

## ***No one wakes up wanting to be homeless: a case study in applied creative writing***

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### **Abstract:**

What does it mean to write the city? And how do you write the city if you live on the streets? This chapter explores the implications of writing (and editing) the city through a collaborative creative project that non/fictionLab at RMIT University has developed in Melbourne in conjunction with STREAT, a social enterprise that provides homeless youth and young people who are experiencing severe disadvantage with supported pathways from living on the street to a sustainable livelihood. As an experiment in applied creative writing, #STREATstories aims to foster a meaningful sense of belonging and connection through the making and distribution of place-based urban stories and poetic expression as a way to create prospects for social change. If we take maps to be representative documents, this case study asks: what is the potential for the act of mapping through a process of collaboration, and the maps themselves, to reconfigure representations of homelessness? Furthermore, if we explore the ways this project might be expanded, transferred, and shared, what are the implications for who is represented; how they are represented; and how the material outcomes are received by varied audiences? Through facilitating workshops, collecting stories, and ‘composing’ the stories into material artefacts, we have explored both the potential for shared storytelling to positively affect participants and their communities – and the potential for applied creative writing to enrich the aims of social enterprise itself.

**Key words / index:** applied creative writing, belonging, collaboration, ethics, homelessness, imagined futures, mapping, Melbourne Central, social enterprise, storytelling, STREAT, #STREATstories

### *If a little dreaming is dangerous*<sup>1</sup>

Australian novelist and poet David Malouf describes the cities we live in as places of topography, a way of tracing ‘the contours of a sensibility’ (1985, 10). He talks about the physical conditions place imposes on the body, ‘the embodiments of mind and psyche’ that belong to mapping place, mapping home, our first homes, and for him, his ‘first mapping’ of Brisbane, Queensland: ‘the only place I know from inside.’ He writes: ‘from my body outwards’ (Malouf 1985, 3).

If this ‘first mapping’ is an experience we can all relate to – mapping place, places of topography – especially for those of us who are ‘home-full’ and enjoy a stable way of life, what does this mean if you are *homeless*, if getting a roof over your head is contingent? How do you write the city if your home – your mapping – is on or belongs to the streets? If the place you know ‘from inside, from my body outwards’ is without walls, open to all weather, always on the move and insecure, and oftentimes unsafe?

When a young person has lost everything through cycles of neglect, violence, abuse, their story – a personal story they can tell of their past and an imagined future that they can make differently to the past if they so desire – is sometimes all that they have that they can truly call their own. A future

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<sup>1</sup> Titles for each section come from story-contributions made to #STREATstories

fiction if you like, or *not nonfiction*, at least not the sort of nonfiction they have had to live. If young people write stories-of-self like this, it is a way for them to become visible, to make their experiences come alive, in that Maloufian way of writing topography being the mapping of ‘the embodiments of mind and psyche’ (1985, 3). ‘My Story’ becomes not just a story that could belong to anyone, a fictional reading, but an embodied reality, an expression of self that is tangible, material, and in the case of these stories, in this case study from the streets of Melbourne, connected directly in both concrete and imaginative ways to place. Story as ‘sense making’ is another way to put it, as defined in conversation about a storytelling project for Melbourne Knowledge Week (City of Melbourne, June 29, 2017). It is through writing that we reclaim our voice and body as our own, as French philosopher and writer Hélène Cixous instructs us: ‘Censor the body and you censor breath and speech at the same time. Write your self. Your body must be heard’ (1976, 880).

The RMIT/STREAT Story Mapping Project or #STREATstories is a writing project that connects city dwellers to each other and to the wider community. It aims to foster a meaningful sense of belonging and interrelatedness through the making and distribution of place-based urban stories and poetic expression as a way to foster prospects for social change. It is premised on the idea borrowed for our purposes from Baumeister and Leary (1995) that to belong is a fundamental human motivation; and that to create a sense of belonging through the telling of story about one’s self and one’s own community has power, that these stories as a collection can become an invaluable resource (Sonn et al. 2014; Rappaport 1995). Specifically, #STREATstories is a collaboration between the Melbourne-based social enterprise organisation STREAT and a group of creative artist-contributors at RMIT, all practising writers working in different forms and publishing as essayists, screenwriters, fiction and nonfiction writers; researchers across different fields of writing, publishing, and advertising. It is a storytelling project that explores an ‘applied creative writing’ approach to creative fieldwork, critical perspectives and imaginative inquiry for researchers keen to employ their writing/research skills and interests to matters of social injustice and inequity.

