

'I don't know what I do for a living actually': A Study of Contemporary Writing Practices

by George Nesbitt

0933139

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF FINE ART

PIET ZWART INSTITUTE/WILLEM DE KOONING ACADEMY

HOGESCHOOL ROTTERDAM

IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE

MASTER OF ARTS IN FINE ART

GRADUATE RESEARCH PROJECT ADVISORS:

MIKE SPERLINGER

KATARINA ZDJELAR

JAN VERWOERT

COURSE DIRECTOR:

VIVIAN SKY REHBERG

DATE SUBMITTED:

29/03/18

'I don't know what I do for a living actually': A Study of Contemporary Writing Practices

by George Nesbitt

contents:

introduction

Sugababes

Nigella Lawson

Britney Spears

Ophelia

bibliography

illustrations by James Sturkey

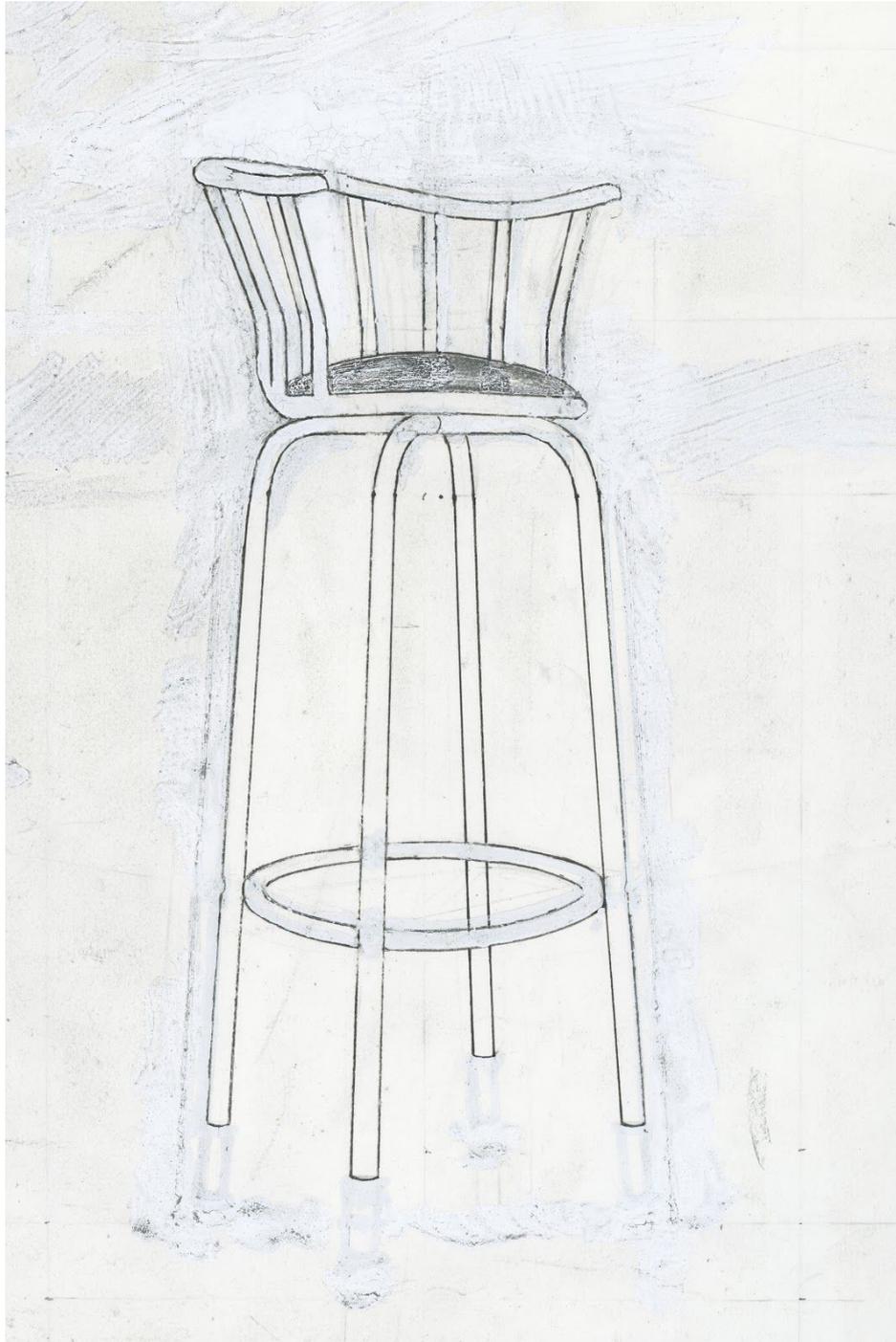
The writers I describe in the pages that follow are all, broadly speaking, cultural producers for whom writing is a crucial skill within a larger palette of talents. This selection of writing practices is based upon personal preference and my admiration for each of them: for their acute disposition and precise ways of operating.

We choose our heroes on a gut instinct, but within every icon are the mechanisms of influence and the tools for inspiration. This is a study into what makes these creators tick, for me. These are my discriminatory thoughts, fleshed out with bias and projection. It is a process I went into head first, immersively, and found a sense of direction en-route. I was researching a book about the Sugababes, and the research turned into this text.

I had to discover a model for orienting myself to my subjects, to understand and articulate the position I was (and was not) taking. I learnt a lot from James, my best friend, who is a great fan of Britney Spears; his love of her is studious, somehow remote, habitual and quietly insistent. I began considering the Sugababes' own writing methods, and in turn the practices of other media navigators.

The true fan dwells upon their star quite independently. Dwelling is the key word here: to dwell is to speculate abstractly and enduringly, to dwell is also to inhabit - to live with. The true fan's entangled engagement is something they do not necessarily theorise upon, or justify; systems of value are constructed along a wildly evolving course. Fanaticism is indulgent, unplanned, and does not directly seek conclusion. This is the embedded model of study I choose.

My idols show me that writing is mostly just the shifting about of existing words: the re-arrangement of larger and smaller blocks of written matter, and the chemistry of collage. They demonstrate that to write is to put down text by whatever means you have. They encourage me to grab whatever I want in huge handfuls; we can work the rest out later. We can write it together, in these spaces. We can practise some form of live cobbling or augmentation, or work from two totally different places in time and genre. Thread these beads this way or that, borrow the whole bracelet if you like. Writing's just half the story, the legible half.



I don't know what you mean, she said, rubbing the dog's velvet ears. She clutched his bony head; his skinny bird-like torso gently clamped between her knees, more as a gesture than a genuine physical restraint.

Oh umm I just read it's an ancient breed, the Greyhound, and they used to race here--

--There used to be a stadium, I heard, nearer the shopping centre, long time ago, he's not... we got him as a puppy.

That was kind of as far as the conversation went, I sidled off, carried on walking the gravel path perimeter of the wooded reservoir, not really sure why I was there. It was a nice coincidence to find an actual Greyhound, I had started to appreciate their beauty, but that wasn't really the reason I'd visited the reservoir. I wasn't sure if I needed to be there at all, and somehow I felt a bit of creep for not having a dog with me myself, or to be jogging, or to be with a lover.

I'm trying to write about Greyhounds because I am writing a book about the Sugababes. I don't really know how to write about them, what angle to take, but I think it would be a good side-note to the book. In this neighbourhood where the original Sugababes are from, Hendon, there used to lie a race-track for Greyhounds, it's where in 1876 the first ever artificial hare for dog racing was trialled. I think it would be nice to give a little context, describe the neighbourhood the girls were from, it's somehow easier to start that way.

