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Creativecritical writing as methodology

Abstract:

The traditional view of theory as necessarily distinct from creativity has become increasingly unsatisfactory. In response to such dissatisfaction writers and scholars such as Maggie Nelson, Christina Sharpe, Michael Taussig, Saidiya Hartman, McKenzie Wark, Stephen Muecke, Joan Rettalack and others have introduced into the theoretical field qualities associated with creative writing – including, anecdote, memory, poetics and play. In doing so they have expanded the boundaries of what counts as theory and why. In *Depression: a public feeling*, literary and affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich argues for her use of memoir as a research methodology. She writes: "While I could have written a critical essay that analysed the genre [of depression memoirs], the results seemed rather predictable" (2012, p. 78). This article takes up Cvetkovich's desire for a mode "beyond" the predictable to argue that creativecritical writing might be better understood as a methodology than as a genre of writing. It claims the most radical aspect of the creativecritical mode is not so much the refusal of the critical/creative, nonfiction/fiction, objective/personal binaries, as what *the doing of the refusal* surfaces and therefore demands of the writer.

Biographical note:

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Keywords:

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1.

Despite the increasing popularity of fictocritical and autotheoretical approaches to scholarship, and to nonfiction writing more broadly, critical texts are typically defined by their unmistakable difference from creative works. This traditional view of theory as necessarily distinct from creativity has become increasingly unsatisfactory and rising numbers of writers and scholars including Maggie Nelson, Christina Sharpe, Michael Taussig, Saidiya Hartman, McKenzie Wark, Stephen Muecke and Joan Rettalack (by no means an exhaustive list) have refused to be constrained by the creative/critical split. In doing so they have expanded the boundaries of what counts as theory and why, purposefully refusing neat categorisation and introducing into the theoretical field qualities typically associated with fiction, poetry or memoir. Such qualities include anecdote, memory, poetics, play, and experiments with voice and the first-person "I". The distinction between creative and critical texts is so pervasive that we see the term "narrative nonfiction" used to denote a subgenre of nonfiction writing engaged explicitly with style, voice, poetics, pace, structure, and so on. The qualifier "narrative" is used to signal this formal interest, as if there is a style of nonfiction untroubled by such concerns. You can see the subtext here: the version of nonfiction untroubled by form is the "truer" one. Which is interesting as it suggests that the less formally sophisticated the writing is the more truthful it is understood to be. Truth here is associated with a kind of unmediated fidelity to facts. Indeed, the primary determiner of the nonfiction text, scholarly or otherwise, *is* whether it is classed true. The word nonfiction indicates right away how powerfully we understand the category of *not fiction* as distinct from anything associated with the made, the invented, or the crafted (to bring us back to form). The very term, in other words, contains a certain promise that the text be factual, or real, or true. As if truth, facts and reality were a simple matter of undisputable agreement. All of this before we even consider the "post-truth" historical moment where authenticity ("speak your truth") and opinion have become so heavily blurred with the so-called facts, and where doing research has become synonymous with Googling – "Do your own research" the catchcry of conspiracy theorists with often very little discernment over the reliability of their sources. Never mind the more slippery matter of *whose* truth or reality is being measured and according to what criteria [1]. Nor the ways in which fiction or art might contain its own version of a true story. As articulated, for example, in Sophie Calle's artwork *The Fake Marriage* (1992) [2] where the artist photographed herself in a wedding dress on the steps of a church in Paris, surrounded by family and friends. In the text accompanying the photograph, Calle writes: "I crowned, with a fake marriage, the truest story of my life" (The Centre Pompidou, 2003).

The desire to write otherwise, that is, against the normative cultural and scholarly imperatives, has gained traction since at least the beginning of the postmodern era when the domestic, the personal, the political, the felt and the embodied became more and more central to poststructuralist and feminist theories (and later to queer, posthuman, disability and ecocritical theories also). There has been an increasing interest in subjectivity, as well as the importance of situating one's practice within the broader historical, political and theoretical contexts in which one lives and works (Haraway, 1988), leading to greater recognition of the local vs the global and the specific vs the universal. Those practices that sit under the rubric of the

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criticalcreative (I am indebted to Peta Murray for noticing my slip in putting critical first here and urging me not to correct it) are connected to a certain refusal to consider creativity, the self, theory and scholarship as always already separate. As Anna Gibbs reminds us, echoing Jacques Derrida [3], "To write in this way is to uncover the multifarious ways in which language – and especially discourse – becomes 'second nature'" (Gibbs, 2005, p. 5).