#STREATstories had its precedence in an earlier project RMIT collaborated on with STREAT where RMIT students and STREAT trainees partnered with each other and ‘texted’ stories back and forth on phones about their shared experience of the street, one trainee with one student: RMIT students provided their phones and STREAT provided lunch, the trainees showing the students their favourite, often secret haunts, with the pairs sending their Twitter length compositions back to STREAT headquarters to be uploaded onto a transient blog fit for purpose. The idea of this project was to create a kind of map of the city through a set of anonymous microstories as a ‘method of communicating heartfelt, highly charge realities in an immediate, raw and uncensored way: *Free shaving gel given on a street corner. But now i have to carry it all day*’ (Rendle-Short 2010, 7).

The current project began in 2015, after a series of conversations with STREAT about collaborating on #STREATstories. STREAT had been approached by Global Properties Trust (GPT Group) with the opportunity to design the annual Christmas wrapping paper for Melbourne Central Shopping Centre. Here was our project: a map of the city as a sheet of A0 paper, which we could use as the starting point for our storytelling collaboration. Over the coming months, in addition to our core team, we gathered together an illustrator, an artist, some musicians. The ‘map’ we would design for Melbourne Central was to be available to shoppers to the centre and was the beginning of a bigger storytelling project with STREAT.

### *No one wakes up wanting to be homeless*

STREAT provides homeless youth and young people who are experiencing severe disadvantage with supported pathways from living on the street to a sustainable livelihood via training and employment opportunities through its four cafés and catering company. STREAT recognises that creating job opportunities is only part of the solution to youth disadvantage. As such, they are also committed to developing creative programs, like writing and storytelling projects for their trainees. Programs such as #STREATstories offer an opportunity for the young people, to re-narrate their

stories. #STREATstories is a project that connects homeless and disadvantaged youth directly and imaginatively to other members of the community. It gives disadvantaged young people a genuine, authoritative voice and sense of place and purpose through the writing and sharing of their stories, as we will discuss.

Founded by CEOs Rebecca Scott and Kate Barrell STREAT takes its inspiration from KOTO in Vietnam. To date over the nine years STREAT has been in operation, it has served 1.5 million customers, supported 520 young people with 52,000 hours of connection and assistance. By 2022 it aims to be assisting 1095 young people each year – the same number of meals we all eat in a year, assuming we eat three meals a day (Scott 2016, 1).

In Australia, a population of 23 million, there are 105,237 people who are homeless (up from 89,728 in 2006), according to the Census 2011 data, which accounts for 49 out of every 10,000 people (i.e. 0.46% of the population) (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2012). Sixty per cent of homeless people in 2011 on Census Night were under the age of 35 years. But the ABS argues this figure masks the real truth. According to the 2011 Census report, homeless youth estimates are likely to have been underestimated due to couch surfing; their characteristics look no different to other youth who are not homeless because they can be marked down as simply ‘visiting’. A young person might not want to report they are in fact homeless, or an adult might have filled out their Census form for them, thinking they will return home later. It is an ongoing challenge for organisations championing homelessness to encourage their clientele to contribute to the Census and to fill in forms (Brown 2016). Homelessness itself is not a characteristic directly collected by the Census; it can only estimate the population based on a range of processes and methodologies (ABS 2012). The ABS will release the 2016 Census estimates of homelessness in 2018 (ABS 2017).

When we think of what it must be like to be homeless or disadvantaged in a city – sleeping rough, couch surfing, seeking shelter on a daily basis – it is similar to a process of redaction or censorship, where you disappear, you’re not counted in, you are absent, missing, CENSORED, blacked out – of ‘no fixed address’. To write story out of this ‘missing’ space reverses this state; it is a way to tell ‘the only place I know from inside, from my body outwards’ (Malouf 1985, 3). Through map-making with story, contributors connect directly to the city in which they live in all its complexities; it becomes a narrative map, a map telling *their* story. #STREATstories is a ‘writing the city’ project; for readers of these stories and other participants, it is way of ‘walking a mile’ in someone else’s shoes: ‘they will never “walk the streets of Melbourne” in the same way again’ (Rendle-Short 2010, 7). It is also a method of un-censoring the city, or perhaps more accurately *un-redacting* the city – a way of being un-Census-ed – because by telling a story the storyteller becomes visible, she or he materialises into the space; they can’t be ignored.

