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Hydraen narrative: Conceptualising inclusive and resistant fiction

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Abstract

Hélène Cixous reclaims the monstrous figure of the Medusa in *l'écriture feminine*. Discourse on feminist writing has widened to be more inclusive, though we do not yet have corresponding conceptualisation for "writing from without" that encapsulates marginalised authors and subversive texts as eloquently as Cixous does that of the feminine. This paper, arising from practice-based research in writing the hypernovel *Seven Sisters Unmet*, posits "Hydraen narrative" to refer to the depth and breadth of narratives written from outside and resisting the homogenising effects of dominant culture. Hydraen narratives are those that proliferate under suppression and reclaim demonised creative excess through previously termed "feminist" structures, styles, and/or content: polyvocality, lack of closure, repetition, ontological metelepsis, unnatural narrative techniques, embodiment, intra- and intertextuality, questions of family versus self, and explorations of sexuality and gender. Hydraen narrative using digital interfaces galvanises the dialectical, participatory relationship between creator and audience that can lead to social change and restored (and restorative) power.

Keywords

digital writing, feminist narrative, marginalised narrative, electronic literature, hypertext, archontic narrative, écriture feminine, fanfiction, collaborative fiction, hyperfiction, hyperstories, hypernovels

> "You only have to look at the Medusa straight on to see her. And she's not deadly. She's beautiful and she's laughing."
>
> —Hélène Cixous

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Introduction

Hélène Cixous reclaims the monstrous figure of the Medusa in her quintessential text "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1976) for women and women's writing, conceptualising *l'écriture feminine* as the plural, subversive, resistant, and/or embodied narratives composed by those excluded from imperialist and patriarchal structures of writing. Those forced to the margins, colonised, devalued, diminished, and ignored, find both escape and empowerment in the embrace of the monstrous, recasting themselves not as the dominant Western patriarchy would have them—monsters in need of destruction—but rather as voices silenced by victors framing their oppression as heroics. Feminist narrative scholars were careful not to define écriture feminine as a homogenous list of qualities, structures, or content, but rather as an effect of the writing itself: a sharing through narrative of knowledge, experiences, inner lives, and *being*, from the outside of culture. These scholars' work was, however, largely weighted toward the examination of relatively wealthy white women authors. While subsequent discourse on feminist writing has widened to be more inclusive of marginalised authors outside of white women (e.g. Anzaldúa, 2009; Ilmonen, 2020; Lanser, 2015; Young, 2018), we do not yet have an inclusive conceptualisation of "writing from without" in the same positive, empowering vein as Cixous's Medusa and écriture feminine.

The driving question behind this paper is: how can we, as writers and as scholars, *inclusively* refer to the depth and breadth of narratives written from outside and resisting the centripetal, homogenising effects of dominant culture and mass media industry? Relying on existing terms—écriture feminine, marginalised voices, feminist (or other identity-based) fiction—either frames communities as victims and outsiders ("marginalised," "underserved") or excludes certain communities through connotation. The bulk of scholarship on women's writing primarily focuses on texts by highly educated, relatively privileged white women, as bell hooks (2014: n.p.) points out and many others echo, including Sara Ahmed: "Feminism became white not because Black and brown women were not there, speaking, knowing, creating, as feminists, but because we were blanked, *not recorded as being there*" (2023: 65, emphasis original). While these theories were intended to be inclusive, in practice they were (are) often only applied to a small proportion of prominent women authors—prominent because of their privilege. Even Susan S. Lancer, whose foundational article urged the discipline "Toward a Feminist Narratology" (1986), admits that the subsequent studies were forged on a limited "body of novels by white, nineteenth- and twentieth-century English and American women and queer men" (Lanser, 2015: 26), creating a binary model that treated women (and men) as if they were a homogenous group (ibid.).

This paper takes a similar stance to Ruth Page, who argues for a more performative approach toward understanding individual linguistic behaviour (2003: 53), though it is more focused on how the *text* performs rather than on whether the identity of the author(s) leads (inadvertently or not) to expressions and/or structures of resistance. The text's performativity is linked to its effects: attempting to "subvert conventional structures and aim at transforming consciousness and society," as Gayle Greene defines "feminist" texts (1990: 88); Ellen G. Friedman echoes that écriture feminine "may be written by anyone… who disrupts the dominant social structure these forms iterate and opens a space for the culturally repressed" (2012: 156). That the discourse arising from Cixous's formulation of the "feminist" text must continually argue for inclusivity while simultaneously acknowledging that such inclusivity is often absent in practice demonstrates the need for a conceptualisation of culturally resistant texts that are "non-hierarchical, nonlinear, polyphonic, open-ended, and [/or have] multiple climaxes" (ibid.). Otherwise, we continue to exclude those who do not immediately see themselves and their work in the term we apply, whether it be "feminist," "queer," or other identity-based framings.