The refusal to "keep separate" follows a poststructuralist turn to deconstruct monolithic cultural concepts including authority, objectivity, hierarchy, taste, truth, and so on. It can be easy to underestimate the significance of the critical shift (note the double meaning of critical to mean essential) that took place at the beginning of the postmodern turn (in the late 1960s early 1970s) given how immersed we now are in its logics, and indeed by how much the logics of postmodernity have become entangled with capitalism. It is particularly difficult for those my age and younger (born in the 1970s and after) given we grew up in the postmodern era. My experience teaching postmodernism in a creative writing classroom with students born in the early 2000s is that the tendency to be so swimming in postmodern tropes as to almost not be able to recognise them has only increased for their generation. Which has resonances with an inability to imagine a pre-digital era and is not unrelated given both tendencies privilege the contemporary over the historical. Mark Fisher was alert to the ahistorical tendencies of the contemporary and famously argued that the collapsing of past, present and future [4] is one of the defining qualities of capitalist realism (2009) [5]. That is, "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it" (Fisher, 2009, p. 2). The same lack of imaginary is now true of what has become of the postmodern. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that the crisis of no-escape was baked in, given that even in the late 1990s, when I was at art school, there was debate as to whether it was still correct to characterise the times as postmodern. Even then, some argued, we were living in the post-postmodern or the post-post-postmodern era. Others insisting that postmodernism would be better understood as movement *within* modernism.

In *Depression: a public feeling*, literary and affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich argues for her use of memoir as a research methodology. She writes: "While I could have written a critical essay that analysed the genre [of depression memoirs], the results seemed rather predictable" (Cvetkovich 2012, p. 78). In what follows I want to consider, or to wager [6], that creativecritical writing might be better regarded as a methodology rather than as a genre. The English word method [7], the root word of methodology, comes from the classical Latin *methodus* meaning "mode of proceeding" (Oxford English Dictionary, 2023) via the ancient Greek μέθοδος (methodos) meaning "pursuit of knowledge or mode of investigation" (OED, 2023). The meaning of the prefix μετά (meta), which due to the grammatical rules of Greek, becomes μέθ [8] in μέθοδος, and demarcates change or movement. Other examples of words that contain this prefix include metamorphosis and metonymy. Combined with ὁδός (othos) meaning "way", "road", "path", we get the pursuit or movement towards something. While writing this article, I discussed the meaning and etymology of μέθοδος with my Greek language teacher whom I met in the early days of the pandemic when she was teaching online from Crete. We have since become friends. She tells me that the initial

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connotation of "to search", "to pursue", in *μέθοδος* had a slightly negative connotation: "Think of a serial killer pursuing their victim down the road", she put it in an email to me (personal communication, 14 December 2023). Any negative connotation is no longer contained within the word which later broadened to mean "research, investigation, search for science, etcetera" (Liddell, Scott, Jones Ancient Greek Lexicon, 2023).

It is Cvetkovich's stated refusal to do the "rather predictable" that pricks up my ears. I am interested in how the most radical aspect of the creativecritical mode might be what *the doing of such a refusal* surfaces and therefore demands in the writing or the making. I add the term "making" here since, like Lauren Fournier (2022), I think of the creativecritical mode as transmedial even as I am referring primarily to writing here. Demand tends to have negative connotations in the late capitalist culture where I live and write, and yet, it is the appropriate word for what I am interested in since it connotes an active participation or grappling with the doing. Cvetkovich describes a turn to practice, which is interesting given she does not come from a creative arts discipline. She writes: "My turn to practice exemplifies the activist principle of presenting criticism in the form of a productive or alternative suggestion" (Cvetkovich, 2012, p. 78). Her attentiveness to creativity throughout the book is pleasing. She describes the inclusion of her depression journals as "both a writing process and a laboratory" (p. 78). In what follows, I want to turn my attention to what I see as some of the possibilities (and limits) of the creativecritical that insists purposefully on subverting the traditionally siloed definitions of "creative" and "critical" practices. I argue that what the creativecritical intervention offers at its best is a model for disruption and refusal. In doing so I consider research praxis, binary thinking, the desire to write otherwise, the limits of recognition and what we might be up against as artists and writers given the unrealities and dissociations of the current historical period.

2.

