

"I Have a Bag of Old Knickers. Do You?" Under-Worlding Our Underwear through Audio Found Poetry

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Article abstract

This article presents audio found poetry as an approach which positions participants' voices in the heart of the inquiry. The methodology was influenced by radio autoethnography and audio papers where theory, voices, and sound are combined to create a new aural experience—an approach that argues that it is essential that the audience listens rather than reads. These two audio found poems share the voices of 14 participants from Australia, United Kingdom, North America, and Mainland Europe, interwoven with the author, talking about their relationship with underwear. Participants recorded their own story. Each voice was edited using Audacity (a software program) and then different voices were joined together. Two poems emerged. Audio 1: Practical Underwear shares stories from day-to-day underwear preferences and stories of those who do not wear underwear. The stories in Audio 2: Dress Code Red are connected to sexuality and political aspects of underwear. Framing the work through the lens of new materialism creates a space of agency for an entanglement between the underwear and the human voices speaking about it, which in turn affects the embodied experience of the listener. What stories could your underwear tell?

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“I HAVE A BAG OF OLD KNICKERS. DO YOU?” UNDER-WORLDDING OUR UNDERWEAR THROUGH AUDIO FOUND POETRY

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Abstract: This article presents audio found poetry as an approach which positions participants' voices in the heart of the inquiry. The methodology was influenced by radio autoethnography and audio papers where theory, voices, and sound are combined to create a new aural experience—an approach that argues that it is essential that the audience listens rather than reads. These two audio found poems share the voices of 14 participants from Australia, United Kingdom, North America, and Mainland Europe, interwoven with the author, talking about their relationship with underwear. Participants recorded their own story. Each voice was edited using Audacity (a software program) and then different voices were joined together. Two poems emerged. *Audio 1: Practical Underwear* shares stories from day-to-day underwear preferences and stories of those who do not wear underwear. The stories in *Audio 2: Dress Code Red* are connected to sexuality and political aspects of underwear. Framing the work through the lens of new materialism creates a space of agency for an entanglement between the underwear and the human voices speaking about it, which in turn affects the embodied experience of the listener. What stories could your underwear tell?

Keywords: radio autoethnography; audio found poetry; underwear; arts-based research; new materialism

Artist's Statement

"We need stories" Haraway (2015, p. 160) says.

"Like the ones that accompany a pair of old underpants?" I joked, knowing I had a bag of old knickers under the bed.

If we are all compost, like Haraway (2015; 2016) argues, then I wonder if that includes private, secret things that we wear close to our bodies, hidden from view, our underwear.

Audio-Found-Poem 1

Practical Underwear

https://ualberta.aviaryplatform.com/collections/1760/collection_resources/88097/file/181156

Audio-Found-Poem 2

Dress Code Red

https://ualberta.aviaryplatform.com/collections/1760/collection_resources/88097/file/181157

Underwear is part of most people's everyday lives. Knickers are rarely spoken about things that silently clothe our body. I am fascinated by something so normal yet silenced, and, aware of the sensitive and political role of people's own stories about their underwear, I decided to gather audio stories about underwear as an unspoken element of/with/on the body. This decision was influenced by my role as a member of the Bodies Collective, an international group of people fascinated with the body and aiming through *Bodyography*—defined as the act of research with, through, in, and between bodies—to unsettle hierarchies and assumptions of the body in research (Bodies Collective, 2018; 2021; 2023; in press). Audio stories allow each person to speak in their own voice, where dialect, language choice, intonation, and background noise are present and celebrated. From the beginning, participants in this creative endeavour gave consent for their voices to be used by the researcher, who would take sections from one story and splice them together with other voices to create new audio recordings. I called these recordings collaborative audio found poetry.

In this article, I invite the reader to explore the arts-based methodology behind creating and using audio found poetry within research. Sharing the autoethnographic

experience of including the actual voices of participants leads to wider conversations that unsettle the dominance of the written word.

I discovered the term *found poetry* through reading articles by Leggo (2016) and Prendergast (2006) in which I learned that found poems are created by weaving words, phrases, and utterings from multiple sources to create new understandings. In this new project, I built upon my own earlier published work—creating found poetry as an Afterword to an academic book (Mendus, 2022)—but followed an approach similar to Penwarden’s (2018) in creating found poems from research data. In their 2021 article, Penwarden and Schoone clarify that, in found poetry, the “ordinary world is revealed as artful” (p. 350); in this way I began to see underwear and their stories, re-shaped into found poems, as art. While Penwarden (2018) took sections, words, and phrases from participants’ interviews and created written found poetry, I took voices from the audio files and created audio found poetry. Thus, collaborative audio found poetry is an audio rather than written response to creating found poetry from a data set, using not just the words but “listening for the poetic” (Penwarden & Schoone, 2021, p. 350), the voice of the participants, to create a new audio poem.