This paper's argument arises from practice-based research (Candy, 2006; Skains, 2018a; Smith and Dean, 2009; Sullivan, 2010) into writing electronic literature (elit), a project currently in final stages: *Seven Sisters Unmet* (working title), a hypernovel using Extensible Markup Language (XML) and epub to enact its interactive mechanics. Initially ideated as an exploration of publishing practice for elit, the process of creating the hypernovel ignited a deeper examination of identity and othering practices in elit writing, publishing, and scholarship. The nature of practice-based research is exploratory; serendipitous findings (Makri and Blandford, 2012a, 2012b) often arise from the creative process that are unrelated to the original research question (which, in this case, was "how can elit enter into the existing market economy?"), yet are nonetheless significant and lead to new insights into creativity and creative outputs. The process of creating *Seven Sisters* immersed me as the author into the nature of writing "from the outside," and the need for updated non-exclusionary nomenclature that encompasses Cixous's groundbreaking work while acknowledging its criticism.

Narrative is perhaps the most effective expression of knowledge and power, the "source of cultural memory" (Homans, 1994: 8) that for most of human history has been hoarded by those who dominate culture: by and large wealthy, able-bodied cis-het men of European descent in Western, English-speaking cultures (Meskimmon, 2003: 71). The narratives of the "other," the marginalised, colonised, and excluded, formed and spread in an underworld: stories told around weaving looms and in quilting circles, folktales and songs shared to bolster the oppressed, manifestos and parodies composed to shape resistance. Even as narrative practice formalised and fixed itself in written form into the novel, cultural attention was pushed to focus on that of the "default," the "natural," the "universal" patriarchal figure, a cycle that repeats itself through each new technological and poetic innovation and iteration. This cycle continually re-defines what is "worthy" of cultural memory and what is not, and consistently devalues variations from the dominant socio-cultural centre; work from women, people of colour, non-dominant religions, LGBTQIA+, and particularly those that fall into intersections of these "others" is repressed, ignored, diminished, labelled, and even actively opposed (Bassett et al., 2020; Nochlin, 1971; Rossiter, 1993; Russ, 2018) until it is forgotten, erased until a new generation, community, or practice rises to challenge the strength of such cultural Hercules.

It is this very resilience, the capacity of marginalised voices to regenerate again and again, that inspires the monstrous metaphor behind this paper: the Hydra as a renewed conception of Cixous's laughing Medusa. If Medusa represents the monstrous feminine, then the Hydra represents the multiplicative, intersectional, monstrous *others*, including women but *not* excluding other marginalised voices. Hydraen narrative expresses the indefinable, irrepressible, and indeed undefeatable power of the very "multitudes" Francis Bacon identified as a many-headed monster in need of destruction (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2003): stories told and wisdom conveyed through methods foreign to the dominant cultural mode, yet innate to those expressing their truths from outside the hegemony. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries these stories were the polyvocal novels resistant to closure that white women were able to push through into cultural awareness (Showalter, 2009); in the twentieth century these narratives progressed through Virginia Woolf's Modernism and Doris Lessing's Postmodernism; Joanna Russ, Ursula Le Guin, and Octavia Butler's social solutions through science fiction; and eventually to Judy Malloy and Shelley Jackson's technological elit frontiers. As we round the corner into the twenty-first century, new and multitudinous heads spawn in elit, fanfiction, collaborative and social storytelling, "own voices," Afrofuturism, Africanfuturism, solarpunk, queer and indigenous futurisms. All express perspectives, identities, and knowledge that have previously been ignored, colonised, degraded, appropriated, and/or subjugated. The future of text lies not in any specific technology or narrative

tradition; the future of text lies in the power digital media have afforded to those voices who have previously been silenced.

The once and future text: Hydraen narrative

Hydraen narrative arises from the bosom of the female, just as the Hydra is borne of Echidna, a feminine serpent framed as monstrous. This origin is not without bias: my primary marginalisation characteristic is that of womanhood, rather than race, religion, or nation of origin. As a cis, Anglo-American white woman, and educated entirely in Anglo-American institutions, my understanding of my identity is shaped by the narratives and knowledge dictated to and/or made available to me. Much of the discourse around the monstrous, otherness, and marginalisation in my immediate environment is thus based in feminism; were my personal background different, I might have approached this concept more firmly in other characteristics. What I have attempted to do is to use a symbol that is well-known in the wider cultures in which I practice (drawn from Greek mythology) that has parallels in other cultures (snakes and serpents), and that can be interpreted in as many practices as the Hydra has potential heads.

