occasion in which we come to understand that what we take to be "real", what we invoke as the naturalized knowledge of gender is, in fact, a changeable and revisable reality (1990: xxiii, original emphasis).

An encounter with effeminacy, however, is not always one in which gender is impossible to ascertain. There is no sense that all effeminate males cannot be ascribed a gender. Effeminacy is not a gender which *utterly* confuses, but rather, as Butler puts it, questions both categories of gender, putting them both into crisis. Effeminacy is often perceptible as a form of masculinity, but a masculinity that is insubordinate and subversive. This kind of effeminacy is a visible and distinguishable refusal of heteronormative gender logic. It is this deliberate refusal which makes effeminacy incomprehensible and unintelligible. As such, effeminacy simultaneously disrupts notions of masculinity and femininity and is a threat to both.

Ironically, this unintelligible gender is often exposed through speech acts. The effeminate male is constructed as speaking in an overtly and exaggeratedly feminine way (Sinfield 1994; Parker 1989). A number of early psychological studies linked effeminacy (and transgender identification) with verbal aptitude (Money & Block 1971, Money & Epstein 1967), a gift for conversation as it were. An early psychological diagnostic tool—proposed for use in definitively identifying suspect effeminates—listed feminine modes of speech as a key indicator (Schatzberg et al

1975). This propensity of effeminates for conversation has been noted with regards to Oscar Wilde (Waldrep 2004; Sinfield 1994) and Truman Capote (Hill 1957), both of whom are constructed in dominant discourse as the ultimate effeminate homosexual. Capote went so far as to place conversation ahead of writing in terms of significance when he said "conversation will always come first with me" (quoted in Hill 1957).

It must be said however that this effeminate mode of speech is also simultaneously seen as not at all feminine; as a strange masquerade of femininity that is neither authentic nor natural. Indeed, it is inauthentic and unnatural, which is how effeminacy itself is defined. Thus, a circular logic dominates in which an effeminate is identified as a male individual who speaks (and behaves and dresses) effeminately. An effeminate is he who performs effeminacy. To paraphrase that famous notion of Judith Butler's (1990:25), effeminacy has no ontological status.

The Tree appropriates these discourses of the verbally-gifted effeminate and constructs one of the main characters, Percival Huckstep, as a man with a noted propensity for adjectives. This reflects my own lived experience. The creative artefact retells (and refigures) a story from my own life in which I was informed by a rather disapproving male classmate that I used words that other boys didn't use. The implication was that they were words that boys *shouldn't* use. When I begged for clarification as to which words were not appropriate for boys, my classmate replied: "Words like *cute* and *nice*, words like *pretty* and *adorable*, words like that, poofter words" (Baker 2011: 10). With this statement, my classmate had identified the verbal aptitude which marked me as effeminate, and as homosexual; all of the "queer words" he had identified were adjectives. One of the minor antagonists in the *The Tree* voices a similar thing (Baker 2016: 35), in a scene in which two men are tormenting the effeminate Percival. The scene in which this dialogue appears acts to foreground the connection in homophobic discourse between "female speech" and cultural anxiety about effeminacy (Parker 1989).

This verbal aptitude, much derided as effeminate, eventually led to my becoming a writer. My writing is largely concerned with exploring the very difference signified by this, and other, aberrant characteristics. In a sense then, my writing practice is profoundly entwined with effeminacy, in both generative and thematic ways. As a nod to the connection made in dominant discourse between verbal-aptitude or conversational skill and effeminacy, much of my writing foregrounds speech and is liberally sprinkled with adjectives. *The Tree* in particular is deliberately endowed with more than its fair share of dialogue and descriptive words.

