

Abstract

In this creative writing research project, a collection of poems has been written in response to, and for co-medial presentation with, a selection of nineteenth-century photographs. The co-medial relationship is defined here as being one in which photographs and poems are presented as equals, the integrity and autonomy of each (photographs and poems as works in their own right) are maintained, and the resulting work (poems-and-photographs) offers more than the constituent parts on their own.

The photographs are the work of William Williams, a highly regarded amateur photographer active in New Zealand from 1881. Drawn principally from the substantial collection of his work held by the Alexander Turnbull Library, they include a diverse and extensive range of images, including striking landscapes, railways-related subjects, portraits of family and friends, and views of urban and rural settlement. The poems investigate, draw and build on readings of the photographs and contextual information about them, as well as broader contextual material from a range of primary and secondary sources, and incorporate actual events, people and contexts as well as imagined elements.

The co-medial work is contextualised first by consideration of issues such as the potentials and hazards associated with bringing together text and image; the implications of mixing history and fiction in the textual element of the work; the role of 'punctum' in responding to images and developing the creative work; and potential meanings and contexts that need to be addressed in interpreting and using nineteenth-century photographs. These meanings and contexts are considered in relation to Williams's work, first in an overview of his life and activity as a photographer, and then in close readings of three subsets of his photographs dating from c.1882 to 1892. These discussions take into account issues such as Williams's purpose as a photographer, his own and others' uses of his images, his involvement with other photographers, and connections between his work and other New Zealand photographic work from the period.

The three suites of poems and photographs overlap with the subjects of the close readings, in terms of the images considered and the periods from which they are drawn. Though presented separately, the poems and the prose discussions were written in tandem, informing and influencing each other. The process by which this occurred is discussed in the final section of the thesis, which also discusses issues arising in endeavouring to undertake a deliberately co-medial approach to the work, and implications of decisions made in managing these issues.