Hydraen origins in "feminist" writing

I hesitate to use this heading, because its effect is to immediately *other* writing by women (and by extension, all other so-called "identity" writing, such as queer writing, writing labelled "post"-colonial[1], diaspora writing, and so forth), cubby-holing it as non-mainstream, and thus only of interest to those who share those self-same identities. It also, as Marsha Meskimmon notes, casts "women's writing" as singular, leading it to suffer "from the occlusion of difference" (2003: 132); there is no one feminist aesthetic any more than there is any one identifiable notion of "woman." Likewise, despite more contemporary definitions of feminism as inclusive and intersectional (Crenshaw, 2017), the term's historical contexts inevitably restrict it to white women (though often queer). Nonetheless, various phrases such as "women's texts," "feminist narrative," and "female plots" have been in use for quite some time, from George Eliot and Virginia Woolf to Elaine Showalter, Hélène Cixous, Susan Lanser, and Gloria Anzaldúa. What most of this discourse boils down to is: women's writing is unique, complex, nearly impossible to define or categorise neatly, but nonetheless it is a *thing*, and it is worth more than a cubbyhole just for women. Thus I use it here as a starting point to explore "othered" writing, and to extend this theorisation of the feminine more inclusively.

Elit practitioners and scholars will find affinity with many of the qualities ascribed to feminist narrative: polyphonic, embodied, nonlinear, repetitive, and resistant to closure (Cixous et al., 1976; Greene, 1990; Kristeva, 1981; Lanser, 1986; Meskimmon, 2003; Page, 2003); full of parody, whimsy, and exaggeration (Showalter, 2009); metaleptic by nature as public and private personas and storyworlds diverge (Lanser, 1986); and often "plotless" (ibid.) or with low narrativity (Page, 2003). A key space in which narratology and elit overlap is in the use and study of "unnatural" narratives and structures: physically and logically impossible representations, scenarios, and/or events, such as polyvocality, anti-mimetic perspectives, impossible spaces, ontological metalepsis, denarration, unreliability, and reversed causal progressions (Alber et al., 2010, 2012; Bell and Alber, 2012; Richardson, 2006). These elements that require non-trivial effort either physically or cognitively to traverse are present in what elit scholars often call elit-antecedents, or ergodic print literature as I have discussed elsewhere (cf. Aarseth, 1997; Skains, 2022: 124), including Murasaki Shikibu's *The Tale of Genji* (ca 1008), Eliot and Woolf's polyvocality, artists' books and

gamebooks, and multimedia books like Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad* (2010). The propensity for women and marginalised writers to integrate unnatural techniques (Peel, 2016: 82) is a result of attempting to "translate the contents of their unconscious into recognisable symbols and myths" (Pratt, 1981: 138) when what is recognisable has always excluded them. They are, as those outside a dominant hegemony always must, "making do" with the materials they are given, subverting them to express their perspectives and experiences: piecing bits of stories together like patchwork quilts, weaving events into networks and lattices, and collaborating as community (Peel, 2016: 104).

Hayles's analysis of Shelley Jackson's *Patchwork Girl* (1995) offers a wealth of insight as to how the digital composition and reading space lends itself to these same "unnatural" tricks (though we see them become more and more prominent as creators once excluded find themselves with greater share of attention, normalising what was once so experimental) (2005). She dissects the multiple subjectivities, the assemblage of story, its duality in originality while also being "intensely parasitic on its print predecessors" (ibid., 143). Embodiment is at the core of *Patchwork Girl*, a body inscribed in digital text and mapped out in dotted patches for the reader to slice apart, linking writing, sewing and the feminine textiles to flesh and the partitioned, piecemeal experiences of women existing in multiple ontologies in various worlds. "Hypertext is everything that for centuries has been damned by its association with the feminine" (Jackson, 1998: n.p.): feminine, monstrous, metaleptic, original, derivative, polyvocal, repetitive, embodied, lacking in closure, networked, and *unnatural*.

Not all women's writing includes all (or even many) of these characteristics, and certainly some men's writing does. In addition, any sort of described feminine aesthetic is complicated by the socio-cultural aspects of each author and era, understanding that "the novel is a social construct and that women authors internalise gender norms from birth" (Pratt, 1981: 11); differences in texts by and for women may also be deliberate and performative. These discussions of what constitutes feminist narrative are primarily generalised observations, initially drawn from eighteenth century novels and fiction (in Showalter's first studies), moving forward through the bloom of feminist writing in English through the suffrage movement and again in the civil rights movements of the 1960s and '70s. The 1970s and '80s established "women's studies" and women's writing as scholarly spheres, but even Elaine Showalter notes that the field seems to stall as "each generation of women writers has found itself… forced to rediscover the past anew, forging again and again the consciousness of their sex" (2009: 10). The discourse around women's work is as feminised (read: devalued) as women's work itself: bound to its cubbyhole of "by women, for women," occluded by primary discourse and doomed to endlessly renew itself.