The Greyhounds got me thinking about how dogs have evolved alongside humans and the way different breeds exist, and our relationship to dogs, is this half accident, half necessity, half fetish thing. I really wanted to buy this book called *Dogs of Capitalism* by Mitchell Jones (1988), but it's out of print and over \$300 online, and I can't tell if he is a reputable author. It seems to be a book about how dogs were essential in the rise of capitalism, because without

them people could not have guarded their land or herded their livestock. And then if you think about the way in which the Greyhound, a hunting dog, became an animal used for racing, and leisure, and gambling purposes - hunting as a sport - you can somehow span a whole progress of human evolution in tandem with dogs and think about what our roles are now as pets and owners and stadium attendees and what we do with our spare time.

This reservoir is a relic of London's canal age, when goods were shifted around the city and country on a system of waterways. The reservoir is ancient and evolving, its edges have expanded and contracted over the years, along with the way people think about it and use it. These outskirts of the city, where land was cheap and space abundant, have a history as a testing ground for entrepreneurial spirit and new formats for leisure. The Welsh Harp Reservoir, or Brent Reservoir, is in Kingsbury, Hendon, North West London, a stone's throw from Brent Cross Shopping Centre, arguably the UK's first American style shopping mall; the remains of the Greyhound track are underneath its car park, literally over the road from the reservoir. We are not that far from Wembley stadium, and under the flightpath of Heathrow airport. The original Sugababes Mutya and Keisha both studied at Kingsbury High School (and incidentally so too did popstar George Michael before them), Siobhan, the third member lived down the road in Hillingdon. I don't think it any coincidence that you can draw a circle around the outer edges of London, one that would pass through this very reservoir, and you would discover the childhood homes of David Bowie, Kate Bush, Boy George, Ms. Dynamite, Adele and so forth; it has something to do with access in an analogue era.

I have a hunch that it is here at this reservoir that the Sugababes did the photoshoot for the cover of their second album *Angels With Dirty Faces* (2002). In the photo the three of them are wearing mostly denim and are sat in differing positions on a faded picnic bench, a large body of water behind them, the evening sun silhouetting them in orange. It is a photo of some

adolescents doing what they do best: occupying those surplus public spaces with pride, too old to be home and too young to be in the pub.

It's a struggle, writing this book about the Sugababes, but I'm lucky to have the opportunity.

There has been a lot written about them already, *Sugababes: The Story of Britain's Most Amazing Girl Band* by Emily Sheridan (2007), is admirably comprehensive in its detailing of the how, why, when, of all the line-up changes, and the actual original conception and formation of the band, which I'm really into, but can't see the use of repeating these facts when you can find them there. I typed up a transcript of the majority of interviews you can find online with the Sugababes, spanning from 2001 to 2013, so you can see for yourself there, laid out, the whole history of the band in their own words. It's a beautiful read should anyone want to dedicate themselves to it.

Though appearing somewhat official, I don't think Sheridan's book is an actual authorised publication, I am at least pretty certain she didn't contact the girls for new information or interviews, but it's amazing what you can piece together from the vast amount of press content out there. I started to realise as I read the book that a lot of the lines were familiar to me, having personally watched all their interviews on *YouTube* in half-speed and written them up myself; certain phrases, then whole paragraphs echoed back to me. It was a strange feeling of déjà vu, re-encountering the words I had listened to and typed into a document; it felt uncanny to find them written down by someone else. When you play an interview at half-speed everyone speaking in that video sounds either a bit high or drunk, slow and numb, very aware of their intoxication, like they are choosing their words carefully. It seems they are thinking before speaking, so as not to give themselves away, but whilst in this zone of interiority gathering a sense of profound wisdom from the most trivial of questions and statements; indulging together in a layer of meaning that I - the viewer - cannot grasp. Maybe this is just what being

interviewed on camera and with a microphone does to people, you just don't notice until it's slowed down.

It is necessary to play the footage like this as it allows you to type the words at almost the same speed you are hearing them, so there's less pausing and rewinding and the typing gets done quicker overall. Transcription is tedious, I could have made a Sugababes interview compilation video much more easily, and shared that; this took me much longer, there must be a reason I stuck it out until the end, something driving me. But a transcript is not a metaphor, so there needn't be a meaning behind it.

A transcript is not a metaphor, it is a record; it is the outcome of a systematic process. This is not to say that writing a transcript is a neutral act, or that there are no decisions for the typist to make. But really, once the system is designed (how to represent a pause in speech, laughter, how to depict when two people speak at the same time), then those rules have to be stuck to consistently for the outcome to have any integrity, and maybe for the text to be considered a transcript at all - it's that sterile objective mood that really makes it feel convincing, like a piece of evidence.

My Sugababes transcript came about because I just wanted to chart their history for myself, see it all laid out: the various line-up changes, their youthful, awkward confidence; the encroaching professionalism of subsequent new band members, and the enduring moments of solidarity. I downloaded all the *YouTube* interviews available: afternoon chat shows, weekend TV, backstage interviews; *Popworld*, *Richard and Judy*. I downloaded them in the fear they might one day disappear, to store them and to watch them in order. But then I wanted to process them further somehow, to grapple with the information more physically, to ingest the story. Some of the journalism, the questions they got asked, it was terrible, so I just deleted it. I had to delete all the questions in order to be consistent, and I just kept the voices I wanted to hear.

The transcript was a long, designed process that I willfully endured; I laid all their voices out in columns, so you can see who said what, and in what order, and in which line-up clearly for yourself. All six members from the different eras, each with their own corner of the page. You can consume it at a pace that suits you, go back and forth, skim. The best part is when the original three suddenly reappear in the script, when they attempted to reform the band in 2013, and the whole thing comes full circle. I don't know, you can see all this in the videos anyway, but I do think that dragging content from one medium to another, from a voice in a video to text on paper, it does something, you see the events differently. So many books get made into movies, but why not movies into books?

When it comes down to actually writing afresh, actually stringing some sentences together, you know, authoring, I think I need more technique. Maybe I can borrow some strategies for authorship from Emily Sheridan, and in turn the Sugababes:

'Despite the fact Mutya, Keisha and Siobhan were young teenagers, they were fiercely independent and outspoken and objected to their studio roles of singers - they wanted in on more action. They convinced [their manager] and the producers they could write their own lyrics and so the Sugababes' songwriting method was born. Even now, the girl group admit they aren't involved in the instrumental side of their songs, but they play a huge part in the vocals and prefer to write their own lyrics.'

(Sheridan, 2007, p.47)

There's a great interview with Mutya from 2001 with an unnamed journalist in Australia (ipolson, 2010). I think it's the fact that Mutya is alone, or maybe the interviewer's slightly off-piste questioning, that allowed for a more insightful account of their songwriting process. If I could learn something from the Sugababes' writing practice what might it be? They start with a theme, a bit of melody from the producer, they go away - come up with some lines in

isolation, come back and throw bits into the pot, aged fourteen, they repeated this process with scores and scores of songs, so many songs get scrapped when an album is written, I guess you just loosen up and renounce your ego and authorship a little, aged fourteen, you throw in the odd cliché, your unfiltered crush, put stuff together that rhymes. It's the rhyme and the rhythm, the beat and the harmonies that make it all fit together. The union and the attitude.

It would be inaccurate and an injustice to say that the lyrics for *Overload*, their defining debut single, are nonsensical, or that it's impossible to glean meaning from the song. What kind of meaning do we seek in a song anyway? It's a misguided task to try decode lyrics in order to sketch out a solid scenario or plot. *Overload's* lines don't follow on from each other coherently at all at times; it's written with a looseness and bluntness, in a group, chunk by chunk, it all rhymes, so who cares. Moreover, they can sing. Mutya states they wrote and recorded the track in two hours (ipolson, 2010), it's brisk and raw:

'Train comes I don't know it's destination, it's a one-way ticket to a madman's situation.'

