

## Writing Strange Letters in the Garden, with Love and Fury

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### Introduction

French feminist philosopher Hélène Cixous says, ‘the book is a letter on the run’ (*White Ink* 177) and I too have taken the letters of two Australian women gardeners on the run to create my thesis. I grasped the letters between wildflower illustrator Kathleen McArthur and poet Judith Wright and ran with them. I held them close as I grappled to understand how contemporary Australian women’s digital garden stories might work to create conditions of community and worlds in common. In corresponding about their gardens, the poet and the artist developed a deep friendship that bloomed into a broader conservation ethic and action. Their letters and deep female friendship evolved into a question about how to live in harmony with the more-than-human world. They would go on to play vital roles in the protection of places I hold dear: The Great Barrier Reef, K’gari (Fraser Island) and the Cooloola National Park. As I held these letters close and analysed my own thesis findings the world around me suffered increasing, human-caused, environmental catastrophe and I felt myself writing with both love and fury, much like Wright did. I began writing strange letters to Kathleen McArthur, alongside letters to my supervisor Professor Liz Mackinlay. Through these letters I searched for what gardens said and did and felt when they were turned into stories. What happens to garden boundaries in this time of environmental love and loss, and digital connection?

### Making Strange Kin through Feminist Correspondence

Dear Liz,

Some time after I first went running with the letters of women I’ve never met, I found myself kayaking by the Cootharaba lake near Boreen Point. I didn’t go far from the shoreline, just far enough to trace a line in the water with my paddle as the kookaburras mocked me from their spots on the branches of paperbark trees and the kangaroos blinked silently from the shore. It was about as far from my garden as you can get. This was a place of huge importance to not only the Queensland wildflower artist Kathleen McArthur and her dear friend, the poet Judith Wright, who spent years fighting for its protection, but also to the traditional owners, the Kabi Kabi people, for millennia. This environment was only threatened a few hundred years ago, when colonisers began moving into this place. As I paddled the waters of Cootharaba, I wondered how these two friends felt when they came to this place.

It is a shallow lake. At times it is as calm as glass that might shatter at any moment. Other times, when high winds blow in from the ocean, it churns, turgid and swollen. Upstream, at the Noosa Everglades, a narrower reach of the river, the tannins from the tea trees that hug the water’s edge

turn the water into a mirror, making the world appear topsy-turvy at times. It seems impossible to write this beauty, feeling and history in a traditional, academic way. On reaching the shore, I returned to the Wright-McArthur letters of friendship and gardening, more certain than ever that I needed creative methods to describe the way their friendship, communication and activism worked. My research journey was becoming strange.

I now find myself the author of letters writ strange; part mimicry, part homage, to the friendship contained within, and carried by, the correspondence of McArthur and Wright. Writer Margaret Somerville says that Wright's first letter to McArthur started formally: *Dear Mrs McArthur* (60). By the third letter, Wright's correspondence was much more familiar: *Dear Kathleen* (60). As their friendship deepened, Wright would simply start her letters: *My dear K* (Wright 93). I have studied the letter-writing garden friendship of Wright and McArthur and have found that their letters of friendship pushed me to take an under-used, under-appreciated research path. Their literary footprints — Cixous might call them rootprints — guided me from the designated track and urged me to run a path I most desired, to create my own desire line.<sup>1</sup>

The strange secrets I uncovered between the leaves of these letters followed me around, fertilising the becoming of a strange feminist writing research method. Perhaps this is what Sara Ahmed means when she says that “to become feminist can often mean looking for company, looking for other girls, other women who share in that becoming” (66). Writing my own strange letters has become part of my becoming ecofeminist, developing writing as a method of inquiry and making sense of my own research. You, Professor Elizabeth Mackinlay, are no stranger to making sense of research through letters. Your most recent book *Writing Feminist Auto-ethnography* features your own letters to Virginia Woolf throughout the manuscript. As my doctoral supervisor and friend, I am eternally grateful for your generous and ongoing mentorship. It has helped me develop and explore the way a letter can be part of critical-creative writing techniques. I began these strange letters while working on my PhD, but the strangeness continues in my research work and so I continue to write them even now.