These recordings were made possible because of who I am as a researcher. I brought with me my own representations of the “felt-sense” (p. 352) as I listened to the participants’ audio recordings alongside my own “emotions [and] embodied experiences” (Krøjer & Hølge-Hazelton, 2008, p. 29).

Those big beige knickers my mother gave me when I gave birth . . .

This audio-found-poem is framed by my lens and is an extension of my autoethnography, where autoethnography is a critique of the self within culture (Spry, 2001). These collaborative audio found poems draw from my life as a white British woman living in Australia, and from my perspective of the participants’ recordings, within wider Western cultural understandings about underwear.

Down Under Literature Review

Building on Underwear Stories

For this project, I chose to focus on collating a series of audio stories building upon creative work by Ward (2016) and Meyer (2021), who also invited people to share underwear stories in arts-based projects but who had not collected recorded voices of participants. Ward’s (2016) exhibition and study included “large thong panties and pennant flags” (p. 209) with embroidered words. Alongside the underwear inspired art

piece played an audio recording of people speaking other participants' words about sex and sexuality. This was different from my project, as the recordings were not directly talking about underwear. I see the importance in oral stories about underwear—in giving precedence to the nonhuman object, the thing-power (Bennett, 2004)—, in the agency that a pair of underpants can have (in this case through its relationship with its wearer) and in their role in telling a shared story. I can draw similarities with Meyer's (2021) ongoing international project, *Cunt Quilt/ Underwear Audit*. Meyer (2021) runs feminist art workshops which have space for conversation and time for worn underwear to be sewn into quilts and other art installations.

Adapting the Underwear Stories

In my study, only one participant apart from myself shared any images of underwear. Similarities can be drawn with Ward (2016) who collected women's underwear stories and Meyer's (2021) participants who were mostly women. Even though my participants were mostly women, I wanted to collect *people's* stories rather than those of women. My aim was to move away from a binary approach of men's underwear and women's underwear, to create a space regarding underwear that would validate other voices—voices that may not usually be heard—and not just women's voices. I have aimed to include a range of terms for underwear, aware of the cultural influences and gendering of the words used. In both this article and the audios, a range of terms can be heard such as: knickers, pants, panties, undies, jocks, strings, and thongs, as well as bras and negligée. I recognise that I often return to the term that I use the most which is “knickers.”

Underwear Methodology and Knicker Wearers

The unique approach of this work is the construction of poetry using the actual voices of the participants as they were spoken, rather than using the notes of a researcher who has interpreted their speech into writing. In the quest to analyse the stories of knickers, I recognised that creating found poetry (Leggo, 2016; Prendergast, 2006, 2020) would give space for multiple voices. I realised that I could expand upon found poetry and engage an audience through research-creation and arts-based approaches using the spoken word rather than the written word, keeping the sounds of the original participants' voices intact. Also, as non-human objects, knickers themselves have stories, and this research would uncover and share those stories through collaborative audio found poetry.

*The underwear speaks.
Underwear, with its own affect,*

*on the embodied experience of the listener and the storyteller.
I ask you here and I will ask you again,
what stories could your underwear tell?*

New materialism, viewed as something that is “moving beyond an anthropocentric ontology” (Jusslin & Höglund, 2020, p. 251), helped me look at underwear differently. I recognised that this project embodies the new materialist space of intra-action (Barad, 2007), where multiple aspects are interconnecting in an ever-changing variety of ways, creating an entanglement between the human and the nonhuman. This entanglement, or getting our knickers in a twist, helps conceptualise this project; as Davies (2021) explains, “the entangled dynamics of social, material and semiotic flows and forces make up the diffractive movements through which life emerges, assembles itself, and endures” (p. 2). I view this entanglement as a relational-encounter, an intra-action between the underwear as a non-human object, the stories and experiences themselves (felt, memories, smells, etc.), and the knicker-wearers’ voices sharing these experiences.

