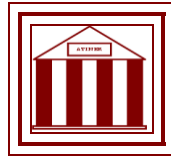


**Athens Institute for Education and Research
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**ATINER's Conference Paper Series
ART2015-1529**

**Autoethnography, Poetry, Memoir
and Performance**

**Mary-Jane Duffy
Programme Leader
Creative Writing
Whitireia New Zealand
New Zealand**

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Autoethnography, Poetry, Memoir and Performance

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Abstract

How can poetry in performance reflect memoir and historical era? In response to this question I wrote a series of poems for performance, *The Gertrude Stein Workshop*. These poems explore my obsession with the lives and work of a number of women of the 1920s Parisian Left Bank—Gertrude Stein, Colette, Sylvia Beach, Renée Vivien, Natalie Barney, Nancy Cunard, and Liane de Pougy—whose voices are recreated through the poems to talk about independence, gender, femininity, desire, identity, and art in the 1920s but also in my life.

The limitations of the performance timeslot—thirty minutes—meant that aspects of the context and backstory of the poems had to somehow be intimated. Coincidentally at the time I was learning to play some of the popular songs of the 1920s. In the way such things occur, it became obvious that these songs could accompany the poems; that they would in fact provide a shorthand for historical context.

In the early performances, songs were matched to the poems—songs by Cole Porter, the Gershwin Brothers, Al Dubin, Friedrich Hollaender, Mitchell Parrish amongst others—and interspersed with the text. The songs were performed by two musicians. This worked well enough but the songs weren't fully embedded into the performance. In this model a 'stop-start/stop-start' quality distracted and separated the musicians from the poems and from me.

A year later I was invited to read the poems at venues outside my home city. I couldn't bring the musicians with me. The songs were by now an integral part of the overall performance. I had to include them. So I decide to sing fragments of the songs myself.

Since making this decision, I have performed *The Gertrude Stein Workshop* on many more occasions. Now the voices of the women talk alongside my poetic voice, and the singing of the songs locates me in the era, while adding context, flavour, and another layer of text.

Keywords: Autoethnography, Poetry, Memoir, Women of the Left Bank, Lesbian, Performance, Practice-Based Research

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Introduction

Writing is a problem-solving exercise. At every part of the process, decisions are made on ways to solve problems, and these decisions are often returned to and rethought as the project dictates. This is the nature of practice-based research—an experimental, evaluative, and reflective practice with the development of a project at its heart. In the writing of *The Gertrude Stein Workshop*, a work about the lives and writing of a number of women writers of the Parisian Left Bank, problems to be solved included how to represent the women; how to write the place; how to include my own experience; how to unpack my obsession with these women and their writing; and how to represent their historical era. This paper will look at the ways in which I solved those problems and answer the principle question: how can poetry in performance reflect memoir and historical era?

Background

Since 2011 I have been researching a group of women writers who lived in Paris in the early twentieth century. I call the poems that resulted from this research *The Gertrude Stein Workshop*. They're love poems but they are also the imagined memoirs and voices of these women—the French writer Colette; the American expat Gertrude Stein and her partner Alice B. Toklas; socialite Natalie Barney who hosted famous salons and wrote poetry; the English poet Renée Vivien who wrote poetry and short stories in French; American ex-pat writer Djuna Barnes; Sylvia Beach who ran a famous bookshop Shakespeare and Co across the road from Adrienne Monnier, her partner's bookshop, La Maison des Amies des Livres; the prostitute Liane de Pougy who wrote a fabulous memoir called *The Blue Notebooks*; and the heiress Nancy Cunard who wrote the first history of African American culture, amongst others. They're loosely known as the Women of the Left Bank.

Shari Benstock's seminal *Women of the Left Bank 1900-40* (1986) provided much of the historical material, references and feminist framework for the early research. Numerous biographies and autobiographies have filled in the gaps and provided much of the narrative around these women's lives. Luckily these women are well documented.

