

# Selvedges/Self-Edges

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I've recently become fascinated by the word selvedge: as a noun, it describes the edge of a piece of fabric finished in such a way that the threads will not unravel, as well as the excess area of a printed sheet, a decorative border, and the uncut vegetation around a cultivated field; and as a transitive verb, it indicates the act of forming an edging or boundary.<sup>1</sup> If that isn't enough to get one thinking about the spaces of edges and the making of borders, it has a geological meaning too—a selvedge is a stratum that has been placed under pressure, a zone of rock that has been altered.

<sup>1</sup> See the *Oxford English Dictionary* online, [www.oed.com](http://www.oed.com).

When I read of selvages, in the shadow of the sickening injustices of George Floyd's brutal murder and disproportionate impact of Covid-19 for people of color, I am reminded of the words of quilting artist Yvonne Wells who opens Elsa Barkley Brown's seminal essay 'What Has Happened Here' addressing the politics of difference in black women's history and feminism.<sup>2</sup> Her words fray edges and borders, make space for understanding difference and ask others to see differently:

<sup>2</sup> David Roberts, *Frayed Edges* (2020). See Barkley Brown, 'What Has Happened Here.'

'My work is not traditional. I like it that way. If people tell me to turn my ends under, I'll leave them raggedy. If they tell me to make my stitches small and tight, I'll leave them loose. Sometimes you can trip over my stitches they're so big. You can always recognize the traditional quilters who come by and see my quilts. They sort of cringe. They fold their hands in front of them as if to protect themselves from the cold. When they come up to my work they think to themselves, "God, what has happened here—all these big crooked stitches." I appreciate these quilters. I admire their craft. But that's not my kind of work. I would like them to appreciate what I'm doing. They are quilters. But I am an artist. And I tell stories.'<sup>3</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Yvonne Wells quoted in Grudin, *Stitching Memories*, 1.

Much of my work as an architectural theorist, art critic and site-writer engages with borders and edges, from 'a place between' to 'spaces of transition.'<sup>4</sup> I am fascinated by the relation between space and subjectivity, interior life and the exterior world, and especially the interweaving of life

<sup>4</sup> Rendell, *Art and Architecture*.

5 See Rendell, 'Doing it, (Un)Doing it, (Over)Doing it Yourself.'

6 Lorde, 'The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House,' p. 112. See also Lorde, *Zami*.

7 hooks, *Yearnings*, 145–53.

8 Enrique Cavelier, *Pido La Palabra – I wish to address* (2020).

9 Anzaldúa, *Borderlands*. See Cherríe, *This Bridge Called My Back*.

and work through life-writing. Twenty years ago, when I was writing my first architectural autobiography, 'Undoing Architecture,'<sup>5</sup> I read French feminist philosophers, and the writing of women of color from the 1980s—Audre Lorde, bell hooks, and Gloria Anzaldúa—to understand how my own life as a writer, researcher and teacher was implicated in the patriarchal culture of the architectural world of words and buildings.

Lorde is well known for stating that: 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house,'<sup>6</sup> while hooks looks more explicitly at the role of space, both real and metaphorical, in shaping us through lived experience, choosing the margin as a positive space, not only of domination and resistance, but also of resistance and radical possibility.<sup>7</sup>

By understanding conversations as the first step in co-producing cities, PIDO LA PALABRA / I WISH TO ADDRESS is a project that aims to produce discussions between individuals and communities who would not usually speak to one another. These exchanges become tools for imagination and experimentation of new ways of acting in public to respond to the current social and ecological crisis.<sup>8</sup>

Referring to the borderland between the USA and Mexico, as a painful division, and potential space of creativity, Anzaldúa's border figure of the 'new mestiza,' writes across linguistic borders of languages, encouraging readers to find new hybrid forms of expression, through the edges and other marginal conditions of the border.<sup>9</sup>