As a creative writing academic and researcher, I am immersed in the supervision, mentoring and examination of research. I also teach a research practice course for an interdisciplinary cohort of Honours students doing both creative practice research and what gets called traditional research (though this, again, tells us something about the way creative practice research is consistently positioned as the non-traditional other [9]). My day-to-day immersion in research praxis means that I am engaged in regular conversations with students and colleagues about research, including about what constitutes creative practice research [10] both theoretically and practically. For quite some time before I was a full time academic, I also worked in what is somewhat euphemistically called Research Development in various Research Offices [11] supporting researchers to write and finesse their major funding applications. This work turned out to be far more useful than I could have imagined. What was most valuable was working with researchers across a broad range of disciplines from astrophysics to economics, mathematics, design, education, the creative arts, history and more. I saw repeatedly that what made for sound research design, and its articulation, was the same no matter the discipline or methods engaged. This was terrifically useful since I was able to

come to creative practice research, when I did so, with the understanding that its only difference from so-called traditional research was methodological (which would be expected given methods and methodologies are *always* disciplinary specific).

I have found that often the students I supervise and mentor do not seem to struggle with refusing binaries such as critical/creative, nonfiction/fiction and objective/personal, but they do frequently struggle with what a radical upending of these categories demands of them in submitting the final work for examination. In other words, there is often a gap between the sophistication with which they can blend, braid and play, with the creative and critical aspects of their work, and how they can then articulate what they are seeking to achieve in doing so. Increasingly, students question (often with good reason and in interesting and sophisticated ways) the distinction between these two categories altogether. Numbers of them see the critical requirement as an add on, or hurdle, and sometimes as an arbitrary addition to the "truer" creative work. This is interesting as it suggests that just as form can be seen to mediate and to muddy facts, so too can certain critical analyses be seen to muddy creativity. I have been struck more than once by the sense that sometimes there is a resistance to thinking too closely about what they are doing (Deborah Levy's wonderfully titled book *Things I don't want to know* comes to mind here) as if knowing will threaten their creativity. As if creativity is equated with not thinking or looking closely. As if creativity is best left unscrutinised. Like artists, those engaged in the doing of research are also engaged with a question of how to do the thing they are doing as they are doing it. Research and art are both engaged, in other words, 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. Including the implications of what they are doing and of how what they are doing is then communicated to an audience (or the public, or the discipline). Like the artist, the researcher must also encounter their own desire, or will, or drive, to do what it is that they do. Not to mention with how what they are doing fits (or otherwise) with what they have done previously. This, before we get to research's (and indeed art's) relationship to knowledge. We would do well to notice how the pervasive creative/critical binary is not only about what is and is not considered "critical", but that it is necessarily bound up with what does and does not count as *knowledge* and as such with the hierarchies and policing of what does and doesn't count as research.

To return to the example of art, we might say that what determines whether an activity or inquiry is understood to be art is usually the declaration that it is so by the artist. I am oversimplifying here since there are surely other factors too – including exhibition context, education, public recognition and so on. But nevertheless, it would seem to me that what comes first is the (often bold) declaration that what one is doing is art, followed by the more integral aspects – key amongst them practice [12] and a commitment to what the declaration and practice then requires of the artist. As the oft cited example goes, when Marcel Duchamp put a urinal in a gallery and called it art, it became a work of art. The declaration didn't necessarily make it "good" art and there will almost certainly be debate about whether it should be recognised as such or not. I think the same can be said of research [13]. Research, like art, is a declarative pursuit separate to any question of quality or achievement. To make such a declaration requires an appreciation of the context within which one is working, the

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methodological framework of the discipline/s and the tradition/s one is working within and of what one brings to these disciplines also (since while the discipline shapes us, we also shape it!). By declaring the activity research, the researcher also triggers certain important protocols including permissions, and ethics clearances, adherence to best-practice guidelines and citation. Note, too, a similar need for public or peer recognition via the examination of student research, and the peer review of research funding and journal articles where the results of research are shared and tested in front of an audience or a community of peers [14]. In saying this, I do not mean to equate the significance of the declaration with the "everyone is a publisher" argument that has become ubiquitous during the rise of social media. My friend, a dancer with decades of rigorous practice and performance experience, was recently asked blithely at an exhibition opening "Isn't it great that anyone can be a performer these days?". My friend was irked by the flippantness of the question and wondered to herself at the time, and again to me later, if indeed *anyone* can be. Which is to say that if the declaration, the context and the practice, is what makes an object or an activity a work of art, it doesn't necessarily make it something anyone can do. Nor does it make the activity in-and-of-itself interesting. What makes something interesting is a whole other topic and must be able to be debated freely. We could say that the rise of cancel culture, whatever else it is, reflects a growing cultural anxiety with disagreement. Consequently, there is an increasing imperative to agree on all things at all times. We see this logic increasingly extending into debates about what should and should not be said, read, listened to and watched, in the classroom (see: Halberstam, 2017) and beyond.

