

INSTRUMENT

Performance Poetry – Reflection Statement

My suite of performance poems, Instrument, consists of a series of revisionist metanarratives which elevate the stories of three marginalised voices within the cultural scientific canon. By reconstructing a multifaceted representation of three historical figures who had indelible impacts on scientific discourse as we know today – Émilie du Châtelet, Ada Lovelace and Hedy Lamarr – my piece aims to counter the assertion that female contributions to science are a recent phenomenon and self-reflexively invite listeners to contend with the inherently patriarchal nature of historical representations.

Hence, I envision my work would be of interest to young female audiences gathering at live performance venues such as the Australian Poetry Slam, which amalgamates the social, political and literary spheres to encourage young writers to explore their identity.

Alternatively, the experimental nature of my work would appeal to a digital literary journal such as Overland which supports the ‘XYZ Prize for Innovation in Spoken Word’ and is committed to elevating marginalised voices and perspectives.

My inquiry question, which explores the construction of feminine identities in history, emerged from my study of The Handmaid’s Tale in ‘Narratives That Shape Our World’ (Year 11 Advanced). Atwood’s meta-reflexive inclusion of the epilogue ‘Historical Notes’ and the effective undermining of Offred’s reliability as a narrator sparked my interest in the ambiguous demarcation between history and fiction as discourses which constitute systems of signification by which we make sense of the past. Investigating this phenomenon led me to Linda Hutcheon’s concept of ‘historiographic metafiction,’ which posits history as a “narrativization of the past” and foregrounds how postmodern literature, through the ironic revision of historical narratives, can challenge Western hegemonic discourses. Instrument draws from this understanding and gives a voice to those silenced by standard history and literary representations by exposing its artificiality.

Supporting this, I structured the opening of my work to prompt listeners to recognise the lack of female scientists in our construction of the history of science and within popular culture. Through the motif of a timeline and the cumulative use of intertextual allusions, from “Newton’s bruised apple” to Zuckerberg’s “quick trip to Congress,” I celebrate my audience’s agency in making connections, thus affirming the ubiquity of these narratives in our cultural dialogue throughout time. Then, by directly engaging listeners in my representation of the reconstruction of voices within a hyperreal digital space through the use

of direct address, “*tonight, you and I are chemists,*” I represent literature as a liminal space capable of reconstructing our perspective of the world and our place in it.

My investigation into concept ran concurrently with my investigation into form.

Performances from the Australian Poetry Slam and Button Poetry, such as Luka Lesson’s The New Crusades and Neil Hilborn’s OCD, drew me to the sense of authenticity offered by performance poetry – a product of its strong authorial control, the preservation of emotion through the human voice, and the intimate relationship between performer and audience. Recognising its potential as a form of resistance and aligning my understanding with Cornelia Grabner’s celebration of the form as a seamless intersection of the social, political, and literary spheres, I decided performance poetry was uniquely positioned to elevate the voices and stories of the historically marginalised, integral to my purpose.

Hutcheon’s reinforcement of the “textuality of our knowledge of the past,” supported by Dominick LaCapra’s argument that the past arrives in forms of “texts and textualized remainders – memories, reports, published writings, archives, monuments,” empowered me to substantially investigate the personal and historical contexts of my characters by examining primary sources, such as their letters. This initially prompted me to emulate their authentic vernacular to transport their voices through time and make accessible their narratives. Yet, drawing from my study of Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels in ‘Literary Worlds’ (Year 12 Extension) and inspired by Joshua Bennett’s pastiche of form in his poem 16 Bars for Kendrick Lamar, I ultimately decided to embed a reimagining of historical documents into my piece, using epistolary framing to drive verisimilitude and position my listeners to recognise the subjectivity of historical reconstructions and the notion that it is only accessible through texts in which storytelling participates.

