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Writing against the tide

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Abstract

A tide of conservatism is rising. Despite bushfires and a global epidemic, many are unwilling or unable to grapple with the facts behind these catastrophes. What is not said drifts in and out of public consciousness. In present silences and lacunae, past stories wait to be told anew. In this presentation, I reflect on discontinuity and continuity in the curious silence around the Joh Bjelke-Petersen era in Queensland history, a time remembered for corrupt politicians and cops, but otherwise culturally (and conveniently) forgotten in literary fiction. I discuss my creative response to this era, and outline processes that are saving me from drowning in entwined political, cultural and personal silences as I write an exegesis and novel.

Keywords creative writing, creative process, extended mind, Queensland literature, Joh Bjelke-Petersen

Introduction

Australian university communities are writing against the tide, in a time of savage funding cuts that seem senseless, perverse even, in a time where education and critical thinking is needed more than ever. This tide of conservatism is rising, along with bushfires, floods and a global epidemic (Flanagan, 2019; Kelly, 2020). In Australia and overseas, politicians refuse to meet the challenge and yet are still elected in spite of their 'radical incompetence' (Davies, 2018). But why are so many people unwilling or unable to accept the facts and act to prevent these anthropogenic catastrophes? And why do these catastrophes seem strangely familiar?

Old stories sometimes need to be told anew, I argue. The political, cultural and personal silences of the Joh Bjelke-Petersen era in the Queensland era (1968-1987) is one such story, a catastrophe on a smaller scale. The Joh era is a time remembered for corrupt politicians and cops, but otherwise culturally (and conveniently) forgotten (Schultz, 2008). I aim to navigate these silences and discontinuities, while exploring writing processes through an exegesis and novel in progress.

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I grew up under a dictator

The Joh Bjelke-Petersen era has been described as a story, ‘well past, well got rid of, but not best forgotten’ (Finnane, 2008). Having lived in Queensland at this time, I concur. A generation of Queenslanders grew up in the shadow of a Premier and National Party government, which was proudly anti-democratic and suppressed protest (Wear, 2002). Ultra-conservative, Joh linked homosexuality to pedophilia and ordered police raids on abortion clinics (Robinson, 2010). When a young gay man was found dead at the bottom of a cliff in suspicious circumstances, Joh’s response was, ‘If you fly with the crows and squawk like a crow, you shouldn’t be surprised if you get shot with the crows’ (Shaw, 2019, 148). But Joh was not just deeply racist (publicly supporting Apartheid, for example), he intended genocide. Joh ‘had hopes for AIDS to wipe out entire Indigenous communities’, said former Queensland premier, Mike Ahern, who was Minister for health when Joh allegedly made the comments (SBS World News, 16 September 2017). Those are just a few sorry examples.

Some will insist Joh was forced to resign, that his government was discredited as corrupt, and we can safely forget him. Not quite. ‘Sir’ Joh was never stripped of his 1982 Knighthood. He was tried for perjury but escaped conviction because the jury foreman was one of his political supporters (Whitton, 1993), and when he died in 2005, he was honoured with a full state funeral. Current Member of Parliament and former Minister in the National Party, Bob Katter, still contends Sir Joh was decent and not corrupt, that ‘none of the allegations were ever proved’ (McClaren, 2017). Like Trump, Joh held onto power to the last. Imagine that Trump would hold power for nineteen years, that he knighted himself and became Sir Donald. Fast-forward another twenty years and imagine that nobody cared about the damage Sir Donald Trump inflicted, and that he was lauded as a nation builder. This is the revisionism of the Joh Bjelke-Petersen as I understand it, even though he and his government are dead and gone (Marr, 2005; *ABC News*, 23 April 2005).

Dis(quiet) on the creative Queensland frontier

So you’d think this era would have had a profound cultural and literary influence, right? Strangely not. Granted, there are plenty of political, historical, and journalistic accounts of corruption and crime (Cacciola 2009; Condon 2015; Dickie 1989; Evans 2004; Herbert & Gilling 2004; Whitton 1993). Cultural resistance to the absurdity of Bjelke-Petersen’s Brisbane and its ‘bible-bashing boredom’ was also strong in alternative media such as *The Cane Toad Times*, 4ZZZ radio station and university newspapers (Jones and Whyte, 2019).

The hopelessness and apathy of that era has leaked into stories and characters of that time in unexpected ways (John Birmingham, *He Died with a Felafel in His Hand* 1994; Terence Dalton, *Boy Swallows Universe* 2019; Melissa Lucashenko, *Steam Pigs* 1997; Andrew McGahan, *Praise* 1992; David Malouf, *Johnno* 1976). Jessica Anderson’s brilliant story of the hated Commander Logan of Moreton Bay penal colony is a perfect allegory for this era, although I am not sure that was her intention (Jessica Anderson, *The Commandant* 2009).

However, radical (dis)quiet on the Queensland frontier from those most affected; Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, workers, artists, and subcultures was manifested on the streets rather than in novels (Evans, Ferrier and Rickertt, 2004). Oodgeroo Noonuccal, Judith Wright and Bruce Dawe also railed against the repressive government in social activism and their poetry (Rooney, 2009). Yet few novels deal explicitly with the crime and corruption of the era, and even fewer explore the fallout of the era in more personal and sociocultural ways (Andrew McGahan, *Last Drinks* 2005; Margaret Simons, *The Truth Teller* 1996; Kirsten Alexander, *Riptides* 2020). These novels grapple with corrupt journalists, politicians and police, rather than broader social or subcultural aspects.

