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Introduction to Creativecritical spaces: practice, pedagogy, methodology, the ineffable

Abstract:

This is the introduction to the first of two *TEXT* special issues designed to survey attitudes toward, and enactments of, *creativecritical writing now*. Alongside an essaying of a major theme within this special issue – the ways in which creativecritical writing exposes the space of its construction – it offers the first part of a conversation between the two editors of the special issues, Stefanie Markidis and Daniel Juckes, as they plan/speak through their introduction, and discuss their findings after the exercise of assembling the issues. This conversation, which was transcribed through Microsoft Teams and then edited for clarity, continues in the introduction to the second special issue: “Creativecritical selves: interconnection, dialogue, entanglement, love”.

Biographical note:

Stefanie Markidis is a researcher and writer, exploring life writing, poetics and creative practice interventions in non/fiction. She is a lecturer in Creative Writing and Literary Studies at Deakin University, Melbourne.

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Creativecritical Writing Now: creativecritical spaces

Creativecritical writing performs scholarly and creative functions simultaneously. Or does it? Creativecritical writing might braid these functions, or registers, of writing. Or creativecritical writing might reject such distinctions.

Formally experimental, but more than a form, creativecritical writing is also an approach, method and ethics of practice. It asks how the critical (scholarly, exegetical, theoretical) might be creative and how the creative (imaginative, practice, artistic) might *do* critical work. Such experimental and blended approaches are no longer new – indeed, they are tracking distinct paths and uses in various contexts inside academia and beyond.

The creativecritical mode has a long lineage across fictocritical, autotheoretical and ethnographic writing, as well as creative nonfiction and the essay form. Recently, creativecritical writing has gained popular currency, as evidenced by the work of Rebecca Solnit, Anne Carson and Maggie Nelson. It is also attracting critical momentum, most noticeably at doctoral level, where, as Kylie Cardell and Kate Douglas note, “Many postgraduates [in Life Writing] are engaging in projects where the creative and critical/exegetical are an integrated text” (p. 207–208).

Our aim with this special issue (presented across this collection and its accompanying *TEXT* special issue *Creativecritical Selves*) was to take stock of the current nexus between the creative and the critical, as well as speculate on future conceptions of hybrid creative writing/scholarship. We aimed to expose the functions, processes, poetics and ethics of creativecritical writing in its many forms (creative nonfiction, fiction, academic writing, poetry/poetics, testimony and more). The works presented in this special issue constellate to ask: where are we now, and what is next for creativecritical writing?

This collection, “Creativecritical Spaces: practice, pedagogy, methodology, the ineffable” is the companion of “Creativecritical Selves: interconnection, dialogue, entanglement, love”. They work together, like we have as editors, to examine and celebrate creativecritical writing

Stefanie

We’re presenting two issues for *TEXT*, but we can consider them two parts of the same special issue.

Daniel

In our first introduction we could talk about the difficulty of splitting these articles into two issues.

Stefanie

Okay.

Daniel

So the conversation we have becomes about the ideas we were forming, as editors, about creativecritical practice. How we were initially planning to do an “in practice” issue and an “about practice” issue, and then seeing the falsity of that.

Stefanie

Yes, we realised we would be reinstating the critical/creative divide we wanted to conquer! Spaces and selves is a better fit.

Daniel

So, this introduction frames our approach to both issues. The introduction to part two will be specifically related to the pieces in that issue and how they add to a conversation which the works here begin regarding a couple of features of creativecritical writing.

Stefanie

The purpose of these special issues has been to interrogate the bounds of the creative and critical as they inflect upon, co-opt, support, contrast or work together. And this is something that you and I have both been interested in for a long time. In fact, when we first met, at the Great Writing conference in 2016, we were both thinking and researching about it for our PhDs.

