

Thinking Through Relation

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**Review of**

**Mussnug, Florian, Mathelinda Nabugodi, and Thea Petrou (eds.), *Thinking through Relation: Encounters in Creative Critical Writing*. Oxford: Peter Lang, 2021.**

*Thinking through Relation: Encounters in Creative Critical Writing* offers rich inspiration for the increasing number of writers keen to muddy the traditional distinction between creative and academic writing. The originality of the collection's offering to this practice derives from the connections of many of its contributors to the trans-national disciplinary archives and approaches developed in Modern Languages and Comparative Literature departments, with some also based in the related field of Visual Culture. Exemplifying the agility of creative critical writing to attend to urgent current concerns within cultural studies—such as the situatedness of knowledge, relational knowledge practices, and how we articulate these (inter)disciplines' relation of the 'real world'—what emerges is a sense of the vital relevance of this practice to these (inter)disciplines and their futures. I would challenge any academic writer to read the essays and not be at least a little tempted to join in.

To begin, it is important to note that the essays are not held together by a shared topic. In fact, presenting a snapshot of interests across these (inter)disciplines, the collection offers fresh readings of writers and artists with whom many readers will be familiar, including Apollinaire, Beckett, Benjamin, Calvino, Dalí, Genet, Nooteboom and Roubard. It also highlights a range of current trends in cultural studies research, from ecocriticism to creative translation practices. While the individual essays will be of interest to scholars studying those topics, the strength of the collection is their shared concern for *how* we write about such topics. Through shifting away from the view of academic writing as a neutral framework into which original ideas are slotted, the essays offer a plurality of approaches that contribute to the development of an academically rigorous creative critical practice that recognises that the form of writing is itself constitutive of its conceptual arguments.

The prelude introduces this shared concern by referencing Timothy Mathews, whose work as Professor of French and Comparative Criticism at University College London inspires each essay.

Art asks what the relation is of form to content. Questions about art are questions about life: about the point at which things begin to mean. Where is the line crossed from a transient perception to a moment of wonder or wound? (1)

If writers are to take seriously this proposition, recognising the entanglement between what we think about art and so-called real life, and maybe even touch on the very reason why many of us dedicate time to experiencing art (that 'moment of wonder or wound'), the neutrality of traditional academic writing can only go so far. For many readers, interest in *Thinking through Relation* will derive from its response to Felski who sheds light on the style of analysis that has become the norm in recent decades: critique. Critique positions the writer as the expert who is able to use their academic training in order to offer an impartial

interpretation of the text of which the non-specialist would be incapable. As anyone who has written an undergraduate critical essay has encountered, critique's claim to impartiality means that you avoid the first-person voice, and *absolutely do not* include how the text, or artwork, made you feel. Felski highlights how this approach results in writing missing out on the affective, unpredictable richness of aesthetic encounters, leaving academic writers with a challenge: how can we capture this unpredictable richness without losing the intellectual rigour maintained by the third-person impartiality of critique? Before reading *Thinking through Relation*, I was not familiar with the work of Mathews. However, his influence on the collection makes clear that his work provides exciting examples with which explore this question.

Towards the beginning of the collection Tim Beasley-Murray provides a refreshing reflection from his privileged perspective as professor on the sometimes ritualistic game of academic writing. Creative critical writing allows writers to playfully break old rules in a way that more effectively articulates the entangled relation between a work of art and ourselves, academic writers who are 'whole human beings' (86). With differing approaches, all essays in the collection seek to make visible the life of the scholar alongside their objects of study, providing valuable examples of Beasley-Murray's claim. They show that foregrounding individual subjectivity does not take away from academic rigour, but can elevate its capacity to capture more precisely the impact of a work of art as 'wonder or wound'. For example, Delphine Grass recounts her relationship with archival work, a relationship motivated and interwoven with her family memories, defined as much by the trans-national history of Alsace as by her bond to her grandfather's body, which for she accesses through her personal experience of its translation into two unconnected statues. The starting point of Emily Orley's essay is a request made by Mathews for her to read a piece of his writing (*Ten Years On*, which is about his visit to a memorial to Picasso). This develops into a meditation on how acts of reading open doors between otherwise unconnected pasts in a way that encompasses her as a reader, who is pushed through these doors to write herself.