Yet renew itself it does, and recent years have seen a transition to more inclusive discourse; much like the women's suffrage movement, most feminist narrative, in practice and in study, has focused on that of privileged, cis-het white women. These women enjoy(ed) a liminal socio-cultural space, in that they benefit from their proximity to the dominant hegemony (relatively wealthy cis-het white men of European descent), while still suffering as othered outsiders. They are thus able to wedge a toe into the door, occasionally squeezing through to pursue more "masculine" endeavours such as mathematics, science, and writing, resulting in more of their work being available and observable. As civil rights advances have given more marginalised communities voices and access, the need for a more inclusive and intersectional approach to narrative and narrative studies has arisen.

To address that need in my own discourse, I step forward from Hélène Cixous's reclaiming of the Medusa, made monstrous by tales of men seeking to diminish her power, as a beautiful and laughing symbol of feminine intellect and writing. Just as definitions of "women's writing" or "queer writing" or "(post)colonial writing" exclude groups, individuals, and works even as they strive to

raise them up, Medusa as metaphor offers little capacity for inclusivity and intersectionality: she is singular in nature, her serpentine follicular companions subservient and non-sentient. Instead, I embrace her cousin, a truly unknowable and indefinable "they," in the form of the many-headed Hydra.

Defining Hydraen narrative

Like Medusa, the Hydra is deeply connected with serpents, the monstrous, the feminine, and the underworld (Deacy, 2024; Linebaugh and Rediker, 2003). Across many different cultures, snakes are claimed by the feminine as world-bringers, mothers, and healers, often associated with life-enabling waterways, from Hydra's locale in the liminal, porous, water-shaped and underworld-adjacent region of Lerna, to Mesopotamia's creator sea-dragon Tiamet and Australia's Rainbow Serpent. As one of Hercules/Heracles's 12 tasks, the Hydra is well-known and oft-used in Western poetics and discourse to refer to "any persistent, complicated problem that cannot be easily solved" (Deacy, 2024: 138). This connotation makes her an incredibly apt symbol for the body of narrative work challenging the normative, mainstream hegemony and yet defying categorisation.

Cixous's Medusa was only made monstrous through superstition, through her opposition to male heroes and her ability to enact consequences upon them (1976; Showalter, 2009: 273); such monstrousness has been reconceived as desirable in feminist discourse as women claim power through equality. Likewise the Hydra has been framed as the pinnacle of monstrousness, her many serpent heads not only immortal, but doubling with each that are hewn off. Of all Heracles's challenges, the Hydra is the only one he failed, in that he needed his nephew's help to cauterise each head as he cut it off, and in the end could not kill them, only immobilise and bury them—and their poisonous blood, left on his blade, is what eventually kills Heracles himself. It is this very irrepressible quality that suits the Hydra for use in the framing of intersectional, inclusive narrative that challenges the dominance of hegemonic literature: there are many heads, many identities, many genres and styles and voices forming the Hydra, and while one may be dispatched, more will rise in its place. The Hydra is a multiplicative, irrepressible, polyvocal, regenerative, cthonic, queer, and chaotic symbol that even the hero of all male heroes could not kill. Rather than monstrous, they are botanical, responding to violence as a tree does to being coppiced: healing, regenerating, and multiplying (Deacy, 2024: 141). Hydraen narrative can thus serve as an inclusive way to reference narratives and/or creative forces that have been undervalued and underrecognised in the patriarchal white supremacy of Western hegemonic culture.

"Hydraen" doesn't have to mean *all* marginalised voices, but specifically those that proliferate under suppression and reclaim demonised creative excess. It is a way of discussing narrative without using either exclusive terminology (feminist, queer, (post)colonial) or by defining these voices by what they *aren't* (non-cis-het white men of European descent) or by what has been done *to* them (marginalised, silenced, underserved). Hydraen narratives, like those who create them, are, as Meskimmon describes in discussing feminist narrative, "subjects inscribed in and through difference… not universal or transcendent… described as 'decentred', hybrid or nomadic, yet they can be empowered, articulate agents in the world" (2003: 74). Their sheer excess provides resistance against the hegemonic colonisation of innovations created through necessity on the margins—by outsiders—of culture, that regular and ritual slaying by patriarchal heroes working to silence their generative forces and claim their power. They are the unkillable tricksters that subvert this world in order to create new ones, in stories and in reality.