Analysing Kate Tempest’s experimental concept album Let Them Eat Chaos attuned me to the effectiveness of manipulating stylistic devices to differentiate between character voices and enhance characterisation. It also informed my structural unification of individual monologues through a central narrator. While Tempest emphasises simultaneity, I structured my piece chronologically through time to establish the increasing complexity of cultural discourse.

Through my first poem Émilie du Châtelet, I validate a figure historically only mentioned as the “mistress of Voltaire” as an autonomous person in her own right. The piece consequently invites audiences to consider the inherent gendered barriers seeded in scientific history, drawing from rap music and paralleling the subversion of its traditional connotations as a masculine mode of expression with Émilie du Châtelet’s engagement in Enlightenment-era discussion. I chose to represent her intelligence and quick wit through the rapid pace of delivery, supported by multisyllabic rhymes, internal rhymes, assonance, wordplay, and subtle manipulation of the AABB rhyme scheme:

*“listen and... act / in a way to include the facts / but if facts change with data then
how do we track / what’s right and what’s wrong and who was right all along...”*

By structuring the monologue as an “OPEN LETTER,” I was able to exclude the other half of the conversation to privilege the female voice while also ensuring I provided enough context within the piece for audiences to understand it:

“cause I’m a woman and it’s not really my place / to engage in scientific debate?”

This decision was supported by my investigation into Wolfgang Iser’s phenomenological theory on ‘The Reading Process,’ which acknowledges the dynamic nature of texts and the requirement for active participation by a reader’s imagination – the “interplay between deduction and induction.” This extends from my understanding of ‘Literary Worlds’ (Year 12 Extension) and enabled me to reaffirm the responder’s role in concretising a text in the process of critically engaging with it.

In examining the philosophy of Romantic scientist Ada Lovelace in her creation of the first computer program, my second piece celebrates the connective power of storytelling in mediating polarising binaries in social discourse and in giving voice to marginalised perspectives. In particular, it interrogates the cultural schism between the arts and sciences, a divide that has impacted my own search for representation as a STEM student with a seemingly incompatible passion for English literature. I challenge the assertion that objectivity and rationality – traditionally masculine qualities associated with the hard sciences – and empathy, creativity and sensitivity – traditionally feminine qualities – are mutually exclusive – a dichotomy I have noticed both in my own experiences and in my

research, including CP Snow's The Two Cultures, which charts the growing cultural division between 'literary intellectuals' and 'physical scientists,' as well as Margaret Wertheim's Pythagoras' Trousers, which argues that this dichotomy disproportionately alienates women entering the field and inhibits a diversity of perspectives.

Inspired by Arielle Cottingham's Tramlines and Emi Mahmoud's How to Translate a Joke, two poems which capitalise on wordplay to shift meaning, I chose to explore the ambiguity of the word "instrument" as a way of representing the fluid interrelationship between the arts and sciences. As such, my poem juxtaposes images of "*strings... chords*," with their musical connotations, with that of an "*engine whirring into life*," emblematic of a machine, and synthesises the two in its conclusion with a heightened reclamation of identity and voice: "*I am an instrument in the shape of a woman... armed with a quill.*"

Furthermore, I found Jesse Brand's Dear Mrs Miller's cyclical structure and effective command of pacing, volume and rhythm effective at enhancing tension in his piece, and so incorporated his techniques in my own piece to draw attention to the tangible implications of technology on the socio-political sphere: "*I helped scatter ash into Hiroshima's lungs / felt toppled cities burning with a flash and thrum...*" Hence, I invite audiences to contemplate the need to align technological development with inclusive ethical frameworks, adding another layer of complexity to the discussion regarding the relationship between the humanities and sciences.

Moreover, my final poem, Hedy Lamarr, rejects the one-dimensional depiction of the figure by the media, employing a stream-of-consciousness style monologue to focus intensely on the fragmented interior experience. Through my use of repetitive rhythm and epizeuxis, evident in the repeated wordplay on "*look cover write check*," the piece evokes a representation of a dissonant and fragmented internal experience, drawing attention to the individual's multifaceted complexity.