As an Australian woman gardener, my own story is entangled with those I study. The more I wrote, the more I found myself jogging between many worlds: their worlds and my worlds and the digital garden worlds of the women's stories I had decided to study. It is one thing to read, and hear and see the words and pictures of women gardeners on the screen but it is harder to describe what it is stories are *doing* and what they are making an audience think and feel. The gardener is always outside, seeking new space to plant seeds or saplings. But as a scholar, I also require time inside to think critically and creatively about what garden worlds communicate. I think the letters I wrote were my attempt to mimic Cixous, to write ‘inside-outside’ in a form of woven writing style (*Rootprints* 78). If I, as an ecofeminist communications scholar, am one of the ‘communicating humans studying humans communicating’, then I need to be “inside what [I am] studying” (Bochner and Ellis 165). And so, to make sense of this ‘inside-outside’ writing, I re-wove my method. I picked up my own pen and began writing these strange letters to both

illustrate and embody this intimate connection, to embody that line between their stories and the ones I studied.

The letters I write to you might seem strange. The letters I write to Kathleen are even stranger. They are a strange form of communication. I write them knowing I will never receive a response. I cannot post them; there is no address to send them to and the recipient is no longer alive. To some of the more traditional scholars, these letters might seem irrelevant or at the very least, an unnecessary distraction. I can only imagine what Kathleen might think or feel if she had received it. I only have my imagination and perhaps that is the whole point. In her magnificent essay *Operating Instructions*, the writer Ursula K. Le Guin describes the imagination as ‘a fundamental way of thinking, an essential means of becoming and remaining human. It is a tool of the mind’ (207). I want to connect the words and stories from their world to the very different ones I was studying. I was certain that there was a link, but for a while that link remained a secret buried in the soil.

A secret can stay a secret by simply not speaking of it. Absence, just as much as silence, keeps things a secret. Colonisation is the not-so-secret secret embedded in the soil. In Australia the garden, and the gardener, plants her seeds in earth that has been stolen. The garden is a British ‘idea’ that colonised Australia. It is the space where “a stolen land became claimed and ‘owned’ through (a) central ‘ritual of habitation’” (Holmes, *Between the Leaves* 152). Garden stories, then, risk contributing to a violence of forgetting when they repeat this colonial amnesia. Aileen Moreton-Robinson might call this colonial secret one of ‘white possessive logics’ (xii). The secret, she says, occurs where any sense of ‘belonging, home and place enjoyed by the non-Indigenous subject—colonizer/migrant—is based on the dispossession of the original owners of the land and the denial of our rights under international customary law’ (3). For settler-descendants like me, exploring this harsh situatedness is imperative.

Writing research is writing to exhume. It is, as Cixous insists, writing to secrete secrets (*White Ink* 178). Exhuming— to dig up or to expose— is also a process inherent to composting. Exhuming these secrets requires aerating the compost of dreams. One must turn the compost regularly to allow air in and prevent contamination, for renewal to occur. I wanted to reweave these worlds of the past, present and future, and consider a method that best explains and senses the strange ecology of female friendship, time and digital connection. And so, I began writing my own strange letters, searching to fill that space in between.

Renee

Dear Kathleen,

I have come inside to write after a day out in my garden. Today's writing is a day when the word garden means nothing is growing very well and everything is in half. I write of stunted zucchinis, of weather that is too hot and of rains that are avoiding me while grey soil crumbles in my hand. I write about the way the flowers are scrawny and will struggle against the day's angry heat blanket that we expect, unexpectedly, at this time of year (Mickelburgh 147). Do you remember when drought decimated your garden too? Kathleen, my garden, like yours, is also where the word home grows. It is home school, homework, work from home, at home, on my home. Margaret Somerville described your ethic as 'based on home, the local, the embodied and (the) direct, daily interactions with landscape' (2). Something significant is going on in the home, it's just that now, more people know about it. Your home sounds like mine.

My garden is a place of everyday action with global consequences. My garden is fenced in, built up, watered down (when the rains come). My garden is the place where secrets lay in wait, just below the soil. I think of my garden as one of many gardens in Australia, rather than an Australian garden. Is that what you thought of too when you spoke of gardens and place? Somerville describes the letters between you and Judith as a 'shared language of landscape' (2). I too now find myself working to discover, or perhaps rediscover, that language. I fear a sense of urgency on this research path; I worry it is a language becoming lost or already forgotten. You both wrote about gardens and flowers, but in doing so you also made notations about things happening outside your garden boundaries and borders. Your correspondence breached garden containment lines, traveling across backyards and through time and space. I too am wondering how today's garden stories are suspended forever in an on-line, web of time where they become entangled in a past, present and future time-line.

