



"Agnostic" thinking: creative writing as practice-led research

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Introduction: artists and knowledge in the academy

In their earliest forms in Europe, the university system provided an important home for creative practice. Here, intellectual activities included the production of music, sculpture, illuminated manuscripts and other creative acts. But this was not sustained: by the birth of the Enlightenment, art had become what the philosopher Alexander Baumgarten termed a *ratio inferior*, the "science of the sensate", and thus related to logic, but only of an inferior type. The sensate nature of aesthetics - so much a part of creative production - could not compete, in Enlightenment minds, with the power of "pure" reason. So, from being very much a form of knowledge, art practice became something that existed in the knowledge domain under a sort of erasure: as something that did not really belong. In recent decades, however, artists have been returning to the academy, and have begun to claim the rights of academic citizenship. One effect of this move is the need to demonstrate that artists do, in fact, have a valid position within the university system as producers of knowledge.

This is a fraught situation because artists in the academy operate under opposing imperatives. As artists, we need to produce work according to the logic of the field of creative production: work that is autonomous (made "for art's sake") and critically respected. We also need to produce work according to the logic of the field of knowledge production, work that is not only rigorous, but also provides economic benefits through research reporting and the attraction of research students. These roles have often been seen as mutually exclusive; and/or as adding an extra load to the already full schedules of any artist in the university. Most importantly, the commingling of these roles has been thought likely to diminish the art produced, while not necessarily generating fine scholarly work. Focus on the production of a fine artwork can give precedence to aesthetics at the expense of knowledge. Focus on the production of knowledge can generate art that is didactic, and "academic". But despite complaints and resistances, this is where we now find ourselves: straddling two contradictory positions.

One response is to explicate what is involved in our work as university-based arts practitioners, which is in part a bringing together of research and practice. These are terms frequently set in an oppositional relationship, although, like any binary pair, they are far more connected and equivalent than they might first appear. It is not possible, in fact, to undertake research in the creative arts that is not practice-based, at some level. It is also not possible, in fact, to engage in practice in the creative arts that does not correspondingly rely on and incorporate research, at some level. All the same, within the academy the terms often seem to occupy different domains, and generate different outcomes. Collapsing those terms into a single domain brings considerable advantages - mostly to do with establishing continuing positions for artists in the academy as staff and students, or achieving greater recognition for our intellectual work. A possible negative outcome, however, would be what so many have feared over the past few decades: the diminution of artistic freedom and innovation. One very real risk is that artist-academics might be captured by what is called *skholé*, a term whose original meaning refers to a

place of leisure: the leisure involved in having time to learn and time for knowledge. Of course artists need a version of *skholé*, of time to learn, make and reflect. But central to *skholé* is what Pierre Bourdieu terms the scholastic point of view - "the point of view of the *skholè*, that is, the academic vision" (Bourdieu, 1998: 127). This is the objectifying and universalising perspective associated with the academy, a logic that, for Bourdieu, undermines practice because it turns it into an object for scholarly dissection rather than for creation.

We suggest, however, that our options are not only the false dichotomy of compliance with the scholastic point of view on the one hand, or a proud refusal to play the game on the other. Rather, and due in no small part to the paradigm of practice-led research, it is possible to take a different position: to make our work in a way that satisfies both aesthetic and scholarly imperatives; that marries research and creative practice, or *skholè* and, say, *techné*, in the interests of producing and interpreting knowledge in a different - but valid - way.

Easier said than done, perhaps? It is, after all, early days for this paradigm, which is not yet unproblematically accepted as valid by conventional researchers or by all artist-academics. One significant issue for both these groups is what it means for knowledge to be generated through creative work: and so, with the emergence of practice-led research, a fresh focus on the problem of knowledge has emerged. While epistemological issues are always under consideration in research communities (or, at least, should be), what constitutes knowledge is, for the most part, conceived on the basis of a very long series of debates (starting with the ancients), and tends to be conceived in relatively restricted terms. Research in the sciences, social sciences and humanities still typically relies on a particular model of knowledge that expects answers to these sorts of questions: *what can be seen?*; *what can be demonstrated?*; *what can be argued?* Utilising conventional paradigms means that interpretation of research into these questions may be complex but is still do-able; project findings may be untidy or even chaotic, but they can be organised and disciplined to come up with a sound interpretive narrative.

