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Creative writing in the ERA era: a new research exercise

Context

In 2009 the Australian government, through the Australian Research Council (ARC), changed the way it assesses research quality in Australian universities. The Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) initiative introduced new processes for the recognition, collection and evaluation of research, which included—for the first time—assessment of creative works as research. For many in the Creative and Performing Arts areas of Australian tertiary education, this signalled the achievement of a set of goals laid down in 1998 with the Strand Report (Strand 1998). The recognition of creative production as research had been, moreover, a project in various Australian university creative departments for at least a decade prior to Strand, going back as far as the rationales supporting the first research doctorates in the creative arts in the 1980s.

There were a number of innovations involved in the ARC's 2009 recognition of creative work. These included: 'using a combination of indicators and expert review by committees comprising experienced, internationally-recognised experts' (ARC 2010a)—in other words, peer review; and the introduction of a device called the 'research statement'—a justifying rationale to be added to the creative work when submitted for review. The format for the research statement was provided:

Format of research statement for Peer Review of creative works for the HCA Cluster

For the HCA cluster, the following research output types can ... be submitted:

- original (creative) works in the public domain;
- live performances;
- recorded (performance) works; and
- curated or produced substantial exhibitions, events or renderings.

For those research outputs which are selected for peer review, a statement identifying the research component of the output must be available in an institutionally-supported repository. The statement must be a maximum of 250 words and address the following categories:

1. Research Background—Field, Context, Research Question.
2. Research Contribution—Innovation and New Knowledge.
3. Research Significance—Evidence of Excellence. (ARC 2010b: 41)

In February 2009, the Minister for Innovation, Industry, Science and Research, Senator Kim Carr, announced that a 2009 trial of ERA would test just two research clusters: Physical, Chemical and Earth Sciences (PCE) and Humanities and Creative

Arts (HCA). With outputs coming from opposite ends of the research spectrum, with one cluster having areas newly recognised as research, and with radically different traditions for evaluating excellence, this trial of science and arts promised to be an informative exercise. The ERA trial established the new HCA research category 19 as ‘Studies in Creative Arts and Writing’, where Creative Writing was specifically grouped with Music and Theatre under category 1904 ‘Creative and Performing Arts’. So from not being present at all in previous research recognition schemas, Creative Writing featured strongly in the new arrangements.

This did not occur without controversy. As much of the discussion in previous decades had indicated, some academics were not comfortable with having their creative products reviewed by ‘expert committees’, while others continued to doubt the capacity of creative work to constitute research outputs. Equally, there were wrangles over the research statement, with the argument raised that the research element in a creative work should be self-evident and should not have to be repeated in academic discourse. There was also controversy surrounding the argument that in some creative disciplines, the process of producing a written rationale for the research component was beyond the capabilities of the performers and artists involved, and was therefore discriminatory. In another controversial development, the government revised its classification of academic and other journals by introducing a ranking system ‘on the basis of the overall quality that each has for a particular discipline’ (ARC 2008). The ranking of journals as A*, A, B, C and ‘unranked’ caused resentment in disciplines and among individuals who were regularly published in those given a lower ranking than they perceived due.

At the same time, the official silence over evaluative measures for outputs not disseminated through journals led to considerable, and sometimes contentious, discussions about the relative merits of forms of publication, and over ‘publication’ itself. Is an award-winning novel, published by an important trade publisher, necessarily evaluated as having more research impact than a slim volume of poems, however genre-shifting they might be, for instance? And does a work of theatre produced in the Sydney Opera House automatically count for more than a play put on in a small theatre in a suburban or regional venue? How do we agree on the evaluative standards that might allow valid comparisons to be made across and between the many art forms, artistic outputs and public venues where we disseminate our work—and how do we tease out the aesthetic, professional and research aspects of a single output? These questions were discussed extensively, but no formal agreement was reached, and no mechanisms were set in place to provide clear directions on the weighting that might be given to social, professional and academic impact, or to artistic, professional or research quality. This can be seen in a positive light—just as the British Research Assessment Exercise acknowledged that ‘in less mature subject areas, ... the intellectual infrastructure of the discipline may still be being built’ and therefore assessors must ‘be prepared to look at a wide range of forms of evidence’ (RAE 2008), so too the ERA policy and procedures provided the assessment panels with a degree of flexibility—even creativity—in their approach to the quality audit.