Positioning my thinking with Jusslin and Höglund (2020), who argued that thinking *with* new materialism allowed a “performative approach to meaning-making” (p. 251), I realised that I was thinking *with* underwear as objects, as stories, as something that is in relation between human and non-human entities (Barad, 2007). By gathering people’s (human) stories (more-than-human) about underwear (non-human), the entanglement is relational. As Jusslin and Höglund argued, the meaning-making occurs “in relations between matter and meaning” (2020, p. 251), opening a space for the underwear to share its stories and have its own agency.

When I ask the question, “What does underwear say?” it is hypothetical, it is tongue-in-cheek, and this article does not aim to find the answer. At the same time, I aim to create an embodied response in the reader/listener. I know I start thinking about all the undies in my life. Do you?

A Call for Knicker Stories

In March 2021, I put out a call on Facebook and in international arts-based email groups for audio stories about underwear. Using voice recordings on messenger apps and email, people chose to share a storying (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) of their relationships to underwear and to submit them electronically. In this *Call for Audios*, I made it clear that I wanted each recording to be made with the understanding that I had the participants’ permission to use their voices. To ensure there were ways for people to participate, even if they did not want their voice to be used, I offered them the option to

have their words spoken by another person in the recordings. To ensure clarity for everyone involved, I explained the approach I would be taking to create the collaborative audio found poetry, that is, by using sections of their recordings alongside other people's voices.

Informing Participants

In Australia, as a non-tenured academic or independent scholar, there are no mechanisms in place to get low risk ethical approval or exemption. I, therefore, drew on my experiences in getting ethics approval for my qualitative PhD studies (Mendus, 2017), and set out to ensure that I had informed consent. As part of my online request for audios, I shared my research statement, clearly stating the approaches, outcomes, and ways in which I would aim to keep participants safe; I also reiterated the importance of participants looking after themselves.

Please keep yourselves safe and only share what you wish to move beyond yourselves, as I am aware that there may be many intra-acting themes that arise from these stories about confidence, judgement, abuse, and 'normative' understandings of body size and ability.

Participants then sent me their audio files and gave their consent via email for the recordings to be used for research. After creating the collaborative audio found poems, I shared the final pieces with all participants, allowing them time to give feedback. I also shared my work with an expert in the field for advice on audio qualitative research projects. The first recordings were shared and discussed at two online conferences, ICQI 2021 (International Congress of Qualitative Inquiry) and ECQI 2022 (European Congress of Qualitative Inquiry). The second edits of these initial recordings happened in 2022—for the Critical Autoethnography Conference on the Gold Coast, Australia—and it is these versions that I have shared above, as part of this article. The research participants have been kept aware of the research process, following Ellis's (2007) approach for an ethic of care and an ongoing relationship of trust.

Further to this, I sought advice from Associate Professor Liz Mackinlay, Chair Human Research Ethics at the University of Queensland on how to proceed, carrying out this project as an independent scholar. Mackinlay advised me that, even though I was unable to get an official tick of approval, I was carrying out low-risk research, defined by the National Statement on Ethical Conditions for Human Research in Australia as research where "the only foreseeable risk is one of discomfort" (NHMRC et al., 2018, p. 13) and had followed protocol within my means. She further advised me

that I had met ethical procedures as I had a research statement and informed consent from all participants, and that I had made sure to follow the four principles in the National Statement on Ethical Conditions for Human Research (NHMRC et al., 2018) of *Research Merit and Integrity; Justice; Beneficence; and Respect*.

Audio Methodology

I position this work as an entanglement of different art-based collaborative audio methodologies, taking guidance from Karen Werner's (2017; 2019) work on radiophonic autoethnography. Werner (2017) defines radio autoethnography as a blurring together of "radio, audio, and other produced sound forms [which] can further the opening of the self into a larger self" (p. 99). This blurring definition is applicable as it encompasses the knicker audio recordings as an example of radio autoethnography. Building upon this, I approached this research with an awareness of the manifesto of an audio paper outlined by Goth and Samson (2016a). I embrace the deeply rooted idiosyncrasies of my audio data; however, I do not see the purpose of my two recordings as being "to extend the written academic text" (Goth & Samson, 2016b, para.2) which is one of the key elements of their definition of an audio paper.