Daniel

Yeah. For me, at least, it’s been a long, long, long process of figuring out that the things I’m doing – sometimes intuitively – have been well thought-through, theorised and deeply practised in a wealth of

now. Splitting this special issue across two parts, we've chosen to delineate the nineteen articles along broad themes of self and space. There are many other ways we could have packaged these works, but the curation is arbitrary: we present this collection not to claim totality of knowledge, but to offer an in-motion picture of scholarship here and now, in this exciting and generative field. The nine articles in Creativecritical Spaces all engage the space of literature: the context of practice, the distance of direct and indirect allusion, the possibilities of the classroom and the worlds of creative and critical practice that open to us on the page.

Editing these special issues, longstanding questions about literature, writing and creative practice have taken on new resonances for us. In writing this introduction, we asked ourselves, "How can an introduction frame a collection of articles?", which quickly led to the (wacky, creativecritical) question: "Can a text be a house?"

Rueben Mackey, in "Inside the house of fiction: The creative-critical possibility of Gerald Murnane's *A Million Windows*", steps into the 'house' of Murnane's fiction, which he examines as a limitless text that opens new possibilities for criticism. Mackey performs a space of extended reading through the use of direct and indirect allusions that "entangles the reader-critic into performing acts of extension, rather than explication". This entanglement, Mackey writes, can "proliferate outward connections":

The finished object isn't important precisely because it can never be finished, only prolonged. Rather than creating alienation, literary estrangement works here as a way of deepening and prolonging, but also of warding off uninvited visitors, creating a space for secret communion. The narrator of *A Million Windows*, after all, desires to never "accept that the last page of a book of fiction was any sort of boundary or limit" (Murnane, 2014, p. 20).

Where is the boundary between forms? Is it a boundary at all? Melody Ellis raises this question in "Creativecritical writing as methodology":

different ways. Understanding that this schema of understanding is a continuing conversation. Which is something that we certainly want to work into this introduction, and most definitely want to acknowledge before we present the two issues that we've brought together.

Stefanie

There's a long history and lineage of creativecritical works in Australia. I'm thinking about experimental feminist collections like "The Space Between" and "Mudmap". This challenging of form is a communal aspiration, I think.

Daniel

Yes! And we have been wonderstruck or awestruck or something-struck by, first of all, the numbers of submissions we had for this issue, the second of all by, let's say, the collegial nature of those submissions, and certainly in more ways than just who is writing them and who they are writing them with and how they represent a scholarly community.

Stefanie

That's true. People have been really supportive of this project and told us, communicated with us, the sense of feeling aligned with a community of thinkers and writers who are trying to do the same thing. It's been a special part of this editorial project, knowing that these questions around the creative and the critical, and the creativecritical as we're calling it, are not just ours. In many, many ways they require us to come together.

Daniel

They are questions that are literally about coming together. That's evidenced in the works that we've gathered, whether that be to do with writing in tandem or writing about being in tandem or writing about how the writing brain accretes or processes or is creativecritical – even that the mechanisms of the creativecritical project seem to be about this sort of entanglement.

A creativecritical text holds at once the on-the-surface-of-it contradictory notion that “a rose, is a rose, is a rose” (Stein, 1993, p. 187) and yet this pipe “is not a pipe” (Magritte, 1929). Which is one way of saying that things can be both what they are and what they are not, at once and interchangeably.

Consider, Ellis suggests, the context of creative and critical practice: here the pipe as phallic, the rose as feminine, and all that is epistemically afforded (or denied) to these images. Consider, she suggests, the creativecritical as methodology. “Research and art are both engaged”, Ellis writes, “with an open-ended questioning at the level of the object of inquiry and at the level of what it is to do the thing they are doing in the first place”. For Ellis, the radical power of the creativecritical (or criticalcreative – why not?) goes beyond form: it is “to trouble what constitutes a contribution to knowledge”.

“Between the word and the world is an open space of signification”, writes Stefanie Markidis, and in this space of signification, she suggests, a creativecritical writer might play. After all, the “logic of creativecritical writing is a logic of spatiality”. In “Creativecritical manoeuvres: carrying over, directing, figuring and going outside”, Markidis identifies and enacts four manoeuvres in a spatialised frame of writing (offering, perhaps, a choreography of writing). Like Mackey, Markidis exposes the space of allusion, of direction, in reading:

Carrying over and over and over.
I read–carry over–she reads–carry over–you read.