Your dear friend Judith's daughter Meredith McKinney collaborated with Patricia Clarke to collate a volume of Wright's letters called *'With Love & Fury'*. The title was a nod to a letter Wright wrote to her cousin's husband, Peter Warwick (237). Warwick was a public relations officer for the Country Party and Wright wrote him a strongly worded letter about that party's position on the rights of Indigenous peoples. Your friend believed in the power of the written word, not just through her poetry but in her communication. She would write up to 12 letters a day to friends and colleagues, as well as organisations and government leaders. She rarely kept her own letters, but you retained much of the correspondence from your friend. You knew it was to be treasured.

And so, I sign off as Judith once did.

With Love and Fury,  
Renee

## Running with Strangers' Letters

Dear Liz,

Why do we write letters to someone who will never read them? It is a strange thing to do, don't you think? For me, it is stranger still to include those unread, unsent strange letters in my research, for another stranger to read and critique and comment on. You too have put yourself on the line, writing letters to Virginia Woolf and then publishing them in a book she will never get the chance to read. When I think about why I've done this I can only say I felt the breath of Hélène Cixous in my ear, whispering urgently that the book is a letter on the run (*White Ink* 177). To run is to be breathless. It makes me think that's why books created from letters take our breath away. Our imaginations run away from us, eager and interested and curious. We gasp with joy or sorrow, fear or anger, hope and despair. It is all we can do to try to keep up.

The letters between, and the books about, wildflower illustrator Kathleen McArthur and poet Judith Wright took my imagination on the run for almost four years. Their words truly did emerge between the leaves — from the leaves of their garden and the loose leaves of paper they wrote letters on. They also emerged, for me, in *Between the Leaves: Stories of Australian women, writing and gardens* by Australian historian Katie Holmes. I first discovered the Wright-McArthur letters there, in my search for something or someone I could grab by the hand and join me on my PhD journey. At the time I felt quite alone and had gone searching for other women who thought and felt what I did when I walked into my garden and became immersed in the more than human world. That's when these letters arrived, sending my imagination on the run, and leaving me breathless. It was a strange sensation, a strange becoming, this strange letter-writing friendship.

I have returned time and again to Holmes' book about Australian women and their gardens, particularly the chapter 'The poet's gardens' (221). The pages are creased and dog-eared now, evidence of my obsession over the correspondence between Wright and McArthur. Holmes shows how, when corresponding about their gardens, Wright and McArthur developed a deep friendship that bloomed into a broader conservation ethic and action. Their correspondence started in 1951, with Wright living at Mount Tamborine on the Gold Coast hinterland, on traditional lands of the Wanggerriburra people, and McArthur residing at Caloundra on the Sunshine Coast, on the traditional lands of the Kabi Kabi. It has been almost 60 years since the pair put pen to paper and wondered, as Holmes writes, 'how do we live and garden in this land?' (224). I had been asking myself the same question as I dug into my own garden. With each push of the trowel, digging deeper into the earth, I dug deeper into those thoughts. As I ripped open packets of seeds and planted them for spring, I realised I was also planting promises and hope. As I speared the shovel into my compost bin, churning the mess of scraps, clippings and leaves over and around, I wondered at the way the old can be used for renewal. And as I straightened up, stretching out the knots in my aching back, I wondered: what is this urge to garden all about? Perhaps I should have been asking all along: where are the absences in this garden story? The

land I, and the women I studied, was digging on is on land and gardens that have existed since time immemorial. And yet, the settler-colonial woman gardener, for all her good intentions, seems reluctant to dig up that particular story. Perhaps they do not know how to speak it? Would they prefer to continue the forgetting?