(Buchanan et al., 2000).

We don't know what's going on but we get on the train because it sounds good and we go with it. It's about feeling overloaded.

When I think of the Sugababes I think of determination, negotiation and compromise; I think about making things work with what you've got, but like, actually work. When it came to performing *Overload* live, the band took their own approach to meeting the expectations of them as live performers; pop groups were expected to sing whilst dancing, choreographed and on their feet, and the Sugababes wriggled themselves out of complying to this format:

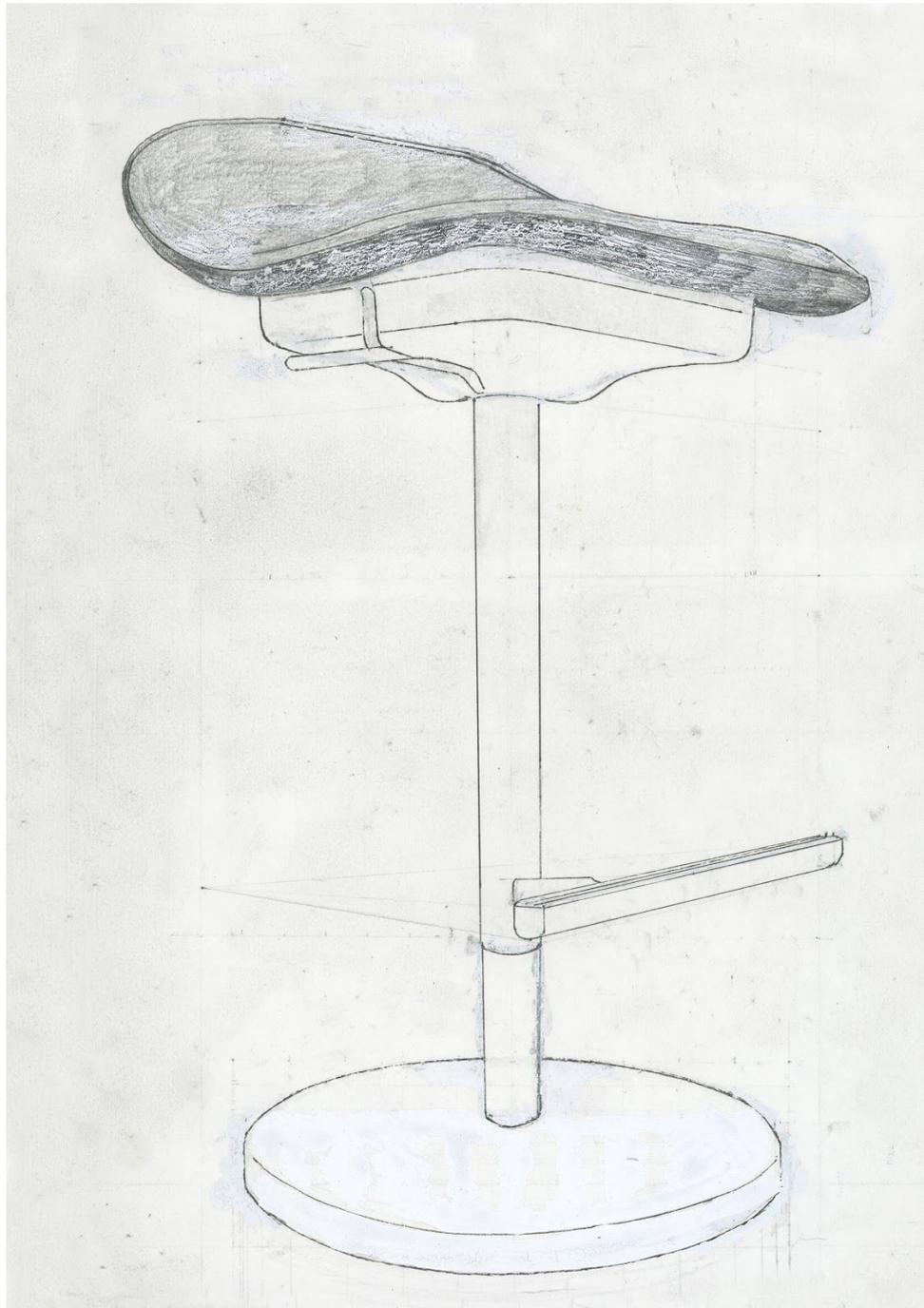
'We've got really horrible memories so if you give us a routine we won't remember it.'

'We can't be bothered to remember it.'

'Yeah we can't be bothered to remember it so we just do our own thing, you know.'

(PureAsMySinsAllow, 2010)

They had no stage school training, no dance lessons, not like other girl bands. Their solution was to sit on barstools with handheld mics, heads down, we hear the drum machine kick in, they raise their heads in unison, a beat passes, Siobhan raises the mic to her mouth, pause, she sings the opening line, all heads turn to the right, and back, they unfold their legs, the guitarist keeps strumming, now cross legs again - but the other way, look to the left, chorus, heads pan slowly to the right, they're all singing. They're not really smiling, but it's hardly the scowl the newspapers made it out to be. The whole setup, the casual zeal. Things fit. Like an accident. I want to write like a Sugababe, I want to go into my corner and write down what comes to my mind in a scurry, I want to be unembarrassed and unashamed, I won't worry about cliché, I want my thoughts to be lost in a mulch. I want the security of my group, I want the shared dignity of colleagues, I want it all to come together and be dizzily vague and dazzlingly obvious, I want the clumsiness of three bodies, I want to go through the motions, I want the theatre of good timing, to strut in unison on my stool and down my mic, we all want to sync with something. (SUGAPIE212, 2013)



The TV cook and recipe writer is a particular type of cultural author whose outputs straddle multiple media simultaneously, and whose work cannot be located in any one singular form or category.

Nigella Lawson the writer, home cook and TV persona is a content maker with plural outputs in different media; it is hard to identify her core product, or rather the mode in which we consume it. I can watch a Nigella recipe, I can read a Nigella recipe, I can cook it, I can eat it and I can in time internalise it, learn it and adapt it. She's a good cook, she's a good writer and she's a good verbal communicator. If Nigella was a popstar, you might be tempted to say her 'songs' were recipes, and her books her albums, but the way a recipe permeates a culture and infuses different bodies, is shared, owned and distributed is a categorically and phenomenologically different encounter to that of enjoying music. It's a fair statement to make that some people who watch her shows would not necessarily read her books, and vice versa, and a lot of them might not even cook her recipes that often, if at all. Then she has her website which operates not only as a freely accessible archive for her older published recipes - and the promotional giveaway of newer ones - but hosts a community driven database into which users can share and rate each other's recipes and tips. The modes in which we interact, relate to or consume the oeuvre of the TV cook and recipe book writer are diverse, and Nigella moderates her articulation in all of them.

Consider for a moment the innovation of the Japanese media franchise *Pokémon*; around a league of fictional creatures the company built a Game Boy game, a trading card game, further computer games, TV shows, films, comic books and toys, and then an augmented reality app. There are many different ways to be a follower of *Pokémon* and buy into the imaginary world of being a 'trainer' of fantastical creatures. None of the formats alone take centre stage or claim precedent, but are fragmentary, detailed and self-contained enough to be encountered in

isolation - but more powerfully, can come together and reinforce each other to create an all pervading and multidisciplinary universe.