As (typically) articulated in the academy, these paradigms rely on a kind of theological structure: that there exists what is knowable, and worth knowing; that there exists what is testable and worth testing; that there exists something that at least accords with "the truth"; and, of course, that there is a source for all this work, all this knowledge, all these interpretations. This (imagined) source, Roland Barthes suggests, is the "Author-God", the foundation for interpretation that anticipates the discovery of a "single 'theological' meaning", and does not pay much attention to the actually messy, multiple space of research which cannot be "deciphered", only "disentangled" (Barthes, 1977: 147). This is, arguably, the interpretive approach taken in much research, but it is not well suited to practice-led research, which tends to be less systematic, less easily reduced to an interpretive framework, less likely to offer its findings in a transparent mode and less susceptible to rational argument.

This is not to say that the creative arts do not generate knowledge; in fact, history is filled with knowledge that has emerged out of creative practice. For the most part, however, that knowledge is gleaned subsequent to the work and is attributed not to the artist, but to those more committed to the theological interpretive frameworks: the critics, the "experts" in analysis, those formally authorised to present an interpretation. Art and the artist, by contrast, often seem mute: the objects rather than the subjects of research and interpretation. Thus the knowledge generated by an artwork, and the interpretation that emerges from it, are traditionally found not in the work itself, but in reviews, analyses and other critical writings that interpret it.

There is an alternative; knowledge and interpretation can be located in and attributed

directly to the art/artist. However, this relies on an acceptance of a less theological approach to knowledge; less reliance on a clear statement from an authority; and less need to follow a line of thought that leads only forward. It relies, in fact, on what John Keats called "Negative Capability": that condition "when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason" (Keats, 1817): or the capacity to accept ambiguities and uncertainties. Negative capacity is like negative space: that which is available to be filled; and, as Bate points out, it is not a refusal to establish meaning, but is rather "an imaginative openness of mind and heightened receptivity to reality in its full and diverse concreteness", and a refusal to be irritated when facts and reason are not immediately evident (Bate, 1963: 18). This is ideal for the interpretation of results from practice-led research because it depends on an observer who is not confident he or she already knows, or even that knowledge can ever be full or final, but is willing to linger at the point of interpretation, and to accept gestures and notions rather than facts.

For us this is "agnostic research", a term we derive from architect Sophia Vyzoviti (2007: 8) and that means (at least) two things. The first is the basic philosophical view that "truth value" is unknowable. This is not to say that nothing can be known. Rather, it is to suggest that certain things are not, finally, knowable - although this, in turn, doesn't mean that it is not interesting and instructive to poke around in them. This is, of course, the framework for most post-Nietzschean researchers, and is now a very well established perspective, in the discourse if not always in the practice. The second way in which we use this term has a much more contemporary derivation: the IT industry. According to industry reasoning, it is not feasible to anticipate all the needs likely to emerge in the course of business. So, in order to get the best use out of the IT resources, it is important to have "agnostic" systems - those that don't depend upon a single model, but can operate in a number of places and ways, and for a number of users. The term is used similarly in economics, architecture and design, history and social theory.¹ What we find within agnostic research, then, is a tolerance for complexity and confusion, and both a willingness and a capacity to be led by the data rather than by a predetermined point of view.

What is knowledge?

This brings to the fore the "problem of knowledge", an enduring area of interest to philosophers and other scholars. It was first raised by the ancients and has been wrestled with ever since: never - of course - to the point of consensus. For philosophers, this "problem" refers to how we know the world, others, or ourselves: that is, the basic issue of epistemology. For other disciplines, the phrase takes on locally specific meanings usually related to research design and interpretation, and includes such elements as the problem of bias, the problem of the limits of knowledge, and the problem of achieving validity or verification of one's findings. These meanings are more about the *application* of the problem of knowledge, and less to do with what is at stake in the question: particularly: where knowledge resides, who performs the act of knowing, and the relationship between knowledge and knower.

Since Plato raised the issue in his *Meno*, answers have been offered along a continuum with rationalism at one extreme and empiricism on the other. For the rationalists, knowledge is derived from reason - from thinking about what is or what might be - and knowledge is *a priori*: something exists, and reason will disclose what follows from the fact of its existence. The empiricists take a different position, arguing that knowledge is derived from sense experience - from the observation, organization and analysis of data; and it is *a posteriori*, so that we must go out and gather evidence before reason can do its work (Kant, 1952: 14).