I’m reading Cixous’ *The Third Body*, in which she is reading Wilhelm Jensen’s *Gradiva*. You, you’re reading me.

Creativecritical writing might carry over meaning from body to body, making present the space of relation between you and you and you.

Stefanie

Connection. Yeah. And sometimes it’s about the self and the other, or the self and that which lies beyond the self. The non-human, the more-than-human. It’s also about the classroom and how we engage students in creative and creativecritical thinking. I think the creativecritical mode, if we can call it one mode, it’s probably many modes... I think it’s about being in relation, always, to our ideas. Whether that’s through citation, practice, referencing or reading.

Daniel

And thinking on something like the Boat piece, how it is inherently a reliance on others – that this connection is inherent to its making, to its understanding of...

Stefanie

Francesca Rendle-Short would call it “communitas”.

Daniel

Yes. And history is important to that. ‘Those who came before’ is an integral part of the mode’s mechanisms. I guess that’s shown me something about creativecritical practice: there is an intense emphasis on, I think, a really vital thread of research that understands position and context and process as integral to a transparent research project and maybe a takeaway – maybe the takeaway – is that the creativecritical mode isn’t a fit for a particular kind of writing or thinking. It’s a methodology through which the coordinates of a research project can be plotted in ways that are, um, ethically necessary in a disembodied research context.

Stefanie

True. There would of course be people who say that the creativecritical isn’t just for research, though.

Daniel

Hmm.

Chance and abstraction might enter this space of relation. Then, what would the chain of signification be? in “Archival versos: unwritten, unread, unreadable, unwritable”, David Thomas Henry Wright recounts his disappointment when, searching for George Perec’s notes in the UQ Fryer Library archive, the documents remained elusive:

Perec, an author whose work stressed the inclusion of absence in works like *A Void*, whose final unfinished novel was never completed... well, his notes were nowhere to be found. Perhaps lost in the archive forever. I did not know how to express my disappointment or how to reference this absence. But I feel Perec likely has a system to include this absence of his own work’s absence about his own unfinished work. The unreadable notes of the unwritten work. Absence d’absence d’ absence d’absence.

Absence d’absence d’absence. Using digital programming language to program poetry from Perec’s incomplete notes, Wright enacts the creative potential of the verso, the underside, at the boundaries of writing. In this practice report on experimental digital methodology, Wright explores the unreadable and unwritable, and we read shades of Perec himself: the writer whose novel *Life: A User’s Manual* moves, chapter by chapter, around an apartment building, leaving just one apartment unopened.

The lost notes, the unopened room, the unwritable language. Creativecritical writing motions toward the ineffable. Mags Webster explores this liminal space in “Writing through ... from ... to ... underneath ... over ... in between ... negotiating the force field of the unworded in the braided thesis model”, a paper that usefully unpacks apophasis, “the rhetoric of denial and negation”, for exegetical writing. “Apophasis helps open up a conceptual space resonant with everything that has not been and perhaps cannot be said”, Webster writes; it “offers multiple possibilities and interpretations for what things might be”:

My words were both raw and leavened with time.
They retained the rawness of first sight, first reading,

Stefanie

Creativecritical is also an art for art’s sake. Or thinking for thinking’s sake, or thinking for art’s sake.

Daniel

Riff on that for me: if thinking’s for art’s sake

Stefanie

Well, because you and I met in the Academy, when we were doing our PhDs and we were both kind of obsessed with these ideas about creativecritical writing, and because it does have history in academia and philosophy, there’s a sense that the traditional roots lie there, right? But thinking and thinking creatively and thinking through creative works is not just an academic pursuit. Consider fictional writers like Coetzee and Kundera – these writers wouldn’t necessarily be considered scholars, but they do engage with ideas.

Daniel

Yeah.

Stefanie

I think that’s something that Ellis writes about really well.

