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# Creative Practice as a Way of Life After Barthes


Eddie Tay

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Eddie Tay

# Creative Practice as a Way of Life

*After Barthes*

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Part of this book was written during my sabbatical leave in Singapore  
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*For May Lyn. Titus, Tabitha and Peggy.*

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

**Abstract** This introductory chapter explores the key concerns of this book in relation to the prevailing debates in the field and summarises the chapters that follow. It argues for a fusion of creative practices with the research process.

**Keywords** Autoethnography · Creative practices · Practice-led research · Dwelling · Roland Barthes

This is a book on the creative practices of writing poems and taking street photographs. It is a work of autoethnography, which enables the reconciliation of personal experiences with larger issues in the scholarship of creative practice. The overarching premise is that through an autoethnography of creative practices, various aspects of everyday life can be examined critically. The writings of Roland Barthes, in particular, his seminar papers in the later part of his life, are used as starting points for many of the discussions that follow. Barthes is known as a semiotician and later as a post-structuralist interested in articulating the personal alongside phenomenological examinations of writing and photography. It is the later Barthes that is of interest to us.

Creative practices take place within specific socio-cultural contexts, and in this case, the cities of Hong Kong and Singapore provide the settings for the author's creative work. Much like other global cities, these two hypercapitalist environments intensify the relationship between the practical rationality of commerce and the aesthetic impulses of creativity, both of which are sometimes at odds with each other. Capitalism requires efficiency and the clarity of goals. In contrast, the creative process, which sometimes requires one to linger, ruminate on and revisit previously covered terrain to accomplish an initially vaguely intuited outcome might seem unproductive to someone with a capitalist mindset. Someone who values creative practice as an end in itself would have to wrestle with the fact that, as Brian Massumi puts it, "the dominant notion of value in our epoch is economic" (5). Two related concepts, capitalist realism and depressive realism, are explored later in the book in relation to creative practices.

### CREATIVE PRACTICE AS RESEARCH

In this book, we think with poems and street photographs. This book makes the point that for creative practitioners, particularly those situated or trained within academia, the boundaries between creative practice and scholarly research are porous, which allows for creative practices to be informed by critical scholarship, and vice versa. This allows for the fusion of the outcomes of creative practice with research. As such, it argues that for a book such as this, poems and street photographs constitute research in that they enable a productive dialogue between artistic mediums and academic writing. Such an approach is already commonplace for proponents of poetic inquiry, an academic field committed to "the quest of engagement with concrete experiences" of creative practices (Galvin and Prendergast xv).

A critically informed creative practice enables a measure of reflexivity on the part of the artist, hence crystallising themes that would otherwise remain latent. It also enables the artist to be aware of critical discussions in cognate fields, hence allowing her work to speak to researchers in related disciplines. For instance, as evident in later chapters, the practice of street photography allows for an engagement with debates concerning modernity and the experience of the city. Likewise, in the case of creative writing, a poet interested in expanding her craft may look to research on Language Poetry to interrogate the otherwise unconscious limits of

her writing process that are circumscribed by the literary movements of Romanticism and Imagism.

In a similar manner, literary and visual arts scholars would look to the creative process to uncover the personal, social and cultural parameters operating on the artist. Drawing from Martin Heidegger's notion of "praxical knowledge", which is the knowledge that can be acquired only via practice (such as driving, teaching and surgery), Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt have made the bold claim that this form of knowledge "implies that ideas and theory are ultimately the result of practice rather than vice versa" (6). In contrast, Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean argue that "that academic research can lead to creative practice" and that research and practice are "interwoven in an iterative cyclic web" (2). The approach in this book follows Smith and Dean's notion that both practice-led research and research-led practice are ultimately interlinked, sometimes to the point where they are indistinguishable.

The meaning of "research" for the artist takes two forms. As Linda Candy points out, "private" or "personal" research involves the solitary act of acquiring knowledge of materials, implements or works required in the process of embarking on a project (236). This form of research is sometimes idiosyncratic and performed in an ad hoc manner, in accordance with the process of preparing for or creating a new work. For a street photographer in a new city, this may involve walking around certain neighbourhoods, going to galleries or looking at the works of photographers who have photographed the city. Such quotidian activities are usually omitted from mention in research publications, though they are often necessary and crucial to the creative process. The other form of research, which Candy calls "shared" or "formal" research, "requires methods, data and findings that can be scrutinised by peers" and this involves the discussion of methodologies as well as an engagement with theories (236). This is more deliberate and calculated, involving critical engagement with, say, the potential and limitations of psychogeographical explorations as inaugurated by Guy Debord. These two forms of research may overlap, though it is formal research which is more commonly articulated via publications. Nonetheless, as this book argues, it is personal research which is often elided in formal publications that are often critical to the creative process.