The divide between these positions became particularly evident with the emergence of the Enlightenment, when "man" (and it was "man": "woman" did not emerge into history until considerably later) became the centre of the universe and of knowledge; when, as John Dewey makes clear, the notions that currently dominate our culture - the conception of progress as a ruling ideal, the conception of the individual as the source and standard of rights; and the problem of knowledge - emerged (Dewey, 1972: 13). With this came a sense of human beings as distinct from, and superior to, the world of nature. The logic of the separate thinking subject is found in George Berkeley's famous maxim, *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived) - or, in other words, the world exists because we perceive it.² Thomas Hobbes takes a similar line in his materialist insistence that all human knowledge is restricted to sensation, which is then ordered and analysed by reason (Hobbes, 1972: 98).

These positions on knowledge appear, on the one hand, to signal a purely philosophical undertaking, the outcome of an objective, scientifically neutral way of approaching a problem. But, of course, it is more than this. As Nietzsche insists, "'knowledge in itself' is as impermissible a concept as 'thing in itself'" (1967: ss.608). Knowledge is always embedded in contexts. So, whether idealist or materialist, rationalist or empiricist, these philosophers took their positions on the basis of a socio-cultural foundation: what they necessarily thought because of where and when they lived, what could be known, and what could be understood.

Despite this, philosophers introduced ways of thinking about knowledge that laid the foundations for today's more sceptical, more pluralistic understanding of epistemology. Profound challenges were mounted by post-Nietzschean thinkers: challenges that demand attention be paid to context; that knowledges thus gleaned be acknowledged as contingent rather than true; and that the knowledge-finder be located within the world. Martin Heidegger is particularly associated with this, and with arguing against the view of knowledge and perception that travels in a line from Descartes through Hobbes, Locke and others to the twentieth-century positivists. Both reason and empiricism, Heidegger suggested, establish perception as "a process of returning with one's booty to the 'cabinet' of consciousness after one has gone out and grasped it" (Heidegger, 1972: 62). Both reason and empiricism place a deep chasm between the "I" who knows and what can be known. For Heidegger, though, knowledge must be "in", not "about", the world, and derives from experience as *a being, in being*, rather than as an observer or thinker.

This conception is of great value to contemporary artist-academics. It provides a legitimate basis for considering alternative research paradigms, and thus for claiming the right to be called "researchers" along with our siblings in the other academic disciplines. It authorises a phenomenological approach to research, with all that means about attending to the things of the world, including one's own sensations, affects and reactions. What it does not provide is a clear path to interpretive frameworks and methods; Heidegger is, after all, bound by the rules of logic and the ancient conventions of philosophical thought. Creative practitioners/researchers, on the contrary, do not necessarily owe duty to conventional logic. They look rather to the creative tradition and its contemporary approaches, which often sidestep (or, at least, look awry at) logic, reason and empiricism.

So the problem of knowledge is that it remains, at base, theological: a reasoned discourse, but one that depends on *a priori* truths and universals. It depends, that is, on something being demonstrated or proven. This does not easily accommodate the outputs from practice-led research, which often fail the tests of empiricism and reason, due to an absence of systematised measurement and the use of intuitive leaps. Creative outputs can convince as artwork, but less easily convince as knowledge work. And this, we suggest,

is due to the limits of the interpretation carried out by practice-led researchers; limited efforts to unpack, unpick and above all communicate what it is we have found. As Brian Eno writes:

The arts routinely produce some of the loosest thinking and worst writing known to history... the lack of a clear connection between all that creative activity and the intellectual life of the society leaves the whole project poorly understood, poorly supported and poorly exploited. (Eno, 1996: 258-59)

Such criticism suggests the need for artist-academics to ensure their thinking is not loose and their writing not poor; find ways of drawing on the value of rigour that comes out of the whole history of epistemology; and put the expressive medium of language to work in order to make clear what has been discovered.

Models for interpretation

"Making clear" is the product of good interpretation, but it is neither a clear-cut nor an objective activity. Indeed, it begins as an act of power, because interpretation is the basis of Enlightenment thought, fundamental to the work of organising, analysing and reducing what is under consideration. It is through interpretation that sense is made - or rather, that data or other objects are made to give up their sense.