I'm also relatively new here, been around for some time now, working out my surroundings, trying my best not stand in anyone's way, intentionally I'm not looking directly into your eyes when you enter, my sight rests elsewhere, bearded lion, jaw, flabby nose, eyebrows turning to horns, cloverleaf, apple, wheat, vine leaf, bold-yellow corn, medium-size grapefruit, red apple, close acorn, flower on flower on flower, maybe it's jasmine, maybe not, pale banana, cocoa pod, miniature pomegranate, another

flower juxtaposed, hint for peach, as time passes by I can no longer see the unpainted ones, they disappear out of habit.<sup>10</sup>

The words of these feminists showed me the role that writing one's life can play in negotiating the edges and borders each of us occupies in relation to other subjects and objects—architectural, human, animal, vegetal, and other.

The highest observed water levels in this area v above predicted water levels.

rtain is that imposition on matter creatures es far more ossilization rreserved for emories of ncestral to nd all other al life.

The multipurpose development envisioned, was to be built upon 3000 acres of reclaimed land.

The only sounds came from the movement of water, whether of rain or streams or waves.<sup>11</sup>

Interested in the writerly qualities of architectural criticism, and in the practice of writing architecturally—in how one could make architecture in words—led me to initiate 'site-writing,' and to explore through research and pedagogy the ways in which critics perform their acts of interpretation through written and other languages.<sup>12</sup>

I cannot even begin to imagine what technology might be in the future, and as such I do not know what I am not recording, documenting, and archiving now.<sup>13</sup>

10 Kuenberg, *Welcoming the Margins* (May 18, 2020).

11 Fragments from Sophie Chamberlain, *Failed Endeavour: Moving Rock and Sediment* (2020).

12 Rendell, 'Architecture-Writing' and 'Site-Writing.'

13 Sean Cham, *House on Hill: Building Archive* (May 18, 2020).

14 Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges.'

Following Donna Haraway, I have argued that objectivity is partial and knowledge is situated,<sup>14</sup> that viewpoints are constructed and critical attitudes performed through writing one's lived and located experiences. Site-writing draws on the history of feminism, returning to rework **the** 'the personal is political' practices that emerged from second wave feminism.<sup>15</sup>

**I tug at the plant. I pull it upwards, unrolling the stems, explaining the leaves. One stem snaps with a pale crack. It hangs looping. It is just as careful, just as careless.**

**I inject the soil with night-time insulin. Ten clicks. What are you now? Are we any closer? We share this composite, share this night-time.**

**I shuffle a finger beneath the soil and squeeze the limp plant with it. The plant sags with its own weight and the weight of my eyes. I stand back and wait. Just as careful. Just as careless.<sup>16</sup>**

Site-writing draws attention to the situatedness of critical writing and the roles sites play in the way critics position themselves and perform their acts of interpretation of works to, for, and with others.<sup>17</sup>

**We need other people; we can't exist in this void of isolation: reach out to other people.**

**... the telling is the performing of an action that presupposes an Other, posits and elaborates the Other, is given to the Other, or by virtue of the Other, prior to the giving of any information.<sup>18</sup>**

**Who are you?<sup>19</sup>**

The desire to work with variations in voice to reflect and produce spatial distances and proximities between works and texts—and between artists, writers, and readers—culminated in *Site-Writing: The Architecture of Art Criticism*.<sup>20</sup> Here I

invite critics to consider the sites and situations through which they encounter their objects of critique—materially, politically, and subjectively. These are embodied in how one first engages with an artwork—in a book, in a park, in a gallery, on the internet ...—and made manifest in the languages used to describe this engagement, from the positions associated with writers' pronoun choices—I, she, they, you—to the fonts chosen for these words, and the pages on which they are printed. Considering the situatedness of criticism can take us from the sites through which a critic investigates a work—emotionally, intellectually, physically—to the ways in which a critical essay is published and meets its audience. This particular take on criticism as a situated practice encourages processes of interpretation to be understood as produced by, and productive of, the sites and situations from which **they emerge and engender**, as well as the ways in which they are performed through the very processes of criticizing.<sup>21</sup>

## Text

In 2001, I set up a history and theory module called 'Site-Specific Writing' for architectural design graduate students at the Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL. Module participants were invited to approach their dissertations as forms of site-specific writing; to use their design skills to create spatial ways of writing and in so doing to dissolve the edges between studio 'practice' and seminar 'thinking.' When writing responds to physical, social, and political qualities of sites, is inserted back into sites, spaces are made out of encounters with readers, and like architecture, texts can inhabit and be inhabited. Experiments with how material qualities and processes in a site—as well as a site's history—can be transposed into writing consider afresh how one might write, rather than write about, site.

