

Towards creative writing theory

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CHAPTER ONE

TESS BRADY
AND
NIGEL KRAUTH

TOWARDS CREATIVE WRITING THEORY

Is there already creative writing theory?

As a university appointments panel sat down to begin interviews for a lecturer's position in creative writing, the chair of the panel – a professor from the communications area – said: 'And who wants to ask the question about creative writing theory?'

The panel looked at each other blankly. 'Is there a creative writing theory?' someone said.

The entry of creative writing into the university – a process begun almost a century ago in the US, but continuing with astonishing momentum elsewhere in the English-speaking world in the last two decades – has placed unusual new pressures on creative writing as a process and as an artform.

Creative writing in English, after Sir Philip Sidney, saw writers in charge of their own theory's destiny: Dryden, Addison, Pope, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, Arnold ... the list goes on towards James, Woolf and Eliot, all of whom were leaders in the theorizing of their field. Always, of course, there was the haunting legacy of ancient philosophers, and the influence of other philosophy and ideology along the way, but generally speaking, creative writers kept hold of their theoretical territory.

The interruption to this happy project occurred most significantly in the last quarter of the twentieth century with Roland Barthes' 'The Death of the Author' (Barthes 1968, tr. 1977) where a philosopher made creative writers sit up, fibrillate, and consider their options.

The fact that Barthes' idea was delivered with such simplicity and plausibility, yet with such a deal of academic-speak required to challenge or confute it, made creative writers aware that to save their practice and identity they needed friends in academic places. Many English and literature departments were hardly friendly towards writers (even though, typically, writers had honed their writing insights by reading literature) and Barthes' new emphasis on the reader's centrality struck a chord where, always, the readerly viewpoint had been valorized.

The collection of essays in this book seeks to respond directly to the greater influence academia is having on creative writing in the English-speaking world. Now more writers than ever have 'day' jobs as academics; more new creative writing is encouraged, edited and supported for publication through academic departments. The fact that so many established writers now teach, and aspiring writers now learn, in the academic context has led to a situation – sometimes criticized in the media – where the

practice of creative writing and the practice of its teaching in universities are becoming blurred. For example, the novel, more and more, is turning into the novel written for academic purposes.

So, since the activity of writing and knowing about writing is now more greatly centered in the university, and since the activity of universities is perennially to theorize about knowledge, it is no surprise that creative writing theory has come under scrutiny. 'Is there a creative writing theory?' The following essays, by writers who are also academics in the US and Australia, investigate the possibility.

Body of knowledge

If we are searching for a theoretical stance in the creative writing discipline, what is our epistemology?

It is important to note that the growth and spread of writing in the tertiary sector did not come about in any ordered or scholarly way. There was seemingly no initial debate among vice-chancellors or elsewhere as to the scholarly nature of writing and its possible inclusion among the ranks of bona fide disciplines. Creative writing arrived awkward as a first year undergraduate, loud and demanding, unruly, too colorful, too fashionable and wanting the best tutorial slots.

But to exist in the sector as more than an elective, to be able to reach the dizzy heights of a discipline, writing needed to illustrate through its practices that:

- there did exist a unique body of knowledge which generates theory and research;
- there were sub-branches of that knowledge;
- academic and scholarly journals were dedicated to publishing research from that knowledge;
- and there were professional bodies to which its members could belong.

While the popular press teased those working in the newly forming discipline with taunts such as: 'Can creative writing really be taught?', in the academic corridors other questions were proving difficult to answer. These questions hinged around notions of research. They were important because without a shared agreed stance on research, writing could not offer anything beyond undergraduate and course-based higher degrees. Ability to offer higher research degrees, the jewels in the university crown, was at times agonizingly out of reach.

As a result, two questions dominated – related to how and what creative writing academics taught, and how and what they researched – and a number of focuses emerged.

Writing scholarly papers concerned with the pedagogy of the discipline seemed an obvious place to begin a research culture, and such papers, from the mid-1990s onwards, fill the early issues of TEXT <<http://www.griffith.edu.au/school/art/text>> and other publications. Familiar and well-rehearsed questions such as: 'How do we assess creative writing?' or 'What workshop methods should we use?' became the early bread and butter research. This is a kind of creative writing / pedagogy focus.