In critical discourse, the Hydra is most frequently used metaphorically as the "many-headed monster" of a difficult problem. It is applied in this way to a great deal of Modernist and

Postmodernist literature and art (Sharp, 2019). More relevant to the argument herein are the uses that are based in the culturo-political, feminist, and constructivist network discourses. Peter Linebaugh and Marcus Rediker frame the history of the "revolutionary" Atlantic around the Hydra, reclaiming the monstrous from Francis Bacon's call to eliminate the multitudinous Hydra of those he felt were lesser-than (2003: 6); instead, they laud the cultural resistance inherent in these groups that led to workers' revolts, slave uprisings, women's suffrage, and greater rights and equality. Cixous's reclamation of the monstrous Medusa for women is echoed in the work of many philosophers, artists, and writers, including Donna Haraway, who defines "chthonic ones as replete with tentacles, feelers, digits, cords, whiptails, spider legs, and very unruly hair," who have suffered genocidal attempts in religious and secular forms, and urges "tentacular thinking" to draw chthonic ones together to "make trouble" for a human society that is destroying itself and its world (2016: 2). Finally, the concept of the Hydra as a network is suited to the unique nature of elit in particular; while the rhizome is the standing structural metaphor for elit's branching, non-hierarchical and never-ending hyperlinked structures (Ensslin and Skains, 2017: 295), the notion of the Hydra's multiplicative and regenerating serpent heads retains the rhizome's decentralised aspect while adding dimensions of authorial identity and intentionality. Stuart Moulthrop approaches early hypertext as inherently resistant, noting it as a site of "breakdown" that "shocks" the reader, a struggle of both power and understanding between author, text, and reader (1995). Unlike the rhizome, however, when a breakdown occurs in a Hydraen network, whether in a text or in a community, the damaged nodes—serpent heads—regrow in duplicate, strengthening the whole. The network is non-hierarchical yet self-organised, with relationships continually emerging and evolving.

Drawing upon this culturally resistant and networked understanding of the Hydra, I define Hydraen narrative as:

> narratives or creative forces that are plural, regenerative, chthonic, and irrepressible. *Hydraen* works multiply, weaving connections and proliferating under suppression, reclaiming forms of knowledge and expression historically demonised as monstrous, feminine, queer, or chaotic. A text's Hydraen properties emerge from the tension between author, text, and reader, as each challenges the other's understandings of cultural power through textual "breakdown" or resistance.

Examples of Hydraen narratives include the multi-authored, archontic, networked narratives of fanfiction creating *more* out of the gaps in mainstream media; the decentrality and divorce of hero from text in *The Tale of Genji*/源氏物語 (Murasaki, ca 1008); the fluidity of gender and our understanding of such in *Orlando* (Woolf, 1928); the American Black cultural polyvocality and jazz-inspired structures of *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987); the hypertextually fragmented and cyborgian nature of the female in *Patchwork Girl* (Jackson, 1995); the networked narratives of people's experiences of the Arab Spring in *A Dictionary of the Revolution* (Hanafi, 2017); and, as discussed herein, my current work in final stages, *Seven Sisters Unmet*, a hypernovel exploring narrative as identity and knowledge.

The Hydra's Lernaean homescape is described as a vast warren of water-carved caves, caverns, and holes creating an architectural maze leading to the underworld: an archontic space that fits neatly with the notion of Hydraen narrative. No description of writing against the dominant hegemony is complete without inclusion of archontic narrative (Derecho, 2006; Skains, 2022: 169): community-driven, collaborative, ad hoc architectural narratives exemplified by role-playing games, wiki-type storyworlds, and fanfiction. Fanfic, as the oldest of these pratices (Derecho and others trace it back at least four hundred years), is also the most undervalued-slash-feminised as

derivative, unprofessional, and even outright unethical copyright theft. Yet intertextual works, adaptations, speculative scripts, sequels, and reimaginings all have a prominent role in "high" literature, from the epic poets' monumentalising oral myth in writing, to retellings of Arthurian romances, to poetic Biblical fanfiction, all the way to modern film adaptations and breaking into TV writing through unauthorised spec scripts. The key distinction is who is doing the writing: cultural insiders, or those still knocking on the door. The more a practice is seen to be performed by women, the more likely it is to be devalued; these communities so internalise this valuation that they often develop complex subculture norms and mores to establish their *own* barricades to mainstream cultural entry. Eighteenth (and nineteenth, and twentieth…) century women writers were often the harshest critics of feminine narrative as they competed for the scraps at the men's table (Showalter, 2009: 37); likewise, fanfic communities' policies decry any action that allows a fanfic writer to benefit from their practice as copyright theft, though very little fanfic approaches the unethical, much less the illegal (Derecho, 2006).

