**Tracing the immaterial spaces of *you***

Texts can become living artefacts as they poetically convey a writer's breath inspired words. Academic writers can explore such forms of writing experimenting with language that mirrors the lightness and effortless flow of breath. Such timeless configurations of words resonate with affect and may be accessed by awareness of mortality. Breath-infused writing embodies an intensity that traces the immaterial spaces of a person and can be a precious gift for our loved ones.

**Key words**

Writing as Inquiry, Timelessness, Immaterialism, resonance

**The immaterial as timeless**

Writing projects. *What next?* What should you write about during any time in your academic career? My colleague and I are talking about our writing projects. Closer to the end of her career, she feels the institution’s endless critique weighing heavily on her shoulders. Books and papers, she has written enough of them, so the question, ‘what now,’ holds interesting possibilities. What should she write about when time appears limited? Hands thrown up in the air in exasperation. She cannot think; her creative ideas have flown away, like frightened birds. But recently, her consciousness has been entertaining a small possibility, a worm of a thought, invading her brain, a writing project that could yield a worthwhile legacy for her adult children. *S*omething for them to remember *her* by. I listen, deeply, head tilted, ears cocked, full of wonder at the immensity of what she is proposing. Her final gift to them would be words that are *alive* with her voice, a vehicle for entering a worldview that was uniquely hers. It would capture the immutable and indelible thoughts, affects and contemplations of her world so that they could intimately inhabit it*.* Writing as inquiry is about drawing these traces of a person, the lilt of their voice, the look in their eyes and the music communicated through the body, all of which form the spaces of *him or her.*

*Words.* I long to hold on them as they are tangible, visible and pierce through silences. They manifest something in what was once emptiness. All words contain possibility, and yet, something about the way that I have started to cling to them bothers me. I am wary about whether my fixation to writing is an attempt to hold onto life. I do not know if these efforts are futile. And yet, I wonder about what sought of words will I leave behind, if words are indeed all that we have left when life is gone. Will they be empty ones that recount facts and sterile information, or those that contain traces of something more substantial? My colleague’s secret writing project words lead me to think about my own parents, who will one day leave me unmoored in the world. Their quiet ways will then be lost, as even my mother, who loves to write in her mother tongue, Korean, will not attempt to bridge the divide as she falters in English. *Leave me with your words,* I silently ask. Let me experience the world as you have seen and felt it, so I can still feel you close. Contemplations of my parents passing, make me consider how people prepare their loved ones for their loss. Is there any way to soften the loss?

I think of my own children, who cling onto me now with their young bodies, and consider the words would help them "conjure" me in my "gone-ness . . . through memory and imagination" (Rendle-Short, 2016, p. 234). I reflect on the smallest detail that separates me from this world and the next, and differentiates the animate body with the inanimate one. The smallest detail, a source of infinite mystery, appears to be breath. If breath is the distinctive trait that separates between the two, how can I create words that retain breath? Breath is a core circuitry of the living body, but is only visible through the passage through the body. It is easy to overlook this as it is immaterial or incorporeal and has no material form or physical state (*Merriam-Webster*, 2019). It is without physical substance, but is not insubstantial, as it is made up of matter that does not decompose.

The significance of breath is inherent in the Latin derivative ‘spirare,’ which is to breathe upon (*Merriam-Webster*, 2019). Breath carries an immortal power as to "breathe or blow into or upon," is "to infuse (something, such as life)" (*Merriam-Webster*, 2019). To breathe also means to ‘aspire,’ and to aim for something with eagerness. Breath suggests a desire and a yearning that has yet to be crystallised, and it holds the momentum for exploration of hidden wonders. To ‘inspire’ means to cause someone to have a feeling or an emotion, and to plant a seed of desire to create (*Merriam-Webster*, 2019). Breath infused writing is filled with life, which spurs on greater action. *Words.* In academia they are often considered as tools or a means to an end, I am therefore surprised at how my colleague frames writing as a gift. It is a living gift that will give her children intimate access to *her* world. She explores the possibility of leaving her words behind so that they can continue on with their dialogue. From this lens, writing appears magical and timeless.