**It acts as an intermedio, a threshold to moving into the new city simulation of zoom, a state of getting ready to meet the new 'virtual flatmates' in this new zoom-room society.<sup>22</sup>**

I draw on site-writing techniques to invent different pedagogical settings and briefs, from 'Travel Stories' to 'The

continues to develop through the postgraduate teaching module I lead, involving exhibitions of student work, and has most recently taken a new form of life through a website, [site-writing.co.uk](http://site-writing.co.uk).

21 Rendell, 'Sites, Situations, and Other Kinds of Situatedness.'

15 This phrase has been attributed to a paper by Carol Hanisch, originally titled, 'Some Thoughts in Response to Dottie's Thoughts on a Women's Liberation Movement' (February 1969) which deals with 'therapy v. politics' and discusses the role of personal experiences in 'therapy' or consciousness-raising groups as part of the Women's Liberation Movement. This paper was published in Firestone and Koedt, *Notes from the Second Year* (1970) and Hanisch states that the title 'The Personal Is Political' was given to the paper by the editors. See [carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html](http://carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html).

16 Honor Vincent, *Homekeeping* (May 11, 2020).

17 Rendell, 'Site-Writing.'

18 Butler, 'Giving an Account of Oneself,' 37.

19 Francesca Marino, *This is a site writing project* (May 17, 2020) incorporating a quote from Butler's 'Giving an Account of Oneself.'

20 See Rendell, *Site-Writing*. This project

22 Artemis Papachristou, *Wallpaper* (2020).

23 Site-writing has also been a key aspect of my supervision of PhD students over the past twenty years. The role of writing in doctoral research—both critical and creative—is something I would like to explore further, especially with respect to the ways in which decisions made about voice, style, and argument relate to those involved in the thesis structure and the relation of texts to works, words to images. Detailed literature is emerging on approaches to writing in practice-led theses. See, for example, Aitchison, 'Writing the Practice/ Practise the Writing'; Barrett, 'Experiential Learning in Practice as Research'; and Paltridge et al., 'Doctoral Writing in the Visual and Performing Arts'; MacLeod, 'The Functions of the Written Text in Practice-Based PhD Submissions.'

David Roberts, *Slab* (2010), site-writing slab-2010/

24 Roberts, *Slab*.

25 Yuxiao Chen, *The Lost Home* (May 21, 2020).

26 Rebecca Sainsot-Reynolds, *Time, Shadows* (2020).

27 'Site-Writing/ Site-Reading' was exhibited at the 2013 *Cities Methodologies* conference, hosted by the Urban Laboratory, and curated by Anna Ulrikke Andersen and Polly Gould, with assistance from Adriana Keramida,

Reading Room' and eventually to 'Critical Spatial Practice: Site-Writing,' an MA module in which participants are encouraged to acknowledge the ways they situate themselves as writing subjects in relation to their objects of inquiry.<sup>23</sup> For example, David Roberts, a one-time student on the program, now co-tutor, produced an inspiring work called *Slab* (2010), a collection of concrete poems and photographs. These were created in response to epitaphs engraved on gravestones in the Sephardi Velho Cemetery in East London and delivered as postcards to students living in the Albert Stern House, a former Jewish old people's home overlooking the site, to remind the current residents of the history of the Sephardic Jews buried beneath their windows.<sup>24</sup>

I stand in front of the glass window every day  
and watch the cars come and go on the street  
the outside world is transparent  
but I can't touch it.<sup>25</sup>

Projects such as *Slab* draw attention to how individual relations to sites can form the very subject of investigation and how writing can intervene into specific sites to produce both emotional affects and discursive effects, building connections to others.