To foreground creative practices as a form of research is to foreground processual knowledge that sometimes escapes formal discussion.

John Keats' notion of negative capability, which involves "being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" best describes such processual knowledge (314). How is one to articulate these uncertainties, mysteries and doubts in ways that are critically and theoretically relevant? More often than not, instead of a fully defined outcome, the creative practitioner allows for various elements of the work to come together, such that the outcome is emergent rather than predefined. Perhaps the metaphor of crystallisation may suffice to describe this process, in that various scattered seeds of crystals are allowed to grow to the point where they gradually coalesce into an organically whole terrain.

Another useful metaphor would be that of the rhizome, a philosophical approach inaugurated by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. For them, "any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be" (7). To regard the creative practice as a form of research is to embrace a nonlinear mode of activity, whereby the process is recursive and the connections to a nodal point are multiple. For a street photograph or lines in a poem, there may be several points of connections, ranging from the personal to the historical to the psychogeographical. This book will follow the multiple paths such connections make.

## AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF CREATIVE PRACTICE

Autoethnography may be regarded as an important nodal point in this book. The genre of academic writing known as autoethnography is allied with ethnography and anthropology. It draws attention to how personal experiences inform larger social and cultural issues, even as one may examine how those very same issues circumscribe personal experiences. There is a spectrum to the writing of autoethnography, ranging from evocative autoethnography to analytic autoethnography.

Evocative autoethnography emphasises the act of telling stories to elicit emotional responses as part of one's knowledge acquisition. It is associated with the work of Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, with the latter's *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (2004) being an exemplary text. Ellis "intentionally combine fictional and ethnographic scenes", such that through dramatised narratives featuring themselves as characters in a novel, it presents the work of scholarship as interactions among individuals who undergo the experience of discovery via reading, writing and dialogues (xx).

Analytic autoethnography lies at the other end of the spectrum. Leon Anderson, a proponent of this mode, foregrounds “analytic reflexivity” and “commitment to theoretical analysis” as two of its core components (378). By analytic reflexivity, Anderson means that the autoethnographer has a “dual role as a member in the social world under study and as a researcher of that world” (384). This implies that there is a responsibility on the part of the researchers to “reveal themselves as people grappling with issues” pertaining to their “membership and participation” in the world they are studying, such that an objective and authoritative point of view may not actually exist (384). By commitment to theoretical analysis, there is the injunction “not simply to document personal experience” but to contextualise such experiences in relation to larger academic debates in the field as to further the shared endeavour at understanding the theoretical underpinnings of social and cultural phenomena (386). This book leans towards analytic autoethnography in its engagement with the psychogeographical affordances of modernity and everyday life, at times highlighting everyday personal and familial experiences from which critical engagement emerges. It also seeks to be evocative in the way it emphasises the doubts and uncertainties of a writer, such as when he seeks to broaden his poetic vocabulary by looking towards Language poetry.

Concerning this book being an autoethnography of creative practices, it has been argued that “[t]he interface between autoethnography and artistic research has been synergetic with both fields developing within roughly the same time span” (Bartleet 133). There have been autoethnographies engaging with the mediums of visual arts, music and dance, all of them involving a “quest for understanding that is emergent, generative, and responsive” that sometimes entails “an improvisatory mode of inquiry” (138). As we shall see in the later chapters, such an improvisatory mode is aligned with the peripatetic nature of street photography. As such, it is the language of autoethnography that facilitates the articulation of personal research as previously mentioned that would otherwise remain occluded from formal discussions in scholarship.

Hence, Heidegger’s notion of dwelling is an important element to this book. Tim Ingold writes of dwelling as an intransitive act, as “the immersion of beings in the currents of the lifeworld without which such activities as designing, building and occupation could not take place at all” (10). Much of this book “insists on the primacy of process over product”, focusing on the intransitive, on act of observing urban scenes

via taking street photographs as well as observing one's own practice of poetry writing (Ingold 9).