Nigella's first book *How To Eat* was published in 1998 and was quickly followed by her first TV show *Nigella Bites* in 1999. This was the same year *Pokémon* arrived in the UK, hitting the TV, gaming and toy industries with a triple whammy. The skills and the dynamism of the TV cook may seem remote and even trivial to the unconcerned, but behind every multimedia, multi-platform brand is a sensorially, practically, and intellectually developed methodological scaffold; an ecosystem of processes, spaces and encounters that can actually be mapped out and understood and admired.

Nigella deals in many phenomena, the first of which is time. Cooking is all about timing they say, and so is writing about it: 'I write a book to find out exactly what I'm thinking,' - and not the other way around (Arts & Ideas at the JCCSF, 2015). She likes to wait 'for all the recipes to sort of bubble up and take mature form' (BNStudio, 2010). This is the structure of her process: she has the format - the recipe book - it's on the horizon; untitled, unconceptualised and blank. She journeys towards it at her own pace:

'I spent almost a year putting [my last book] off, in every way, but it's important... I couldn't get the framework of a book, I had to let it - you know - simmer on the back burner, and you can't rush that, I mean I can't rush that because it has to have its own form and shape. So although I had recipes, I couldn't see - I couldn't connect the dots... When you put it off you are actually working, your mind is even if you think you're you know - washing the dishes - you're doing everything you would normally put off doing, that's when things come together... It's a very important part of the process, I feel that I'm not a cherner outer... you can fill the space but you really want to feel that you can stand by it and you want to put your name to that.' (Arts & Ideas, 2015)

Time and contemplation are essential in the materialisation of a form. The writer and TV cook always begins with the steady process of writing the book, the TV show follows after, and only after. This transmutation of media takes time, because as she puts it 'the grammar of television is slightly different from the grammar of a book' (Arts & Ideas, 2015). She never works with a script, insisting that under such conditions 'my brain and my mouth rebel' (92nd Street Y, 2015), and these were the terms under which she agreed to film *Nigella Bites*. Instead of reading from a pre-drafted text, Lawson and her team will film the cooking of a recipe again and again whilst she ad-libs about what she is doing:

'The director says action and I start talking... You have to be slightly driven by fear, which I am, and the need to fill the silence, but I do feel - particularly when I cook - that because I don't cook in particularly structured way and because I don't do professional style cooking it's far more organic and I feel I take my cue scriptwise from what the food is doing.' (Arts & Ideas, 2015)

The food/life/career practice of the TV cook and writer, whilst filtered to the audience through the two-dimensional forms of text and video, is necessarily a physically enacted vocation. After time, space is a very important container in her practice. Another prerequisite made before agreeing to shoot her first series for television was that Nigella do the filming in her own kitchen. So the kitchen is not only the cook's laboratory and studio (in the traditional artistic sense), it also periodically becomes a professional TV set, all within a room of her own home. It's three kitchens in one.

'I wanted to get as much of the flavour of the kitchen in as possible, not just the food but also my clutter, the little bits of things I've collected and as much as possible try and get the *movement* of a kitchen.' (BNStudio, 2010)

When Nigella moved from London's Shepherd's Bush to a much grander house in the more centrally located Belgravia it was important to maintain the honest familiarity of her original set, with the identifiable character and relatively modest proportions of a middle class Victorian terrace. So she had it rebuilt south of the river on an industrial estate in Battersea. To recreate the humanising 'clutter' Nigella sourced objects herself on *eBay*, as opposed to leaving it to the work of a TV set designer. (Turner, 2007)

'For me the kitchen is a real and important place but it's also a symbolic space... the culmination of all the kitchens I've cooked in... memories of my grandmother's kitchen... I've got a different kitchen now but this mess is my own mess.'

(Abril Insights, 2014)

Whilst operating as a symbol, a tool to communicate from within, the cook's kitchen becomes a special kind of sensorial writing space:

'I might be cooking myself supper and I think oh that was really good and I might jot down what I did afterward, not weight and measures but just what I did. And then I'll do it again, I have one person who works with me... she will write down what I am doing, it's very hard to write and cook because it stops your creativity. You've got to be stirring and feeling.' (Arts & Ideas, 2015)

The non-verbal time and space spent in the kitchen, sensorially experimenting, is a core activity that one almost feels Nigella is safeguarding, insisting 'I need to be in the kitchen playing.' (Abril Insights, 2014). In this practice the dichotomy between a lived encounter with ingredients and its representation through written word is almost diagrammatically clear; distinct, like oil on water:

'They are very different domains, and it was the challenge of how do I use language - which is in itself abstract - to conjure up a world which belongs in the realm of the senses; it was that challenge that first made me want to write about food.'

(Arts & Ideas, 2015)

This notion of sensory space, and its relation to text, extends further than the kitchen, as does Nigella's practice; our visit to her library is overdue. Lawson's library has an almost mythological reputation, this room has an equally important place in her creative methodology. The library and kitchen coexist, reinforcing one another. The word library describes both the collection of books itself and the space they are stored in - whether it be purpose built or circumstantial - it is a malleable and moveable thing, it is indexical and arguably digitisable but best understood as a three-dimensional environment in which a user is able to physically navigate a huge body of knowledge, a body of knowledge much greater than one brain can reasonably internalise. A private library is a powerful tool as it serves as an extension of the owner's mind, it comes with the luxury of rare and possibly non-digitized knowledge that can be explored with the tactile senses. Nigella has revealed on her website that her library holds nearly five thousand cookbooks (Lawson, 2011). The recipe author has many different ways of concocting a new recipe, but it often involves the library:

'What I tend to do when it's a recipe I've never ever cooked before is do more in depth research, so maybe look at about twenty different ones to see what they have in common, see what they don't have in common, and then try and get an idea of a structure.' (Abril Insights, 2014). 'One of the great things about being a home cook also is that I am not obliged to be novel, so if another writer or if a food blogger or if a friend has given me an idea for a recipe I like to credit that, I also think the evolution of a recipe is interesting'. (Arts & Ideas, 2015)

Lawson enthuses about the thought exchanging process that recipe writing opens up, and the loosening of authorship: 'It's not about originality it's about how you develop an idea and where you got it from is really interesting.' (Arts & Ideas, 2015). The library allows her to surf a landscape of conversations, and these are conversations that continue outside the confines of the page, and even re-enter:

'People come to a book signing and they have altered a recipe and their variation has inspired me and then it might enter into a later edition: I might put a not saying someone came to me saying “you don't need to fry this you can put it in the oven”. Because food is a conversation and I'm learning all the time as well.'

(Abril Insights, 2014)

Her private collection is an organism that she propagates and shares, where food choreographies are released, performed, eaten, reconfigured and transposed back into word. A recurring motif on her TV shows is to see Nigella on her reading chair and sharing one of her books with us, among her greats is *Are You Hungry Tonight? A Collection of Elvis's Favourite Foods*, from which she has re-published for a peanut butter and banana fried sandwich (Lawson, 2012). She has allowed her library to be photographed for magazines, in its various guises as she has moved homes over the years. Like the kitchen space, the library it is not only both a practical tool and an inhabited environment, but a symbol of her craft as a writer, and how she performs her relation to this collection of books is an act to be interpreted, it's a physical manifestation of her process. A recipe's history and authorship are to be both respected and played with, these needn't be contradictory terms.

Irreverence and iconoclasm are characteristics regularly exercised by Nigella. This reaches a pinnacle in her use of language and her treatment of ingredients. Her way with text mirrors her way with food:

'Food is very much like language and it can only carry on if it's living and I think that [to] codify language very stringently and also have a notion of “these are traditional foods that you must not change”, isn't really how people live. And you can decry neologisms as much as you like... but the difficulty is it's futile to try and stop it, because language develops as it will, and so does cooking. Because the truth is that usage dictates development, to try and make the rules govern people's behaviour is to misunderstand what a wonderful live and unfurling thing language is, and food is.'