*May I share this couch with you?*

#STREATstories is founded on the idea of collaboration, team effort and cooperation (Rendle-Short et al. 2017). It is an experiment in the making that applies creative writing to spatial modes of representation. It is not finished, in the sense that while one phase of the project has come to an end the project itself is ongoing. #STREATstories asks what does it mean to ‘apply story to a map’, how is ‘giving voice’ actually done in the composing and crafting of new work, what does it mean for a story to be made visible (Rendle-Short et al. 2017, 4)? Findings to date encompass the notion that to apply creative writing is also to change how the writing is done; this idea is pertinent in both the making of original story and text, as well as in the composing of writing to describe and analyse that writing and research. In other words, the ‘writing up’ of the collaboration is also an exercise (and experiment) in applied creative writing, where writers and creatives come together in a shared community of practice, a plural space, to bring their skills and expertise together. Typically, writing is a solitary practice where to write, you have to be alone. But when collaborating something enigmatic happens, something akin to magic, a process of ‘joining hand, eye and mind’ (Carter

2004, xiii). Working side by side in this plural ‘we’ space, in openness and exchange, together you are able to ‘make something tangible together that did not exist before’ (Rendle-Short 2017, 6). This approach challenges the role art can play in the ethical project of becoming (6); demonstrates that any good collaboration needs to be both intimate and far-reaching (9, 13); and evidences voice as a distinctive characteristic that is fundamental to story: ‘found, lost, shared, exchanged and negotiated in the collaborative process’ (Rendle-Short 2017, 12).

So how do we do it, *write spaces* in the way we are talking about here – ‘write to taste life twice, in the moment and in retrospect’, as Anaïs Nin famously muses (Webber and Grumman 1954, 38)? How do we write the streets?

### *No such thing as a finished story*

For us, the writers and creatives who planned this (re)writing of the city, the map started as a kind of touchstone. We wrote emails back and forth, bouncing ideas of each other, getting inspired. Here is an example:

It occurs to me that the [...] street poems work because they *are* a form of mapping. Maps literally level the landscape so the CEO and rough sleeper are on the same plane of representation. For cultures that do not think in abstract mapping there can be subversions of the map as object (using the underside; sonic maps) (Aung Thin 2015)

It was exciting playing with words and interrupting meaning. We quoted Georges Perec: ‘Contrary to the buildings, which almost always belong to someone, the streets in principle belong to no one’ (2004, 47). And wasn’t that true? The name STREAT itself, with its deliberate substitution of *eat* for *et*, encouraged a playful (re)writing of what was familiar or expected; a way of seeing what was there not only in the words, but also in sound. It pointed to a doubling of or sliding between; contiguity of meanings and of disruption. We could use this playful approach when it came to mapping as a form of storytelling. We could disrupt the map as authoritative, official and exclusive object that also intimidates because it can be so hard to understand and use (ask anyone who has tried to navigate from a street directory as they’ve driven around an unfamiliar town, or GPS for that matter). We could colonise the map. We could assert belonging. In fact ‘belonging’ emerged as a core value underpinning the project. We could map those who were homeless and disadvantaged onto the city, make them visible; make them present through their stories. Assert the right of various voices to these streets that, officially, belonged to no one. In fact, instead of using street names at all, we could use familiar landmarks. Or landmarks that were unfamiliar to some, but familiar to the homeless and disadvantaged young people we were working with in conjunction with STREAT, that were a part of their story, their ‘topography’, such as a shelter-tree in the park.

But a space that is deemed empty, seemingly belonging to no one, does not automatically belong to everyone. Australians are familiar with the term *terra nullius* (a Latin expression meaning ‘land that belongs to no-one’ or ‘finders keepers’ [Mabo Native Title]) and how it was used as a justification for European settlement and ownership. The idea of what might be ‘owned’ on the map was raised in another way too, specifically in our right to use personal stories. For the homeless and disadvantaged young people we were working with, their own personal stories were highly valued. Writers value story, but this very particular sense of ownership is different – we were donating our time and ability, but asking the STREAT trainees to ‘give’ their stories to the map asks them for something they might not want to give up. We had to be careful not to squander the slenderest of means.