However, the task at hand need not be simply about power: all the knowledge in the world does no one any good until it is made public, until others can engage in it, test it out, put it to work. So interpretation is an act of community, an act of communication. It is also an act of making, and of matter. As a form of making, interpretation is, at least from one point of view, at the heart of our work as creative practitioners. Artists interpret almost without thinking about it: we look at the world, and reflect on it, respond to it and frame it. This is interpretation in essence: intelligent attention, close observation, and a willingness to be led by the process into an understanding of what it might be, what it might say, and what knowledge it might generate. Taking this approach, it is possible that we can use the logic of interpretation to legitimate our place in the academy, demonstrating that what we do generates knowledge in how we assign meanings: how we frame and arrange, organise and evaluate our findings.

The term *interpretation* is often used in research discourse to refer to the assignment of meanings. Interpretation indeed may be, as Susan Sontag suggests, "virtually... translation" (Sontag, 2001: 5) in that it has the responsibility to make transparent what has been "said" in a different language - in this case, the language of data. As translation, the act of interpretation depends on the production of a model in which parallels and analogies can be made, and the meaning and reasoning behind the meaning can be framed. It is never straightforward or unitary: it is always based on decisions rather than absolutes. Yet it is always necessary: we must interpret our work both to make it, and to make it meaningful. As Nietzsche said, famously: "Against positivism, which halts at phenomena [and says] 'there are only facts,' I would say: no, facts is precisely what there is not, only interpretations" (Nietzsche, 1967: 481; S7.60). There are no facts, as such; only interpretations; so interpretation cannot merely *follow* the work; it is an integral part of the work and of its making. But this recognition of the integral nature of interpretation is not (on its own) necessarily enough for a work to count as a research product.

Research is defined by UNESCO as:

creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge, including the knowledge of man, culture and society, and the use of this stock of knowledge to devise new applications. (in OECD 2001)

This definition is widely used by governments and research institutions, and seems to offer a place to creative work. But this does not mean that art as such, and of itself, is accepted by the authorities. Those artists located within the academy, who assert the value of their role as knowledge workers, need to find a point of accommodation between the demands of the classical research modes, and the classical creative modes. At the research end of things, the techniques available to us are typically not the purely scientific or quantitative modes; artwork is rarely undertaken on a sufficiently systematic basis, being more about exploration, chance and intuition than hypotheses and laboratory systems. However, the theological approach to knowledge is not the only way to address a problem. John Dewey writes:

Pretty much all students [of philosophy] are convinced that we can reduce knowledge neither to a set of associated sensations, nor yet to a purely rational system of relations of thought. Knowledge is judgment, and judgment requires both a material of sense perception and an ordering, regulating principle, reason. (1972: 4)

Taking Dewey at face value, we can lay claim to something more than conventional logic in the work of valid interpretation; we can draw on the insights generated by the sensate domain, framed though it might be by reason, or refuse the dogma of theology, instead applying an approach that is closer to agnosticism. This requires researchers to draw on a wide range of research platforms and to avoid the fundamentalist purity of one model, one notion of truth, in making and interpreting their work. It requires them, too, to accommodate the sensate as a sense-maker; rely on the phenomenological and the concrete, on what Paul Carter (2004) characterizes as "material" rather than abstract thinking. In this, practice-led research and the interpretation of creative research products initiates a new epistemological landscape, one less committed to linearity and logic, and more committed to the analogical, to "going around" a problem.

Agnostic researchers are likely to draw on one or more of the formally legitimate methods of interpretation available to carry out this work. One is heuristics, almost perfectly designed for creative work, since it is a comparatively informal approach based on rules of thumb, educated guesses or trial and error - approaches familiar to anyone involved in studio or other creative practice. However, the heuristic is not precisely an interpretive mode; it is more about problem solving than about the making of sense, more about drawing analogies in order to see something more clearly than about translating those findings into knowledge. It does, however, allow for the production of contributions to knowledge when it is deployed consciously as a reflexive approach to the making of a work. Brian Eno writes, in this respect:

As soon as you externalize an idea you see facets of it that weren't clear when it was just floating around in your head... In organising a thought in any way an unsuspected dimension is added to it. It's exactly the same way with music. You work on a piece of music, you put in certain ingredients, and suddenly they react in a way you hadn't predicted. If you're alert to that reaction, that's what you work from. (1982)

Applying the heuristic approach is likely to make new knowledge more visible. It allows the artist to interpret both that work, and their practice more generally; if only for themselves, initially. To render this the sort of knowledge that counts as research in OECD terms, it is necessary to apply a second level of translation, one that will make the knowledge transparent to others and that will, thereby, "increase the stock of knowledge". How to do this depends partly on the project undertaken. Was it, for instance, developed to explore knowledge about field, tradition or process? Was it undertaken to address a social or philosophical problem? In addition, the selection of an interpretive framework depends on the analyst's own epistemological bent and background: his or her training,

knowledges and socio-political concerns. This means that the interpreter is not presenting the only correct reading (or "the truth"), but merely a story about the work and its findings, one based on context, values, and the habitus of those involved that is, therefore, limited and contingent.