### LATE BARTHES

While one would not regard Roland Barthes as an autoethnographer, there are heightened reflexive moments in his writing that are instructive for anyone interested in the autoethnography of creative practices. This book is informed by Barthes' thoughts on writing as an object (material texts to be read) and as a process (of reading and writing). In his later years, Barthes' works moved away from an impersonal structuralist approach to literature and culture as in the case of *The Fashion System* (1967), among others, to a more life-writing-centred approach as evidenced in works such as *A Lover's Discourse* (1977) and *Camera Lucida* (1980). His lectures on writing practice at the Collège de France, collected in his notes now published as *How to Live Together: Novelistic Simulations of Some Everyday Spaces* (2002), *The Neutral* (2002) and *The Preparation of the Novel* (2003), consisting of ruminations on the organisation of a writer's life and his or her writing process. Barthes regards "*writing* as a radical practice, an obsessive labor, *a way of life*" [italics in original] (*Preparation* 211). At various moments in his lectures, the focus on the practical aspects of writing is informative to literary and creative arts practitioners.

Barthes writes of a fourfold typology of writing roles: first, the *persona* is "the everyday, empirical, private individual who 'lives' without writing"; second, the *scriptor* is "the writer as social image, the one who gets talked about"; third, the *auctor* is "the *I* who considers himself [or herself] the *guarantor* of what he [or she] writes; father [or mother] of the book, accepting his [or her] responsibilities" and finally, the *scribens* is "the *I* who's engaged in the practice of writing, who's in the process of writing, who lives writing everyday [sic]" [italics in original] (*Preparation* 211). The first and second roles are projected roles, in that these are writerly roles externally envisioned by others. The third and fourth roles are roles internalised by the writer. In this way, Barthes argues for "a return to the author" (*Preparation* 208). He acknowledges that he is consciously moving away from his "Death of the Author" thesis that "repressed the author, or at least deprived him [or her] of consciousness" (*Preparation* 208). This book is largely concerned with the third and fourth roles, in the way in which the author takes responsibility for his or her creative acts

and also the process of literary and artistic creation that is envisioned as a way of life.

By regarding one's "life as work", Barthes extends the remit of the creative process from the act of writing to one's approach to everyday life (*Preparation* 207). He writes of the tedium of everyday life that detracts from writing, of "administrative tasks" that represent for him "so many little demons that come along to upset, break up the unity of the work in the process of being written" (*Preparation* 222). The detail to which he writes of the creative process is evidenced by his comments on the writer's desk, "which is a localization of functions and connections between micro-functions, for example, the writing surface, lighting, writing instruments, paper clips" (*Preparation* 235). Here, the quotidian details of his writing process elucidate his thinking process for us, drawing the link between the physical environment of writing and critical thought. As such, his notion of idiorrhhythmic life is perhaps best thought of as the rhythm of everyday routines centred around creative practice.

Indeed, the focus on creative practice in this book is particularly animated by Barthes' intertwined notions of idiorrhhythmy, ideosphere and xeniteia. It has been argued that Barthes' "fantasy of an idiorrhhythmic life reveals itself to be a productive way of thinking" (Stene-Johansen et al. 11). It is a fantasy because it is an ideal that cannot be brought to complete fruition. Nonetheless, it is a productive way of thinking because it enables a solitary and at times idiosyncratic way of life that does not entirely alienate one from society. Barthes describes it as "[s]omething like solitude with interruptions" (*Live Together* 6). By thinking in terms of temporality, the individual is conceived not as fully located within social and institutional regimes; rather, the rhythm of the individual life weaves in and out of alignment with social and institutional rhythms. In this way, one's autonomous pursuits may find social and institutional affiliation at various moments of synchronicity, as in the case of Barthes' singular approach to literature and culture which finds articulation at the Collège de France.

Idiorrhhythmy is a response to the ideosphere; Barthes describes the ideosphere as "the linguistic system of an ideology" (*Neutral* 86). By this, he means "the soft symbolic violence of language, the violence of assertion, of arrogance", in other words, the social and institutional norms effected via voices of persuasion as well as written constitutional documents (Lecerle 80). By weaving in and out of alignment with social and institutional norms, one experiences the condition of xeniteia, whereby



one feels like a foreigner to one's own environs (Barthes *Live Together* 124–129). To experience one's own city as foreign is “an aesthetic process”; it is “part of a process of personal development” as well as a “social and existential phenomenon” (Schimanski 313–314). These notions are applicable to the creative practitioner in that various aspects of everyday life are conceived of through aesthetic lens. It is also applicable to the scholar of the arts and the humanities in that the critical objectivity expected of the academic professional has to be balanced with one's singular everyday reality which in turn is largely circumscribed by social, institutional and capitalist norms. In this way, through idiorrhymy and xeniteia, through a critical scepticism of the ideosphere, one finds a way of life through creative practice.