**Language of *you***

The inadequacy of words. Language, with its fixed and material structure, cannot express our unknowable depths of the emotions, as what we pin down ceases to move and be animated with life (van Maanen, 2010). Words inevitably become limited versions of what they seek to represent. But academics doggedly persist in spite of these limitations, as writing is our favoured mode of knowledge exchange. It is how we contribute to the broader academic community. Our efforts can be counter-productive, however, as we seek to establish legitimacy by removing subjectivity and voice, thinking that this will help us to measure the value of our work. The hard edges of academic style can further constrict, and like ill-fitting shoes that chafe and stifle, they can leave us painfully hobbling around. Rendle-short (2015) critiques “conventional scholarly writing, its ‘natural order,’ the linear arrangement around a central theme, the authoritative text of thesis-body-conclusion where explaining is the main function; where it is not considered entertainment and there is no place for digression or repetition – or play. . .” (p.92). She understands the limitations of linearity and seeks to move past it, as having developed a richer and more nuanced understanding of language, she is now ready to explore “other arrangements and derivations, exclamation and phrasing: ‘what to look at’ and ‘how to think’ "(Rendle-Short, 2016, p.242).

A greater fluidity of form can give shape to what is difficult to pin down, such as intent, affect and resonance. Rendle-Short (2016) eludes to this craft of making visible hidden possibility as she describes Knausgaard’s skillful capturing of presence and absence in *A Death in the Family*, reflecting, “There is not. There itself. . . He entertains possibilities, that there is ‘there’ as writing as presence and ‘there’ as writing as absence. He acts, makes decisions” (p. 236) to encapsulate a “. . . a new grammar of life, and death” (p.237). Her discoveries concerning Knausguard’s enigmatic writing style takes her to the spaces of an intensive care unit, where she sees her unconscious mother lying in a hospital bed, recovering from an operation.

Not ‘what happened there’ in ICU, not ‘what actions played out’, but the intangible, the unspoken, unbidden, the hard-to-conjure, the absence present in her body, presence left by her absence – the gaps between words and phrases in sentences, the held breath made by pause, the space between us marked by space (air and length). This scene is so emotionally charged (Rendle-Short, 2016, pp. 237).

Through experimentation and play, we can uncover words that resonate. With play there is no such thing as a mistake, as “Imaginative thinking, creative solutions, surmise and anticipation come out of playing with idein (what is seen) and eidos (the giving of form)” (Rendle-Short, 2015, p.92). The ability to play means to give rise to the ‘not yet,’ which Pearce (2010) defines as a suggestive mindset and the ability to forge new insights and connectivity by testing out new paths. Play opens up our field of vision, allowing us to catch a glimpse of the felt sense that would otherwise pass us by.

Playful experimentation enables us to create a “new sort of grammar” that allows readers to see, hear, touch and smell the very same sensations that a writer encounters (Rendle-Short, 2016, p. 242). To this end, a writer needs to be like an artist, and to deliberate on “the shape of words, its configuration, arrangement . . .” to ascertain their impact (Rendle-Short, 2015, p.93). They need to craft forms that are circular, recursive and not linear, and nuanced enough to depict light, depth and movement. Rendle-Short (2015) provides an example of Malcolm’s *Forty-One False Starts*, where she writes about the artist David Salle, who is fearless, borderless and provocative in his art. Malcolm embodies a similar abandonment to parody Salle’s “melancholy art of fragments, quotations, absences – an art that refuses to be any one thing or to find any one thing more interesting, beautiful, or sobering than another” (37). To write about Salle's work is to take on a similar poetic lens, and to mimic his unconventional montage approach that enables discoveries and digressions.

***Words* that trace my** **mother**

*“To begin (writing, living) we must have a death”* (Cixous, 1993, p. 7).

This idea of writing ‘presence’ leads me to my mother, whose spaces I seek to trace. “Her north and south is so far away,” my mother had once told an old acquaintance. She had once used the points of a compass to describe me, revealing his lens to view the world. She had translated a well-known saying in her mother tongue to English to lay bare her insights. The effect was beautiful and *poetic*. The north and south are far away, in fact, they are opposite poles and can never touch. Despite the limited English words available to her, she was able to convey the mystery of the immaterial parts of the self, which lies neither here nor there, but everywhere, and is not black and white but nuanced and poles apart, flowing like colour and emotion, more often felt than thought, and awakened by a pain, suffering and joy. She could sum up the essence of something in a single breath, making communication appear as effortless and vital as breath. Vivid. Colourful, striking and with an abundance of feeling. *These are the spaces of her.* Where does such a poetic state of being derive from?