To be engaged in research is to ask questions, not only of the topic but of ourselves as researchers. The question of whether and how what we are doing counts as research must, in my view, remain an open proposition and not something that should be taken for granted even when and if the researcher has previously produced or collaborated on a major body of research. The question "what is research?" and the associated question "what is a researcher?" are essential and must, one would hope, remain open-ended. By which I mean necessarily unanswerable – allowing for an unknowing, unmastered inquiry, where the researcher does not take for granted what they "know" about what they do. Where the researcher is attentive to the particular approaches they are taking to the research. Perhaps even (I am being a little provocative now) being attentive to whether what they are doing should be done in the first place. Is the research needed? Could the research cause harm? Being careful not to imagine that harm is only something that other people cause. The question of harm is of course very interesting and complex, often particularly so when working with material from our lived lives, as those of us engaged in creativecritical writing so often are. But if harm, damage, violence, and exploitation are only ever understood to be operating out in the world (never within *us* individually) we are in deep trouble, because they will remain constantly someone else's responsibility.

That research has been traditionally understood to be objective, has afforded it all kinds of permissions and entitlements. Historically, there have been few if any limits set on what the researcher does in the name of knowledge. Including experimenting on human and animal subjects. This entitlement has also informed the language of knowledge as something discovered, acquired, held, categorised and collected (collected sometimes used as a

euphemism for stolen). As Eve Tuck and K Wayne Yang remind us, "the right to conquer is intimately connected to the right to know" (2014, p. 224). Kamilaroi artist and activist Richard Bell calls our attention to the impacts on Australian Aboriginal communities in the name of research when he writes:

> We have been the most studied creatures on earth. They ***KNOW*** more about us than we know about ourselves. Should you ask an Aboriginal how they're feeling, the most appropriate answer would be "Wait 'til I ask my Anthropologist." They are stuck so far up our arses that they on first name terms with sphincters, colons and any intestinal parasites. And behold, they DO speak for us. Countless books have been written about Aboriginal People by White folks. (Bell, 2012, author's emphasis)

3.

For good reason, there is a tendency to theorise binaries in terms of oppositions. The logic of binary thinking that is so central to Western values positivises and negativises each term within the dyad. In doing so, not only does the traditionally negativised term come to be associated with all that the positivised term is *not*, but it acts as a way for the positivised term to avail itself of negative association altogether. The civilised/uncivilised binary is just one example of how the construction – in language, in values, in rhetoric – of "civility" relies on seeing itself as good and just, and as such in denouncing its own violence, which is instead ascribed to the so-called less civilised other. Colonisation has relied on (and continues to rely on, in the Australian context where it has not ended) the justification of European (white) civility. We might begin to think (if we haven't already) about the ways that binaries can transform in the presence of their so-called opposite. Perhaps if the positivised term were less defended against what it cannot know about itself to remain so positively positioned, it might come into a different sort of relation with its understood-to-be negativised other. If we personify this example for a moment, to allow itself to be seen – not only as it sees and understands itself to be, but as it is seen and understood to be by the other. For example, in the traditional dyad in the English dominant Global North where binary thinking has so much defined the hierarchies of value, it is only ever the positive term that gets to see its opposite as having negative traits. Within this system of value, the positivised term is necessarily defined without negative association. Indeed, the ideological modus operandi of binaries is precisely to ensure the superiority and dominance of one term over and above the other. Nevertheless, what I am interested in here is not so much the problematising of the categories "critical" or "creative" but in what refusing the binary construction of these terms altogether might allow for, or demand of, the writer. Including whether it can be escaped at all – a rather grim thought! But I tend to agree with Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank that "There is not a choice waiting to be made, in evaluating theoretical models, between essentialism and no essentialism. If there's a choice it is between differently structured residual essentialism" (1995, p. 517).

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

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and interchangeably. I find myself struck in drawing this comparison by the contrast between Gertrude Stein's traditionally feminine image of a rose with René Magritte's traditionally masculine (we might even say phallic) pipe. Presumably both Stein and Magritte could have chosen other objects to use in their work, so their choices bring with them all the historical and culturally specific meaning of roses and pipes. Including the identification roses have with romantic love, and that pipes have with a certain arm-chair philosophy or conjecture. It leads me to think that there is a point worth making in putting this poem and artwork together, which is that historically women have been positioned as the shallower sex (no more than what they are) while men have been seen to contain multitudes (more than what they appear). Indeed, let us not forget that the creativecritical intervention before it was anything else was a feminist one. Another point worth making here, as Kazim Ali and others have argued, is that the normative policing of genre boundaries is not dissimilar to the policing of gender. Indeed, etymologically gender and genre are related. Along with "kin" they share the same Latin root word *genus*, meaning "kind", "type", or "sort" (OED, 2023). And as we know, to be classed is often to be sexed.