Some academics looked around to find under-researched empirical situations and used standard quantitative research on these. Examples are: studies on the effectiveness of writing programs in generating new writers; increases in tertiary postgraduate degree offerings; or statistical aspects of the publishing industry. This is a kind of creative writing / statistics focus. There has also been a focus on writing and the writer in cultural situations. Writing practice and product has been examined in terms of gender, race and ideology. This is a kind of creative writing / cultural studies focus.

Some have written and thought about the nature of research in writing. Could it, and should it, be significantly different from other disciplines' approaches to research? Is creative writing itself research? Does it relate to better established university research areas in visual art and theatre? Could we develop new modes of writing which embraced traditional research methodologies and creative writing, such as fictocriticism? All of this work, often associated with the development of the exegesis or the critical essay, sought out methodologies which provided space for creative writing to find a research voice rather than to have to learn to sing to another discipline's tune. It is a kind of creative writing / methodology focus.

Others concerned themselves with subcategories and genres, exploring how one genre might move in and out of another, how issues to do with politics, gender, sexuality, psychology and postcolonialism might influence genres and develop new ones. Creative nonfiction emerged strongly from these concerns. This is a kind of writing / genre studies focus.

Some researchers embraced new media and developed ideas about creative writing from them, especially creative writing in program-driven random and fragmented forms. Hypertext, codework, and self-generating texts have developed from these experiments. The experiments are often closely aligned to postmodern positions on the role of the perceiver of the work and the way meaning is made. It provides a kind of writing / meaning studies focus.

Finally, some academics concentrated on technical aspects of the writing process – on setting or person or point of view, etc. But they asked questions beyond the technical, using craft matters as a portal into larger questions about why and what to write. This is a kind of writing / aesthetic, or practice analysis focus.

In recent times these focuses have formed the sub-branches of a creative writing epistemology. They occupied space in scholarly output because the traditionally listed categories in the area – writing for performance, writing poetry, writing novels, writing for new media and so on – have become untenable. Now, more pertinent to an age of cross-form practice, the sub-branches for study are the likes of aesthetic, methodological, genre and cultural studies.

But what is ignored in these lists of academy-approved focuses? An extensive range of concerns that we know writing deals with, it seems. For example, how do love, the sacred and the political find a place in the writing curriculum? How do the psychological, the psychoanalytic, the mad, find a place in the scholarship? Have we been too shy to include these? Are we only brave enough to go as close as a discussion on metaphor? And yet we know as practicing writers and academics that writing is an

art form which takes enormous courage and guts: that it is a sweaty, smell business; that love, passions and the sacred are paramount; that the profound dancing a tango with the ordinary is commonplace. We know writing is in the path of madness. We know it shuffles with the political. We know it has to do with plot, person, narrative and setting, and yet also has everything to do with much, much more. But where are these issues in our curriculum or our research? Where are indefinites such as these interrogated?

Further, what is striking about this collection of essays (and the same can be said for many bibliographies accompanying PhD novels and their supporting exegeses) is its eclectic nature. Scholars use many and varied doors to enter the discipline of writing; some are even climbing in the windows. Approaches are based in psychology, biology, philosophy, ecology, architecture, ethnicity studies, psychoanalysis, sculpture, writing technique, and so on. These source areas work as portals or provide metaphorical structures, but each of them brings to the discipline a richness, a complexity. This is one of the great gifts that writing conveys to the academy; and rather than suggest that the focus should be narrowed, this collection celebrates the breadth and elaborate color range offered by writing research.

The great age of writing and the body

In the twenty-first century, we speak less and we write a lot more. Email, blogs and cell phone technologies have encouraged this. It's not so much a time of writers as a time of writing. In the formally-unpublished sphere, humans used to write diaries and letters which passed slowly in manuscript between select individuals; now we have the technology to broadcast instantly, to scribe personal material to large readerships. The technology and the way we have taken to it, has meant that writing has become – curiously – more public and more personal at the same time. This is different from an age of reading where only a select few writers were formally published or broadcast.

