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# SIDESTORIES

3

& AFTERWORDS

4

2009



It's the  
sidetracks  
not the  
highways  
that shape our lives  
...

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Through  
creative digressions  
we escape the  
**terror**  
of perfect reproduction  
...

This text endeavours to break free of the hegemony of traditional academic research by inviting the 'forgotten' literacies back into the research fold. *Alien literacies* and *alien knowledges*—the otherwise marginalised ways of 'writing' the wor(l)d—have been allowed back in, to speak for themselves and to invigorate the research process. *And why not?*

(Andrew Miller, *Eschatologies*, 4 August 2009)





## ALIEN LITERACIES

PERUSING UNIVERSITY GUIDELINES about how to write and present essays could lead one to believe that capital 'K' Knowledge begins and ends with the word on the page: specifically, with the **black** word on the **white** page, with Times New Roman font, 12 point characters, 4 centimetre margins, A4 paper, portrait layout, double line spacing, linear prose, rational arguments, academic language, correct grammar, local spellings, footnotes, references, and other such conventions. What goes on outside these specifications is **NOT** knowledge, or literacy, in the academic sense, and certainly not welcome in the current system. Such a text, if it is text, would be unreadable by the majority of institutionally accredited experts who have no means of recognising or reading such a text let alone judging it. As gatekeepers of official knowledge and proper scholarly conduct—with their own expertises and literacies to uphold and defend—such experts judge the legitimacy and illegitimacy of knowledge claims—and *knowledge presentations*—based on the criteria used to judge and accredit them. In other words, they use the rules and regulations as handed down through the generations to judge the

To enter classroom settings in colleges and universities with the will to share the desire to encourage excitement, was to transgress. Not only did it require movement beyond accepted boundaries, but excitement could not be generated without full recognition of the fact that there could never be an absolute set agenda governing teaching practices. Agendas had to be flexible, had to allow for spontaneous shifts in direction.

(bell hooks,  
*Teaching to  
Transgress*,  
1994, p. 7)

merits of contemporary knowledges and languages. Not surprisingly, this system selects *for* certain literacies—and certain people—and *against* others. If you believe these guidelines then all other knowledges, if they are knowledges, and literacies, if they are literacies, don't really count, at least not in the university context. They are the **alien** literacies and **alien** knowledges that go on outside and beyond the academic accreditation process. After all, if it can't be argued (and argue it must) in **black** words on *white* paper in pseudo-scientific prose then it's **NOT** knowledge in the academic sense. It's like the word **fuck** in an academic paper: *u-n-a-c-c-e-p-t-a-b-l-e!*

It is precisely this type of 'illiteracy' and 'indecency' that I wish to explore here, not to deride academic knowledge, but to enrich it: to bring the excluded discourses and marginalised media back into the scholarly fold and let them speak. And **speak loudly**.



## ALIEN KNOWLEDGES

THE TRADITIONAL UNIVERSITY PAPER is a modernist and structuralist technology. It comes in various forms: the essay, thesis, dissertation, and exegesis, to name but a few. The aim of these highly structured and regimented technologies is to bring order and meaning to an otherwise disorderly and meaningless universe. They are artefacts of the Enlightenment and the rationalist project. The world becomes knowable by dividing it into small parts, labelled segments, structured arguments, distinct knowledges, and manageable 'projects' (i.e. the world as a dictionary). Rather than terrify ourselves with the inexplicable nature of life and reality, we *pretend* to know the universe through the languages and literacies we invent to describe it. We turn the multi-dimensional world into the mono-dimensional word: *we name the world to tame the world*: we name the world to *create* the wor(l)d. The essay is perfect for this task. As an order-building device it disallows and disqualifies disorder and digression. It demands a linear, structured, ordered, logical, rational, and objective approach to wor(l)d-building. The author vanishes from the artefact to create the illusion that knowl-

In hypertext,  
 multivocalism is  
 popular, graphic  
 elements, both drawn  
 and scanned, have  
 been incorporated  
 into the narratives,  
 imaginative font  
 changes have been  
 employed to identify  
 various voices or  
 plot elements,  
 and there has  
 also been a very  
 effective use of  
 formal documents not  
 typically used in  
 fiction - statistical  
 charts, song lyrics,  
 newspaper articles,  
 film scripts, doodles  
 and photographs, ...  
 dictionary entries,  
 rock music album  
 covers, astrological  
 forecasts ... and  
 police reports.