Fanfiction, and other collaborative forms of online narrative from wiki storyworlds to net-based folktales or "creepypastas," create open-ended, participatory storyworlds in which readers can immerse themselves ostensibly in perpetuity, particularly as archontic narratives are some of the most resistant to online obsequity, churn, and obsolescence (Skains, 2022: 185). Their communal nature not only aids in their longevity, but also in connecting disparate writers, readers, and collaborators into a networked community as they jointly explore the wealth of narrative potentiality afforded in these environments (Derecho, 2006: 73), an aspect Ellen Peel notes as particularly unnatural in narrative (2016: 88). Community is key, something present for early women writers only in letters and circulating libraries for sharing texts and ideas (Showalter, 2009: 83), and amplifies the inherent resistance to archontic narratives, as those participating in these communities come to value cultural exchange for content rather than currency and eschew hierarchies in favour of variance and difference (Derecho, 2006: 77). Archontic narratives are thus a prime example of creative practice developed, embraced, and perpetuated outside the dominant hegemony of culture, presenting many different heads of the wondrous narrative Hydra.

The danger of defining Hydraen narrative becomes apparent: given the breadth of narrative work and identities it can refer to, it may be simpler to define it by what it *isn't* than what it is. Yet that is somewhat my purpose. Literary studies, narratology, epistemology—every key sphere of interpretation, criticism, and knowledge in our Western world has been described and constructed by the dominant hegemony, which is an extremely small and rigidly defined minority community. Everything else has been deliberately placed outside this gated community in a concerted effort to maintain the existing power imbalance. The *everything else*, once afforded entrance, will overwhelm the gatekeepers immediately, as the Hydra does Heracles until he enlists help. Until the patriarchy is dismantled and the power spread more evenly amongst the various voices, we can frame the chaotic and cacophonous chorus of other in the many-headed challenger of the Hydra.

Seven Sisters Unmet, a hypernovel

My creative hypernovel, working title *Seven Sisters Unmet*, was borne in 2016 not in the interests of exploring feminist narrative, but from a professional creative desire to experiment with publication methods for electronic literature. I piloted two short stories or *hyperstories*, "The Futographer" (Skains, 2016) and "The Pyxis Memo" (Skains, 2017), as testers for what I call "hyperbooks," creating them specifically to be published using commercially available platforms for ebooks. Ebooks, constructed using XML, have the same linking capabilities as documents constructed in HyperText Markup Language (HTML), though more structure and rigidity is applied to XML

documents. Few commercial publication platforms exist for electronic literature, and as indie publishing through means such as Amazon KDP became ubiquitous, I wanted to explore pathways to reaching mainstream audiences through mainstream means.

The story formed around a central premise: a character who would be defined in seven parallel worlds in both a physics sense and a narrative sense (Bell, 2010), six diverging from our own "actual" universe through key changes to twentieth century historical events. The seven versions of the parallel character have different lives and environments, but their stories mirror one another, overlaid like layers of cloth. Hyperlinks offered at particularly resonant moments in the parallel stories pin these layers together and provide metaleptic connection for readers to pick and choose their way through the novel as a whole. Each of the seven characters developed in response to her divergent storyworld, and in each story, she is a singular, unique character in her own right, though in all iterations she has a connection to the natural world in some way, as a geneticist, a meteorologist, a biologist, a botanist, a healer, an apiarist, and a community-connecting trader.

Several serendipitous factors arose as I created these stories that pulled me ever more deeply into the realms of Hydraen narrative: I experienced various events that inspired me to engage more than ever before in topics related to equality; I identified a need for a framing narrative for *Seven Sisters*; I examined epistemologies of research for another project. This latter factor led me to view practice-related knowledge as *feminine*: devalued, open, natural, subjective, collaborative, intersectional, interdependent, experiential, hidden, polyvocal, subversive, and resistant. I found this (woefully delayed) enlightenment preceded by that of many writers and philosophers: George Eliot, Virginia Woolf, Doris Lessing, Gloria Anzaldúa, Rosi Braidotti, Donna Haraway, Hélène Cixous, N. Katherine Hayles, Sarah Lucia Hoagland, Sara Ahmed, Julia Kristeva, Susan S. Lanser, Judi Malloy, María Mencía, Dene Grigar, Stephanie Strickland, Marjorie Luesenbrink, Ruth Page, Elaine Showalter, Sadie Plant, Robyn R. Warhol, Patricia Waugh, Gayle Greene… and so many more that I had more than one descent into grief and rage that *these* had not been my required readings throughout my formal education. Joanna Russ expresses the frustration of the Anglo-American education system's patriarchal moorings: "When the memory of one's predecessors is buried, the assumption persists that there were none and each generation of women believes itself to be faced with the burden of doing everything for the first time" (2018: 114). Indeed, I had no existing framework for theorising and processing the ideas and emotions emerging from the collision of my creative practice and events that affected me during its construction. The theorisation and understandings presented here are thus the result of reconciling a belated exploration of relevant literature with my initial, raw understandings of how my essential self is split into many heads, and how endangered they all are by the swords of "heroes."