To answer these pressing questions that were emerging in my research work, I found myself writing to both yourself and Kathleen McArthur, rather than Judith. Perhaps this is because Judith did not keep many of her letters; those kept and preserved were the ones Kathleen received from her friend. And so, perhaps, I too thought McArthur might treasure mine. Did you feel this too when you wrote to Virginia? This strange method probably wouldn't come as a surprise to Cixous, who always insisted that 'when one truly writes, one inhabits two worlds'; that is, a principal world and a secondary world (*White Ink* 16). This incessant travelling, Cixous says, exposes 'the conflict between writing and life, between the act of writing and living' (16). I was conflicted. My research had me immersed in the digital world, where I discovered other Australian women's garden stories — a garden to read, a garden to listen to and a garden to watch. But I was failing to explain how they might replicate or expand on the intimacy contained within the McArthur-Wright letters. I was also failing to best explain the silence within many of these stories. The internet brings ordinary, private lives to light into a public world, mediating intimate connections from the private to the public in what is referred to as 'digital intimacy' (Dobson et al. 2018). This intimacy is quite different from the pen-and-paper correspondence of another time and place, and yet I could not shake the similarity between the two worlds. I needed to explain the way this intimacy *felt* as well as what these stories said.

Renee

### Writing with Strange Secrets

Dear Kathleen,

When I decided to write about women and gardens, I never dreamed the ways my work would wander from the page, like the creeping tendrils of a vine. I imagine the leaders in the Academy will say, we asked you to write about women's gardens and the stories they tell, what does that have to do with connection, communication, and community? I found myself riffing from Virginia Woolf to explain. When I told them I would speak about women and the stories they tell about the gardens they love, I sat at my computer for a long time to wonder what the words meant. They might mean a few words about gardens and stories and women. The title women and gardens might mean, and you may have meant it to mean, 'women and what they are like'(3), or it might mean women and the gardens they tell stories about; or it might mean the stories that are written about women and gardens, or it might mean all three.<sup>2</sup> Yet just like Woolf, I have

found myself unable to find a ‘nugget of pure truth’ (4). Promises of the good life stake a claim in the garden.

Gardens are rituals of the soil. They are also a colonial ritual linking the past with the present. Katie Holmes says these rituals manifest in myriad ways: from the way we order this environment, through to the design and materials used to create (‘Gardens’ 152). They require us to construct boundaries and borders to prevent the out there from getting in and the in here from getting out. Gardens stake a claim about place; in Australia they stake a claim on a stolen place. These gardens, and their stories, were all emerging from land that had already been loved and cared for over thousands of years. They were stories grown over other stories. In not acknowledging that, were they also contributing to their silence?

Gardens as we now know them make promises about what happens when you live a certain way. There is the promise that something will grow if you tend to it, if you care for it. Gardeners discover, especially when there is drought or flood, that promises are easily broken. Garden stories prompt the reader to ask, like Cixous did, ‘to feel rich, in myself, what does that mean?’ (*White Ink* 16). I’ve re-turned to these stories again and again, considering them as Karen Barad does, not as a going back into the past, but as in ‘turning [them] over and over again’ (168) and following the faint trace of a thread linking them all. To listen and watch and read garden stories one must consider the dreams and desires gardens are made of.

Dreams can quickly become things of nightmares: fantasies that fray (Berlant *Cruel Optimism* 3). Are garden stories filled with compassion, or just an example of what Lauren Berlant describes as cruelly optimistic fantasies? Are they the object of my desire that has become ‘an obstacle to [my] flourishing’ (1)? Gardens are places where life is composted, but also land filled. They are places where one gets deeply acquainted, rather than briefly associated. They are places where dreams, ideas and fantasies live in harmony with everyday actions. As I work my garden, I dream of my research. As I dig up the soil, I dream of the women who have dug in spaces like this before me and now. I want to highlight the way their work is important. I want to show how it says something about paying attention, and care and compassion. That is why I’ve re-turned to these stories again and again; aerating them, breathing new life into them, as Karen Barad might say (168). I worry I expect too much of garden stories.