Writing the Effeminate Subject
Germinal to this project was my own wish to explore and describe gender and sexual difference. For me, the wish to engage with difference both preceded and inspired the intention to write. Additionally, my research interests flowed from a personal wish to discuss and understand my own difference and to contextualise the expression and discussion of that difference in my own creative writing. In other words, the research and creative practice developed out of my own experience of difference as an effeminate male and a need to theorise and express that difference.
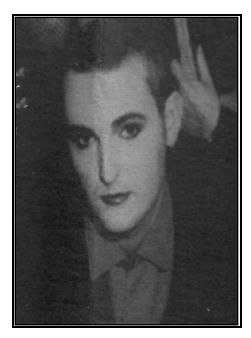
Figure 1: The Author as Young Effeminate

Lived experience is core to the constitution of subjectivity. Scott (1991) argues that subjects are constituted through experience. This makes experience central to the understanding and expression of subjectivity. In order to draw on the specificity of my individual experience, I determined that—although the script is set in the American South and not truly autobiographical in the strict sense of the word—it was important to draw on my own life experiences in a circumscribed way by using them to construct one of the principal characters. Thus, although the miniseries is fictional, a semi-autobiographical process was used to construct the character of Percival Huckstep. This character is semi-autobiographical specifically in that it draws on my own experience with gender and sexual non-conformity. The way I wrote Percival's experience in the South was based on research but also just as much on my lived experience as an effeminate youth in regional Queensland in the 1970s and 1980s. *The Tree* is a depiction of the significantly *homosocial* cultural milieu of the South. The term "homosocial" connotes a form of male bonding often accompanied by a fear or hatred of homosexuality (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1992). The homosocial cultural milieu of the South has echoes in the highly homosocial environment of the rural Australia of my youth. The script is an exploration of this and also a performative exploration of the construction of both discursive effeminacy and my own effeminate masculinity.

This semi-autobiographical approach to character construction best enabled an informed (as in based on experience) discussion of the issues at hand — liminal gender, sexuality and identity. This approach to the constitution of Percival's discursive subjectivity also enabled me to reflect on my own experiences as an effeminate male in a rural setting. Stewart (2007) argues that such autobiographical methods enable "a personal investigation of the self: self-research, self-portrait, self-narrative" (129). Stewart explains this in more detail when she writes that autobiography provides:

> …ways to incorporate and map a deep sense of the intricate relationships of the meaning and actions of artistic practice and its embeddedness in cultural influences, personal experience and aspirations (2001: 129).

In other words, as I wrote the character of Percival I found myself understanding the deep relationships between artistic practice (writing) and the socio-cultural situation and individual positionality and contextuality in which it was embedded. The similarities between some of the character of Percival's traits and my own produced other insights as well.

From the outset, the narrative was conceived as a discourse that would foreground the mutable and fluid qualities of sexual and gender subjectivity as well as the potential for productive resistance arising out of the act of creative self-construction. The key themes of the work—that of the shifting and "shifty" quality of identity categories, the self-constructability of subjectivity and the constraints and possibilities in the performance of effeminate masculinity—all lent themselves to ambiguity. This ambiguity, I felt, was best emphasised by a text that included a character largely modelled on myself but in a totally fictional story and setting. Given this, I felt that some aspects of *The Tree* resisted (and frustrated) easy categorisation, much as desires and identities resist over-simple definitions. *The Tree* is fictional, yes, but Percival as a character owes much to my own history and experience. For me, this blurring of the boundaries between the effeminate character and myself as an effeminate subject foregrounds the performative aspect of the act of writing and the performative and reflexive quality of narratives.

Queer Writing as Performative Self-Making
As signalled above, the creative practice emerged (and was embedded with) my own intention to discuss and write about my own and others' gender and sexual difference. Central to how this sexual and gender difference was explored in practice and expressed in narrative form was the notion of *performativity* (Butler 1990).

Performativity
Judith Butler's theory of performativity could be said to be one of the most influential ideas of Queer Theory (Jagose 1996: 83). Certainly, Butler's notion of the performativity of genders has had a wide-reaching impact on both the creative and critical practice at the heart of this project. Performativity is central to how the project explored sexual and gender difference through, and in, practice and how knowledge garnered from that exploration was then expressed (or disseminated) in creative form in *The Tree*.

Judith Butler first presented the notion of *performativity* in her ground-breaking work *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990). Butler frames the notion of performativity in relation to gender and norms of heterosexuality (1990, 1993). Butler further argues that gender is a performance without ontological status when she writes: "There is no gender identity behind the expression of gender; …identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (1990: 25). For Butler, performativity describes how what might be assumed to be an internal essence to something such as gender or subjectivity is "manufactured through a sustained set of acts, posited through the gendered stylization of the body" (2004: 94). Therefore, it can be argued that genders,

sexualities and identities are all equally performative; manufactured through a sustained set of acts (some of them cognitive) enacted through the racial, gendered and sexual stylization of bodies. Butler's theory of performativity draws on and aligns with Poststructural conceptions of identity in which identity/subjectivity is seen as multiple, changing and fragmented (Sarup 1996). In this way, performativity re-conceives gendered identities and sexualities as plural, varying, fragmented and produced in, by and through discourse.