This work on epistemologies deeply influenced the creation of *Seven Sisters*' framing story, which emerged as an intergalactic researcher or "raveler" with the capability to "un/ravel" one world into seven in order to examine how memory persists across parallel universes. The hypernovel itself became her research dissemination. Through this lens, *Seven Sisters Unmet* became a research experiment on multiple narrative and actual levels: my experiment in creativity, hypertext, and publishing; the raveler's experiment to study the (fictional) concept and effects of "atomic memory"; and the experiments each character carries out as part of their everyday lives. I had thought I was working with only seven "alternative figurations" of women seeking knowledge, as Rosi Braidotti (2002) and Enza Gandolfo (2012: 62) refer to the multiplicity of cyborgian (Haraway, 1991) constructions and masks that make up women (and other heads of the Hydra). What I was doing was entering unconsciously, naively even, into a rich tradition of Hydraen narrative, as I sought to become something other than the monstrous other after life and world events had cut off my head and let me grow new ones in its place: a search Gayle Greene argues has

led many of my Hydraen predecessors (Woolf, Lessing, Russ, Le Guin, Butler, Samuel Delany…) to science fiction (1990: 84). I feel, as they did, that "science fiction provides a mode for projecting better worlds while keeping sight of social reality, for postulating romantic lands of hearts' desire while detailing the wastelands one must traverse to attain them" (Pratt, 1981: 109).

I reiterate that this project did not begin with the intent to write a "feminist novel," or to be subversive, or to challenge societal power structures. *Seven Sisters Unmet* was, quite simply, the work that I, as a middle-aged, middle-class, white, educated, peripherally queer woman, wanted to write. The Hydraen elements emerged in the work as a result of what I wanted to express in my fiction; their emergence led, upon reflection and analysis of this work and others, to the conception of Hydraen narrative as discussed herein. The hypernovel engages many aspects of so-termed "feminist writing," though I would only recognise them as such after the bulk of it had been drafted: polyvocality, lack of closure, repetition, ontological metelepsis, unnatural narrative techniques, embodiment, intra- and intertextuality, questions of family versus self, and explorations of sexuality and gender.

> Polyvocality: eight focal "main" character/narrators, including the raveler/scientist.
> Lack of closure: the raveler/scientist observes the seven worlds over a specific period coinciding with the approach of a comet from the direction of the Pleiades star cluster. The end of this period is the end of the story, and while some threads do have a sense of closure (a marriage and career ended, a life decision made, a mistake rectified), others just stop with a note from the raveler that she is sorry, but that is the nature of research. Further, these threads only have closure if they are read linearly; if read hypertextually, the reader may not experience the beginning/middle/end of any one thread.
> Repetition: events and story elements echo across all seven stories. Most notable is the appearance of the Pleiades comet, which is the trigger for the stories. A middle chapter of each thread conveys relevant mythology around the Pleiades cluster; a later chapter involves a fight or battle. Characters close to the "sisters" appear in different guises across the threads, and certain conflicts occur repeatedly: mother-daughter relationships, actualisation of self against worldly expectations (questions of family vs self), the role of knowledge in community.
> Ontological metalepsis: the raveler/scientist is able to observe and comment upon all seven narrative threads. An argument could be made that, because of this premise, the seven different worlds are, in fact, all one ontological storyworld (the raveler's), but she would see that as an oversimplification. The raveler is closest to the presence of the author within the text itself, an intrusion of the actual world into and across the fictional storyworlds. The raveler also introduces intra-/intertextuality as she compares characters and events across storyworlds in the framing narrative.
> Unnatural narrative techniques: Each thread has a unique voice, reflective of the sister-character and her story; some use relatively familiar perspectives (Thread 5, "Maja," is told in first person, past tense perspective by the main character), while others are more constructed: Thread 3, "May," is told with a pseudo-graphic-novel-script style, as though describing a sequence of still images: "A swirling dust-devil kicks up: Benedict's car whipping off the highway, its tires grinding on the gravel and sand next to the taqueria. May getting out of the car, standing in its open door, shading her eyes from the sun and settling dust." Thread 4's "Amaya" narrates the story as daily retellings of events to her sundowning mother: "De todos modos, we all sat down to dinner together. BenTo asked you to say grace, and I was grateful for that."