This does not mean that this work is not worth doing; it does mean, however, that such interpretation needs to be produced and consumed with caution. This is particularly true for creative works, which tend to be less determined - or transparent - than conventional works of science, and therefore more open to contextual specificities. Physical and social sciences are, of course, also contingent, but researchers in these disciplines do not rely on casual observation; rather, research projects are set up, objectified and contained in such a way that inferences can be drawn from any findings.

This is not the case for the production of most artwork; but nor is it also the case for much research in the humanities and, thus, it is not the only answer to the problem of knowledge. A number of sociologists as well as researchers in the humanities have discarded the old positivist model and instead adopted an interpretive framework that accounts for the context in which a work was made, the experience of the producer of the work, and how audience members might share that experience. There are several steps involved in this. The starting point is an epistemological foundation that acknowledges the social and historical location of all knowledge, and its imbrication in systems of power, including pragmatic matters like grants and publications, and philosophical matters like the principles of knowledge formation. Also important is an appreciation of the social, historical, personal and political elements that impact on any research project - including the discourses, social categories, and persons involved (whether the researcher or other participants) - and researchers' attempts to account for this when making sense of the work's outcomes.

Perhaps the most familiar approach in this general domain is hermeneutics, an interpretive model that takes into account the individual parts of a work, context, event or idea, and considers how those parts relate to each other and to the whole. And, while committed to understandings, hermeneutics has no pretensions to the production of unequivocal meanings. Rather, it provides a space for thoughtful, intelligent, reflective conversation. It involves cultivating the ability to understand from somebody else's point of view, and to appreciate the cultural and social forces that may have influenced another's outlook. It is, in short, based on the logic of triangulation, and on building a situation where there is not only shared understanding, but also a common language for making sense of a work.

Such triangulation comes mainly from the social sciences, where it is applied to increase the validity of research findings. This involves combining the sources of information, the data itself, and the observers, whether field workers or analysts; each, in N.K. Denzin's terms, "played off against the other" to strengthen the results (1978: 304). This is not what we are likely to do in creative research, but there are aspects of the approach that can usefully be appropriated to aid in interpretation: not least the three elements of makers, contributors, and a shared environment.

Of course, it is not a simple matter of juxtaposing these three effects, and using their interaction to lead understanding. Each effect is already mediated by context and personality, so artist-researchers need to add to triangulation a focus on reflexivity - the capacity to turn the analytical gaze on the self, to incorporate within the research project process and its outcomes an investigation and interpretation of the practitioner. Artists need to ask: *why these choices, why this approach?* because we do not interpret the world; we constitute it; and it is incumbent on all researchers to be very precise about the limitations on the knowledge they produce.

As researchers, artists also need to be precise about the selection of the perspectives they bring to the interpretation of their work. A very common approach is to import theories from other disciplines and use these as interpretive tools. There is value in this: literary studies, for instance, offers a number of valuable approaches to texts that can be applied by artist-researchers; cultural theory provides a plethora of effective mechanisms for making sense, and locating context. But there is a risk in importing techniques from other disciplines. As Michael Maranda points out, such imports "carry with them their own interpretative strategies and... authorise the use of certain dominant metaphors which may or may not be present in the work being discussed" (2002). Literary studies, for instance, focuses on the meaning of a particular work, the social location of the author, the investment of readers and so on - all useful in delimiting the work itself, but all focused on the literary or aesthetic elements of the work, and not on its knowledge generation. Implicit also within the framing rhetoric of literary studies is an understanding that such investigation is a practice carried on by someone who is not the maker of the work and can, therefore, claim some sense of objective distance in relation to that work.