Then there was the issue of map as object. Our map was not just another form of abstract representation but a thing. It would have a top, sides; a bottom. It would also be wrapping paper, intended to be folded and cut up. What would happen when the paper of the map folded in on itself, allowing that which was separated in space to suddenly touch? What would happen to a precious

story if it were abruptly interrupted by a pair of scissors? In particular what would happen if a young person's story was cut through the middle and thereby unwittingly censored. This was something we spoke about at length.

Folds, creases, doubling over – this was in effect our process. We doubled back on ourselves, thinking and rethinking what we were doing at each stage of the process. The philosopher Michel Serres nominates these acts of touch as the beginning of self-awareness, of consciousness (2008, 22). As we thought through what the map as representation might feel like and how it might be used – map both as wrapping paper for fundraising and as physical object in the world – our awareness of what this might mean to our constituents or 'stakeholders' (stakeholders in the broadest sense of the word, because something important was at 'stake' here) sharpened significantly. We began to articulate (what we already instinctively knew) that mapping as storytelling was by its very nature more than presence, the physical, material object. If we were going to pursue this idea, we would need to find what it was in the process and crafting of storytelling in combination with the process and discipline of mapping that led to something new and worthwhile being made.

Every story is a form of negotiation (Atwood 2002). As we considered the ethics of what we were doing, it was the *negotiations* required for storytelling that we brought to bear on mapping. A story negotiates time, point of view as well as place and space. The philosopher Charles Taylor writes of 'an implicit map of social space' that we all carry inside us, one that includes the bodily 'knowing whom to speak to and when and how' as well as 'what kinds of people we can associate with, in what ways, and under what circumstances' (2002, 107). It is these 'implicit social maps,' each one a series of unceasing negotiation, that a storyteller seeks to understand. This is what we might aim to 'map' onto the blank page.

Thus, our #STREATstories mapping process became not just mapping as storytelling, but storytelling as mapping. We were not colonising the map, but rather we were in constant negotiation *with* the map. Ultimately, in effect, what mapping-as-storytelling/storytelling-as-mapping becomes in this project is a negotiation between the city we thought we lived in, the city we actually live in, and the city we want to live in or dream of. David Harvey, the geographer, argues that '[t]he freedom to make and remake our cities and ourselves' is 'one of the most precious and yet most neglected of our human rights' (2008, 23). When we change the city, we 'change ourselves' expressing the 'social ties, relationship to nature, lifestyles, technologies and aesthetic values we would desire' (Harvey 2008, 23). When we use this map to tell these particular stories we are expressing our desire for a different sort of city that better reflects who we are and what we would like to become.

*Autumn leaves covered me in Carlton Gardens and it felt like the arms of my mother*

Stories for the #STREATstories map came from diverse sources. Some were already gathered by STREAT, in the form of meditations on homelessness by members of the STREAT team, or accounts of lived experience, offered with permission by participants of their programs. Later, members of the STREAT community were invited (by CEO Rebecca Scott) to respond to the prompts 'random acts of kindness' and 'flights of fancy', generating further small lines or longer stories. Others were collected by writer and alumni of the RMIT Bachelor of Creative Writing, an Indigenous writer and First Nations consultant for many films and art projects, who was immediately clear on what areas of the map would best serve the Indigenous content. She arranged the authentication of an Acknowledgement of Country, suggesting these words run through the Yarra River. She compiled stories from Indigenous residents, homeless and otherwise, in the Central Melbourne area. Completing the collections was a number of stories that came from a significant act of *applied creative writing* in the #STREATstories project – that being, the running two creative writing workshops at STREAT fundraisers.

As teachers of creative writing more broadly, we know that our workshops never run as pre-planned. We ask our students to respond to tangible provocations while we ourselves simultaneously (and necessarily) respond to more subliminal prompts, asking ourselves: by what are the students inspired? Questioning? Curious? Confused? Confronted? We go off-script accordingly and take the workshop in new directions. Exercises we have long forgotten re-emerge according to need. Or half-remembered strategies nudge at the corners, and are recruited in new forms. Sometimes, disappointingly, we ignore our instincts, persisting with an inappropriate strategy, eager to make good on the invested time and preparation. Other times, thrillingly, a new writing exercise is born on the fly. Always the singular workshop insists on forging its own, unique path, an aspect particularly true of these #STREATstories workshops; workshops designed and delivered for a varied group made up of mostly non-writers (so-called) in the writing space.