From Greenwich meantime which originates nearby, to the burning of a candle in a bedroom or living room, to the act of looking closely, and that of remembering. Time is displayed, time is rendered, time is spent. Time is told and it tells, we watch it often.<sup>26</sup>

Artists books and performative text works produced by participants of this module, and curated with Polly Gould, an artist-writer-curator who teaches alongside David and me, have been displayed in several public venues.<sup>27</sup> Through these pedagogical experiments 'teaching' critical writing becomes a critical spatial practice in itself,<sup>28</sup> questioning the power dynamics governing the relation of tutor and student, and moving towards improvised workshops with facilitators and participants instead, making creative propositions with each

other in textual form that critique, respond to, and intervene into, specific sites.

Where I live, there's a corridor. It's outdoors, leading to the apartment. And since the apartment doesn't have any balconies, I spend a lot of my time in that corridor, especially at night time. The corridor has a light bulb with a sensor, so it turns on every time it senses movement. I prefer to stay in the dark. So I spend much of my time in isolation trying to move slowly enough so that the sensor doesn't detect my movement. I'm getting better at it. That's one new skill I've developed in quarantine.<sup>29</sup>

This year's site-writing experience has been fairly exceptional. We had hardly got started, when the *UCU Four Fights* strike—on pay, workload, equality, and casualization—in UK Higher Education began.<sup>30</sup> As we were nearing the end of this strike, the third in less than two years, we took the difficult decision on 12 March 2020 to close down our picket in solidarity with the NHS to stop the spread of Covid-19.<sup>31</sup> Students bore the brunt of these disruptions, showing amazing fortitude and resilience, leading strike-writing teach-outs and translating key union literature into other languages during the strike. They then struggled through the lockdown with isolation in London and stressful journeys home—to China, Egypt, Greece, Colombia, Singapore, and Slovenia—and the various conditions of quarantine awaiting them on arrival. The work produced by this year's cohort bears witness to a period of uncertainty but also evidences ethical and poetic transformations. These are voiced here in bold, as responses to my invitation to take up positions in this essay in draft form.

Our cities become plague space. I'm imagining the ill city as a body. A sick corpus with its organs attacked by the virus, unable to recover, breathing heavily. It gives the impression it is dormant, like the virus while it proliferates throughout the entire system passing through blood streams and public transport.<sup>32</sup>

Povilas Marozas, Azzurra Muzzonigro, Mrinal Rammohan and Ishita Shah. See the text based on the exhibition: Rendell with Keramida, Marozas, and Rammohan, 'Site-Writing/Site-Reading.' A 2017 exhibition, *Gutter/Index/Margin*, curated by Joanne Preston, Rachel Siobhan Tyler and Lili Zarzycki, traveled to the MA Architectural History Conference at the Bartlett School of Architecture in UCL's Bloomsbury site in central London; the Situated Practices conference at Here East, the Bartlett's East London site in Stratford; and the Urban Room, as part of the fringe festival of the Folkestone Triennale. In 2018, site-writing workshops led by alumni of the module were held, and work exhibited, at the Creative Critic conference at the University of Newcastle, and later as 'Reconstructions,' curated by Emma Filippides, with Maria McLintock, as part of the Urban Storytelling event, hosted by Emily Stone, at the Bartlett School of Architecture, as part of the Bloomsbury Festival on October 20, 2018. Exhibitors from the Bartlett's MA Situated Practices and Architectural History courses included Anastasia Balykina, Kai-Wen Chen, Emma Filippides, Eliza Grosvenor, Rafael Guendelman Hales, Maria McLintock, Valeria Mutteri, Anna Livia Vørsel, Max Wisotsky.

28 For a definition of critical spatial practice, see Rendell, *Art and Architecture* and critical-spatialpractice.co.uk.