A more valuable approach, we suggest, is one that explores the questions opened up by the work itself. Not the kind of question raised by an external critic or commentator such as: "what does *Atonement* reveal about early twentieth century class relations?" (for instance), but the sort of question more likely to be asked by a writer-researcher. This might focus on the thought and intent in the making of the work, how to inhabit the world of story, the economy of attention involved in the work - questions about process, in other words. This is not to say that a novel like *Atonement* does not also reveal important information about early twentieth-century England; but what it reveals cannot be subjected to the evaluative criteria we might apply to a work of historical research. The aesthetic element is the main driving force in production and it is here that interpretation can reveal insights of the greatest validity. What is needed, then, is an approach that does not use the creative work as raw material to explore a particular theory, but one that understands that the creative process incorporates the data, and that the process-data must lead the process of interpretation. Interpretation then becomes a matter of putting material in context, and in perspective; of comparing what was found with what was already known as well as what was expected to be found; of analyzing method and measures; and of responding reflexively to the artist's own practice and shifts in thinking during the course of the project. After all, interpretation need not only be a matter of stripping back a work to reveal its knowledge. As Susan Sontag writes, "In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art" (2001: 14). This is not to say that no intellectual work should be done on the creative products of research. It does, however, illustrate the fact that there is more than the theological, "scientific" and objective approach to interpreting research.

Creative writing research in Australia: a case study

We now turn to writing as a particular form of creative and research practice. All writers engage in various forms of inquiry and interpretation, whether their work obeys the dictates of traditional trade publishing, or is committed to a more experimental mode of delivery. The relatively recent recognition of creative writing as an academic discipline has, moreover, prompted a number of writers both in and outside the academy to conceptualise their creative practice as research activity. This thinking has, in turn, impacted upon writers' working practices and the outputs they produce, and how their research has been conceptualised in terms of process, interpretation and results.

"Writing" as a form of university-based research study is a broad term that encompasses many types and forms of textual production. The area of study that concerns us here is most often named "creative writing", a term that attempts to differentiate practice-based

work from the academic writing that underpins so much of university life.³ Creative writing in Australian (and other) universities is based on the production of written works that may include poetry, novels and short stories, creative nonfiction, scripts, fictocriticism, texts that employ media technologies, and hybrid formations of the above. It does involve a close reading of published texts and commentary about those texts, but the focus on the production as well as the analysis of text distinguishes it from the critical disciplines, and associates it with other creative arts.

Creative writing is a relatively new field in Australian higher education research and teaching. The past decade has seen an extraordinary increase in student numbers and the levels at which it is taught (see Dawson, 2005), and there are no signs that this demand is abating. Some 35 of the 39 Australian universities currently teach creative writing, and over 20 offer doctoral level degrees in the discipline (AAWP, 2007). Over the same period, scholarship into creative writing research has similarly been expanding. While the courses were originally staffed by academics from areas such as English, literature, communication and cultural studies, creative writing academics are now usually required to possess research higher degree qualifications in writing, significant industry experience and/or a profile as a writer outside the academy. The Australian journal *TEXT: journal of writing and writing courses* also contributes to knowledge generation, publishing articles that explore various aspects of research in, as, and about creative writing. As this work circulates and is discussed, the ideas and approaches explored influence the way the discipline is conceptualised.

As understandings have thus developed within, and been disseminated through, the Australian writing-academic community about research ethos, the problem of knowledge, and the relationship between creative, professional and research practice, the quality of research theses produced in Australia has improved measurably. Despite vocal criticisms that the growth in creative writing postgraduate courses is producing second-rate manuscripts that will not find publishers, the PhD, DCA and other higher degree by research graduates have generated some excellent creative work that is publishable (including works that have won prizes and awards), and that has demonstrably offered an original contribution to knowledge: usually through exegeses, prefaces or companion essays.

Like artist-researchers in other disciplines, writers are articulate about what research means in their field, and what epistemological, ontological and hermeneutic technologies are available. But while in many ways writing seems closely allied to the other creative disciplines in Australian universities, this is not entirely the case. Creative writing researchers face problems with research methods that are not faced by creative researchers in the other arts in the same ways, or to the same extent. Unlike painters or producers of film, writers' medium is language - the same medium that is used in conventional research. Unlike practitioners in forms such as dance or music - and even painting or sculpture - our mode of practice is (generally, and comparatively) static. This means that much of the recent discourse around practice-led research seems not to apply to writers' methods; or at least to lack a comfortable fit with it. This is because the language of practice-led research is typically based on metaphors and actualities that emerge from the visual and performing arts, and that thus positions non-linguistic "seeing" and "perceiving" as research methods. Such conceptualisation does not fully take into account the actualities of practice for writers, and often leaves writing researchers uncertain about how to designate their work. This gives rise to a seemingly intractable problem: is it possible for writers to conduct research according to a practice-led model, or is the only research mode available the conventional (critical, and often *a posteriori*) investigation and interpretation of content?