It was the nineteen eighties when I first encountered some of the women. As an avid reader and Francophile, I read Colette in my early twenties and became enchanted by the *Claudine* and *Cheri* stories. Later when I studied art history at university in the 1980s, I met Gertrude Stein through her painting by Picasso and came to understand that this was a community of women. What bound them together was sexuality—many were lesbian—and also a desire to live independent lives at a time when this was not the norm. Even from the perspective of the 1980s, this was inspirational and matched my own desire for independence.

I didn't know what I wanted to do with this material until I read New Zealand poet Lynn Jenner's *Dear Sweet Harry* (2010). I had read books and single poems that processed lives—Margaret Atwood's *The Journal of Susanna Moodie* (Atwood, 1970), poems by Adrienne Rich such as 'Paula Becker to Clara Westhoff' (Rich, 1975-76/2012)—but *Dear Sweet Harry*'s point of departure was that it wound the writer's life through the poems. It explores Jenner's obsession with Harry Houdini and entwines it with her own and her uncle Harry's lives. I knew that I too wanted to be present in whatever I wrote about the women of the Left Bank.

And then a quote by Renee Vivien found me. In a short story, 'The Splendid Prostitute', written in 1904, the character Glory says to the Envious Man "...there are good and sentimental people who hope, by their writings and their works, to attract kindred spirits to their lonely condition either now or at *some time in the future*." It was an 'aha' moment. I was one of the kindred spirits from some time in the future. My writing had found companionship across time. It had found heroes and friends. It was a looped thread that attached me to the women of the city on the Seine, a thread that snakes like the river around bookshops and theatres, downstairs bars and backstreet bedrooms, opium dens and parlours. That trails behind two women as they walk a dog called Basket, circles a carriage in the Bois de Bologne, a motorcar on the Pont Neuf, and reappears in a kitchen where pots steam and dishes bake.

I imagine the thread tied at each end to a tin can, the notional telephones that children like to make. My ear strains to hear.

Themes

The manuscript explores a number of themes and it seems useful to mention those now. They include female homosexuality, romance between women, femininity that is non-conformist, the language of research, the presentness of history, and a notion of positive Feminism.

Process

As I was writing *The Gertrude Stein Workshop*, I was coincidentally learning to play American swing tunes with a friend. When I looked at the sheet music, dates jumped out—these were the songs of the era I was writing about. Further investigation revealed that American musicians flooded into Paris during the 1900-40 and that their music was hugely popular (Shack, 2001).

I work in an arts faculty, which has three lively administrators—one of them happens to be a singer, and I saw her perform around this same writing moment. In an instant it all came together. The poems would be interspersed with the songs of the period and Lee Hodson would sing them. We later solved the problem of a guitarist with a colleague from the music programme.

For the first performances of the work, I matched songs with poems. At

specific places during the reading, Lee sang songs by Cole Porter, the Gershwin Brothers, Al Dubin, Friedrich Hollander, Glen Miller, Eden Ahbez, Edith Piaf and Mitchell Parrish.

Recordings of the performance showed that this worked well enough, but the stop-start/stop-start quality of the performance bothered me. It created a distance between the musicians, the poems and me. A year later I was invited to read the poems at venues outside my home city and wasn't able to take the musicians with me. The songs by this time were an integral part of the work (more on that below) and I couldn't imagine performing it without them. As mentioned above, I'm also an amateur musician. To solve the problem, I decided to sing the songs myself—well not whole songs, but fragments and lines that added something else to the poems.

Since then, I have performed *The Gertrude Stein Workshop* on several more occasions with good reviews. Now not only do the imagined voices of the women speak alongside my poetic voice, but the songs augment the text with additional lines and quotations that add context and another layer of meaning. The song fragments evoke the era without overwhelming the poems and obviate the need for additional descriptive text.

Methodology

For me, writing poetry is an intuitive process of writing and rewriting for sound, imagery, nuance and meaning. But to reflect critically on the process and develop this work, I needed a framework.

Practice-based research provided this framework. Practice-based research positions the iterative practice of 'doing-reflecting-reading-articulating-doing' (Nelson, 2013, p.32) at the centre of the research process. To quote Marion Milner, 'Instead of doing what I imagined I ought to be doing, I began to inquire into what I was doing' (1934/2011).