Radio autoethnography comes again into focus in these recordings. I gave my own voice and stories about underwear a similar approach to the stories shared by the participants, including many words being discarded by my own editorial hand. Thus, within these two audios, there is no one main voice, nor one narrator, as suggested in Goth and Samson's manifesto. Rather, my audios should be viewed more as a *vox populi* in the journalistic sense, that is, describing a method of gathering and sharing multiple viewpoints on a subject from members of the public. I created the audio found poems with an awareness of the "ethical considerations of representation" (Penwarden & Schoone, 2021, p. 349); however, I acknowledge that the participants still come from quite a narrow remit as many are friends, colleagues, or academics who responded to the call for audio stories. I am not arguing that the views in my audios represent the general public, but that it is not simply one voice; it is a gathering.

This piece represents a crafted understanding of multiple voices talking about underwear through my lens as the found poet. I aim to be "poethical" (Krøjer & Hølge-Hazelton, 2008, p. 32), which acknowledges that the choice of representational method is never completely inclusive, and is political in who the poet decides to "make access for, who we wish to speak to (not for), and who we think might profit from what we are saying in the way that we say it" (p. 32). Therefore, I work with the voices and the sounds around the participants on the particular day that they chose to make a recording for this project. I respect the participants' feelings and hope they feel fairly

represented in the audio found poems. I craft independently, with a belief that the final project is my view on what I think is happening, and with no expectation of the participant to think or feel similarly (Ellis, 2004). I hope the sentiments that stir in the listener are connection, empathy, and a deeper understanding of a potentially mundane object, that is, everyday underwear (Audio 1) or the connection to sexuality and the political role of underwear (Audio 2; see Mendus, in press, for a deeper discussion of the content of the audio found poems).

Inclusivity of the Knickers

In terms of inclusivity, I am very aware that these voices are privileged and that the English language—although not the first language of every participant—is given dominance. There is one included voice that is speaking in Swiss German. The participants come from the United Kingdom, mainland Europe, North America, and Australia, and provide a glimpse of people's privileged stories. Through crafting these multiple voices to create audio found poems, I hope to invoke a personal interrogation of the notion of voice. Even within the limited range of voices collected here, there were differences in volume, pacing, tone, reverberation, vocabulary, and ability to communicate, thus highlighting what an audio-found-poem has to offer compared to a written found poem. By sharing these audio found poems, I am hoping to inspire a newness in what/how voices can work in the world.

I wonder, since most folk (see Mendus, 2021) in the world wear underwear, where else this project could go. I have dreams of funding and workshops, making and talking about underwear. Through a feminist approach, the patriarchy of underwear could be addressed, exploring this unspoken knicker aspect of our lives. I see these conversations, as Davina Kirkpatrick and I describe, as *abject autoethnography* (Kirkpatrick & Mendus, 2017), something personal that can be seen as uncomfortable and is rarely talked about.

Results: Hanging the Underwear Out to Dry

To make the two audios, I listened for narrative gems in the recordings, what Roberts (2017) described as moments, “when a bland interview breaks out into poetry” (p. 118). I also gave space for everyday lived stories. I did not conduct the interviews, either in person or virtually. Instead, I asked each participant to make their own recording on their phone or computer and send it to me electronically. This meant that some participants pre-wrote what they wanted to say and read aloud. Some pressed record on their phone and spoke directly, with one take, into the recording device. Some participants were total strangers, and I felt humbled by the intimate nature of the stories

shared (seen also by Roberts, 2017; Walmsley et al., 2017). I wonder if having this one additional step of detachment between the participant and the researcher allowed for greater freedom in sharing their knicker stories.

As I listened, I let the words and the storying (Phillips & Bunda, 2018) wash over me. I let the essence of their stories tickle my toes and awaken my senses and connection. I became more familiar with the participants, feeling my attention move from what Walmsley et al. (2017) described as a focus on the words written, to a deeper place through “listening closely to the music of the human voice” (p. 84). Since I position this work as an autoethnographic piece on audio relationality, I wonder how my own stories dance with the stories that have been shared by the participants.

In the end, although I tried to not give precedence to the written word over the spoken word, I did decide to use Dictate Software on Word to produce a written piece for each audio. The transcript was not completely accurate, yet it was usable enough for me to start playing with the audio stitching. I printed the transcript document and shaded each voice in a different colour, grabbed my scissors and started cutting. I looked for text lines that jumped out, as if hearing the different voices of the participants. This post-qualitative approach is one that I often use, inspired by Maggie MacLure’s work on data-glow (2010) and my experiences of editing collaborative artful narrative inquiry (Kirkpatrick et al., 2021). I saw connections between my approach to creating poems and that of Penwarden and Schoone (2021) when they described creating found poetry as a “new being . . . a new coat; a new garment woven from the patches of others’ works” (p. 354). A new garment of underwear is created “as the utterances blend or jar with each other” (p. 354) as stories and old underwear are discarded into the compost. Perhaps Haraway (2015) would agree that these audio-stories are a way of making kin with the unspoken aspects of our lives, acknowledging that through making kin, the meanings have changed.