This question adds a layer of complexity to the research process for writers who, along

with other artist-researchers, must confront the complexities of teasing out the contested relationships between research work and creative work - contestation that is manifested in, for example, the difference between the process of reflection upon the creative process and research inquiry; or the relationship between imagination and reason/enquiry. In recent years, a number of national associations of university-based creative practitioners in Australia have attempted to investigate what research means in their discipline. While such explications typically adopt elements of the official government definitions, they often add to this a real focus on critical reflection, and reflexive analysis. At the same time, those national associations have stressed the contribution the creative arts make to national cultural and economic life. A report for the Australian Council of University Art and Design Schools, for instance, states:

Contrary to popular belief, contemporary arts research is not some side event to "real" research. University based artists, designers, art historians and art educators are leaders in their fields. They are making a difference, inspiring, altering and moulding the culture of the nation, and contributing to the economy like any other research community. (Baker, Howard & Rhodes, 2007)

However, many practitioners still seem to identify their contribution not in terms of knowledge production or interpretation, but in terms of publishing advances, book sales, reviews, and literary awards and prizes - that is, the conventional professional and aesthetic markers of success.

In a backhanded way, they are encouraged to do just this, and to identify either as artists or as researchers. It remains extremely rare for anyone to win a major competitive research grant for a creative project in Australia, and creative works only come into the research quality assessment exercise under a sort of erasure. The Australian Research Council (ARC) will not support activities that, in their terms, "lead *solely* to the creation or performance of a work of art", which makes it very evident that the official position is that artworks do not of themselves produce knowledge. The Australia Council for the Arts, the Australian government's arts funding and advisory body, specifically excludes art that is, substantially, research work. Not surprisingly, given this climate, artist-academics typically bifurcate their practice when applying for funding, gliding over any research aspects in an Australia Council grant application, and excluding any substantial creative output from their ARC applications.

Despite this environment, there is an increasing trend for academic writers and graduates from creative writing higher degrees to perceive their work as potentially fulfilling the criteria of both art and research; and to do that without relying on external critics to do the work of interpretation. In the past three years, for example, several writing academics have produced a novel or other creative publication and, alongside, a companion piece that frames, interprets and establishes the epistemological foundations for that work.⁴ This is what is required of virtually all creative writing PhD submissions, so it makes sense for it to extend into the public sphere.

Of such writers, perhaps the best known outside Australia is Kate Grenville, whose multi-award winning⁵ novel *The Secret River* (2005a) explores and exposes frontier violence in Australia, and the dispossession - and often the slaughter - of the indigenous people during the settlement stage, something that has often been denied (or, at least debated) during the 200-plus years since the arrival of the British. Grenville, an Honorary Associate in the English Department at the University of Sydney, notes that during the process of producing this work, "I did an enormous amount of research. This book isn't history, but it's solidly based on history. Most of the events in the book 'really happened' and much of the dialogue is what people really said or wrote" (Grenville, 2005b). The point of this work, she continues, is that:

I hoped to create an experience for a reader in which they could understand what that moment of our past was really like. The great power of fiction is that it's not an argument: it's a world.

This is a fair point; but to count as research, the argument and interpretation must become more visible. How does the academic-writer shift from the purely aesthetic or literary mode to the knowledge mode? It could seem that writers here have an edge over the other art forms, because our work is produced in the same medium as knowledge work: written language. Indeed, *contra* Grenville, John Carey insists that literature is the only art form capable of making an argument, writing:

Literature is not just the only art that can criticize itself, it is the only art, I would argue, that can criticize anything because it is the only art capable of reasoning. Of course, paintings can convey implicit criticism... But they cannot make a coherent case. They are locked in inarticulacy. (Carey, 2005: 177)

Dance, sculpture, design, music: we do not go as far as Carey in suggesting that they are inarticulate, but certainly it is more difficult to make an explicit statement in these forms than it is in writing; and the interpretations of their meanings and the knowledge they convey is perhaps more open to idiosyncratic readings than is the average written form. But writing is not completely straightforward either; like the other art forms, it folds in on itself, and works through metaphor, analogy and allusion rather than argument. David Morley reminds readers that, "a novel or poem is the visible part of an iceberg... the knowledge a writer brings to their creation is the invisible submerged section of that same iceberg. Reflective essays capsize it; they show that working knowledge, partially or completely" (2007: 38). It is not the work of a piece of art, literary or otherwise, to interpret itself for viewers: viewers must do the work themselves. But as producers of knowledge as well as art, we may wish to "capsize" that iceberg, and "show that working knowledge".