For Butler, performativity is not total "voluntarism" (2004). We do not freely choose how to enact gender or sexuality without constraint (Butler 2004). Our genders, sexualities and subjectivities are not freely chosen but rather "compelled and sanctioned by the norms of compulsory heterosexuality (*heteronormativity*), and the subject has no choice but to exist within… norms and conventions of nature" such as binary sex difference (Pratt 2009b). Performative subjectivities are also socio-culturally and historically embedded; they are "citational chains" and their effects depend on social conventions (Pratt 2009). According to Butler, gender and sexual norms and subjectivities are produced, disseminated and reinforced through repetitions of an ideal such as the ideal of "woman" or "man" (Pratt 2009b). As the heteronormative ideal is a fiction, and thereby unachievable or "uninhabitable", there is room for disidentification (or counter identification) and human agency and resistance (Pratt 2009b).

Moreover, it can be said that performativity is an analytical tool and a process of enactment; it is a way of thinking about something and a way of doing something. Such a framework is appropriate for application to the reflective practice of writing. In other words, creative practices like writing can be seen as performative. If we accept that the act of writing itself is performative—in that it produces discourse and is a process through which subjectivities are constructed and disseminated—then writing can be seen to be a highly appropriate methodology for exploring genders, sexualities and identities, especially in the context of writing as a practice of self-making.

Performativity figured deeply not only in the writing practice but also in how I was able to *risk* who I was (Ambrosio 2008) and move towards constituting a new subjectivity. This new or emergent subjectivity was inspired by and is more in accordance with the fluid subjectivities and genders proposed by Queer Theory. This queer notion of performativity impacted on the project in many other ways as well. The completed creative artefact can be seen as a performative research output (Haseman 2006) which produces discourse in which performative subjectivities are explored. Indeed, the artefact can be seen to be exploring the notion of subjectivity *through* writing. In effect, the artefact constituted or produced textual subjectivities, specifically gender subjectivities, and explored how they operated with and against each other; including how the discursive subjectivities interacted with my own embodied identity.

This exploration of difference occurred "through and in" (Nelson 2008) writing practice and highlighted the ways in which my intention to explore effeminacy was met in that practice (writing). New personal understandings, around the performative nature of sexual and gender difference and effeminacy, were produced through reflexivity and (simultaneously) in the process/performance of writing.

The creative text is basically the story of an effeminate man, a Southern sissy, learning to accept himself as he is and to navigate the perils (and possibilities) of homosocial culture and queer desire as it manifests in the South. The main character, Percival, is based on my own experience but is not a factual rendering of myself. Percival is and is not me at the same time. The effeminate character of the miniseries is an amalgam, a composite. In this sense, though the action may be totally fictional, the ways that Percival responds to that action are based on my own character traits, embodied gender and lived experience.

The process of writing and reflection illuminated the fact that all of the statements about the character Percival Huckstep above could be made about myself. I am an amalgam, a composite. I embody characteristics from many of those I have known. I am modelled on others, though I have creatively adapted and refined myself to become the sort of person I can appreciate. In fact, a number of those who read drafts of the script commented that whenever the character Percival spoke, they heard *my* voice. This juxtaposition between Percival Huckstep and myself reflected the complexities of subject positions, of identity; it revealed the reciprocal ways in which subjectivity, practice and discourse informed and constituted each other. It also blurred (or queered) the lines between what was real or intelligible about my own and Percival's story and what wasn't. I came to conceptualise this blurring of lines between the fictive and the "real" in the character of Percival as a kind of deliberate unintelligibility. In a sense, the character of Percival is a discursive example of an uninhabitable body (Butler 1993). It is not only his effeminacy that makes him unintelligible but his abrasion of the borders between the real and the unreal. Webb and Brien (2011: 197) make an interesting point about this kind of merging of fact and fiction when they write:

> …juxtapositioning of memoir and fiction both explores and draws attention to contemporary debates about whether literature can represent the complexities of life with any accuracy, and what it means to "tell the truth" in a period when the idea of any absolute truth is outmoded and discarded.