As Adrienne Galy argues, at the heart of Barthes' *Preparations for the Novel* (and his lectures at Collège de France in general) lies “a paradox: they appear to demand a form of critique on such a small scale—the singular micro-relation—that they effectively nullify the argumentative logic within which cultural and literary theory must operate to be intelligible” (41). What this means is that because personal, intimate and non-fungible experiences are attended to, the lectures resist any kind of generalisation as required in the language and operation of critical theory. In this way, Barthes is bringing forth “the end of cultural and literary critique in its most recognizable and replicatable forms” (Ghaly 41). If it is singular and non-generalisable, how then, may we learn anything from the lectures? As Lucy O'Meara puts it, the generative quality of Barthes' work is such that they are often meant “to encourage [others] to respond creatively to the material offered to them: the material itself is subsidiary to the thoughts to which it may give rise” (40). This book is one such response.

## SUBSEQUENT CHAPTERS

There are many moments in Barthes' seminars at Collège de France that speak to the art and life of creative practitioners, and Chapter 2 highlights these instances, focusing on ideas pertaining to the notions of authorship, the death and subsequent return of the author, writerly and readerly texts, as well as the conjuring of a space of the Neutral in which one could pursue one's aesthetic impulses free from ideological and institutional constraints. In this chapter, poems are placed in dialogue with his ideas to bring to the fore the affective affordances of his thought.

Barthes' work speaks for creative practice as a form of attentiveness that is attuned to nuance, and Chapter 3 is an exemplification of the contributions of street photography and autoethnography to cultural critique. Here, the urban landscapes of Singapore, specifically, Jewel Changi mall, Universal Studios Singapore and Little India are seen as microcosms of Singapore. These are pockets of the nation-state that may be described as examples of urban phantasmagoria, as hallucinatory landscapes that facilitate the capitalist enterprise.

Chapter 4 considers depression as a psychological as well as a cultural phenomenon linked to the capitalist demands of modern city life. It discusses the related notions of capitalist depression and depressive realism. This chapter is to some extent a work of personal research, in that the experience of depression is channelled into the solitary act of writing poetry and taking photographs. Drawing from Barthes' notion of the *vita nova*, it makes the point that depression, which is the loss of a former functioning self as circumscribed by capitalism, may be thought of as ushering in a postcapitalist vision of creative endeavours.

Following the previous chapter, Chapter 5 is a reflexive consideration of the creative endeavour of writing poetry. It considers Barthes' notion of *jouissance* as a term for the release or alleviation of mental tension into a creative play with language. This chapter considers the craft of creative writing as a source of pleasure, as a way of writing that parallels Barthes' fantasies of the reading process in *The Pleasures of the Text* (1975). It looks at the dominant tendency in Singapore and Hong Kong of a mode of lyric poetry allied with the Imagist leanings of literary modernism. It also looks to Language Poetry as a way of enlarging one's poetic vocabulary.

Chapter 6 is a Language Poetry sequence that crystallises the *jouissance* of the previous chapter. It is a work of extimacy, in that the interiority of the writing self is othered through language, thus drawing attention to language as an artefact that requires aesthetic vigilance for expressive work. This chapter exemplifies a poetic practice that adheres to the tenets of Language Poetry and at the same time embraces the qualities of the lyrical and confessional.

Chapter 7 looks at poetic practice alongside the presence of the Internet. It starts with the point that the Internet is the embodiment of Barthes' statement that "the text is a fabric of quotations, resulting from a thousand sources of culture" (*Rustle* 53). It examines how the master text of the Internet positions the writer who, even if he or she deals with poems on the page, is almost always already online via a digital

ambience afforded by social media and other digital communicative technologies. As such, poetic practice is no longer within the domain of print culture alone. There is the poet who now exists online as a digital author function.

Chapter 8 looks at street photography as a practice likewise circumscribed by the Internet. The virtual environment has engendered an idiorrhythmy in the sense used by Barthes, given that a global community of street photographers exists online with its individuals able to retain the personal rhythms of their everyday lives. It looks at the cultural logic of street photography, considering the street camera as a commodity as well as an object that enables creative practice as circumscribed by the history of street photography. It also outlines the implications of street photography as a practice for the process of creative writing, and vice versa.

The conclusion addresses the following question: given our understanding of the critical possibilities of creative practice via an autoethnography such as this book, how may we, as creative practitioners, prepare for a future shaped by generative AI technologies such as ChatGPT?

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