*Death.* An awareness of breath also encompasses a knowledge of its cessation, which is death. “I will live until I am fifty,” my mother had declared as a young girl. That was my mother, who even as a young child, would express sentiments so strong that they would take my breath away. Her intensity was both overwhelming and intoxicating, and regardless of her strong gravitational pull, I felt the need to distance the space between us. She had supposed that fifty was the age when the sun shone the brightest, and wanted to leave the world with a heart beating fast, unable to bear the *decline.* She had not realised as a child, how quickly this time would come. A desire for life thankfully overruled after the birth of her children, as newfound responsibility generated a will to live. She was able to overcome the melancholy that emerged with her birth as the third daughter in a patriarchal family, which signalled the death of her parent’s hope of a son. It was a time of mourning, rather than joy, as she could not carry down my grandfather’s family name, and as she married into her husband’s family, she would look after his parents rather than them in their old age. Her oldest sister had described how their father had he left their exhausted mother alone in the room, facing the wall and wailing aloud in despair. My grandmother had disgraced her family by only producing daughters and my mother had never fully recovered from the wounds.

*Mourning.* Cixous (1993) proposes that both in writing and in life, there are three schools of thought. The first of these is the School of the Dead. Cixous (1993) writes that living or writing requires a death, or an exit, as this opens a door to unknown places and realms of greater possibility. She explains that courage is required to step through this door to access what she elusively terms as the “truth” (p. 8) or “the primitive picture. . . the one that frightens us” (p.9). Without a death, she argues that there can be no movement into the unknown, as she states, “Writing is learning to die. It’s learning not to be afraid, in other words to live at the extremity of life, which is what the dead, death, give us” (p.10). Cixous (1993) hints at the hidden gains within death, such as an “overabundance” and an “extraordinarily vital stream” (p. 11) as she confesses how her first book was inspired by her father’s death. His death had awakened a realisation of what mattered. She expresses feeling drawn to “mortally wounded” writers, who could access a liminality of sight to identify *what matters* through an awareness of mortality (p. 32). Such writers, she believes are the salt of life.

*Hunger.* For six years of her childhood, my mother went without eating her lunch. A full day of learning passed by with nothing to sustain her through it. This was the cost of being the ‘third’ daughter. The memory had slipped out not so long ago during a passing conversation, and without self-pity or emotion, she related how my grandmother had only packed ‘four’ lunch boxes each morning despite eventually going onto have five children. Her other two younger siblings were sons, and received every advantage that she was denied. Only my mother went to school without food each day, not ever thinking to ask for it. She was also only given milk to drink after her eldest sister begged their mother for it. My mother accepted all this without complaint, taking in whatever mistreatment she received as her ‘lot’ in life, instinctively feeling, deeply through her body, that she was unloved and unwanted. “Even babies can recognise when they are a burden,” she said. Being rejected by the people who are supposed to care for you has a lasting impact. You are less able to ask for things as you think you do not deserve them. No joy to light up someone’s eyes to greet you; she had understood too early, the void. The brave will to live, of shoulders firm and high, coloured by anxiety. The hunger of the body and the spirit fermenting to create an intensity of longing.

*I have respect and admiration for those writers who, in their lifetime, have approached that point where cowardice and courage are so close to each other they might fly into the flames if they were to say one word more* (Cixous, 1993, p. 37).

*Intensity.* Hunger alerts to the body. The ache of the body awakens the knowledge of being alive. It stokes the fire of intensity and gives rise to voices that sit on a knife’s edge. Cixous (1993) expresses feeling intoxicated by writers who can commune with an intensity that evokes a pain so great that it feels like joy, labelling them as “writers of *extremity,* those who take themselves to the extremes of experience, thought, life” (p. 34). Such extremity impacts all fields of their life. It is fully embodied. I think Cixous would have felt close to my mother, whose emotions were like clear notes coming from an unknown place, resonating extremity in experience, thought and life. She spoke in a mortally wounded voice, the hurt of her childhood deeply embedded. Such writers, she declares, speak from the “direction of truth,” as they unravel and expose life for what it is, something, which might only be attained through one’s “final hour,” which she defines as “the hour of relinquishing all the lies that have helped us live” (pp. 36-37). Pain has the potential to awaken human soul, and to bring on a ravishing intensity. Broyard, a journalist who was diagnosed with cancer, expresses such a wholehearted desire for life as his mortality looms, as he writes, “I am filled with desire-to live, to write, to do everything. Desire itself is a kind of immortality” (1992, p.32). Every encounter feels, “vivid, multicolored and sharply drawn” as he becomes aware of the “eloquence” of living (p.32). Moments become *sharply drawn* as they hold greater significance, poignance. There is no time for dishonesty.