Daniel

The point you make is a good one because I think it’s a broader point about... the question... What is literature for? It makes me think on a headline I saw in the *Guardian* recently. It was for an interview with Irvine Welsh. I have never actually read any of his books, but the headline caught me because he said something like, “If you’re reading for comfort, then you’re doing it wrong”. And I think that the thinking that happens through art is thinking that’s valuable and useful because it’s the kind of thinking that’s going to challenge or push or is decidedly unrelatable. Or idiosyncratic. That it might become an aggressively rigorous practice within the kind of literature which is read by, I don’t know, book clubs, or teenagers, or, ohh, old men.

first stroke of the pen or the key, and yet long thinking, slow scholarship, hesitation, rephrasing and rejection have also leavened them.

Webster braids and blends the critical and creative while reaching for the “un-worded”, to make the point that “The interplay between lucidity and ambiguity ... reinforce[s] language’s propensity for fracture and flexibility when verging on the ineffable”.

It is the verge of the ineffable that Caitlin Noakes pushes at, too, in “Kings, clowns and trumps: creative-exegetical irony in the creative writing HDR thesis”. In this article, Noakes explores the space of meaning in the exegesis by using the Bakhtinian framework of the carnivalised novel – and the utterances of kings, clowns and trumps (not that one) – to describe ways an exegesis can use “trump utterances” “to undermine the authority of both languages [creative and critical], [and] socio-ideological conceptual systems and discourses”. Through this undermining, “new meaning can be generated”. The new and the unknown is part of what research is for, and understanding how emerging scholars can perceive the knowledge they contribute, through Webster and Noakes’s papers, is part of what we hoped to capture in this special issue.

Karen Le Rossignol and Hayley Elliott-Ryan, in “Braiding the exegetical voice through creative nonfiction research”, offer another mechanism through which the developing creativecritical voice might be perceived. They detail the affordances of the personal essay and the manifesto to help students find their own exegetical voices, suggesting that “Braiding the personal/public voice across the experiential essay by way of a manifesto enables a response to the research question/s across both the exegesis and creative artefact with greater understanding of the creative and critical strand requirements of the exegesis”. Le Rossignol and Elliott-Ryan write:

There is a potential tension and uncertainty in moving between creative and critical voices, with students expected to build on and integrate their range of disciplinary skills and knowledge within those

Stefanie
Or students.

Daniel
I guess the potential of me saying something like that is that, that I give off an old-man-shouting-at-clouds vibe. But what I want from the works that I read is a critical strength because that informs the ethic of a work; something that informs the pulse and throb of a work or gives the work a conceptual depth – which is the reason why I, or is one of the ways in which, I would come to think of a literary practice. Please save me from this riff.

Stefanie
Do you think it is because you and I both work mostly within the realm of nonfiction that creativecritical feels very accessible to us, because bridging the personal and intellectual is what we do in nonfiction? Because this thinking through ideas and practice is foundational to a form like the personal essay.

Daniel
Yes, is the short answer, but yes but but... But I think other writers from other disciplines would make similar claims, and I think even other writers from spaces like anthropology, where autoethnography is deeply embedded, would make similar claims. And I think that is maybe, uh, another hint that the creativecritical mode is...

Stefanie
Pervasive?

Daniel
Pervasive. Yeah, that’s a good word.

Stefanie
Yeah, which is part of what we’ve enjoyed about making this special issue. It’s not a special issue on poetry. It’s not a special issue on nonfiction. It’s not just about fiction. It’s not about place writing. It’s not about object writing. It’s not about

projects. The undergraduate student studying across writing, literature, history or philosophy, for example, has been developing a public voice that is academically rigorous, demonstrating research across those aligned disciplines. At the same time, the undergraduate student creative writer is working to establish their own industry-or market-oriented creative voice, based on the requirements of genre and form.

The manifesto, sharp and charged, is useful to develop a voice that is both scholarly and creative, that can communicate the student's practice and their critical assertion. An emerging researcher might adopt the affordances of personal essay and manifesto to step into the space of research.