The happy accident of necessity which forced me to turn the performance into a one-woman show, also gave me the opportunity to reflect on the performance, articulate the problems, and try out solutions.

The first problem was the restrictions of the timeslot which required a way to create context in a shorthand way. This was solved by adding sound—the songs chosen for their lyrics and their era. Next the songs needed to be integrated into the performance in a seamless organic way. Me singing them provided an answer to this problem. With the structure of the performance in place, I was able to focus on fine-tuning the language and texture of the work.

Autoethnography

As well as the women of the Left Bank, this work is also about me. I wanted to examine my own experience in relation to theirs. Autoethnography provides a framework for this, in particular the *personal narrative* form of autoethnography—'...stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic, research, and personal lives' (Ellis et al, 2004, p.5).

As a writer, I understand that 'Writing is a way of knowing, a method of

inquiry.’ (Richardson, 2000 in Ellis et al, 2004, p.5). And further, as poet Hugo Williams has been famously quoted as saying ‘the object [of writing poetry] is to find out something you didn’t know by collaborating with the language, that poetry is research, not self-expression’ (quoted in Duncum et al, 2011, p76). I have combined these two ideas to make poetry the vehicle for this work. Collaborating with the language to make poems has become my method of enquiry, a way of exploring my experience ethnographically connecting ‘the autobiographical and personal to the cultural, social and political’ (Ellis, 2011, p.xix)—but also to the historical.

The text

In rehearsing with the musicians for two performances, it became obvious that the poems lacked texture. There wasn’t enough variety in the voice—in fact there was only one voice and that was mine; and it wasn’t conveying the richness of the material. Rehearsing and performing the poems was a way of figuring this out, a way of listening to the poems. So even though working with the musicians didn’t quite pan out in the way I expected, they were an important part of the process.

Slowly over several more years I have rewritten the poems, experimented with voice and content, developed themes and metaphors, *enquired into what I was doing*. This process is ongoing. Discussions after performances always crystallise another aspect of what I am trying to achieve. The development of the work continues.

Story Arc

After the first round of performances, *The Gertrude Stein Workshop* went into the drawer for awhile. In the meantime I started researching and writing a novel and investigating story-telling. Joseph Campbell’s research on myth identified via Carl Jung, that historically across cultures, traditional stories more often than not, have a particular structure. He called it ‘the hero’s journey’ (Campbell, 1949).

The concept of a story arc filtered into the next iteration of *The Gertrude Stein Workshop*. This time I arranged the poems to create a sense of story. And what was the story? A story of obsession, of inspiration. A story about getting to grips with particular material, of finding kindred spirits across time and space. A multi-voice, inter-textual memoir.

The Songs

American pop music was popular in Paris in the inter-war years. It was promoted and played by American musicians and bands that relocated to the city attracted by the opportunities and the audiences (Shack, 2001). I chose particular songs to evoke the era but also to add new textual elements. In the context of the manuscript which takes female homosexuality as one of its subjects, the lyrics take on a new meaning.

I’ve got a crush on you pretty baby

*Falling in love in again never wanted to
I stand at your gate and the songs that I sing are of moonlight
There was girl, a strange enchanted girl, she wandered very far over
land and sea*

Their normal ‘reading’ is controverted. In this new context they are informed by the themes of the manuscript—themes of romance between women, female homosexuality, love between women.

Furthermore, in singing the lyric fragments, I put myself in the era but I also bring the songs with me into contemporary time. They bridge the different aspects of the manuscript across time.

Summary

The answer to the question of how poetry in performance can reflect memoir and historical era turned out to be a relatively simple one. With the addition of sound—songs written in the same era as the historical subjects of the work—the performance was able to reflect and evoke the era of the 1920-40s. The song lyrics add extra text which elaborates on the poems, and the poems give new readings of the songs. Love songs sit alongside love poems providing a background of romance and historical setting.

Practice-based research provided the methodology for arriving at this answer. Positioning the doing and making at the centre of the research process meant that the poems and the performance were informed by the iterative practice of writing (doing), reflecting, articulating, reading, and writing again. Articulating the process in this paper has re-emphasised its importance, as well as making the case for the recognition of intuition and serendipity in the process of artmaking.

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