We have referred, above, to ‘paths’ and ‘new directions’, metaphors well worn, perhaps, in discussions of writing, teaching and creativity, but these are especially congruent for our #STREATstories, centering as they did upon a map of the Melbourne CBD. Participants engaged with their own notions of writing the city, although (almost certainly) without thinking about it in those terms. As with programs such as the Sydney Story Factory (a creative writing centre established in 2011, nurturing the writing and publishing of young people’s stories, especially those from marginalised backgrounds), the #STREATstories project ‘seeks to create and sustain a vital contribution to the community, by respecting and giving voice to people’s stories’ (Xerri 2016), in our case, the voice of young people living with homelessness and disadvantage and, by extension, those in their wider community of support.

The first of our workshops was with the participants of #SleeplessinSeptember an annual fundraiser, which in 2015 was run in conjunction with STREAT and GPT (the property group who own Melbourne Central Shopping Centre). For the event, GPT invited people participating to stay overnight in the mall, partially recreating the conditions of sleeping rough in the city. Those committed to the sleepover camped out, sponsored by the hour by friends and family for giving up their warm beds, but fortified by the community spirit, program of musicians, food supplied by STREAT, and activities of which our creative writing workshop was one. The event took place in an air bridge running over Melbourne’s popular Bourke Street and between Melbourne Central and the major department store, Myer. This sense of linking two places, of being in that space in between, was a fitting setting for an event designed to forge new pathways of understanding between those living with homelessness and disadvantage and those who are more privileged and home-full. This location felt similarly aligned with our writing station, fitted out as it was, with its stack of photocopied map templates, featuring grids of intersecting roads and alleyways, anchored by icons depicting familiar landmarks. City blocks on these pages left deliberately blank and awaiting words. Melbourne Central was also pledging donations for each story written during the course of the event. Different price points applied depending on the paper size. What could fit on a luggage tag, for example, was a legitimate offering worthy of two dollars for STREAT – an option for those with a talent for brevity and/or a reticence to share too much.

Our writing station was one of many other activities, including knitting, and Lego. Live music was constant. It should not have been the ideal environment for a creative writing workshop, reliant as they usually are on quiet writing space, instructions delivered and comprehended, and/or the reading aloud of work generated by those willing to share it. Yet the writing station was busy throughout the workshop and beyond, into the night, generating stories.

The participants of the #SleeplessinSeptember workshop included friends of STREAT and STREAT trainees. By the latter, we mean young people who had experienced, or were still experiencing, homelessness and disadvantage. Many of the participants claimed, at the start at least, to be unable to write. Several were self-conscious about spelling and grammar. Illustrations were encouraged. For all of this, the stories flowed. In the process of encouraging the composing and crafting of new work, we aimed to provide opportunities for participants ‘to develop the creative voices they already possess, and to tell their stories in diverse ways’ (Butler 2014). These ranged

from words that could be contained, as discussed previously, on small canvasses like luggage tags, to those transformed into lyrics (later recorded and linked to the public map with the hashtag #STREATbeats). With all this came the knowledge that this was a workshop that had to be played like a game. Participants were full of soup and bonhomie, excited to be in Melbourne Central after hours, an atmosphere contributing already to the ‘sense of community generated through [...] writing workshops’ (Richard Short cited in Xerri, 2016). The workshop started late – close on 11pm. This made for an impish atmosphere and mimicked perhaps, the irregularity of hours kept by those without the borders of conventional homes. Our provocations were all tethered to our map: sometimes directly (‘choose an intersection and share a memory’), sometimes more obliquely – for instance, stories written in pairs, line by line, with each new sentence’s first word starting with the next consecutive letter of the English alphabet, using street names and landmarks as potential inspiration if struggling to find a word.

The process was repeated two weeks later in the high-rise city office of a global accounting firm. The Melbourne city branch had arranged their own ‘Mini-Sleepless’, bunking in at the office overnight. The evening began with a presentation, acknowledging the sponsorship raised for STREAT by the individual participants.

More than once these office workers protested that they were not creative: ‘We’re accountants!’ At one point, in a small room, we were competing with a screening of *Pitch Perfect 2* (2015). Yet, when the participants were convinced that silliness was not only acceptable, but also encouraged, the pages began to fill. The negative self-evaluations and self-criticisms around creative writing and their capacity to write original stories were different, perhaps, to those expressed the week before in the shopping centre air-bridge (suggesting anxieties around literacy), but equally as prohibitive, making it necessary to proceed ‘by making writing fun, by demystifying the process’ (Xerri 2016). After group and paired exercises produced a series of non-sequiturs (albeit lines of prose that were singularly compelling) we worked with ‘story spines’, improvising aloud a simplified three-act structure of storytelling where incomplete sentences are provided for each participant to fill in the blank when it comes to their turn. While the workshops’ separate participant challenges around literacy and the ability to be ‘creative’ made for different internal struggles, what united them was the need to dissolve concerns about ‘doing writing correctly’.

