

Julieanna Preston and Anna Brown

Editors of
Performing Punctuation

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Julieanna Preston is a professor of spatial practice at Toi Rauwharangi/College of Creative Arts, Massey University, Wellington, Aotearoa/New Zealand. Her practice spans across architecture, art and philosophy, interior design, building construction, landscape gardening, material processes and performance writing.

Anna Brown is an associate professor, design researcher, educator and practitioner whose expertise is in participatory design. Her research focuses on deliberative engagement, participatory policy design and design-led innovation.

Performing Punctuation is such a striking title. What first sparked the idea for this book and how did the collaboration between you begin?

J> I credit the idea emerging out of a 2017 international event I curated here in Whanganui-a-Tara entitled *Performing, Writing: A Symposium in Four Turns*. John Hall was a keynote and being a fan already, I witnessed the way he moved letters and words around as material substance. Punctuation became visceral. I have known Anna Brown for many years, first as a master's student and now as a revered colleague. I invited her to collaborate knowing the immense skill and knowledge she has in book design and critical thinking.

A> Julieanna has been the driving force of this project since the start. As a long-time colleague it's been a great pleasure to finally work together on such a thoughtful and interesting project. The diverse contributors we've been on this journey with – from nascent idea to fully formed book – have made the process engaging and occasionally fraught, but never dull.

For readers new to the topic, how would you describe what the book is about in a few sentences?

J> Exploring English language punctuation. Critique its colonizing habits. Imagining something other.

A> All of the above and a visual feast. This is punctuation as you've never seen or conceived of it before. Be ready to be inspired, surprised, challenged and moved.

Why was it important for you both to examine the colonial roots of punctuation and language?

J> The world we live in is looking at itself in the mirror, reflecting deeply, searching to do something different than to bring harm to one another. Language (and punctuation) are not neutral; they can be weapons, subtle and not. Living in Aotearoa brings this issue related to the fore, exposing the gnarly and sometimes conveniently forgotten actions and values that keep oppression in play.

A> When you start to scratch the surface of what underpins punctuation, you realize how much of it is bound by rules, convention, must-dos, have-to-haves and control. But whose rules? From where? Why? Isn't it time to question or subvert them? This book is a start, at least my start, in exploring these ideas and making space for new ways of thinking creatively and playfully about these ideas.

How do these colonial roots impact us today without us realizing?

J> One need only consider what a privilege it is to have a home, own a home, eat healthy food, go to the dentist, have an island holiday, send one's children to university, get to the voting station, defend oneself against injustice, the list goes on... to realise how these roots disenfranchise people, communities and cultures. The anecdotal evidence supports the immense amount of research that points to these inequities.

A> Once you start to see all the rules and control sitting behind our systems of language, what they enable for some and how they disenfranchise others, you can't think or act the same. This book is a quiet revolution being led by the most unconventional leaders – the macron, the asterisk, the full stop, the apostrophe. Join us!

What do you see our next steps being in decolonizing and making language and punctuation more inclusive?

J> I suppose a first step in my view would be to learn more languages, to learn more histories, what are the undocumented histories and stories. To embrace language as spoken, embodied, residing with the speaker and their place, which is not my place. A next step would be to reconsider how writing is taught and leave it open to a multitude of new forms of expression including those that are aberrant to convention but really registering one's positionality, identity, life values and environment. We could look forward to students not quaking in their boots when asked to write, afraid of misstepping, getting it wrong. We would read/hear voices from many bodies that are currently disciplined and managed away from their own voice.

A> I love Julieanna's response – it is our responsibility to educate ourselves, expand our horizons and in our role as educators provide opportunities for others too.

Who is your intended audience?

J> We were hoping to tap into audiences from across language studies, creative practice, literature, feminist studies, cultural studies and education. Because we are artist, performer, academics, book designer respectively, the book would naturally offer a message to people like our students that experiment with breaking the rules and might see themselves as creatives with political force.

A> The curious reader and creative!

What is one thing you hope all readers will learn from the book?

J> How diverse, complex, contentious, charged and beautiful punctuation is and can be, much more than commas, margins and full stops as most know it to be.

A> To question even the littlest things on a page.

Why was it important for you both to highlight Māori and Pākehā voices in the book?

J> We are each Tangata Pākehā, Tangata Tiriti, which means we are allies in a respectful partnership with Māori. This book, in many ways, registers our commitment to demonstrate what being a good ally is and to gift what we can to Aotearoa something that might help it transcend its colonizing history, as recent or old as that might be.

A> The dominant powers in English language punctuation (think British English or American spelling) leave little room for alternate ways or voices. It was important to us to showcase Māori, Pākehā and Pacific contributors and to provide a platform for new and emerging creatives alongside established practitioners.

How have you used form as well as the content in the book to challenge the tradition of the English language?

J> I would think that is self-evident in the book. No page is the same. Authors used the citation style of their choice, and some used none at all. Things run off the page and gravitate to the gutter. Images and multimedia jump out as reminders that people are visual learners. Sound reigns supreme. Standard editing and proofing processes were pretty obsolete. We work with all contributors as collaborators, making decisions together and encouraging subtle to significant differences between each contribution to occur organically.

A> As a designer, form and content working together on the page is the work, so consciously challenging the rules is part of what we were doing in the design of the book. And at the same time, we were trying to maintain some other things that we know go towards making a book work, such as pacing, consistency and queues for the reader. So, the whole process has been fascinating and challenging and generated a lot of discussion between the collaborators.

In light of women's history month, does gender influence your work or play a role in the book?

J> I don't think so, and I hope I don't live so much any more in a 'two-gender' world. Maybe more, paraphrasing Luce Irigaray's title, 'a sex that is not one'. I have witnessed feminism become the host for many a non-gender argument, cause, philosophy and policy that does not buy into the male/female binary. I hope I live long enough to experience an everyday world where gender is reconstructed, maybe abolished, definitely more diverse, nuanced and fluid. However, it does not surprise me that women are usually the force guiding, fuelling and advocating for those ideas and actions.

A> I agree with everything Julieanna has said! Perhaps more interesting is the the way we worked – grounded in values of inclusivity, care and openness, sharing work amongst the contributors via Zoom across the world, feeding back to each other our aims for the chapters. We were told this approach was different to many other experiences of editorially curated books.

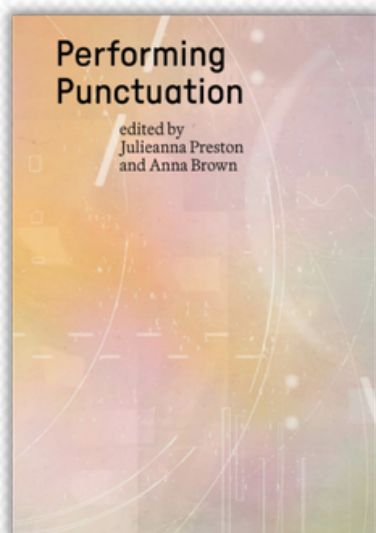
Are there any other women whose voices on this topic influenced or supported your work?

J> Immediately, I would respond by saying that the voices, all the voices, in the book influenced the work. The contributions by women in this book are utterly astounding. They conjure tears, fist-pounding chants, defiant retorts, gentle comforts, quizzical pecking and scratching, melodic climbing and persistent rocking.

Finally, what do you hope readers feel or do differently after encountering *Performing Punctuation*?

J> I would hope that the book inspires some of those readers to take it to the next level, imagine/produce the next volume, expand it to other oppressive colonial and patriarchal habits and lead us out of what we are currently still mired in.

A> Question, explore, resist!



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