With Love and Fury,  
Renee

Dear Liz,

I returned often to the whispers of Cixous as I wrote to Kathleen, to help me understand this strange letter-writing research habit I had developed. I write to you about letters on the run

because I've been pondering the concept of the secret in writing, the traces of the secret in texts and I know you too understand the importance of feminist secrets. When one is writing to exhume, Cixous says, one secretes secrets (*White Ink* 178). Perhaps you too were trying to discover secrets as you wrote to Virginia Woolf — secrets about writing and women and feminism. I held Cixous' words close while trying to make sense of the letters between Wright and McArthur, and the books about the pair that I ran away with. At times, though, it felt that I escaped with secrets that were not mine to keep. The intimacies of this long-ago female friendship, so casually scrawled or typed on the page, were never meant for my eyes. It is a strange experience, a trespass of sorts, reading someone else's letters; it is an action that feels like running in bare feet along forbidden ground. The authors never expected at the time of writing that their words would be read by anyone besides their intended recipient, their beloved friend. And yet, I felt a strangely intimate connection with these two friends, through/by reading their secrets.

In my defence, I am not the first to take these letters on the run. Many others have peeked inside this world they were not invited into. Perhaps, like me, they sensed the Wright-McArthur letters were more than an everyday correspondence between two friends. They contained a secret code, a language of friendship and conservation. I assume they would not self-describe as feminists, but there is something about feminism that I can trace like a line through their correspondence. Through their letters, their garden secrets spilled onto the page. Margaret Somerville suggests these secrets emerged in the form of 'a new landscape language of gardens and wildflowers' (60). Female friendships contain powerful secrets, the secrets of connection with those who are similarly charged.

This new language of place formed the basis of the pair's environmental protection work (Somerville 61). Writer Fiona Capp notes that Wright's move from 'private poet to public activist' first registered for her concern about her own backyard and then, 'it was just that her sense of what constituted her backyard had expanded' (224). I couldn't help but wonder, as Margaret Somerville did about Kathleen McArthur, 'what happens when a woman moves out of her garden into a wilderness that is both physical and political?' (66). Yet by drawing on this question, I was starting with a secret. The way the word wilderness is used is wildly incorrect, suggesting that what is wild is untouched, keeping millennia of Indigenous care and conservation on these lands a secret (Fletcher et. al. 1). So perhaps instead of wilderness, I replaced it with the word world. It makes me think of what Ursula K. Le Guin was trying to achieve when she entitled her novella *The Word for World is Forest*.

I wanted to follow these strange secrets of friendship and activism, and I wanted these secrets to follow me as I researched another group of Australian women who told stories about gardens and the worlds they lived in. Reading these letters has been like peeking into a friendship circle I desired to join. I felt a strange sense of kinship growing as I read their words, nodding along to the way they described their thoughts and feelings about gardens and the natural world and even



about being a woman and mother in Queensland. I think writing these letters to Kathleen was my way of trying to be part of that loving connection. I was searching for the spark that lit them up, giving them energy for their activism and their desire to protect and conserve the more than human world. I needed to find that spark, that thing that would light a fire under others so more people could understand the terrible predicament we have found ourselves in. And do something.

Sara Ahmed says that ‘loving connections are live connections, electric connections’ (82). The letters between Wright and McArthur were letters about gardens that lit a loving spark. Ahmed names this spark wilfulness; it is what lights us up (82). Their friendship, like a charge, struggled for proximity and against separation. They sparked my imagination, lighting me up, encouraging me to run into the past and insisting I hold them close as I ran back to the future. I’ve always been enamoured by female friendships, of the way they ebb and flow like the tides, of the way each friend influences the other, encourages and enthuses, or at times when they clash and clang about in discord. Imagining that I was part of their wilful worlds sent me down the path I most desired. Writing *about* the friendship of Judith Wright and Kathleen McArthur did not seem to adequately explain this strange secret. Writing *to* Kathleen was a way to be part of the secret code.

Their letters were about the many things wives and mothers are expected to do – dealing with husbands and children and maintaining a home – but they were also about how gardens and poetry and art are part of the wider world and the more-than-human world. About protecting something before it is destroyed forever. Their letters were a story of a deep and fierce female friendship. They wrote of their own gardens, and in doing so spelled out why gardens are never simply gardens alone. Reading Judith’s letters found me transported to another time and place, yet to one that is still familiar. Her words to Kathleen have the familiar timbre of friendship aligned in and through gardens. Whether it was reporting on her overgrown garden when the rains came, ‘the kikuyu when we got back’ (93) or forgetting to turn off the tank-fed garden hose during drought ‘...which is a sad blow. No rain for a month at least is my guess’ (81) these words strike a chord for their everydayness, their ordinariness, but also their importance. Gardens are affected by weather and animals and human presence. Additionally, my own joy connects me to them. The places at which I am most happy are places that they, quietly and persistently, strove to protect. They were tireless advocates, working to conserve some of the most pristine places in the world: The Great Barrier Reef, K’gari (Fraser Island) and the Cooloola National Park. These places are familiar to me, they border my childhood, contain stories of my adolescence, and etch a deep outline around my family’s world.