Eventually, even games designed to be silly and spontaneous resulted in considered collaborations on co-authored stories. For example, playing the alphabet game, two writers built a story of unrest on the waterfront: **Opposite** the ‘clocks’ a distance unsettles the crowd. **Police** are on the prowl [...] **Quietness** returns [...] **Right** around the corner, the music and activities continue around the establishments near Swanston Street and Fed[eration] Square. **Sounds** of drunken laughter start to lift the mood [...] **Trouble** is afoot again...

These workshops, themselves acts of applied creative writing served to generate stories of the city, and inspire those invested in the work of STREAT to invest in their own creative agency.

*I’m not me without you!! I’m not me without you!!*

We undertook this project knowing the act of mapping, the process of collaboration, and the maps themselves, would contribute to representations of homelessness. Whatever the impact of our work, it was already engaged with an established social enterprise and moreover real lives, which meant it was situated outside the territory of our individual and shared creative projects. The intersection of the real world with the written word was already closer, and necessarily closer, than in creative writing projects not built on the experiences of the vulnerable. After the generative, collaborative, and creative processes of the writing workshops, the editing stage was where we began to both ‘compose’ stories into material artefacts and to consider the implications for who is represented and how they are represented. In other words, we were now asking how to balance the risks of representation against creative possibility.

We were able to consider a range of textual material, the most substantial being handwritten artefacts from the creative workshops. These were composed on the fly: written at odd hours of the night, often at speed, with different pens and with an unknown number of fast-changing collaborators. Occasionally very different sets of handwriting could later be attributed anecdotally to the same author. We had twin goals when transcribing the text on these artefacts: putting them into a form that could be used elastically on the surface of the map; and preserving all that was ‘real’ in the originals.

Asked by an interviewer: ‘And the function of an editor? Has one ever had literary advice to offer?’, Vladimir Nabokov famously replied: ‘By “editor” I suppose you mean proofreader’ (Gold 2003, 198). In practice, these editors – whom Nabokov wonderfully called ‘pompous avuncular brutes’ – can perform a range of functions, from conceiving an idea with (or for) an author; constructing sentences, paragraphs, chapters, books, or sections; recasting material in a consistent voice; or simply rewording for clarity. Editing is really a collection of tasks of varying creativity and intensity; an editor prepares a manuscript depending on its needs.

Compared to the texts editors sometimes receive, the #STREATstories material seemed relatively simple. It was often fragmentary in form, and conversational in both tone and intention. Because most had been collected from fast-paced, collaborative creative writing exercises, there was the sense the writing was not finished (or ‘meant’ to be finished), and moreover that it had been generated and gifted to a community. Contributors signed waivers for the use of their work in #STREATstories, but perhaps within this project there were multiple communities: the community within workshops, sometimes formal collaborators, certainly us, and the eventual readers and recipients of the map. Meanwhile the nature of the map, which was meant to evoke the shared experience of a city, could not accommodate lengthy stories; the map spatialised stories, and would not take a form that suggested a linear reading. It became possible to view the stories as poetic fragments or even as alphanumeric data, meant evocatively, suggestively, materially and spatially and therefore able to be cut up.

However, as discussed, the workshops were not just composed of Creative Writing academics, STREAT employees, interested businesses, and the public; in fact the purpose of the workshops was partly their status as meeting grounds between these parties and homeless and at-risk youth. In a meeting ahead of the editing process, STREAT staff established clear ethical guidelines for the treatment of text. The priority was respect.

In practice, this was a nuanced brief. For example, we asked the STREAT staff whether or not we should retain the spelling mistakes of the authors, since this is a means of conveying the text’s origins in the real world. As experienced youth workers, they quickly vetoed this. What a hypothetical reader may see as ‘authentic’ or even ‘charming’ falls secondary to the need for an author to feel not just ‘represented’ but ‘*well*-represented’. Reading and especially transcribing – an intimate encounter with handwritten text – we had the sense that the writing process was special and enlivening to all participants. Some were more vulnerable than others; yet all had produced stories that had been collected in good faith; therefore all had at least to be correctly spelled. Beyond this rule though, the need to ensure the material was well-represented entailed creative decisions.