Producing subjectivities within text, whilst engaging in an ongoing reflexivity, proved to be an acute and experiential method for highlighting the constructed nature of subjectivity. The act of producing (writing) Percival required reflection on my own history as an effeminate man. These reflections were themselves informed by research into the performativity of gender and sexuality. As the writing proceeded, and Percival emerged from the syntax, I began to see how my own subjectivity had also been produced within a complex matrix of discourses; including my own internal discourses about who I was and, perhaps more significantly, who I wanted to be. This experience echoes Sarup's (1996) argument that identities are narrative constructions adapted through self-talk. Our identities are the products of our own self-telling.

Like myself as a young man, Percival wants to be who he is in the place that is his home. More to the point, he desperately wants somebody, anybody really, to love him. This exaggerated need for love and attention arises from his feeling of being not merely undervalued but loathed. Anecdotally at least, this is considered a common response to the trauma that Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex and

Queer (LGBTIQ) individuals experience from growing up and living in a homophobic culture. This is certainly my own experience. Percival is the much loathed Southern sissy whose life of aesthetic escapism blocks out the discomfort of his day to day reality, which is typified by loneliness, bullying and intimidation.

The excerpts below illustrate Percival's tendency to live in the escapist space of aesthetics rather than the marginal space he is begrudgingly allowed in the "real world". The first (Baker 2016: 38) is an exchange between Alison, the twelve year old tomboy protagonist of the narrative, and her grandmother, Verna.

```
                    ALISON
          Who is that?


                    VERNA
          That's Percival Huckstep. The queerest
          duck on the pond… spends his life in a
          fantasy world if you ask me. He's one
          of only a few white folks left in
          town. And, to his credit or shame I'm
          not sure which, he's the only white
          man with the gumption to shop in my
          store.
```

This next excerpt (Baker 2016: 32) illustrates Percival's privileging of aesthetics over practicality and is in his own (effeminate) words:

```
                    PERCIVAL
          Oh, you know me Verna Hobb, I spend
          all my time, and practically all my
          money, on the pretty things in life. I
          can't see no point in doing anything
          else.
```

Apart from his many avoidance behaviours, Percival's primary goal in life seems to be to survive, one day at a time, and to forestall what he fears is an inevitable violent confrontation with local youths and men. The strategy he employs to endure the fear and isolation he feels is to isolate himself from his own (white) community and only associate with those with whom he has some affinity as an outsider: the local African-American community. For the same reason, he also avoids the company of men in favour of the much less threatening company of women.

Like other narratives set in the American South, *The Tree* engages with the ever-present violence of Southern life and its traumatic social reality (Goddu 1997). In Southern writing this violence often takes the form of racism against African-Americans (Goddu 1997). *The Tree* also depicts this violence in the form of homophobic discourse and aggression towards homosexuals, a form of violence that is ever present in homosocial environments. Specific insights arose from writing about effeminacy as a liminal gender performed or enacted in the homosocial environment of the South. The quote below, from *The Tree* (Baker 2016: 187), refers directly to the "horrific social reality" (Goddu 1997) of the homosocial South as experienced by African-Americans and effeminate males.

```
                    PERCIVAL
        …You forget I've lived in the South
        all my life. I've heard all the
        stories: the young men found strangled
        in the woods. The girly little boys
        whose own daddies tie them in seed-
        sacks and drown them in the river like
        unwanted kittens…. I know it's not
        just coloreds who need to be afraid of
        the knock at midnight.
```

As noted earlier, the term "homosocial" connotes a form of male bonding often accompanied by a fear or hatred of homosexuality (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1992). This male bonding often expresses itself as an equally virulent objectification of women and vilification and subjugation of effeminate or homosexual males. In many instances, homosocial relations have an erotic quality. This eroticism between men in homosocial relationships is routinely repressed and disguised as a mutual identification over heterosexual desire and activity (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1992).