An encrypted past

Why this prolonged creative silence in novels? Trauma and affect theory, particularly cryptonymy, is an interesting angle from which to explore this question (Abraham, Torok and Rand, 1994).

Perhaps Queensland has buried Joh alive. Extreme injustice may be too hard to endure and is hidden, deep within the psyche. Shame is buried, encrypted in the sense of entombment, and also as a secret code and language (LaCapra, 1999). In the collective Queensland cultural memory, Joh symbolises an imaginary loss, supposedly a simpler time (for the privileged) when men were men, and women and blacks and others at the margins knew their place. But of course few could admit that, even to themselves. Joh is code for an ugly, colonial past and an open secret, part of an unspeakable cycle of trauma and ‘in the depths of the crypt unspeakable words buried alive are held fast, like owls in ceaseless vigil’ (Abraham, Torok and Rand, 1994, p159-160). We have inherited a crypt-like silence that continues to influence politics and society today. In part, this explains the resurgence of politicians like Pauline Hanson. Joh, Pauline, are more than media personalities; they are ideas that stay in our system, mutate and form other strains, like a contagion. This contagion still circulates through culture and society, down through the generations (Atkinson and Richardson, 2013).

Joh is dead and gone but what happened under his regime still matters. We feel this unarticulated shame and cover-up, ‘the collective disregard for painful historical realities - may disrupt our lives’ (Abraham, Torok and Rand, 1994, 21). We see that now in the #BLM movement (ABC News, 6 June 2020). Silences matter. I believe the unspoken story of Moreton Bay penal settlement is a part of Brisbane, a part of the Bjelke-Petersen era, and a part of who I am. As a non-indigenous writer, I am party to this complex and enduring trauma whether I am silent or not (Atkinson, 2017). My exegesis and novel attempt to break inside this political and cultural crypt and to show the past still matters.

Writing process

As I work through these lacunae with fiction and autoethnography, I unearth my own silence and crypt (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). If it’s doing its job, my fiction should bear witness to internalised communal silences (Felman, 2013). The main character of my novel is my second-

generation Italian, socialist gay friend Carl, who became a heroin addict and died too young. Carl embodies what could happen to outsiders who disagreed with National Party politics and prevailing orthodoxy. As such, the novel is a personal and political mourning for both Carl and Queensland. The novel itself is also on some level a crypt that keeps Carl alive in an imaginary form (Abraham, Torok and Rand, 1994).

This process of transdisciplinary research, literature and reflective analysis informs the novel and my creative decisions (Smith & Dean, 2009; Skains, 2018). I research in a ‘personal and voiced’ practice-led way the subcultural resonances of that era (Bacon, 2017, p387). I keep a writing process journal to track progress, notes, pinpoint areas of interest, shape the project and reflect on both its phases and research my lived experience (Van Manen, 2016).

Through such research into creative practice, I stumbled upon the concept of ‘bowerbirding’ (Brady, 2000). Bowerbirding helps with the ‘doing’ of creative thinking and research, to externalise my thought via visuals and metaphor (Freiman, 2015). For example, the bowerbird creates the visual illusion of forced perspective by collecting and arranging objects around a nest to attract mates, a type of instinctual Ebbinghaus Illusion (Kelley & Endler, 2012). As a writer, and bowerbird, I want to attract an audience with my creation and change reader perspectives. I hope to achieve this by being resourceful in my research and using whatever is at hand, like the bowerbird.

I have built on bowerbirding as a metaphor to what I call ‘digital bowerbirding.’ The web can be used to create nests from traditional research, and digital tools can help externalise and extend messy thought. Through this process, I have found creativity in ‘doing’, thinking in images, and collating them, which spark new ideas, research and writing directions. Below I share some brief examples of tools and digital bowerbirding practices that help me make sense of what I’m doing:

- Change the context, literally: I use [remove.bg](#) to remove the backgrounds of images to play with the visual and see things differently, especially if I have a creative block.
- Construct schemas and tables to structure thought: simple, free design tools like [canva.com](#) help me summarise the essentials and move around components.
- Analyse text: [voyant-tools.org](#) lets me zoom out from content. I upload text and explore emerging patterns through frequencies of words, how words and phrases are connected, their frequencies and other statistical analyses.
- Visualise research: [connectedpapers.com](#) generates a handy data visualisation so I can see how research papers relate to each other and the field, rather than trawling through reference lists.
- Reflect: I use Google Jamboard for brainstorming and design thinking; its sticky notes make text easy to manipulate.
- Trust the process: I keep a process journal in Google docs which makes it easier to find things, to thematise and conceptually group ideas, as well as to remind myself that the work is moving forward.

These digital tools are helping me to ride out the tsunami of conservatism and stay optimistic about creative possibilities.

It's not enough. Ultimately, we need universities and communities of creative thinkers and writers to speak louder than the crashing tide of past and present injustices. In the meantime, I'll continue my digital bowerbirding to creatively explore the silence around a very dark period of Queensland history that continues to haunt our culture.

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