(Sydney Opera House Talks & Ideas, 2016)

The cookbook writer samples, modifies and stirs the pot. She demonstrates her way. Her methodology is necessarily crafted and physically lived out by her, but what she sells is immaterial, it is a cocktail of knowledge, orientation and attitude; that in turn can be re-lived.

'I do not believe it's a moral good to cook.' (Abril Insights, 2014)

Tell me more, I implore her. You're full of wisdoms.

'I like a culinary pun as well.' (Sydney Opera, 2016)

How else do you like to break the rules?

'I have absolutely no shame about any ingredient I use.' (Sydney Opera, 2016)

Yes, your Marmite spaghetti recipe is delicious, and mad, I've cooked it a lot.

'I have a very camp and kitsch side; therefore I sometimes feel if an ingredient is really disgusting and everyone thinks it is very 'low rent' I feel compelled to use it, I can't stand the sneerers, I'd rather be sneered at.' (Sydney Opera, 2016)

I can't stand the sneerers either, I'm not taking the piss: I liked the fact you presented avocado on toast on your TV show, with the grated ginger. It's the way some people live.

'I like to share my enthusiasms that's all I do.' (Abril Insights, 2014)

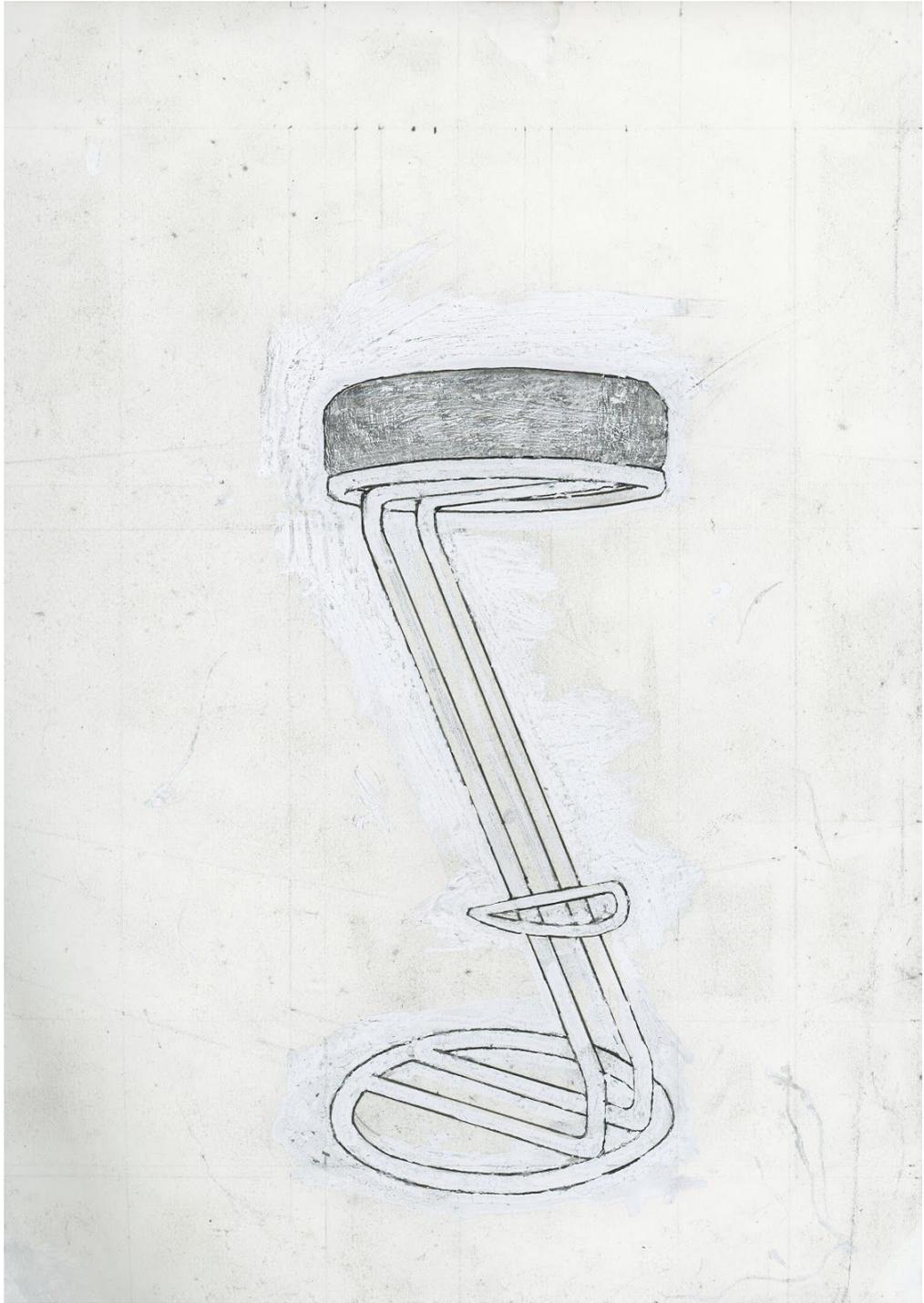
Yes, that's the thing you're always saying, you're not a professional chef, you've never worked in a restaurant.

'I don't cook for a living, I don't know what I do for living actually.'

(92nd Street Y, 2015)

Exactly, because you're navigating multiple terrains, exposing your attitude through your daily existence. Sharing your experiments, making mistakes, taking joy in trying stuff out.

'Sometimes my mistakes make the food better and sometimes they make the food worse, there's only one mistake - I think - in cooking, that you can't remedy, and that's too much salt, everything else you can make better. Just as in life outside the kitchen, it's true in the kitchen: often it's what you do to make something better that becomes the way you live or the way you cook. When you go through life you make mistakes a lot, and it's not the mistake that matters it's how you rectify it. And that's true out of the kitchen, and that's true in the kitchen.' (Abril Insights, 2014)



There are three versions of *Tom's Diner*, the song; well, three distinct versions in its long history of samples and covers. It was originally written and sung by Suzanne Vega. She wrote it about a real diner in New York that she would visit for breakfast before catching the subway to work as a secretary.

'I am sitting in the morning
at the diner on the corner.
I am waiting at the counter
for the man to pour the coffee.' (Vega, 1989)

Vega's original ambition for the song was for it to have a simple piano backing, 'sort of like a background for a French movie' (Mali Yojez, 2017). It was foremost a practical solution that lead her to just sing it unaided acapella since she couldn't play piano herself, or know anyone who could, but it worked out well. She performed it this way as part of her live set for years before it was recorded in the studio for her 1987 album *Standing Solitude*, retaining the effective bare vocals. Suzanne did not write the song at her stool in the diner, but it is a common misconception that she did.

'And he fills it only halfway,
and before I even argue
he is looking out the window
at somebody coming in.' (Vega, 1989)

It makes sense, the idea that it was written in a diner; the evocative lyrics, written in the present tense, portray the solitary protagonist experiencing a moment of isolation over coffee, a bit like an Edward Hopper painting, notebook out. JK Rowling famously wrote Harry Potter in an Edinburgh cafe, but Vega was actually in a rush to work. In 1990 the electronic music duo

DNA lifted Vega's folksy vocals and set their overt melancholy against a borrowed dance beat belonging to the London band Soul II Soul. When Vega and her record company heard the track they liked it. They managed to contact the anonymous duo DNA, had a conversation, and officially released it rather than seek an immediate financial settlement. It was an unexpected runaway hit, selling three million physical copies. (Mali Yojez, 2017)

"It is always nice to see you',
says the man behind the counter
to the woman who has come in,
she is shaking her umbrella.' (Vega, 1989)

The 'da da da da - da da da duh' outro from Vega's acapella original was a simple ad-libbed wind-down essential for easing the audience out of the song. It only appeared at the very end of the original song. It follows the same melody structure as her four-line verses, but replaces the words with a 'da da da' syllabic repetition. It eases us off the narrative of the song, and returns us to our world, humming along in the car, perhaps alone. It is probably a very necessary feature in a song that lacks the typical instrumentals to fade us out.