What are the implications of this universality of publication for the creative writing discipline? The new age of writing has brought with it a new growth of language and of thinking about writing.

One growth is via writing as computer-speak – codework and the rest. The other is via sms and rap. The new Macquarie dictionary, 4th edition, includes in the appendix sms messages with meanings in much the same way that the Oxford includes new words in an appendix until sufficient time elapses and the words move into the dictionary proper. Will the inclusion of sms in the dictionary proper generate a shift in language? Eg, where do '18' (= late) or '8-)' (= amazed) fit into alphabetical order? Will rap's ingenious rhymes now appear officially in rhyming dictionaries?

This new language growth is significantly of the body – its meters swing in time to the beat of the body. Its clipped words dance swiftly off the fingers of a text message sender. It is a reemergence of the body into language which has, in the nineteenth and much of the twentieth centuries, been divorced from the body: purified, monitored, and made safe for high art. There was a division between those who wrote, those who read and those who were excluded from the dialogue. But newly there is a breaking

down of the old boundaries as the body infiltrates writing, as many practices of spoken language – always freer – are saddled into written forms. Communication is fast, written, taps of the fingers and global in its rhythm. Here are two examples of creative writing focused on what is happening. The first uses the language of rap and hip-hop, engaging directly with changes to language in the new age of writing:

Windows is Shutting Down

Clive James

Windows is shutting down, and grammar are
On their last leg. So what am we to do?
A letter of complaint go just so far,
Proving the only one in step are you.

Better, perhaps, to simply let it goes.
A sentence have to be screwed pretty bad
Before they gets to where you doesnt knows
The meaning what it must of meant to had.

The meteor have hit. Extinction spread,
But evolution do not stop for that.
A mutant languages rise from the dead
And all them rules is suddenly old hat.

Too bad for we, us what has had so long
The best seat from the only game in town.
But there it am, and whom can say its wrong?
Those are the break. Windows is shutting down. (James 2005)

And the other has wittily re-written William Wordsworth's sonnet, 'Composed Upon Westminster Bridge', using sms language:

NWst Brdg

Peter Finch

erth nt a thng so brill
hes dul v soul pssng by
sght of mjstic tch
cty now wrs grmnts
of mrng bty :-) slnt bare
Shps twrs dms thtrs + chrchs
opn t flds + sky - ^v^v^
brite glttrng in nosmke air
nvr sun so butfl steep

n hs 1st splndr vly rck or hll
 nvr saw nvr flt clm so deep!!!
 rvr flws at hs sweet wll (own):
 Deer DG! vry hses seem slp I I
 + all that BIG HRT lyng still! (Finch 2002)

What is interesting about the sms-language poem is how easy it is to read. The poem illustrates the power of sms as a language which in the hands of an experienced writer evokes poetic meaning. What is equally fascinating about the Clive James poem is the way the poet has employed the language of rap and hip-hop, coupled with the metaphors of the contemporary computer world, to communicate beyond sub-culture boundaries.

Both illustrate that in this age of writing there is still the need for the writer, doing much the same job as always – articulating, broadening, intervening, naming (the unnameable), putting the culture's thoughts, hopes, dreams and fears into words.

The implication for the study and teaching of writing in the tertiary sector and for writers in general is the importance to see this age of writing as vibrant, alive, and informative. It's not good enough to hide our heads in the sand and bemoan the lack of grammatical skills, any more than we should bemoan the lack of literary output in publishing houses. We need to embrace and thus help shape the new language era, the move in syntax, the move in metaphoric content, the very way we write. It's no longer appropriate to isolate 'new writing' into some safe stable – the horse has bolted.

It's not surprising that so many essays in this collection relate writing to the body, its generative function and its sense of positioning in community. Creative writers don't take their position in society for granted any more. The author may not be dead, as Barthes provokingly suggested, but the writer's sense of self – and the readers' understanding of who they are hearing when they read – needs continuing clarification.

This book prepares a way for creative writers, for teachers of creative writing, and for readers, to understand the frameworks within which creative writing takes place in the early twenty-first century.

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THE WRITER READER SPACE