During 2009 the ARC sent teams of administrators to universities around Australia to explain the new arrangements, provide information regarding the processes, hose down the angry and encourage the timid. One of the key messages the teams carried was that the weighting of journal rankings was of far less significance than most academics believed: that there was a ‘dashboard’ of indicators for research quality, and that just as, for annual research reporting, publication in an A* journal has the same value as publication in a C or unranked journal, so too the value of, and return on, a publication in a C or A* ranked journal might be precisely the same. Context, the teams insisted, would be of far more importance than journal ranking. Few were convinced; the money flowing in would tell.

It will be some time before Australian academics see the material consequences of ERA on their research practice and its financial returns to their institutions. But in the interim, the effects of the 2009 ERA trial, and then the 2010 first real application of ERA, have been to provide creative writing academics the opportunity to write in innovative ways that add new knowledge to their art form and the discipline, and that promise reward via their universities research funding mechanisms. Although we will need to wait for the first reports, and then for the government’s decision about whether to continue with the ERA process in future years, it is probably fair to say that this nation-wide, formal acknowledgement of the capacity of creative works to deliver research outputs, has subtly changed the position writing academics can hold within the research framework, and may yet change aspects of our practice.

Process

Research in and for the creative arts is an increasingly important aspect of the University’s productivity. It should be evaluated and rewarded, but as *creative arts research*—as something with a distinctive character—and not just pillaged for signs of something that looks familiar on radar screens in more traditional areas of the University (Meehan 2010).

Michael Meehan, a professor at Deakin University, has published four novels in the last 11 years (including a New South Wales Premier’s award winner) and two in the last two years. Suddenly, it might be said, Meehan is the kind of researcher a university would wish to headhunt. Under ERA, his profile has been transfigured into something like that of a highly successful North American academic—a professor of creative writing thoroughly appreciated by his university. The scholars researching his work in the English Department down the corridor are now clearly not the only ones benefiting from his creativity. For ERA, of course, assessment of the quality of his novels as research comes under the scrutiny of a confidential peer review panel, to whom he will supply the mandatory research statements. But one imagines Meehan’s major award-winner status, and the reception of his work in the public and critical domains, would also contribute to a high ERA assessment. His *Below the Styx* (2010) is described as ‘a challenging, amusing, and intriguing novel about reading, writing and thinking’ (‘Below the Styx’ 2010)—a good description of a novel likely to score well as research.

There are questions surrounding the influence ERA will have on the kind of writing academics will now wish to do, or be obliged to do, in Australia. Will there be a shift towards prose, poetry, plays, scripts and other works that are more easily justified in academic jargon? Will there be a move towards the production of more challenging, investigative, experimental or cross-genre works of the kind publishers have been loath to publish in the past? Or, will there be less of these produced?

The academic creative writer, whose plight has been studied previously (see, for example, Kroll 2004, 2006a, 2006b), is now presented with a new set of dilemmas. Do we write what we personally need to write as critical artists intent on analysing or changing the status quo, or do we write what ERA demands? And are these two things different? Does ERA recognition provide us with the opportunity to write in ways that really do change knowledge and understanding? Or will peer-review, as has been the case often enough in academia, lead to the status quo being replicated rather than challenged?

These sorts of questions, along with the history outlined above, led to the proposal that *TEXT* should approach a range of established Australian creative writing academics to participate in an experiment where creative works considered to be research should be submitted for a peer-reviewed *TEXT Special Issue*. A requirement of the submission was that each would provide a research statement in the form stipulated by the ARC for ERA. These authors would then provide peer review of a range of these works. The original invitation sent out in January 2010 went to approximately 80 writer-academics including the creative writing professoriate, and the executive committee of management of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP). It included the following statement:

Your work will be peer reviewed, the reviewing process is double blind, neither author nor reviewers should know of the others' identities at any time during the process.

Please note that refereed articles make a distinctive contribution to knowledge that extends the current scholarly literature in the field.

- Refereed papers will draw on a sound framework of methodology and scholarship relevant to the paper's topic, although this may include personal experience and/or anecdotal evidence where relevant to the argument, and where this is supported by scholarly literature.
- Creative work will—be accepted for refereeing if it makes a distinctive contribution to knowledge that extends the current scholarly literature in the field and is accompanied by a 250-word exegetical statement for publication that makes this case. The statement will indicate the research significance of the creative piece and will follow the ERA guidelines on this element.
- Final revised articles (including endnotes) for this Special Issue will be a maximum of 3,250 words in length. Reference list not included in word count.