I can only describe these secrets hidden between the loose leaves of their writing paper as a kind of code, a strange language about female friendship and activism and connection between humans and the more than human world. Wright and McArthur were mothers living unconventional lives in conservative 1950s Queensland. They bonded in outrage at unfettered

progress, development and what they believed was the almost certain destruction of the Great Barrier Reef, K'Gari (Fraser Island) and the Cooloola region. They breached their garden boundaries through their letters and friendship. They helped to start the Wildlife Preservation Society of Queensland in the early 60s, campaigning tirelessly to stop sand mining on Fraser Island, preventing oil drilling on the Great Barrier Reef, and establishing those locations and Cooloola as national parks. Their friendship was a charged connection; their wilfulness was a spark.

Renee

Dear K,

As you know, when I first began the groundwork for my research the earth was hard, dry, and unstable. I began digging with bare hands to scrape away the earth and they still have not recovered. My fingernails splintered, and blisters bubbled like transparent balloons on my palm. I tried smashing the earth with the dull end of an axe, but even it proved no match for rubble and rock. The only rewards I received for my labours were aching arms, some damaged pride, and tides of sweat that ran down my back and forehead, stinging salt into my eyes and leaving my shirt with dark, dank patches. There seemed to be no way through this tough and difficult terrain.

Despite my hopeless digging the garden continued to grow on higher ground. To the distracted observer this place probably seemed perfectly fine. On your advice, I spent many months pointing the hose beneath the leaves each day, careful not to drown the ground in too much warm water despite the drought and the harsh, humid Queensland summers we experienced. I sprinkled fertiliser generously around the base of fruit trees four times a year. Things would bloom, sprout, or go to seed, as they should. Sulphur-crested cockatoos, their wings stretched out like a wave, continued to screech overhead, calling to each other through the mist. Rainbow lorikeets responded in kind, their daily nails-on-a-chalkboard jabber wreaking havoc among the eucalypt blossoms. After a while I started to notice things: small moments, tiny indications that something was awry. The garden was forcing me to pay attention and paying attention meant wondering why my garden wasn't growing as well as it could or should. Small shoots emerged, but the buds became smaller with each season. Black spots peppered my tomato leaves, curling them into listless, useless appendages before fruit could set. Other plants wilted into a churlish sadness. The food that did grow tasted bland, its flavour as faded and pale as its colour. There was something the matter with my garden.

I was certain that the key to understanding what was growing on the surface required a better understanding of the complicated entanglement, of the secrets lying below. My simple digging method was useless and rigid. My garden was troubled, but so was the world outside the garden

borders. Perhaps this was the bloom space another Kathleen, the sociologist Kathleen Stewart, writes of (340). These are the private-public spheres of affect. Along with being simple representations of a gardening life, these letters are also affective stories. They are stories that create worlds we are bound to. If, as Stewart says, this bloom space is both an 'allure and a threat that shows up in ordinary sensibilities of not knowing what compels' then my research now hums in this bloom space (340). It contains stories and thoughts about the worlds we are bound to. My chapters are the 'affective projections of a constantly negotiated common interestedness' (Berlant 226). They matter because 'affect matters in a world that is always promising and threatening to amount to something' (340). I see now as I step back from these chapters and scan my thesis and my garden in unison that much of what I have been doing is simply trying to scratch some sort of rhythm back into the page.

With Love & Fury,  
Renee

#### NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Desire lines require walking a path that is 'worn into the landscape by countless footsteps' (Smith and Walters 2987). A desire line is not the designated path; it is the one preferred.
- <sup>2</sup> The rest of this famous sentence is not a direct quote, it is a palimpsest response to Woolf's further words in *A Room of One's Own* that 'it might mean women and the fiction that they write; or it might mean women and the fiction that is written about them.... Or it might mean that somehow all three are inextricably mixed together' (3).

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