'And I look the other way
as they are kissing their hellos,
and I'm pretending not to see them,
and instead I pour the milk.' (Vega, 1989)

But the 90s DNA remix of the song in fact opens with a sped-up version of Vega's 'da da da da' outro, cropped and repeated as the snare drum kicks in. The crop takes the A and B lines of the verse melody and does away with the similar - but subtly different - tunes of lines C and D. In this action the sense of narrative time passing is flattened; inserting an infectiously relentless

and languageless chorus where before there was no chorus at all. In the chorus we no longer hear the ghosts of sentences, the pattern of storytelling, but an even more basic rhythmic structure more akin to movement, walking and dance; bodies in the city. The sense of ambivalent alienation remains, it's just a bit more hiked up and exuberant.

'I open up the paper
there's a story of an actor
who had died while he was drinking,
it was no one I had heard of.' (Vega, 1989)

In subsequent performances of *Tom's Diner*, but not all, Vega has appropriated DNA's version of the lyrics. Da da da da, da da da da. Da da da da, da da da da. It's been sampled by 2Pac, Drake, Destiny's Child and more. It's a simple song about a woozy sense of solitude found in an 80s formica New York Diner, but in its tightly woven structure, and in the ubiquity of it's morning coffee routine there is something that transmits, bounces between musical genres and across eras. Maybe because it is a song about feeling out of place in a non-space it can get away with being displaced itself.

'And I'm turning to the horoscope,
and looking for the funnies
when I'm feeling someone watching me
and so I raise my head.' (Vega, 1989)

When producer and DJ Giorgio Moroder (a disco pioneer who worked a lot with Donna Summer) approached Britney Spears to collaborate on a remix for his album, she came back to him with the idea of *Tom's Diner*. When we hear the distinctive vocals of Britney sing the song we know she didn't write, we still visualise her occupying that stool in the diner,

self-consciously observing her morning, passive and amongst it all on her seat, maybe with her notepad and pen. Some fans online made a photo collage where they pasted modern day Britney into that famous Edward Hopper painting, as sort of suggested cover art. It's funny and incongruous. But if something is funny it's because it rings true or somehow works. Maybe it's the proliferation of paparazzi photos showing Britney fetching a Starbucks that's etched into our consciousness, or again just this sense of double displacement.

'There's a woman on the outside
looking inside, does she see me?
No she does not really see me
'cause she sees her own reflection.' (Vega, 1989)

Britney's *Tom's Diner* is zappy, synthy and autotuned and that's not a criticism it's an observation, it's very much the sound Moroder was pursuing on his album. It doesn't have any of the chilled-out brassiness or warm bass of the DNA version, and it's a million miles from the folk monologue of Suzanne Vega. It really sounds like the studio, like the actual electric veins of a studio, and all the possibilities that come with that. It's exhilarating. When Giorgio approached Britney she was busy working on her own ninth studio album. I don't believe they actually met face to face in the process of making *Tom's Diner*. The hyped electro production together with the anonymity of the shiny diner really rhymes with that industry transactionality that produced it, the cold intimacy; but don't get me wrong, transactions are a necessity and even better when everyone's being transparent whilst having fun.

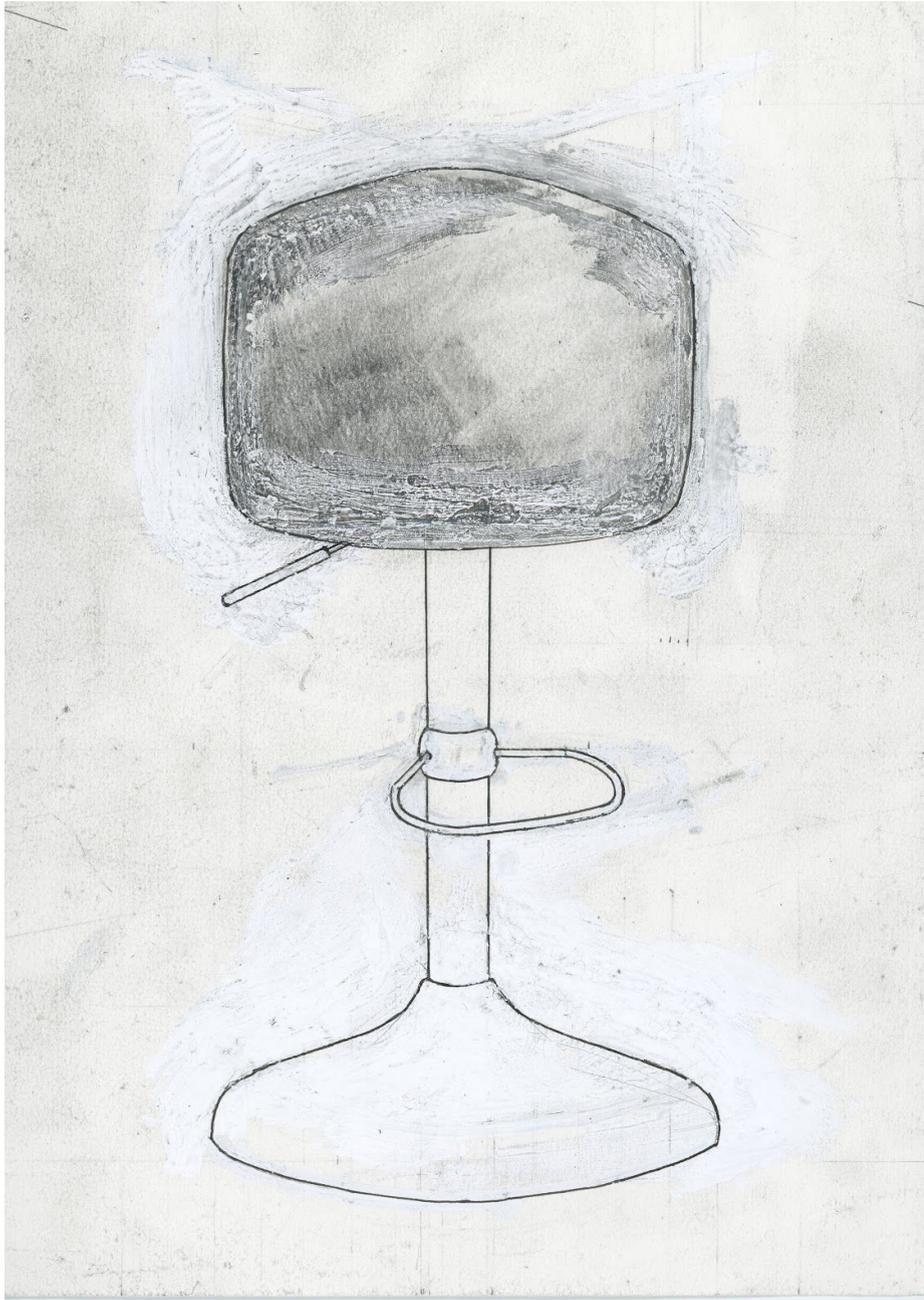
'And I'm trying not to notice
that she's hitching up her skirt,
and while she's straightening her stockings
her hair has gotten wet.' (Vega, 1989)

Britney spent two and a half years writing her ninth album, and a lot of early material was scrapped. Britney has always been just one of the many hands that authors her songs, but by album nine she had earned a considerable amount of sway. 'The songs weren't coming in right, and that took probably, like, six months, and then we found this amazing A&R girl that came in and just hooked me up with the funnest people to write with.' (Luminous Productions, 2006). Britney knew what she had in mind for the album; she wanted to take risks, to be playful and she needed to be around people who knew how to play. 'Honestly.. when I would go [into the studio] I would really just tell myself 'dare to suck' (Lorraine, 2016). Her adventurousness really comes across in the dizzying mix of sounds on the album, the Guardian newspaper remarked 'she's sounding like she's having the time of her life'.