(Coover, in Gregory  
 L. Ulmer,  
*Heuretics*,  
 1994, p. 177)

edge came *to* and not *from* the text; that is, from  
*out there*—**in the world**—and not *in here*—**in lan-  
 guage**. This technology is a kind of magic. It turns  
 the world into recordable facts and knowable com-  
 modities. It makes the previously terrifying and  
 strange *familiar*. It is through this technology that  
 we are able to eradicate the ‘other’ from our midst.  
 To make everything the same or similar.

The exegesis extends the modernist project by  
 attempting to name and tame the ‘creative product.’  
 It names and classifies its parts, dissects its vital  
 organs, prods and pokes its mysteries, and identi-  
 fies its diseases and deformities; in short, it speaks  
*for* and *about*—but never *to*—the object under its  
 examination. The exegesis is the modernist micro-  
 scope made text. It stands over and speaks for the  
 creative specimen under its all-intrusive gaze. All  
 such modernist texts, as exercises in order-build-  
 ing and mess-reduction, help to stave off doubts  
 about the nature of knowledge, meaning, death,  
 and chaos. They permit us to get further away from  
 the truths and terrors that haunt and harangue our  
 lives. They permit fiction at the most fundamental  
 level, that is, at the level of ‘truth’ itself. These arte-



facts are fictions *par excellence*. Excellent because good fiction allows the reader to suspend disbelief and enter the manufactured reality of the argument or narrative. Such texts not only permit the suspension of disbelief, they obliterate the disbelief itself. They have conquered doubt all together. They have transcended fiction so absolutely as to have become nonfiction, to have become reality. What's more, they have disqualified all those knowledges that can't communicate via the linear-rational formula. Anything that can't speak in the language of the master can't enter the knowledge game (of war). The lunatic text and irrational narrative are stricken from the meaning-making and meaning-verifying process. Creative digressions and narrative asides become the undisciplined junk fictions of the illiterate and unruly—the barbarians that the education system (factory) attempts to domesticate and tame. Their unstructured and messy knowledges and texts are everything the modernist crusade sought to annihilate in the name of human perfection and human progress: in the name of order and predictability, and in the *un*-naming of disorder and unpredictability.

... art can be research if the conceptualisation and thinking around the production of an artefact are sufficiently articulated. To be able to recognise art-as-research, it is necessary for student, supervisor and institution to develop appropriate literacies so that correct judgements and assessments can be made. It is also necessary to ... embrace the 'new' and not shrink away from it just because it doesn't fit old paradigms.

(Sally Berridge, 'What Does it take? Auto/biography as Performative PhD Thesis,' *FQS* 9(2), 2008)

The truly postmodern and poststructural text is almost impossible to imagine let alone enact in such a system, since the system itself demands that all such knowledges be expressed in the language and structures of the master, and the master can't speak in anything other than the orthodoxies and strictures it has set up to defend itself from any such attempts to write or think it out of existence. The essay and exegesis make it nigh on impossible to 'perform' the postmodern and poststructural in any other way than through the modernist and structuralist paradigm; in other words, through the languages, literacies, rules, and regulations of the modernist machine: and the university is a gigantic modernist (and now neo-liberal) machine. But that's another story in the sea of stories that make up our wor(l)ds. The point is that we make up such stories to protect ourselves from the "benign indifference of the universe" (to quote Meursault in Albert Camus' *The Outsider*).