The construction of Instrument through this rigorous cycle of research, composition, and refinement has been a rewarding process.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Beauvoir, S. d., 1949. *Le Deuxième Sexe*. Paris: Éditions Gallimard.
- Bennett, J., 2013. *16 Bars for Kendrick Lamar*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=olapC5Y7omA>
- Bernstein, C., 1998. *Poetry and the Performed Word*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Brand, J., 2013. *Dear Mrs Miller*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HXf-3O9nyGQ>
- Brand, J., 2013. *Joshua*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8HA6wzhSpII>
- Brand, J., 2013. *Oblivion*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I130A_OuHN4
- Choi, F., 2019. *Ode to Epinephrine*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ooEOJk7JZOY>
- Cottingham, A., 2016. *Tramlines*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yocCysa0wPg>
- DiFranco, A., 2013. *Self Evident*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gTY8sCzHTNc>
- Elhillo, S., 2016. *Alien Suite*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dh5wSt-hfL0>
- Forbes-Macphail, I., 2015. "I shall in due time be a poet": Ada Lovelace's Poetical Science in Its Literary Context. In: *Ada's Legacy: Cultures of Computing from the Victorian to the Digital Age*. s.l.:s.n., pp. 144-168.
- FreeBeats.io, 2019. *LONG NIGHTS*. <https://freebeats.io/long-night>
- Hilborn, N., 2014. *Audiobook*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=za7_KZ0isjQ
- Hutcheon, L., 1988. Historicizing the postmodern: the problematizing of history. In: *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, pp. 87-101.
- Hutcheon, L., 1988. Historiographic Metafiction: The Pasttime of Past Time. In: *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, pp. 105-123.
- Hutcheon, L., 1988. Intertextuality, Parody, and the Discourses of History. In: *A Poetics of Postmodernism*. London: Routledge, pp. 124-140.
- Kaye, P., 2018. *Unalienable*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_iaF1_UuKl4
- Koyczan, S., 2007. *Atlantis*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PIQLTYida4>
- Luben, D., 2014. *14 Lines from Love Letters or Suicide Notes*.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Iy4cEW15SdE>
- Mahmoud, E., 2017. *How to Translate a Joke*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tq-W_GLxsUs
- Nicol, B., 2009. *The Cambridge Introduction to Postmodern Fiction*. 1st ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Nkululeko, N., 2015. *Not Finished Yet*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lUBP76q6cVU>

- Nünning, A., 2004. Where Historiographic Metafiction and Narratology Meet: Towards an Applied Cultural Narratology. *German Narratology II*, 38(3), pp. 352-374.
- Piombino, N., 1998. The Aural Ellipsis and the Nature of Listening in Contemporary Poetry. *Close Listening*, pp. 53-72.
- Reframed Pictures, 2017. Hedy Lamarr's Reciting "The Paradoxical Commandments". <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SpCNvz4Ehio>
- Silliman, R., 1998. Who Speaks: Ventriloquism and the Self in the Poetry Reading. *Close Listening*, pp. 360-378.
- Snow, C., 1959. *The Rede Lecture: The Two Cultures*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Spertus, E., 1991. *Why are There so Few Female Computer Scientists?*, Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Swaby, R., 2015. *Headstrong: 52 Women Who Changed Science and the World*. 1st ed. New York City: Broadway Books.
- Tempest, K., 2016. *Let Them Eat Chaos*. (Fiction Records).
- Tempest, K., 2017. *Brand New Ancients*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QdE0BkP95Ng>
- Toole, B. A., 1992. Ada, the Enchantress of Numbers: A Selection from the Letters of Lord Byron's Daughter and Her Description of the First Computer. s.l.: Critical Connection.
- Vonna-Michell, T., 2014. *TateShots*. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IkkQs_ybPW8
- Wertheim, M., 1995. *Pythagoras's Trousers: God, Physics, and the Gender War*. 1st ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.
- Wertheim, M., 1999. *The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace: A History of Space from Dante to the Internet*. 1st ed. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.