*Honesty.* Cixous (1993) regards such “truth” telling to slice through the easy and comforting lies that underpin our lives. She considers lies to be a necessity of living, as “truths,” such as the reality of our mortality “hurts everyone” (p.37). An honest confrontation of what is difficult can accordingly be synonymous to death. Such honesty involves unearthing the primitive, the rawness of life and death that “frightens us" and may make us “tremble, redden, bleed”(Cixous, 1993, p. 32). This is, as she states, the only worthwhile way to live. There is little room for dishonesty on the edge of a knife as bodies are overpowered and laid bare. Growing up, I remember the pain of honesty. My sounding board of truth was her body, which I would try to read each day. Life was tenuous as our family survived through the earnings of a drab little shop that barely made ends meet. It had a little cash register, which to the agony of my parents, would often remain closed. I would watch my mother’s face like a hawk, hoping to catch a glimpse of our future. When the register had only rung open a couple of times, darkness covered her face like an ominous storm. There were many such days, especially when the wind blew wildly outside, and people drew their purses closer to their chests. But during the rare times, closer to Christmas, when business was good, her eyes would sparkle and exude radiance. I carefully examined her face each day to catch the signs of safety. I had wanted to know the “truth” even though it caused me pain and distress.

*Beauty.* The beauty of intensity can emerge from despair. There is no room for *just getting by,* as true anguish is all-encompassing and potentially redemptive. The redemption comes as vibrance emerges from this sense of closing door, as Cixous (1993) writes, “We cannot bear to tell the truth, except in the final hour, at the last minute, since to do so earlier costs too much” (p. 36). But once this moment of “truth” comes, it can enable an act of revelation or creation, so stunning, that life may never the same. There is also the act of letting go of self-protection and security, to abandon oneself to the possibilities. Cixous (1993) introduces this point as she proposes, “. . . writing is writing what you cannot know before you have written: it is preknowing and not knowing, blindly, with words. It occurs at the point where blindness and light meet” (p.38). Cixous reminds us to write to generate life, rather than reciting empty words that hold no mystery. Writing’s potential to generate life equally leads Colyar (2009) to describe it as “an act of self-witnessing” that enables the process of “becoming” (pp.428-429).

**Capturing the immaterial: “spirare”**

Breath-like writing emerges from equally immaterial parts, or words that are infused with *breath*. Any additional weight is to be chipped away, so that only the lasting core remains. Breath-infused words flow as effortlessly as breathing, but surprisingly, enormous effort is required to construct this natural flow, as Colyar (2009) writes, “Done well, writing looks easy, but in fact it is incredibly difficult. . . Complete papers are never written, only re-written (p.422). Britton et al. (1975) also propose that writing becomes more difficult as skill increases, perhaps suggesting that nuanced understanding requires equally supple forms. Effortlessly writing that flows like music on the page involves endless revision. And through listening for rhythm and making endless adjustments, we can develop a finely honed 'ear' for simple breath-infused words, as Cixous (1993) writes, “I have an ear for a certain type of writing that doesn’t hesitate to go beyond the self. . . These texts move me, touch me, strike me with blows of the axe . . .[and] give me such intense joy that it resembles pain” (p. 36). She has developed an ‘ear’ for writers who speak with intensity. The acuteness of her hearing for such words enables her to feel alive and present.

Creative constructions of grammar follow the rising rhythms of the inhale and exhale. So close is the grammar to the spoken and felt word, it is possible to hear the person’s voice inside your head. Pearce (2010) refers to this felt, immaterial matter as affect, stating, “Affects are not to be equated with emotions but transitions from one state to another. Therefore, they can neither be represented in any straightforward way nor be hermeneutically recovered, for their life is one of the suggestions that exists in the in-between—between the not yet and the possible; the virtual and the actual; being and becoming—they need to be brought into being in every sense of the term” (p.905). Affect has been defined as “intensities that pass body to body (human and nonhuman), in those resonances that circulate about, between and sometimes stick to bodies and worlds” (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 1) that is guided by movements, rhythms with the individual, which passes onto the next, as the “ rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter” and “travers[es] the ebbs and swells of intensities that pass between ‘‘bodies’’ (Seigworth & Gregg, 2010, p. 2). Affect suggests responsiveness and movement. There is an ebb and a swell, and a large sweeping tide that carry emotion into other bodies. To write about affect means to be attuned to the energy, vibrance or breath of a person. Affect consists of the immaterial parts that can be felt through resonance. Wikan (1992), an anthropologist, reflects on the power of resonance as she an attempt to understand those who speak a different language. She seeks to find resonance by listening to the underlying message and by “attend[ing] to what people say and the intent they are trying to convey, rather than groping for some “larger” answers within the particulars of their spoken words” (p. 467).