29 Abdulrahman El-Taliawi, 'Prelude (00:04-00:50)' from *Being, On the Line*, vimeo.com/420308199 (May 18, 2020).

30 ucu.org.uk/media/10715/Our-four-fights/pdf/ucu\_four-fights-explainer.pdf.

31 'Britain: On the Coronavirus and the Social Crisis: An Open Letter to the Trade Union Movement from Labour Transformed,' see links.org.au/britain-coronavirus-social-crisis-open-letter-trade-union-movement-labour-transformed (accessed June 25, 2020). See also See Warren Pearce, 'Reputation over Responsibility: UK HE and the Covid-19 Crisis,' #USSbriefs92 (accessed March 12, 2020), medium.com/ussbriefs/reputation-over-responsibility-uk-he-and-the-covid-19-crisis-dc0b5745e429.

32 Lia Mazzari, *Pandemic as Site* (April 2020).

33 Vid Žnidaršič, *No Alignment* (May 17, 2020).

34 Sara Kärpänen, (*Be*) *Longing—Poetic Narratives on Nostalgia* (May 18, 2020).

35 Fournier, 'Sick Women, Sad Girls, and Selfie Theory,' 643.

I really did want to know what was going on with him, though.

'Do you think "D" is ok?'

Although my question came out of the blue, 'Č' knew exactly who I was talking about.

'I am sure he is. Maybe he returned home. Or he might be making coffee at the hospital for people working there now!'

I guess she was right. Although, knowing him the whole hospital thing was quite improbable, but he might have returned home.

Home. What does it *really* mean anyway?<sup>33</sup>

I wanted to understand and give a name to this yearning, this feeling of separation and home, loss and belonging one faces during gentrification processes. In early March, everything changed due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the lockdown that followed the global disease. It was not Hackney Wick I was longing for; it was everything. I was lingering on memories of road trips when I was 22, of being a child again and running in the freshly-cut grass in my parents' backyard, of the vast, spotless turquoise sky outside my bedroom window when I lived in Portugal.<sup>34</sup>

Recently I've started to look into the history of feminist life-writing, and a specific strand of that work called 'autotheory,' where autobiography itself operates as a mode of theory, described by Lauren Fournier as 'the practices of engaging with theory, life, and art from the perspective of one's lived experiences.'<sup>35</sup>

In response to Covid-19 and the rising racist provocations, Fanqi (Kiki) Zhou wrote entries for a 30-day diary (2 March–2 April), navigating her experience of identity as a 'Chinese national, who has spent most of her adolescence living and being educated in Europe', as the Covid-19 pandemic takes hold. The diaristic autotheoretical writing makes visible and critically engages with the politics and ethics of her embodied positionality, subjectivity, and racial and cultural vulnerability manifested through the pandemic. It invites the audience to

reflect on the subject matters raised as well as the importance of international solidarity in dealing with global crisis.<sup>36</sup>

Layers, selvedges perhaps, of sandstone, limestone, siltstone, claystone and shale need to be dynamited to extract coal from the Cerrejon open-cast mine owned by Anglo American, BHP and Glencore. In this process, the ancestral home of indigenous Wayuu and African-descent communities is destroyed in La Guajira, Colombia to produce electricity elsewhere. In 2001, the Tabaco community was brutally displaced: 'It cost us our lives to leave our town. Today with the Coronavirus we wish we could go back to our land,' says Edgar Arregoces. Tabaco is yet to be rebuilt and the mine continues expanding in a world climate crisis that calls for the end of coal use.<sup>37</sup>

It is possible, as Stacey Young has done, to locate the early history of such an approach in the writing of second wave feminists, such as Lorde and Anzaldúa, as well as Adrienne Rich.<sup>38</sup> And if I were to rework 'Undoing Architecture' now I would likely wish to call it a piece of autotheory, as well as a site-writing. Both terms are perhaps prefigured by Michel Foucault's 'Self-Writing,' the title of an essay from 1983, in which he explores how the involvement of writing practices in processes of self-formation gives them an '*ethopoietic* function.'<sup>39</sup> Critical writing that draws to attention to the relation between the poetic and the ethical has been described by poet Joan Retallack as 'poethical,'<sup>40</sup> and developed more recently by Denise Ferreira Da Silva through her 'black feminist poethics.'<sup>41</sup>