'Oh, this rain it will continue
through the morning whilst I'm listening
to the bells of the cathedral;
I am thinking of your voice' (Vega, 1989)

It was in this inventive spirit she proffered *Tom's Diner* to Moroder. It was a hectic and creative time, she was still resident and performing in Vegas amongst all the album production. Writing very rarely takes place alone on a high stool, but the stool as a symbol for a writing that happens out in the open, publicly, chimes. It's a writing indebted to the services of others, that dices with alienation, and is found in the humming of a familiar melody. It's a writing that steals from the newspaper and completely renounces authorship, unabashedly. It's held together by decision making, a distinctly recognisable vocal delivery, and perhaps the diner itself.

'My son actually came up with the album title, Glory, he was like 'Mom you're going to feel glorious once this is over'... he is very proud of that, so yeah, it's a body of work that I am very very proud of.' (Luminous, 2016)



I wonder if Keisha and Mutya came here much - this reservoir - in their youth, at the turn of the millennium. You would pass it if you were walking from Kingsbury High Street, or school, and heading to Brent Cross Shopping Centre. In 2013 when Mutya, Keisha and Siobhan were putting together the release of their reunion album they posed actually *in* a lake, pond or river resembling this reservoir. They're stood the three of them, up to their waists in a body of water, all in long off-white dresses, their arms are down by their sides but lifting slightly outwards, palms open toward the sky. A smattering of white flowers and foliage forms the background behind them.

The water, the flowers, the dress and the palms are all a reference to an image I've seen before, that of Ophelia, a character from Shakespeare's play Hamlet, whose image has been conjured by painters so many times. Millais' version of her is particularly well known and is hanging in Tate Britain, I went to go look at it after the whole Sugababes thing. I already knew a bit of the character Ophelia because when I was working at a theatre taking tickets and ushering, I also had to watch the audience for people taking photos who shouldn't be, and actually sit inside the theatre during productions. I had to watch Benedict Cumberbatch's Hamlet at least ten times and it was unbearable.

My favourite part of the play was a scene that didn't feature Hamlet or Benedict. In the scene the character Gertrude describes Ophelia's tragic drowning having been jilted and generally messed around by Hamlet and her Dad. The death happens offstage, and this is how we hear of it, through Gertrude's account. It's clearly an important part of the plot, but we don't witness it directly. It probably came down to practicality a lot of the time in Shakespearean theatre, when stuff happens offstage, it's probably because it was too tricky for it to happen live on-stage, and Ophelia of course drowns in a river. But then again, it's such a beautiful monologue the way it is, and it depicts her death with a dignity that brings shame on the characters who have driven

her to it. Maybe the force and the imagery of the words, and her absence, are more powerful than a dramatic staging of the drowning could ever be.

In her last scene onstage we see Ophelia handing out flowers and herbs, and with her knowledge of Elizabethan botany she reveals the symbolic meaning of each posy that she gifts and ascribes to the characters on stage, all the while singing songs to herself. Gertrude's description of the death that comes next goes like this: Ophelia came to the edge of a 'glassy stream' to weave with the leaves of a willow tree that stands there, taking various flowers, leaves and weeds to hang garlands upon the tree. As she does this she is singing snippets of folk songs and hymns from the era. When she slips into the water accidentally, she does little to save herself, spreading into a two-dimensional image on the surface of the water, along with her dress, surrounded by her flowers and their symbolism, still singing 'snatches of old tunes'. (Shakespeare, 1998, 4.7)

This is the scene Millais and many others painted again and again, I can only really say why it endures for me, not others, and that's in both its ambiguity and vividness. Gertrude speculates that Ophelia was 'incapable' in her own distress, she died from her inability to save herself, or even her reluctance to, and yet in the serenity of her tuneful last moments appeared 'native' to the water, like a 'mermaid', or siren (Shakespeare, 1998, 4.7). It's not really clear whether you could class this as a suicide. In the indeterminacy of Ophelia's death, on the thin surface of the water, one thing we might determine is Ophelia's choice ways of communication, placing her own body in the centre of a collage of flora and song, expressing herself indirectly through layers of sampled materials, of differing genres, constructing a new image of authorship that will continue to germinate and long live outside the silly boy-story of Hamlet.

I think of Ophelia when I see Lady Gaga in a swimming pool surrounded by garlands, when I see Kylie Minogue in *Where The Wild Roses Grow* - with Nick Cave, in photoshoots with

Beyoncé, I see Ophelia in Vogue, and in countless other music videos, fashion editorials and weekend magazines; it's no coincidence the Sugababes were at it too, in fact it has become a trope or a commonplace, a default.

I think of Ophelia whenever I see this image of scattered flora, this pattern is ubiquitous, the smattering of flower heads and petals, it's very Victorian I suppose, the florals. When I go into JJ Moons, the pub on Kingsbury High Street I see this blossom, in vivid blue, smeared across all the dinner plates; the blue offsetting the fat-bronzed fish and chips floating on top of them, the steak and chips, the ham, egg and chips - all suspended upon a rippling tessellation of flowers. This pub belongs to *JD Wetherspoon PLC*, the UK's largest chain of pubs, and you'll find the indigo floral-patterned plates in every one of their thousand outlets. It's the mulch of fallen plant life settled on the surface of the pond, only choicely picked out, curated, and presented in a casual scatter bomb.

Rarely is a *Wetherspoon* pub new or purpose built, their rapid expansion owes to their ability to convert defunct banks, public swimming pools, old cinemas, post-offices; all now places to eat and drink. The blue dinner plates are the same wherever you go, but each carpet is bespoke. The walls of each *Wetherspoon* pub are adorned with wikipedia-esque local histories: bygone industries, home-grown celebrities and political figures, links to royalty and nods to folklore. Nothing in the pub feels genuinely old except the original architectural shell (which is being used in spite of its designed purpose), yet much of it refers to the past. The tall bar stools, like the ones the Sugababes used, are moved away from the beer pumps and card machines (to maximise space for transactions). Triggered by the plates, I think of Ophelia, look around these pubs, and think about the sourcing of the text on the walls, the mix of materials, the brown stained wood, the myriad of references brought together, the brass and the plastic reproductions, anachronisms, the reclaimed railway sleepers now mounted on the wall, the modern glass balconies, the stained-glass windows, the steel of the refrigerators. It all feels

familiar but rearranged - in the tradition of an old ale house but fresh and wipeable like anyone could enter, walk in just to use the toilet. It's an ahistorical collage of old and new forms where provenance equals ambience, the artifice is self-evident and the mood is legible in its layers. A composed clutter, like Nigella's *eBay* finds.