Many of the essays show the capacity of creative critical practice to access a different kind of intellectual precision through shifting away from the goal-oriented forms of traditional academic analytic argument. Jenny Chamarette describes her dissent from academic rectilinear structures as writing *slantwise*, a practice through which she conjoins ideas about honouring provided by other writers and musicians with her own anxious questioning about how she can honour another writer—Timothy Mathews. What she achieves by this is a more emotionally precise response to the question of her essay. Mathelinda Nabugodi's essay also stands out in this regard. Her essay reflects on what mediates our relation to the past through the archives. However, instead of explicitly informing the reader what is of interest here (in the style of traditional academic writing), Nabugodi is more creative, exploring the topic through practising a structure described as the 'art of relation'. Instead of traditional theoretical methods, this is a way of mediating the archives by placing historical events and documents beside one another and inviting the reader to identify their interconnections. Florian Mussnug's essay, 'an exercise in cluttered thinking', takes a similar approach to shed light on the capacity of literature to help us to comprehend, and actively deal with, environmental threats (119).

These modalities—keeping the life of the scholar visible and using structures that avoid the goal-oriented underpinnings of traditional academic writing—are what enable the creative critical practices presented by the collective to capture something of the entanglement between writers and works of art, and touch on their capacity to 'wonder or wound'. *Thinking*

*through Relation* also demonstrates how this approach may, more wholeheartedly than critique, address pressing, interconnected areas of concern, including the value of relational knowledge practices, the ethical responsibility of situating academic knowledge practices and the civic value of artists and those who interpret their work for providing insight for what is classed the ‘real world’. While these concerns may be traced in several essays (for example those by Sharon Morris and Mussgnug), it is the interview between Helena Carvalhão Buescu and Mussgnug that offers greatest insight about this capacity. Taking as an example the oriental framework of South-ism, the dialogue sheds light on how creative critical practice foregrounds aesthetic experience not simply as seen through an expert academic lens but, by attending to the specificity of the scholar’s position, as a plurality of possible receptions.

In seeking to contribute to the development of creative critical writing, several of the essays are notable in their offerings from the transnational knowledge practices of Modern Languages and Comparative Literature. These include the interview with poet Jérôme Game about the relation between text and art, and the essays by Patrick Ffrench and Clare Finburgh Delijani which explore Beckett and Genet as creative critical practitioners. There are also essays which reflect on acts of breaching the gap between theoretical academic practices and artistic practices that traditionally take place outside of these: Morris’s essay which starts from her own poetic practice, Stephen Hart’s reflection on his experience of the productive synergies between practice-based and quantitative methods within film studies, as well as Jane Fenoulhet’s and Clive Scott’s contributions focused on creative practices of translation.

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How should I conclude?

Chamarette’s anxious questioning about the capacity of her writing to honour aligns with my own. Taking a traditional form of the review, I hope to have provided some guidance to help readers understand how its essays may be of interest. But I have not achieved the emotional precision that I enjoyed in the essays.

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Even though the editors write in the prelude that any grouping of the essays is provisional because of their many interconnections, the collection structures the essays into five parts. However, at the back of the book, readers find an ‘index of relation’, which tracks the criss-crossing movement of ideas across the essays, creating a Borgesian maze, ‘a place to get lost’ (295). These pages may offer a more precise review of *Thinking through Relation*.

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Chamarette describes her honouring as an embodied relation, one expressive of a personal friendship. In fact, the inspiration provided by Mathews for each contributor is as much his writing as the personal affection each holds towards him, as a colleague and teacher. I don’t know Tim. But, as Orley finds, texts that reveal the writer looking are also ones that open a door to their reader. I have struggled to write anything since completing my doctoral thesis two years ago, yet reading the collection I feel the same generosity that Orley finds in Mathews’ work.

A widening. It is a writing that makes me want to write myself.

**Works cited**

Felski, Rita, *The Limits of Critique* (University of Chicago Press, 2015)

Mathews, Timothy, *Alberto Giacometti: The Art of Relation* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2013)