For Kosofsky-Sedgwick (1992), homosociality is a form of male bonding with a distinctive triangular structure. In this structure, men have avid but non-sexual bonds with other men, and women function as the conduits through which the passionate feelings aroused by these bonds are acted out, sometimes as shared heterosexual identification, sometimes as competition for women's attention and sexual favours (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1992). Kosofsky-Sedgwick further argues that "such a triangle may disguise as rivalry what is actually an attraction between men" (1992: 21). The feelings aroused by bonds between heterosexual men are often a kind of eroticism sublimated as aggression and physical competition. As this excerpt from *The Tree* (Baker 2016: 35) illustrates:

```
                    SIMON DONNELLY
        Hey Percy! How are ya this mornin'
        darlin'?


                    NATE
        Out for a morning stroll petal?
```

Percival ignores them and walks past. The two men stop.

```
                    SIMON DONNELLY
        Hey Percy, how about a bit of this!
```

Simon grabs his crotch whilst Nate, spurred on by his friend, starts to rub his own nipple.

```
                    NATE
        How about it Percy! Wanna try some?
```

Gilbert Herdt notes that "the more polarized the gender roles and restrictive the sexual code, the more homosociality one expects to find in a society" (1999: 152). Certain parts of the rural South of the 1960s, where gender and sexual codes were strongly controlled and constrained, can be seen as such homosocial environments. *The Tree* is set in a homosocial environment in order to highlight the active bullying and persecution of all boys and men who fail to live up to the ideal of "hypermasculinity" (Scheff 2006, Nandy 1983). Hypermasculinity is not just an aggressive form of masculinity, in some societies it is deployed as a way to police effeminate and homosexual males. In other words, hypermasculinity is enacted "as a social system" (Scheff 2006). This was certainly the case in the town and region of my upbringing and seems to have been common in many rural cultures of the recent past, including the South. In hypermasculine societies like rural Queensland in the 1970s and the American South of the 1960s, hypermasculinity can be seen as something of a totalizing norm. As such, *The Tree* is a critique of a situated, historical and extremely masculinist heteronormativity (Pratt 2009).

Writing and Performing the Effeminate Self
The writing of *The Tree* revealed that, for me, the performative act of writing and the performance of effeminacy as a gender are creative practices of equal significance to the formation of my subjectivity. I write myself and perform myself. The creative text refers indirectly to my own and others' performance of effeminacy and—once joined with knowledge from gender research and understanding garnered through reflection—acts as a formative narrative that informs the ongoing performance and production (in both the construction and theatrical senses) of effeminate subjectivity.

The miniseries script, as the creative practice component of a Practice-led Research project, was the principal means through which notions of effeminacy (sexual and gender difference) were explored and expressed. *The Tree* presents effeminacy as a uniquely constituted and performed liminal gender. The creative writing artefact was envisaged as an example of how critically informed (performative) sexual and gender subjectivities can be articulated in an accessible way for professional, academic and general audiences. Thus, *The Tree* targets audiences of not only LGBTIQ individuals but also an academic audience and professionals (producers, directors) with an interest in queer television and queer scriptwriting. I mention audiences here because it is in the viewing/reading of the creative text that a performative understanding (or knowledge) of the performativity of gender, in particular effeminacy, is produced. This *experiential* understanding occurs as part of what Foucault called an "object-event" (Foucault 2006), in which the text is an event that triggers a chain of further events. A text is consumed by readers/viewers, it inspires commentators to discuss its qualities, and it is the focus of "multiple interlocutors who constitute its various discursive contexts" (Huffer 2009: xii). In this way, a text's "truth effects ripple through the world like rings on water, as the light-bringing rupture of an expansive doubling" (Huffer 2009: xii).