Creativecritical writing pays homage to a history of experimental writing in Australia. In a fictocritical piece, Stuart Cooke employs a baroque style to perform a "critique [of] nationalist historical and spatial mythologies by drawing on the agility and flexibility of creativecritical methods". Cooke's creativecritical piece, "The Island of Brazil: a baroque travelogue", journeys across form and out of the self, with Patrick White's *Voss* never far out of sight. Cooke searches for alternatives to a "dull, regulation travel narrative":

The alternatives, however, are confusing: do I turn inwards, does the story thereby become one of failure, of the distance between my self and the world? Or is the failure part of something else – the way in which I am called to places, and the ways in which they might take me in or push me away? I would be an expression of the world – no, not its lone voice, but an expression, a manifestation of its flows, an apparition of its processes.

What of the written work, then? A kind of translation, the world unfurling another facet of itself, searching for relation selectively – ready to embrace with one hand, to repel with the other.

referencing. It's not about visual art. But it includes all of them.

Daniel

This mode is philosophy; it's methodology. It's approach. It's something that is inherent to the *how* of practice. I think that's become for me a really valuable way to think on it. It's not something that I do just because I write personal essay. It's something that has to infuse the research project – whatever research project that might end up being. And again, I'd say that that is a kind of ethic of practice.

Stefanie

Yeah, I think what we found in this issue, and what our contributors all touched on to some degree, is that the creativecritical mode is a kind of positioning, or awareness of positionality, that comes before even the writing itself.

Daniel

Yeah.

Stefanie

But when we read a piece that blends the creative and critical, what we notice first is the form. It looks different, renegade or "out-law" (Kaplan). But with writers like Ellis, or Mackey, or Webster, there's an assertion that the creativecritical mode is a position that one takes toward the writing and the thinking itself. That it comes, sometimes, as I said, *before* the writing.

Daniel

Yeah. And so, in that sense, creativecritical practice now is – it's not a posture. It's not a rhetorical kind of gambit, it's...

Stefanie

An ethic. You've been saying that.

Daniel

Yeah, yeah, it's... I guess for me it's an attempt at... I don't know, you may think this is bullshit. It's representing the research, sort of a *trompe l'oeil*.

How to approach the creativecritical ethos? “To draw a line. To watch it slide through two different countries. Or: to wander into two countries and find the same line”. Cooke writes a Brazilian coastline that is also the edge of Tasmania, that is also the edge of forms. “The point”, he suggests, “is that it’s moving. And so the point of view is also moving”. If you “try to use your language like tweezers”, Cooke writes, whatever you pick up will be “swept up in immeasurable profusion”.

You might use language as tweezers, as a scientific instrument, but in “Admissions: A report from a pilgrimage to an alternative university”, biologist Bryan Shawn Wang offers an alternative to scientific dissection as he watches a bird with a group of students:

Long ago, when I first encountered one of these wondrous winged creatures, my instinct was to shoot it. Or, better yet, to trap it, stun it with a blow to the head and put it in a sack. In my laboratory, I would euthanise it, then pluck it and lay it on the dissection table ... With a hand lens, I would have examined the wing feathers – remiges, coverts, alula. The vane on the central rachis like a sail on a mast, branching barbs, interlocking barbules. Naming these parts would have felt like staking a claim, asserting authority. The animal, I would name, too. *Volans miraculum*.

This, I would do – no, I *did* this; I did as I was taught. For this is what had gained me entry into the University in the first place: my ability to scrutinise a thing, determine what made it tick.

But there’s another way of seeing and knowing. Leaving the bird at the pond, Wang asks his class: *Why have you come to this place? What do you see when you enter?* In this final work of the collection, Wang, his colleague Sandy Feinstein, and their students – Nicolas Fay, Nathan Tam, Nicollas Bernhart and Kyla Ebersole – co-author a speculative fiction invoking two traditions that reflects on creativity in education.

Stefanie
Hmm.