It leads me to realise that there's something about how space is conjured by these writers in the instances I've been giving: in Nigella's Kitchen; her library, in Suzanne Vega and Britney's *Tom's Diner*, and in Ophelia's stream, and even the train carriage of Sugababe's *Overload*. It's in these projected spaces that the writing comes together. It's the space from which they publicly grapple with text, upon their stools. Where allusions, quotations and self-referencing can rest suspended in the air. It's a type of writing that weaves text, sends it orbiting around us, ambiently, spinning into an atmosphere. It's not writing you *read* as such - eyes travelling across a page, it is not studied in this manner. Rather the text navigates *itself*, around our heads. Well, like lyrics. Yes, there's definitely something about a conjuring, and a spaciness, in all this writing.

Out of all Mutya Buena's post-Sugababes solo material, my second favourite single of hers is *Song 4 Mutya (Out of Control)* which she made in collaboration with Groove Armada. (My ultimate favourite is the haunting duet she did with fellow Kingsbury High School alumni George Michael - *This is Not Real Love*, which you can see them performing on *YouTube*, live at London's Earl's Court, twelve miles from their High School, anchored on their bar stools) (padarpanos panos, 2017). *Song 4 Mutya* takes place in her car:

'I'm drivin' fast, I feel so fine

I got Prince singin' *Hot Thing* to me

I know every line

So I pulled up to the red light

Sittin' here in my car

I looked up to my right, and there you are' (Cato et al. 2007)

Mutya's singing along with Prince, or as she puts it, he's singing *Hot Thing* to her. Not only is he clearly a sonic inspiration for *Song 4 Mutya*; but his lyrics in *Hot Thing* go:

'Hot thing, barely twenty one,

Hot thing, looking for big fun' (Prince, 1986)

They have been appropriated here to refer to Mutya herself, surely; she was twenty one at the time. So not only are they kind of singing to each other, she's then addressing a fictional ex-lover:

'Sat there with some new girl, what is this?

Don't panic, panic, Mutya don't drive erratic

That's who has replaced me, what a diss

Don't panic, panic, don't act too manic, manic' (Cato et al. 2007)

Many fans interpreted the scenario of the replacement girlfriend within the song as a direct jab at Amelle Berrabah, who swiftly filled Mutya's shoes after she left Sugababes. But that's just over-enthusiastic speculation, right? And then finally Mutya's singing to herself, this bouncy refrain running throughout the song, a mantra for self-composure:

'But don't react now, you can't go back now

Don't panic, panic, Mutya, just look ahead now' (Cato et al. 2007)

Mutya is not credited as a writer at all on this track. But as we've been discussing, there are many shades of authorship. So what do we make of all this interpersonal and pop-historical positioning? She denied any deliberate reference to Amelle, it's not her style. Is Mutya even that into Prince? The title of the song is clearly an acknowledgement of Groove Armada's indebtedness to her contribution. It's a funny song title, *Song 4 Mutya*, it's an ode, a dedication. Groove Armada were certainly into Mutya, the fantasy they had of her. The song is a fanatical daydream; we are a passenger in Mutya's car as she consciously steers through her post-Sugababes career. It's a multiplayer game she was complicit in. Without her, what could this song possibly be? Her young gravelly voice carries it.

She grips the steering wheel, and accelerates into the chorus.

BIBLIOGRAPHY:

BOOKS

Jones, M. 1988. *The Dogs of Capitalism; Book 1: Origins* Austin, TX: Twenty First Century Logic

Sheridan, E. 2007. *Sugababes: The story of Britain's most amazing girl band* London: John Blake Publishing

Lawson, N. 1998. *How to Eat* London: Chatto & Windus

MUSIC

Sugababes, 2002. *Angels With Dirty Faces*. [CD] London: Island Records

Moroder, G., 2015. Tom's Diner. In: *Déjà vu* [CD] London: RCA

Buena, M., 2007. Song 4 Mutya (Out of Control). In: *Real Girl*. [CD] London: Island Records

Michael, G., 2006. This Is Not Real Love. In: *Twenty Five*. [CD] New York: Sony BMG

LYRICS

Buchanan, K., Buena, M., Donaghy, S., Howard, F., McVey, C., Rockstar, J. and Simm, P., 2000. *Overload*. [lyric] London: London Records

Vega, S. 1989. *Tom's Diner* [lyric] Santa Monica: A&M Records

Cato, A., Hutton, T., Poole, K., Findlay, T. 2007. *Song 4 Mutya (Out of Control)* [lyric] New York: Columbia

Prince., 1986. *Hot Thing* [lyric] Chanhassen, Minnesota: Paisely Park Records

VIDEOS

ipolson, 2010. *ex Sugababe Mutya Buena Interview in Australia 2001* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bJxycyOBPpWs>> [Accessed 10 December 2017]

PureAsMySinsAllow, 2010. *Sugababes - Popworld Interview With Live Clips 27/05/2001* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L4BzcEPw4Cg>> [Accessed on 12 January 2018]

SUGAPIE212, 2013. *Sugababes - Overload Live @ Top Of The Pops Germany 10.02.2001* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tdN0Y1i7ws0>> [Accessed 16 December 2017]

Arts & Ideas at the JCCSF, 2015. *Celebrity Chef Nigella Lawson* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f4HTvDHs60c>> [Accessed 14 January 2018]

BNStudio, 2010. *Meet the Writers – Nigella Lawson* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u0bIWSDNblI>> [Accessed 14 January 2018]

92nd Street Y, 2015. *Nigella Lawson with Gabrielle Hamilton* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Amalx1eDfLo>> [Accessed 14 January 2018]

Abril Insights, 2014. *Nigella Lawson -- Abril Insights* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zF0E2FGOZQw>> [Accessed 12 January 2018]

Sydney Opera House Talks & Ideas, 2016. *Nigella Lawson in conversation with Annabel Crabb* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BQC0ewHows0>> [Accessed 20 January 2018]

Mali Yojez, 2017. *Suzanne Vega - Tom's Diner (Live Acappella) (BBC TV 1994)* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DkYPge6ZKSQ>> [Accessed 10 December 2017]

Luminous Productions, 2016. *Britney Spears - 2016 iHeart Radio Interview (KTU 103.5 FM)* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4PWGm1XadjA>> [Accessed 4 February 2018]

Lorraine, 2016. *Britney Spears Talks Life in Her Thirties and Being Single* [video online] Available at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=84Iau9VOsIs>> [Accessed 21 January 2018]

padarpanos panos, 2017. *George Michael & Mutya Buena - This is not real love (Unique)* [video online] Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UbBDl_-hOOU> [Accessed on 4 March 2018]

WEBSITES

Lawson, N. 2011. *ALL-OF-A-TWITTER* [online] Available at: <<https://www.nigella.com/latest/all-of-a-twitter>> [Accessed 26 February 2018]

Lawson, N. 2012. *ELVIS PRESLEY'S FRIED PEANUT-BUTTER AND BANANA SANDWICH* [online] Available at: <<https://www.nigella.com/recipes/elvis-presleys-fried-peanut-butter-and-banana-sandwich>> [Accessed 3 March 2018]

NEWSPAPERS ACCESSED ONLINE

Turner, J. 2007. The N Factor. *Times Online*, [online] 1 September. Available at: <http://web.archive.org/web/20110916092724/www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/life_and_style/food_and_drink/nigella_lawson/article2322458.ece?token=null&offset=0> [Accessed 13 February 2018]

Macpherson, A. 2016. Britney Spears: Glory – track-by-track review of a triumphant return. *The Guardian Online*, [online] 26 August. Available at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/music/musicblog/2016/aug/26/britney-spears-glory-track-by-track-review>> [Accessed 8 February 2018]

PLAYS

Shakespeare, W. (1998) *Hamlet*. Edited by Kevin Bryant. London: Penguin.

ILLUSTRATIONS

Special thanks to James Sturkey