I then began to arrange and rearrange, rearrange and arrange the words, phrases, and sections, aware of my role in the representation of other’s voices, and the “role of the poet as maker and re-maker” (Penwarden & Schoone, 2021, p. 354). In this space, two themed pieces began to emerge. This was enough to get started. I used the program Audacity to splice each track into segments and then began to paste them together. As I created the audio found poetry, I became part of the soundscape (Goth & Samson, 2016b), realising that “beneath it all is the poetry that gets us closer to that elusive heartbeat we call truth” (Roberts, 2017, p. 127). I then shared the developing piece with my partner, friends, and colleagues for feedback before publicly sharing the study.

Returning to these pieces with fresh ears in September 2022 was exciting. I decided to create sharper, shorter poems, with more level, nuanced sound and gave myself permission to be braver—to playfully cut each person’s voice into shorter phrases. I took inspiration from one of my reviewers, who suggested I take on board the new materialistic framing of this paper to influence the style of the recordings. The reviewer suggested that I include the ripping of fabric and other noises connected to underwear, but I felt, in this instance, the noises were too subtle. Instead, I chose to create more impact for the audience by moving more swiftly between participants so that one voice did not dominate, creating a more conversational, dialogic style, particularly around more complex issues such as the influences of societal power and control over a person’s underwear choices.

With iterative reflection, I realise that, instead of seeing this piece as a more traditional *vox populi*, I take great learning from Bhattacharya’s (2007) scholarship on feminism and postcolonialism in relation to whose voice is heard in qualitative research, as well as building on my own work on how to have your voice heard in the academy (Mendus, 2021). Bhattacharya argued that often participants’ voices are “partially or completely silenced” (2007, p. 83); therefore, using the actual voices of the participants in the final artistic product of this research was essential and a key element from which I hope to inspire others. Rather than a more traditional approach to a *vox populi*, which includes the narration and interpretation by the journalist, I chose to create an audio-found-poem where an awareness of which voice is mine is not made clear to the listener. This was following Bhattacharya’s thoughts that research “can only be represented as fragmented, contradictory testimonials of participants merging with my own” (2007, p. 84). Therefore, my voice is just one of the many creating the collaborative relational piece.

Discussing the Down Unders

Audio Poems Lived Beyond Voices

Found poetry allows the finder to take and re-use the words of others “with an authorial intent, through which meaning endures and also changes” (Penwarden & Schoone, 2021, p. 355). An audio-found-poem uses the sound—the voice, the accent, the speed, pitch, and background noises—of the participants to create a new recording. These sounds live beyond the person/thing that made that noise. I am aware of the affect that the whole experience had on me as the producer/researcher and wonder how the experience will move beyond the listener. I hope that by cutting up and entangling all 14 recordings that I was able to let the piece “speak in multiple mitigated voices” (Bhattacharya, 2007, p. 84), reminding myself and the listener that, “our bodies

don't end with our skin" (Werner, 2019, p. 561) and that audio, or "radiophonic space" (p. 561), offers enormous potential for creativity and play in autoethnography through the narration and "dispersal of the self" (Werner, 2017, p. 99).

Essence of the Spoken Word

The essence of this research project is the spoken word, the utterances of the participants; my enabling their voices to be heard rather than my reframing of their words in a new format. Found poet Adrian Schoone (Penwarden & Schoone, 2021) described the importance of noticing the body and sounds of both the researcher and the participant when writing poems, yet his work, although evocative and engaging, is composed in the written word. My project aims to build on that work by noticing and using the original sounds of the participants through creating audio found poems which I craft with an awareness that the final product is "a new voice that is not wholly the presenter's nor the found poet's" (Penwarden & Schoone, 2021, p. 359).