Embodiment and exploration of sexuality and gender: Thread 1's "Maia" struggles with a middle-aged body, its shape, and its sexual pleasure as she embarks on both a relationship with a younger man and fertility treatments. Thread 7's "Mya" is a trans woman navigating her revealed self through body in sports, drag performance, a new relationship, and the censure of her family even in apocalyptic times. Thread 5's "Maja" travels a dystopic wasteland as a (covertly) queer and (eventually) disabled woman of colour. The sisters' bodies are more than mere conveyance for their characters: they are formative of their identities, their relations to others, and their acceptance and/or rejection of their selves.
Hypertextuality: present in *Seven Sisters Unmet* both literally (hyperlinks between stories) and metaphorically (as the stories reflect, repeat, and amplify one another), hypertextuality is perhaps *the* foundational Hydraen element that shapes all the others. Intention to write a hypernovel drove the conceptualisation of seven parallel characters and stories like layers of a quilt, basted together with hyperlinks. Hyperlinks appear where story events across the threads are closest to one another: observation of the Pleiades comet, tellings of Pleiades myths, and at the closing of each chapter. Clicking/tapping a hyperlink (whether in ePub or Twine version) takes the reader to the same point in the story but in another thread, to carry on the narrative with another character. Not only is the hypernovel thus fragmented between perspectives and segmented between identities and worlds, as fiction from the margins so often is, the hyperlinks open the novel as a whole to reader agency, ceding (limited) authorial power to the audience. This is an act of subversion largely unique to electronic literature, excepting ergodic print literature such as *Hopscotch* (Cortázar, 1966) or *Composition No. 1* (Saporta, 1962) that enable reader agency through variable reading orders.

Seven Sisters Unmet resonates with Sadie Plant's treatise on digital women and technoculture: "These relations of entanglement exercise a kind of sympathetic magic, in which apparently distant particles are coextensive, mutually dependent, resonant, and interactive" (1998: 260). Caroline Bassett, Sarah Kember, and Kate O'Riordan argue that, particularly in digital realms, "individual lives open up to multiple worlds" (2020: 28), that "an individual is always already plural" (ibid., 36); if we take quantum mechanics into account, this is a literal statement rather than metaphor. Our atomic particles are always multiplicative, already interactive elements, Hydraen from the most fundamental level of the universe to the conscious enactment of our (various) performed selves. *Seven Sisters Unmet* is my creative performance of my feminine self, my queer self, my daughter self, my wife self, my scholarly self, my creative self, my scientist self, my enraged self, my weeping self, my childless self, my mother self, and the fleeting masks and unexpressed potential selves that I could have been, might have been had I turned right at Albuquerque rather than left.

Refusal, resistance, and poetics

Hydraen narrative, connected more than ever through digital interfaces, galvanises the dialectical, participatory relationship between creator and audience that leads to social change and restored (and restorative) power (Pratt, 1981: 177). The connection created through Hydraen narrative is what Annis Pratt calls "a form of 'unvention'," where writer and reader meet in a realm of the imagination that is already familiar to both (1981: 178). The many-layered knowing that is constructed from the body, from creativity, from subjectivity, is hidden from that dominant hegemony (though not very well; it's available in every library, fanfic archive, blog network, social media platform…), a Lernaean network of underground streams and rivers and waterfalls that supply the many heads of the Hydra with self-sustaining connection and transformation.

Digital creativity, that practiced in elit, fanfiction, and even social media narrative, presents new opportunities for Hydraen voices to not only proliferate, but to actively build a tradition of archontic resistance that persists across generations. No longer doomed to "rediscover the past anew," the underground caverns and holes of the digitally connected Lerna affords greater volume (in space and sound) for subversive narrative to emerge and persist: in the dissonant fabulations of reviews for sexist products (Skains, 2018b), the socio-cultural "gap-filling" of media-based fanfiction (Pugh, 2005), and the electronic literature frontiers that cannot be completely gate-kept by a still-dominant hegemony (Skains, 2026). Elit has long provided not just an escape from dominant narrative and publishing structures (Bassett et al., 2020: 74; Hayles, 2017: xiii), but also a new creative realm from which those structures can be demolished and re-envisioned, reclaiming polyphonic voices to establish and maintain a "distinct ontology/cosmology/epistemology" (Hoagland, 2020: 55). Indeed, the initial forays into these spheres were led by women, from the LiveJournalers to the Archive of Our Own founders (Heeg, 2022), to the early hypertext authors and elit networks (Coverley MD // Marjorie Coverley Luesebrink, 2017; Thomas, 2017).

Seven Sisters Unmet is my resistant poetics in the intersection of many spheres: in elit, a field that pushed back against the notion of commercial digital literature—unless it was the dominant hegemony within the field buttressing existing patriarchal publishing and literary elitism with "serious hypertext" (Skains, 2026). It resists "normative" narrative structures in its polyvocality, its lack of closure, its refusal to follow a linear storyline. It explores romance as dramatically—and comedically—as it does war and conflict. It establishes itself in the tradition of "women's work"—textiles, healing, bearing children, social caring, community building—even as these women's stories are translated into experiential, subjective knowledge through an intergalactic scientist. Perhaps the most poetic element of the work is found not in the words themselves, but in the slow inner revolution the hypernovel reveals: a head of the Hydra that was severed by patriarchal "heroics" and grew more in its place, serpentine sources of rage, resilience, and restitution.

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1. I use "postcolonial" under protest: the prefix implies a conclusion to colonialism that has not occurred.

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