The "rupture" referred to here is a break in the citational chain (to use a Butlerian term) in which the history of a subject (a viewer/reader) is interrupted and altered (and illuminated) by the intrusion of an alterior discourse. This alterior discourse is the irruption of speech that Foucault (1978) demands of any discourse aimed at destabilising normative ideas of sexuality. In this sense, *The Tree*, as a Foucauldian-style irruption of speech, is a discursive break from normalizing discourses about

male gender and sexuality that performatively disseminates understanding about gender (in this instance effeminacy). This understanding of gender is itself performative, as it occurs in the act of reading or viewing, reflection and discussion, and thus produces not only a theoretical understanding, which it does, but also produces knowledge as an affective experience. This is an alternative route to knowing, a different way of coming to understand the themes or issues investigated in creative works. As we engage with cultural artefacts, we experience them in quite an embodied way. We laugh, we cringe, we cry, we feel good, we feel bad, we sympathise, we identify, we rage. These affective experiences inform us about material realities and lived experiences that we may never have understood otherwise. To put it simply, affective experiences are another (and a non-theoretical) way of producing knowledge (Haseman & Mafe 2009). The creative artefacts coming out of practice-led research projects can be seen to disseminate knowledge in the context of narratives which readers directly experience, thus providing an alternative (and affective) way of coming to understand the themes or issues investigated in those projects. Affect, as both a kind of research and a kind of knowledge, is also performative. In the moment of experience we simultaneously understand or know something about that experience. Accepting that affect is both a kind of performative research and a type of performative knowledge radically changes the way that we think about research in the arts. As Grayson Cooke (2011: 60) has articulated:

> 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.

For me, affective experience of the act of writing the miniseries caused a rupture in the citational chain of my own identity. This rupture provoked a new understanding of effeminacy as applied to my own subjectivity; an understanding that was itself performative and affective. As it occurred in the practices of writing, re-reading, reflection and re-writing, this understanding produced more than theoretical knowledge. This experiential understanding was informed by research into queer theories around the performativity of gender but was "brought to life" in the creative practice and reflection and in the application of the understanding and/or knowledge to my own subjectivity and its ongoing queer remaking.

The writing of the creative text facilitated a deep exploration of notions of subjectivity, in particular how subjectivities are performative and produced in and through discourse (Butler 1990, 1993). The act of writing, which is in effect the constitution of discursive or textual subjectivities, by its very nature a productive act, both reveals and illuminates the performativity of subjectivity, especially gender and sexual subjectivity. This brought into sharp relief the ways in which the act of writing not only evidenced performativity but was performative itself. Writing produces subjectivities, tests them out against each other—surveys their boundaries as it were, to see how they might respond in different scenarios—and disseminates them all at once.

If we recall that Butler (2004: 1) argued that exposure to a non-normative (or "new") subjectivity can "undo a prior conception of who one is only to inaugurate a relatively newer one" then we can see that engagement with or exposure to a queer text can have potent effects. An experience of a non-normative subjectivity, such as effeminate masculinity in a discourse or text, can "undo" one's subjectivity and facilitate the emergence of a new one. As an example of the power of discursive subjectivities to provoke shifts in individual identities, think of the way that Jack Kerouac's novel *On The Road* (1957) triggered the "rucksack revolution" (Kerouac 1958), the emergence of a counter-culture as individuals remade themselves in accordance with the subjectivities celebrated in Kerouac's writing. Think of the sudden emergence of a whole generation of young feminists that followed the publication of Germaine Greer's *The Female Eunuch* (1970). Think also of the proliferation of "gender-benders" in the wake of the popularity of 1980s popstars like Boy George, a clear example of how exposure to effeminacy triggers the emergence of more and more effeminate subjects.

This idea of Butler's was proven accurate by a subtle change to my own subjectivity as I wrote *The Tree*. Before writing the piece, and undertaking the research that preceded it, I had ambivalent (and uncomfortable) feelings about my effeminacy. In writing the figure of Percival Huckstep, an effeminate character who refuses to be marginalised because of his gender insubordination, I was able to shift into a new subject position; one which embraced effeminacy as a radical position capable of powerfully disrupting oppressive gender norms. Put simply, the act of writing within a reflexive and theoretically informed PLR process constituted a kind of immersive exposure to an effeminate subjectivity that triggered the emergence of a new, subtly different, gender position. This process was one in which research around queer theorisations of gender, exposure to the discursive effeminacies of narratives set in the South, and my reflexive writing practice triggered affective experiences, which then produced new understandings around effeminacy as an embodied gender and lived subjectivity.

During the writing of *The Tree*, critical research and creative practice were intertwined and mutually informed each other in ways that enriched both processes. This intertwined relationship between research and creative practice was core to the way I undertook the project and was crucial to the development of knowledge and an iterative understanding of my object of study: the performativity of effeminacy as a unique liminal gender. In that act of writing my lived experience of effeminacy coalesced with knowledge from gender and sexuality research so that my writing practice became a productive, identity-forming act.