Grenville seems to have come to this realisation too, because the year after *The Secret River* was published she produced a companion volume titled *Searching for the Secret River* (2006). In this work, she laid bare the research process and the epistemological foundations for the novel, as well as her mode of interpretation of the primary materials. Interviewed for the University of Sydney, she states:

I didn't want people unsympathetic to the idea of frontier violence to be able to say: it's just a novel, she made it up, none of this really happened, so I promised myself I'd write another book that would sit alongside the novel and show where I'd got my material from. (cited Maral, 2006)

Writers, and other creative practitioners, have always tended to explain and interpret their work at some level, whether in the form of prefaces or artist statements, or in public talks and lectures; but a careful, incisive and consciously explicatory account of such work is increasingly necessary, and to be expected, from artist-academics. Although Grenville's success in getting her interpretive work published may have been, at least in part, determined by her existing public reputation as a writer, we suggest that such practice may become more common in the years to come, as readers become more familiar with the form.

Conclusion: pathways to research recognition in the creative arts

Such realities and possibilities lead us to suggest that there is a need to revisit the epistemological preliminaries associated with research practice. It also suggests that practice-led researchers need to negotiate relationships of knowledge with our siblings in

the social and natural sciences and the humanities, so that together we can come up with a rounded picture of the issue under investigation. Perhaps most importantly, it means those outside, as well as those within, the creative arts disciplines must understand that artist-researchers typically produce not fact but artefact, not unique prototype but novel example, not truth but possibility. Interpretation must similarly be investigated, described and formalized within the creative practice disciplines. Responses to questions such as: *What sort of approaches might be taken?*; *What are the politics of interpretation?*; and, *How can my interpretation advance knowledge in the field?* are starting points in any discussion of what a work might mean and what it might be. Acknowledging that a work requires interpretation, and that this interpretation should be couched at least partly in the language of the research community, will take us a long way along the road towards being able to assert that our creative works are also knowledge products.

Endotes

¹ For discussion of "agnosticism" in research, see, for example, G.M. Breakwell, J.A. Smith, S. Hammond & C. Fife-Schaw 2008 *Research Methods in Psychology*, London: SAGE; S. Cunningham-Burley, N.P. McKeganey 1990 *Readings in Medical Sociology*, London: Routledge; M. Bulmer 1984 *Sociological Research Methods* (second edition), Transaction Publishers; R.W. Belk 2006 *Handbook of Qualitative Research Methods in Marketing*, Edward Elgar Publishing. Indeed, agnosticism is thoroughly entrenched in writings about social research, whether or not a genuinely agnostic approach is taken to the work and its interpretation.

² This immaterialist (idealist) principle is first discussed in his *Principles of Human Knowledge* (1710); George Berkeley, in Howard Robinson (ed) 1999 *Principles of Human Knowledge and Three Dialogues*, New York: Oxford University Press.

³ We acknowledge David Morley's point that "we do not burden other taught art forms with the first name 'creative'" (2007: 23); however, given the amount of writing that goes on in universities, it seems pragmatic to burden this sort of practice with the first name "creative".

⁴ See, for instance, Sue Woolfe's novel *The Secret Cure* (Picador 2003), framed and interpreted in *The Mystery of the Cleaning Lady: A Writer Looks at Creativity and Neuroscience* (UWA Press 2007).

⁵ By 2006, *The Secret River* had won the Commonwealth Writers Prize - Australasia/South Pacific Region; the Commonwealth Writers' Prize - Overall Winner; the New South Wales Premier's Prize for Fiction; the New South Wales Premier's Community Relations Award; the Australian Booksellers' Award; the Australian Book Industry Award for Fiction; and the Fellowship of Australian Writers prize for Fiction. It was also shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Literary Awards, the Queensland Literary Awards, the Kibble Award, and the Man Booker prize.

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