Regardless of our separation, I have developed a relationship not just with the book but with the text itself. Although I cannot feel its pages I see them through my screen and I know their frailty. The disjointed familiarity I feel for this object has become analogous to the relationship I have with the dialect of my ancestors. There is a tender distance between us.<sup>42</sup>

36 Fanqi Zhou, *Covid19desktop: All that once was directly lived has become mere representation* (June 14, 2020).

37 Diana Salazar, *19 years displaced... Still searching for the promised land* (2020), youtube.com/watch?v=VHg28fW61OI (May 2020).

38 Young, *Changing the Word*, especially Chapter 3 on the history of feminist autotheory.

39 See Foucault, 'Self Writing.'

40 Retallack, *The Poethical Wager*.

41 Ferreira Da Silva, 'Toward a Black Feminist Poethics.'

42 Rachael Docherty, *Ecsodus* (May 2020).

43 Haraway, 'Chthulucene Manifesto from Santa Cruz.'

44 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 33.

45 Ibid., 2.

46 Ibid., 3.

47 Ibid., 177, note 18.

48 Olga Markou, *This Unknown Stops the Machine?* (April 24, 2020).

49 Rendell, 'From, In and With Anne Tallentire.'

When Donna Haraway reconceptualizes the Anthropocene as the Chthulucene, as a 'time of mortal compositions at stake to and with each other,'<sup>43</sup> she notes in *Staying with the Trouble*, that this epoch in which the human and non-human are inextricably linked is sympoietic not autopoietic. She takes the term sympoiesis from M. Beth Dempster, and writes that mortal worlds 'do not make themselves,'<sup>44</sup> but rather require a poiesis that thinks-with, makes-with and becomes-with. This is what she calls SF, defined as 'science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminism, science fact, so far.'<sup>45</sup> For Haraway:

SF is practice and process, it is becoming-with each other in surprising relays; it is a figure for ongoingness in the Chthulucene.<sup>46</sup>

But in an intriguing endnote, right at the end of the book, what we might think of its edge, she suggests that self-examination or autocritique might not be antithetical to thinking-with:

Thinking-with in the sf compost pile of this essay is not an enemy to the profound secular self-examination of Arendt's historically situated human figure, but that is an argument for another day.<sup>47</sup>

While we are forced to take a break from the 'great acceleration', earth is taking a breather.

While humanity is on a state of immobility, nature is growing fast.

As the virus is spreading, nature is taking over.

(Are they the same?)<sup>48</sup>

That other day is now, a time when the ecological crisis we face requires both autotheory/autocritique/autopoiesis and sympoiesis. Referencing and quoting those whose writing has enabled us to transform ourselves are ways of making-with.<sup>49</sup> But I am also interested in transdisciplinary citational practices, curatorial or editorial perhaps, that can blur self-edges through the 'featuring' and 'remixing' of another's work.

Changes to our usual pedagogical conditions of self-edge as a result of the pandemic—becoming physically remote and yet digitally co-present—have generated different possibilities for writing-together, where zoom proximities have been reconfigured as textual adjacencies in this essay. Such edges between selves and others linger around vegetal fringes, lie compressed between geological strata, form along architecture's borders, line the margins of textiles, and whisper from the coasts of texts. In offering my own text as an initial structure for site-writing participants to enter, the approach taken here is arboreal rather than rhizomatic; and in setting out the conditions of encounter, I still hold onto the vestige of tutor power, or curatorial oversight, and so, I would venture, do not go far enough ... at least not yet. But with the slow attention born out of the lockdown, writing across the earth, from the ecological crisis that sprung the Covid-19 pandemic of 2020, the engagements between the chronicles of these site-writers still selvedge this text.

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