Work will be refereed according to the following aspects

- relevance for the theme of the Special Issue
- quality of the creative work

- quality of the research statement in terms of ERA guidelines
- contribution to knowledge: level to which submission extends the current scholarly literature in the field
- engagement with scholarly literature / quality of evidence
- soundness of the methodology
- originality
- quality of the writing, including effectiveness and clarity
- quality of presentation

Thus the exercise sought to test the current quality of creative writing by Australian academics in short forms, and also their ability to justify their work as research. We presumed that the research statements (some of them reworked significantly during the refereeing process) would be included in submissions made to the ARC for research recognition in the future.

It must be said that, in early 2010, there was no uniformity of the extent to which Australian creative writing academics were prepared for ERA requirements (Webb & Krauth 2010: Appendix), and initial responses to our call for papers was sluggish. In a bold move (after a good meal) one of the editors sent off his own contribution to a number of invitees as a model. In his defence, he claims that he purposely included too many words in his research statement just to see whether motivated contributors would actually investigate the ARC requirements. Responses to the invitation eventually came from academics in universities around Australia, and one from New Zealand. They comprised submissions in poetry, digital poetry, fiction, creative nonfiction and works that might be called hybrids. In an attempt to categorise the hybrids, the editors came up with the tags: ‘experimental’, ‘poetic prose’, ‘poetry/prose’ and ‘fictional memoir’.

The next step in the process was for the editors to create a peer review schedule, with appropriate double blind refereeing by at least two reviewers for each submission. An intriguing aspect of the cohort of contributors was that they were, to a significant degree, also the best suited to referee the contributions. Having indicated their interest in the experiment by contributing to it, the group was also invited to referee it. With some exceptions—where peers outside the group were asked to referee some works—and with special arrangements made for double-blind refereeing of the editors’ own contributions, the task was completed. Of the works that were rejected, the main reason for rejection cited in the reports was that, irrespective of the consideration of quality of the creative work, the pieces were not research, that is, they were not considered innovative or groundbreaking and/or did not ‘extend the current scholarly literature in the field’. As in any review process, a number of works were not returned after the reviews suggested changes.

Meehan called for creative arts research to be ‘something with a distinctive character’ (Meehan 2010). The object of this *TEXT Special Issue* is to begin to map the nature of that ‘distinctive character’ in creative writing. Certainly this collection is distinctive because, for the first time, a group of works by recognised and strongly emerging writers is accompanied by exegetical statements. And in this case, the statements are part of a process recognising creativity as research on a national scale. This is a

distinctively new look for academic writing, and one which the group of writers in this collection have embraced with imagination.

The works themselves

Seven of the creative works included in this special issue—or more than a third of the total—are hybrid in form. As part of their experimentation, they transgress boundaries between literary categories, or blur distinctions between them, or seek to find new spaces for writing in the interstices. But even with the works that can be somewhat confidently assigned to the categories of poetry, fiction or creative nonfiction, a significant part of their research involves a destabilisation of the form, upsetting its previous orders, fragmenting it, wrenching together newly-contiguous or superimposed elements, or pushing its boundaries. This is, of course, the nature of research and, indeed, the nature of creativity. We should expect the transgressive, the unruly and the risky here.

But there is also the refined perception expressed by David Brooks in his research statement:

It has taken nearly forty years of trial and error—*continual experiment*—to be able to do some of the things I have done in this poem, mostly to keep them so barely visible that (hopefully) most readers won't consciously register them (Brooks 2010).

Brooks points not only to the complexity of his own work, but also to the complexity of the relationship between the creative piece and the research statement. The exegetical can undo the aesthetics of a work; an analysis of process can mar the work's mystique or effectiveness (see, famously, Poe 2001: 743). Exposure of professional and personal technique may provide a reason why some writers will prefer not to experience the indignity of 'explaining themselves' to peer review panels. (Others may, of course, just not wish to undertake the extra work entailed.)

According to their research statements, the poets in this collection are focused on the intuitive and the counter-intuitive, neglected tradition (Brophy), knowledge coming from '*not* understanding' (Freiman), the therapeutic effects of blurring the boundaries between life writing, fiction and poetry (Neilsen), memory as 'episodic and procedural', transposing European tradition into antipodean vernacular (Pittaway) and the poem as essay (Brooks). There is a pervasive sense here of research into the poem as a didactic medium, its connective abilities, how poetry benefits reader and writer, and how in making connections it operates ethically.