To begin capturing words that resonate with my mother, I breathe in *her* spaces through the body, guided by rhythms and configurations that resonate. The shape of words are painstakingly crafted, as I ask each step of the way, “which word is right?” (Colyar, 2009, p.430). My innermost thoughts slowly manifest through writing expressively. Britton (1971) reflects on how closely expressive writing reflects inner meaning, as he relates, “Expressive speech is language close to the speaker. . . [in which] attention is freely verbalised . . . in expressive speech that we get to know one another, each offering his [sic] unique identity and (at our best) offering and accepting both what is common and what differentiates us (p.207). Britton (1971) positions the expressive mode on a writing continuum that moves from the transactional, expressive to poetic. The role of the “participant” and “spectator” lie on either end of the spectrum. The participants take on a transactional role, whilst a spectator’s view is poetic, as Britton states, “When the demands made of a participant (in the world's affairs) are at a maximum, we have called the function 'transactional', a term that will need no explaining. Where the use of language in spectator role achieves its fullest satisfactions, we have called the function 'poetic'” (p. 210). The participant has a functional role through initiating purposeful action, whilst a spectator “holds” and “savours” an encounter through “emotions dynamically related” (Britton, 1971, p. 211). Poetic writing can be savoured through a gaze of appreciation; its words resonate as the words are infused with breath.

**Spaces and traces of the immaterial**

A new comforting thought emerges, which tells me that not all is lost as my parents’ words, to some degree, live on in me. Their colours have become imbued through sharing spaces, like a dye, as I have unconsciously ingested their worldviews. As I write the spaces of my mother, I can subsequently hear the rich timbre and melody of her voice and can sense her “extremity of feeling." Cixous (1993) relates how the immaterial parts of one person can be shaped by similar parts of another, as she declares writing can be a “marvelous gift of constantly bringing back our dead alive,” so that we can be a “guardian, the friend, the regenerator of the dead,” as opposed to killing them all over again (p.12). Writing that does not contain traces of the immaterial and affect is to snuff out life, whilst writing from the immaterial self is to affirm the life of the speaker. To blow breath into words is to infuse them with breath, mist-like; they carry something esoteric that transcends the material world. This notion of timelessness is reflected in Cixous’s (1993) thoughts on reading Clarice Lispector in 1977:

She appeared so great and strong in her text that I didn’t think of her outside of it. I read her above and beyond Clarice Lispector. What carried me, what retained me, was the power of her thought. I spent a year listening to what she was saying, without thinking about her. It was all in the eternal future. And suddenly, I was told she had died. I believe this didn’t affect me at all, because I hadn’t thought of her as either alive or dead. The life and death of Clarice Lispector had remained in another world I was in the future of Clarice Lispector’s texts (p. 35).

I didn’t know how to articulate the value of the immaterial in academic writing, but the puzzle pieces slowly fell into place when I heard my colleague ruminate about her writing project. She spoke of a gift of words that would convey her presence, a steady heartbeat that spoke louder than words themselves. To understand the value of ‘presence’ and breath-inspired writing, is to perceive writing as a gift of life. This gift would contain permanent traces of *you*, the parts that feel so real and near, the ones that would speak in your place. I dream of such writing, as professionally, my words are carefully curated, with little hint of dangerous emotion. I am a writer who holds back, someone is dishonest through partial engagement, focusing on what I think others want to hear, rather than what matters. But fortunately, the more I seek words that sit on the edge of a knife, the more I can hear and appreciate them. Sontag touches on this point through the term “ethics of seeing’” and uses the analogy of how photographs can “alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe” (1977, p.3). The lens of the camera directs us by narrowing down frame of perception. In our writing we similarly choose to frame our sight of vision by latching onto glimpses of the immaterial or words that settle onto surfaces like dust. Writing the immaterial is an ethical act. It involves passing through death’s door and to emerge with the unearthly skill of weaving words that breathe as *living* forms.

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