The Tree is a story about a marginalised figure attempting to find ways to resist the normative push of the heteronormative and homophobic culture in which he lives. In reflection and in the act of writing, it became apparent that the main character of *The Tree* was searching for a way to enact a Foucauldian "reverse discourse" (Foucault 1978: 76) through which the uneven power relations operating in his daily dealings with hegemonic masculinity might be ameliorated if not overturned. As the writing of the artefact progressed, it became apparent that the issues the effeminate subject raised were not just about gender. It became clear that this reverse discourse must address not only the intimidation and bullying that Percival experiences but also the

strange and unequal sexual dynamic between masculine and effeminate men in which the protagonist finds himself unwittingly entangled.

The theoretical and thematic importance of the sexual dynamic of a highly charged homosocial environment only became apparent after the writing practice, in concert with reflexivity informed by critical research, began. The sexual dynamic emerged as important because it revealed something significant about both gender and sexuality. Firstly, it revealed the fluid (and performative) nature of masculinity as a gender. In extreme homosocial environments many males (especially adolescents) define and indeed constitute their gender in explicit opposition to effeminacy (Pascoe 2007). This reveals the central importance of the effeminate subject to the constitution of heteronormative masculinity. Anecdotally at least, it is a kind of "common knowledge" that many adolescent males engage in erotic behaviours that are in contradiction to adult masculinity which is defined as exclusively and compulsorily heterosexual. My own short memoir piece, *Cherry Blossom Bicycle Crazy* (2011), discusses the highly charged erotic quality of homosocial and all-male environments in this way:

> I had become ensnared in the boys' school mojo… we had entered what the Japanese call the 'cherry blossom years': youth. The time in-between childhood and manhood in which there is a magic that makes many things possible. Things that are impossible as an adult (Baker 2011: 8).

Many men's initial sexual experimentation is often with members of their own sex (Kinsey 1948; Bullough & Bullough 2013: 278) and it seems likely that this is even more the case in homosocial environments (like the South).This sexual dynamic reveals the centrality of the effeminate male to the development (and exercise or practice) of male sexuality in hypermasculine environments. The centrality of the sissy to the constitution of masculinity as a gender and male heterosexuality is more pronounced in all-male environments (prisons, boarding schools, the military) but not insignificant in the male population in general. This is in accord with Kosofsky-Sedgwick's (1990) ground-breaking argument that homosexuality is necessary for the constitution of heterosexual masculinities. Jane Ward (2015) argues that same-sex behaviour is used by some males to reinforce or enhance their masculinity and thus, because masculinity and heterosexuality are indivisible in heteronormative discourse, confirm their heterosexuality as well. In a seemingly contradictory way, sex with men (while always remaining romantically uninterested) boosts a heterosexual man's sense of their masculinity and their status as heterosexuals.

In homosocial environments like the South, the effeminate male is target and object of both desire and disgust. The effeminate is both the subject of an often violent discipline, and the very means through which some men test the limits of and transgress that discipline. In a very real way, the sissy is necessary for the constitution of heterosexual masculinity and the exploration of its boundaries. The sissy is, in fact, the boundary embodied. This is expressed in the script when Nate Bowman, an ostensibly heterosexual male character, expresses his disgust with Percival's effeminacy by victimising and bullying him, only later to find himself attracted to the very object of his disgust. In other Southern narratives, this attraction might have been refused or repressed so that Nate could be recuperated into heteronormative culture. In *The Tree*, however, Nate's attraction to Percival is

allowed to develop and the actions occurring as a result of that desire lead to the disassembling and reassembling of Nate's sexual identity so that, at narrative close, he occupies a much more open position. The following excerpt (Baker 2016: 189) depicts the moment that Nate Bowman, the supposedly heterosexual character of the script, encounters the idea that he might be able to occupy a more open sexual subject position:

```
                    NATE
          Look Percy, I… I just don't know if
          this is me…. If I'm the kind of guy
          who…

                    PERCIVAL
          Climbs in another man's window in the
          middle of the night?

                    NATE
          Yeah.

                    PERCIVAL
          Well, I don't know you very well, but
          I do know one thing for certain…

Nate's interest is piqued.

                    PERCIVAL (CONT'D)
          In this house, and in my room, you can
          be any kind of man you want to be. It
          doesn't matter who you are outside, in
          this place, you can be whoever you
          want.
```

The sexual dynamic unique to homosocial cultures places the effeminate in a paradoxical position — one in which they are both oppressed and, in a limited way, empowered. In the sexual economy of homosocial (and especially all-male) environments, the sissy has significant capital, principally in the form of the pleasure and boost to masculine status they can provide.