Each of the fiction writers say their research is concerned with applying a trope in an innovative way: an architectural trope, for example, the surrounding building applied to the reconstruction of self (Crew) or the asylum applied to Australian history (Green); and the Icarus-Daedalus trope applied to intimate relationships (Webb). In each case there is a sense that fiction research is 'experimenting with language to create images that might provide tools to think through the problems of being' (Webb). With their focus on architecture and recurring figures, these works offer

material with which it is possible to analyse our constructions of self-view and world-view.

The creative nonfiction writers represented here research age-old topics—death and love. There's a piece about grieving the death from cancer of a young adult daughter (Arnold), and another about the use of multiple family voices in a grieving situation (Carey). They focus on the operation of voice and viewpoint in nonfiction. Multiple voices again provide the focus of research in a case based on historical documents (Brien). Here we have three very different first-person narratives: the autobiographical 'I'; the interviewer 'I' and the fictionalised 'I'. Each provides a very different account of events, and tests the nature of ethical truth-telling within the genre's tenets.

The works in the hybrid group share common goals of layering, fragmentation, combination and re-combination across genres. Prose poems are used to investigate emotional coherence across discontinuity (Smith), and prose and poetry are combined to test subjectivity and the handling of anxiety (Hecq). Liminal areas between poetry and prose are explored in the context of writing for adolescents (Kroll), and fusings of fiction and nonfiction are tested in family and travel memoirs (Gandolfo, Krauth).

From the start of this project, the editors wanted to celebrate the current state of groundbreaking academic creative writing, but there was also another strong motivation. We also wanted to analyse the new 'genre' of the research statement—its methodology, language and foci. We foresaw that the research statement would evolve with time, but here was an opportunity to see it in its infancy. There is plenty to say about the research statements in this collection, but of interest is category 3: 'Research Significance—Evidence of Excellence'. This category appears to be the most difficult to quantify or describe, especially since the categories preceding it seem to have covered some of its territory. The word 'excellence' is key here. With relative ease we can describe what we are doing, why we are doing it, and the significance of it to research overall in our own view. But how do we demonstrate our excellence? Almost bafflingly, category 3 conflates 'significance' with 'excellence'. But *excellence* is a matter of context, of peer evaluation and ranking, of superiority, while *significance* is to do with meaning, consequence and importance other than excellence. There is much to be debated here.

Most research statements (7 out of the 16 studied) cite publication or performance recognition (previous, present or future) as the major justification for the significance of the work. That pieces have been chosen for publication, and others want to hear/read academic writers in quality/scholarly venues, is the driving idea here. Pieces have already been performed at festivals or conferences; are allied to similar works already published, performed or under contract; or, most slippery of all, are now accepted for publication in an A-ranked journal. We think there is much to be nuanced in research statements taking these lines, and a possible direction is to combine them with the following types of justification. The next most popular justification (in a quarter of the statements) is that the work adds something new to a neglected tradition, to Australian writing, or to a genre. This notion of 'new development' would seem to be a very solid line to take, but it requires evidence. The evidence needs to be grounded in the preceding categories, but also, we suspect, further argued

and nailed here in the Excellence category. Two contributors justify their piece by indicating it is part of an ongoing body of their own celebrated work, and another identifies it a part of an acclaimed global scholarly discourse. Relevant to these are the fact that more than half the research statements (9 out of 16) include the author's own works in the list of references, and in 5 of the research statements the author's works comprise more than a third of the reference list. A point of discussion might be the relative situation of one's work in the context of one's own output, or in the context of others. Which will hold greater sway with an ERA review panel? Only one author here saw fit not to use a list of references for the research statement.

Finally, particular mention must be made of David Brooks' bracing statement regarding his poem's innovative and groundbreaking significance: 'As to research, *poetry is always its own research*' (our emphasis, Brooks 2010). We may agree with this, but in the past we've not been allowed to get away with it; and this too is, perhaps, an argument in waiting.

We envisaged this collection not only contributing to the discussion already being had in universities and at venues such as the AAWP annual conference, and so we look forward to continued discussion and debate in the pages of, and contributions to, *TEXT*.

Here's to that future!

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