*I’m not me without you!! I’m not me without you!!*

Do we retain the repetition, and if so, what does the repetition suggest – desperation or excitement? Or just a person sitting with an idea? If we retain the repeated words but cut the repeated exclamation points, how does that change the effect?

*I went to the State Library and saw some lovely paintings. I loved it.*

Does the repetition evoke speech and thought (one word becoming another), or even more than speech or thought, participating in a writing exercise, the trace of the material process of producing text?

In general, the idea was to do a light copyedit, retaining stylistic differences and usage when it sounded the way people spoke. But in a long-form narrative that describes the childhood of a homeless young person, is it better to keep the phrase ‘group of men with a gun’ or change to ‘group of men with guns’ – is it better to feel as though you’re hearing a person tell you a story, or to engage with a person through a lens that makes its subjects agree with its objects? Meanwhile, the work of processing text creates its own realities. For a long time, a favourite phrase was ‘We are all making this us’, until we realised this was a transcription typo (originally ‘We are all making this up’). In many cases, we left queries in documents and deferred to STREAT, allowing experience to guide ethics.

What began as a technical exercise was quickly revealed to be an ethical enterprise. To apply creative writing was more than just to apply experience with prose; instead, it applied experience within a creative and ethical space.

### *Thank you human for being human*

Melbourne’s CBD is planned on a grid, a seemingly no-nonsense approach to navigating the city. King Street runs parallel to William, Queen to Elizabeth – if you can name the historical characters you can find your way. But running through is a series of hard-to-find alleyways, analogous to the stories that came from our workshops in writing the city. Just like navigating the streets, there are more complex through-lines awaiting discovery.

In making a map of the CBD, for this project, we literally wrote stories up and down the streets: one-liners, words and phrases, lolly-wrapper sized stories on A0 sheets. In exchange for a gold coin donation, Christmas shoppers at Melbourne Central could have their presents wrapped up in these stories, or could take home the wrapping paper sheets to keep as an artwork or to use in some other way. The map was full of content: of stories, of illustrations capturing key Melbourne landmarks, and of Indigenous stories and an Acknowledgement of Country. In addition to all of this there was various embedded content, which included links to long-form stories on the STREAT website (of which just snippets had been used on the wrapping paper), and a suite of songs collected on soundcloud and identified by the hashtag #STREATbeats. Anecdotally, when Christmas Day came and people opened their presents, there was a spike of activity on the STREAT website where much of this additional content could be accessed. The map caught the attention of Architects for Peace who wrote that the map gave readers an opportunity to think about the city from the perspective of others in one of the world’s most ‘liveable’ cities (2016). A story about the project also ran in RMIT’s newsletter (2015). Other associated projects – cups with snippets of story, a series of stories that opened out the underside of the map – were mooted, pursued, but ultimately did not get off the ground in this iteration of the project.

If we take maps to be representative documents, this case study asks: what is the potential for the act of mapping through a process of collaboration, and the maps themselves, to reconfigure representations of homelessness? In other words: what does it mean to write the city? And how do you write the city if you live on the streets? We wanted to explore the implications (and limitations) of writing (and editing) the city through a collaborative creative project, and through the making of material objects. The biggest outcome, at least in research terms, is that this project allows us to think about what a creative writing project is. To ask: what does a creative writing research project look like? How is it done? What *is* applied creative writing, and what does it allow for? Through facilitating workshops, collecting stories, and ‘composing’ the stories into material artefacts, we explored both the potential for shared storytelling to positively affect participants and their communities – and the potential for applied creative writing to enrich the aims of social enterprise itself.

The #STREATstories map is the visible outcome of what we are describing as an applied creative writing project, but being applied creative writing, it does not just map a collaboration, it creates a

model of practice. For example, the researchers found ‘the effects and ethos of the partners and projects’ fed back into their practices (Rendle-Short et al. 2017, 4). They ‘borrowed the worldview suggested by the [...] project, and allowed the terms of the project to extend to their own creative practices’ (4). This has resulted in ongoing collaborations; in ideas about mapping to influence individual creative works; and in the publication of research that questions collaboration, while working within a collaborative form, towards a collaborative outcome.

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