It is precisely these types of non-modernist, non-conformist, illiterate texts that I seek to explore here, not to deride academic knowledge, but to enrich it: to let the excluded discourses and mar-

ginalised media back into the scholarly fold and let them speak. And **speak loudly**.

The postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher: the text he writes or the work he creates is not in principle governed by preestablished rules and cannot be judged according to a determinant judgment, by the application of given categories to this text or work. Such rules and categories are what the work or text is investigating. The artist and the writer therefore work without rules and in order to establish the rules for what *will have been made*.

(Jean-François Lyotard,  
*The Postmodern Explained*,  
1993, p. 15)



### Memoir Bricolage Outline: A 'Nobody' Narrative

Order	Medium	Year	Information
1. Introduction	Lyrical essay	2009	Theory / method / ideology
2. Mum	Letters	1974	Mum's death
3. My name	Meditation	2009	The self as language
4. Love letters	Letters	1996-2005	Failed love
5. Rehab	Diaries	2001	Alcoholism / recovery
6. Houses	Photos	1970-2009	Vagabondage / moving
7. Postcards '67	Postcards / letters	1967	Mum & Dad's courtship
8. South America	Emails	2004	Becoming a tourist
9. Coroner's reports	Sworn statements	1974	Mum's death explained
10. Alcoholism	Vignettes / montage	1970-2009	My life & alcoholism
11. Maslin Beach	Photostory	2009	Finding a place to call home
12. House	Photostory	2010	Building a house / home
13. Side stories	Meditations	2009	Theoretical reflections

**Exegetical aim:** To present a memoir in fragments and let the gaps and omissions speak. To deconstruct and reconstruct the past to build provisional presents and futures. To show possible histories and possible futures through visual and verbal texts. To build a bricolage where all stories and all meanings are provisional: *until further notice*. To avoid the temptation of telling a 'complete' and 'coherent' story about an otherwise fractured and chaotic life. To show the incompleteness of memory and memoir. To avoid the temptation of 'fixing' the past in time, space, thought, and emotion. To show *a-life-in-fragments*.



### Discontinuous Narratives

As lived by its members, time in the liquid modern society of consumers is neither cyclical nor linear, as it used to be for the members of other known societies. It is instead, to use Michel Maffesoli's metaphor, *pointillist* – or, to deploy Nicole Aubert's almost synonymous term, *punctuated* time, marked as much (if not more) by the profusion of *ruptures* and *discontinuities*, by intervals separating the links between them, than by the specific content of the spots. Pointillist time is more prominent for its inconsistency and lack of cohesion than for its elements of continuity and consistency; in this kind of time whatever continuity or causal logic may connect successive spots tends to be surmised and/or construed at the far end of the retrospective search for intelligibility and order, being as a rule conspicuously absent among the motives prompting the actors' movement between points. Pointillist time is broken up, or even pulverized, into a multitude of 'eternal instants' – events, incidents, accidents, adventures, episodes – self-enclosed monads, separate morsels, each morsel reduced to a point ever more closely approximating its geometric ideal of non-dimensionality.

(Zygmunt Bauman,  
*Consuming Life*,  
2007, p. 32)



### Non-verbal Narratives

Sculptors and theatre performers can and do try to articulate verbally what they've discovered in their art practices. But, perhaps because their art-forms are predominantly non-verbal, they are also frequently not shy about speaking out against the exegetical process, especially when it comes to recognition for the quality of their work and its impact. If your art involves ways of revealing knowledge that are, for example, visual, and you are always being asked to explain/verify/justify it verbally, then it figures that you will get frustrated and begin to fight against this, and demand that your non-verbal work be recognised for its *very non-verbalness*.

(Gaylene Perry,  
'The non-verbal and the verbal: expanding awareness of  
practice-led research in creative writing,'  
*Creativity and Uncertainty: AAWP 2008*,  
2008, pp. 7-8)

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ROAD  
CLOSED