As Dmae Roberts (2017) points out, audio gives a space for "listening to people speak" (p. 116). When do we really do that or allow our audience to do that as researchers? These audios supported my hope to develop and "delve into human experience—and the human voice" (Roberts, 2017, p. 126), creating a deeper connection between the stories shared and the audience. As Werner (2017) explains, we become much closer to the real point of the work through listening to an audio than from reading, as "we imagine a scene, making radio the most visual of mediums" (Werner, 2017, p. 99). When sharing this work at conferences and in this article, I include one image to represent each recording (see Figures 1 and 2). The Figures aim to serve as a place holder, allowing listeners to create their own images as they listen to the audios. I want the audience to listen to the poetry and share in "catching someone in the act of being: flickering into life" (Penwarden & Schoone, 2021, p. 356) through audio found poetry.

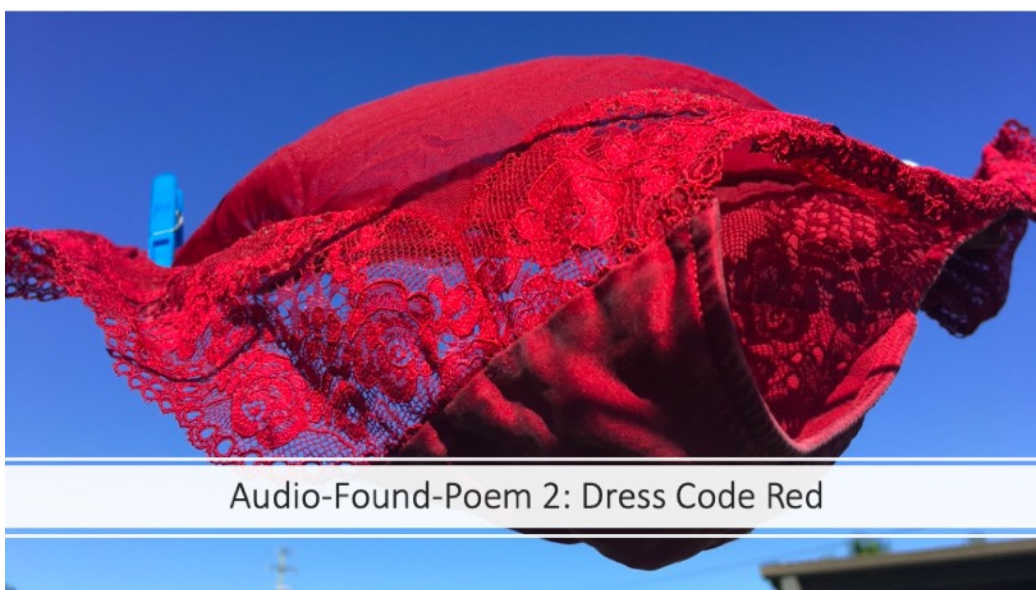
Figure 1

Practical Underwear. Photo taken by the author



Figure 2

Dress Code Red. Photo taken by the author.



What is the Under-Worlding of our Underwear?

Alongside my argument for the importance of an audio methodology, I position this work with Barad's (2007) as an intra-active entanglement with space for the human voices, the stories, and the physical underwear. Following Davies' (2021) argument that the role of new materialist research is to find research questions that do not see humanity as separate from the nonhuman or more-than-human world, I, too, aim to be more "responsible/response-able in our encounters" (Davies, 2021, p. 5). By creating a space to listen to and then think about the often-unspoken aspects of underwear, I hope to widen the scholarship of "thinking and doing things differently" (Davies, 2021, p. 5).

Through a nexus of entanglements that cross borders between the public space, the private space, and beyond, these digitally stitched audio found poems attempt an under-worlding of our underwear. Haraway (2016) defined *worlding* as the embodied and enacted process of multiple entities being in and attending to the world, through the interaction of technology, species, and understanding. In this way, under-worlding is the embodied and enacted process of being in and attending to underwear, the human wearer (or rejector!), the stories, and the human waste (blood, sweat, excreta, mucus etc.) left between the wearer and the worn.

By listening to the audio found poems, the audience can hear the knickerwearers sharing intimate and non-intimate knickerness, with some stories carefully laid out, and others representing the fraying of undies. If the knicker elastic is still intact, then, as Haraway (2015) might say, undies "are just big enough to gather up the complexities and keep the edges [leg-holes] open and greedy for surprising new and old connections" (p. 160). I hope that listening to these audios and reading this article has created a multi-voiced composting of lingerie: a clothesline with plenty of underpants, a layering of entangled stories from deep down in our dirty laundry—a virtual collective of composed and choreographed cotton and polyester stories. After all, underwear has a lot of stories to tell.

I have a bag of old knickers.

Do you?

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