Unfortunately, hierarchies in homosocial environments often respond to this problem of effeminate empowerment, which constitutes a challenge to the "normal" gender order, with violence and sadism. Many homosocial environments are governed by intimidation and force. This violence is often designed specifically to ensure that the body of the effeminate male is treated as a mere resource to be plundered. In other words, the bodies and pleasures of sissies are colonised by the homosocial male hegemony. Despite this, it is possible to imagine a scenario in which effeminate men use this sexual dynamic in their own favour, much as post-feminist women might argue that their sexual attractiveness to men can be used to empower themselves. In some instances, even in the South of the 1960s, it may have been possible for effeminate males to use their own sexual capital as a route to empowerment. *The Tree* explores that possibility.

Overt political acts are beyond the character of Percival, however he manages to empower himself in other, more subtle ways. There is a scene in the last episode of *The Tree* (Baker 2016: 188) in which it becomes clear that Percival is more than a mere object of disgust, he is an object of desire as well. The scene features Percival and Nate Bowman, who has climbed in through Percival's bedroom window in the middle of the night. We first meet Nate Bowman in episode one, in a scene in which he and another man are tormenting Percival, making fun of the way he walks and speaks. In this scene, Nate has crept into Percival's bedroom on the pretence of warning him that some of the townsmen are on the verge of acts of violence against Percival because of his effeminacy. Thus, the following scene comes as something of a surprise:

```
                    NATE
          I like you Percy, always have. Ever
          since I first laid eyes on you years
          ago… You make it hard for a feller
          though…

                    PERCIVAL
          Making it hard for fellers is what I
          do best…

Nate's upper body jerks back in shock at this very forward comment,
as if he's been struck. But he pauses only a second before he
responds.

                    NATE
          There you go again. Can't you have any
          decorum at all?

                    PERCIVAL
          No, I'm afraid not. Besides, "decorum"
          is a strange word for a feller like
          you to use. Could it be there's more
          to you than meets the eye?

                    NATE
               (meekly)
          A whole lot more, if you're lookin'.

                    PERCIVAL
          I am looking.
```

As this excerpt and the discussion above show, *The Tree* constructs the effeminate subject in a way that places him at the centre of the narrative, rather than at the margin. It also resists recuperation of marginal characters back into a heteronormative discourse. Instead, the marginal characters of *The Tree* revel in their marginality. The script's trajectory and conclusion produce a discursive space in which liminal masculinity survives despite the aggressive war against effeminate males (Kosofsky-Sedgwick 1994) that the narrative documents and resists. Percival has used the desire that normative men feel for him to ameliorate, and perhaps even overturn, the uneven power relations of hegemonic masculinity that positions him as little more than an object in a sexual power play.

Conclusion

This paper discusses effeminacy as a liminal gender, in particular how effeminacy was explored in a practice-led research process. This discussion outlined how understandings concerning sexual and gender difference as performance were produced through reflexivity and (simultaneously) in the performative act of writing a television miniseries. The paper also describes how a practice-led research process produced knowledge concerning effeminacy as a liminal masculinity that has the potential to disrupt masculinity and femininity simultaneously. These new understandings have been expressed as narrative in the miniseries script *The Tree*.

Finally, I discussed how writing, in that it produces discourse, is a process through which subjectivities are constructed and disseminated. Thus, the production of a narrative such as *The Tree*—that presents and describes a liminal masculinity—is a highly appropriate methodology for exploring the performativity of gender and subjectivity. It was shown that these artefacts, these creative works, can then act as triggers for an undoing of gender and a remaking of subjectivity within a queer self-bricolage.

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