Daniel
A hyperreal describing of the research that you’ve done. It is a depiction of – thinking on the work of Ulldemolins and Pint, and even Hawkins and Murray – the kind of ecstatic spatters of your brain as you’re doing the things of the research. The the the, the the... Ohh, I guess maybe another way to think about it is that any singular trajectory is anathema to a creativecritical practice, which has to accommodate the dead ends of research, the missing questions of research, the pluralities of research. And that’s another reason why it’s a powerful method as opposed to a sort of thing with defined results or schemas.

Stefanie
Yeah, I think it sounds to me like you’re talking about being, it’s like a mode of being with your thinking, of being with your doing – now I sound like Heidegger. I think a paper that grounds that concept really well is Hennessy, McFarlane and Yu. Because they talk about their own experiences of coming to creativecritical writing and doing so in a way that lets them be who they are and speak from where they are. They discussed their place in the classroom and bringing students in and allowing students to take up a position. To make them theorists in discussion.

Daniel
It’s nice to come back to the classroom here, because that’s also a theme of the issue: pedagogical approaches to creativecritical practice. What you are saying particularly resonated with my reading of Karen Le Rossignol and Hayley Elliott-Ryan’s work empowering students to approach exegeses through manifesto. I guess what that implies is that we come to these research projects in the creative arts through a need to figure out something of, about, or through ourselves. That is

In this work again the classroom scenario is scrutinised for its ability to hold creativity and criticality, and Feinstein and Wang find ways to work with their students to achieve this. Together, the students and teachers:

used fiction as a vehicle to travel to an alternative university that admits an expanded role for creativity in learning. The exploring party included the English professor (Sandy) and the biologist (Bryan) who taught the Penn State course in creativity and those students who, upon completion of the course, expressed an interest in “extra creativity”.

This “extra creativity” brings together students and teachers and helps them forge forward in valued collaboration. The reports from the students cross and blend computation, composition, maths and art in a fictional (but maybe closer than we think?) university of creative criticality.

This special issue considers the space of creativecritical writing. Perhaps, as suggested by Murnane-via-Mackey, it’s a house. Perhaps, as written by Cooke, it’s a horizon that shimmers under sunlight. We are thrilled to offer this collection of timely and exciting works. Please enter this house, walk along its edge, use its methodology and choreography, take it into and out of the classroom – find *space* to think, to challenge, to be, to create.

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valuable for situating work, but also for understanding what we actually want work to do. This kind of transparency of, and vision of, self that the creativecritical mode might enable is key to actually figuring out what the research is, *why* the research is, and maybe too, in response to your prompt from before, what the creative work is, and why the creative work is.

Stefanie

Yeah. We’ve been talking for a while about the creative and the critical. At this point, after thinking about both of those terms for so long, I begin to lose my bearings.

Daniel

Hmm.

Stefanie

What do you think makes creative writing creative? What is the creative side?

Daniel

Can I rant here?

Stefanie

We don’t have to use any of this in this article. You were talking about creativity?

Daniel

Yeah. Well, it is idiosyncrasy – or, as the transcription has it, “it city are syncrasy”. But yes, idiosyncrasy is part of how I would define creativity, and that idiosyncrasy comes from really knowing yourself, your motivations, all the ways your self is interconnected with other things/other beings, which have their own motivations and ways of enacting their knowledge. What I tether to any description of creativity is a kind of – and here begins the rant – something anti-generative AI. The scraping of, for instance, literary works to come together to produce a new literary work which isn’t new at all – which is just the kind of dead tendrils of previous works – is anathema to a creativecritical practice and is anathema to the notion of creativity. The unthinkingness of GenAI, the

Welsh, I. (2024, June 21). Irvine Welsh: “If reading gives you comfort, you’re not doing it right”. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/books/article/2024/jun/21/irvine-welsh-if-reading-gives-you-comfort-youre-not-doing-it-right>

unthinkingness of content machines, the unthinkingness of novels that rinse and repeat, is what I think this project rejects. That underpins the creative side of this sort of slightly unwieldy portmanteau, “creativecritical”.

Stefanie

Yeah, I get that. I think I understand what you’re saying: creativity is that which AI can’t do.

Daniel

Yeah. And maybe I’ll be proved wrong in five years’ time...