As I write this, there is a social media trend among young Chinese university graduates who, instead of capturing the moment with the stereotypical tossing of graduation hats up into the air, are photographing themselves lying face down on the ground or throwing their final theses in the rubbish bin (Hawkins & Lin, 2023). In these highly staged photographs there is, for me, no separation between their creativity and the urgent critical message these young people are sending out into the world that things are *not okay*. Indeed, the seriousness could be the very thing that calls for such a playful (albeit depressing) intervention. The Kurdish novelist and journalist Behrooz Boochani, who was detained by the Australian Government in an offshore prison on Manus Island for six years after seeking asylum here, says in his talk "Writing is an act of resistance":

> I soon found that the language of journalism is not able to describe the systemic torture we are under and the life in Manus prison camp. The language of journalism is a kind of language that is part of the power structures I am fighting against … That is why I have worked for years to tell this story, through creative and literary language. (Boochani, 2019)

The kind of creativecritical intervention I am interested in can also be abstract [15]. I am thinking, for example, of an installation by the textile artist Sheila Hicks entitled *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands* where the artist filled part of a warehouse with enormous brightly coloured handmade yarn balls. When asked about the balls in the installation, Hicks replied:

> [it] is not a construction of yarn balls. It's a creation of an environment … Did you walk in and hear acoustically, how it changed when you approached it? … The idea of its monumentality is to envelop you so … you're not thinking about the grains of the sugar. You're into a very big meringue, like a huge lemon meringue pie. (Cohen, 2019)

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Here Hicks is articulating the way in which her artwork seeks to supersede its medium. To understand *Escalade Beyond Chromatic Lands* purely via the textile objects is to miss its spatial and atmospheric qualities, which are integral to the work.

4.

There is a paragraph in Francesca Rendle-Short's essay "My Father's Body in Nine Drawings" where she calculates the number of possible interactions between her, her siblings, and their dying father. She writes:

> Did you know, with six children in a family there are six children trying to say goodbye to six fathers? In mathematical terms, there are 720 different sorts of relationships the six of us can have – a multiplication of 1 x 2 x 3 x 4 x 5 x 6. Add my father into the equation and multiply that figure by seven, to take it to 5040 combinations and permutations. (Rendle-Short, 2010, pt. 4)

I have heard Rendle-Short describe the mathematics of possible interactions within her family before, in conversation, and am always stuck by it as the only child of separated parents, neither of whom re-partnered. In my households growing up, and again now as the sole parent of an only child, the different sorts of relationships within my home have been limited to two (1 x 2 always = 2) [16]. Similarly, in the scholarly context of a creative writing PhD there is a limit to the set of relations between the creative artefact and its accompanying critical text. The most common approach is to submit a creative work alongside a separate critical text. Or the candidate merges the two texts into one. Were the student to submit multiple creative artefacts for their PhD (as I did) there remains nevertheless a relation of two since the orientation of the work is necessarily between the critical text and the creative work/s.

From 1977–78, Roland Barthes gave a lecture series at the College de France entitled *The Neutral*, a term he defined as "that which outplays {*déjoue*} the paradigm, or rather … everything that baffles the paradigm" (Barthes, 2007, p. 6). There is a remarkable paragraph close to the beginning of these published lectures where Barthes writes:

> I took the word 'Neutral,' insofar as its referent inside me is a stubborn affect … for a series of walks along a certain number of readings … I took the Neutral for a walk not along a grid of words but along a network of readings, which is to say, of a library. (Barthes, 1977–78, pp. 7–8)

Note Barthes doesn't use the word concept. Rather, he locates the logic of the term within his own affectual experience, explored in and against texts. The "testing" here is not against a literature review or a canon but a library (a personal library, no less). By using the word "network" he is making it clear that there is an interconnectedness between texts by virtue of them being in the same collection (to consider one's own "network of readings" might be as good a way as any to think about scholarship). I want to draw our attention to the writing/thinking/making/planning/jotting/preparing of a lecture (or any text), that is another relation of two. Between what one is attempting to say, or to test out, and the world. Between

the self and our ideas "walked" in and through our libraries. Other relations of two that come to mind in this context include reading, dialogue and the psychoanalytic scene. While each of these examples can occur in groups, if we nevertheless consider them momentarily as a site of relation between two (a text and reader, a speaker and listener, an analyst and analysand), we can see that there is within the dyad enormous potential for myriad experience. There is also we might say a heightened, sometimes excruciating, meeting of difference within the relation of two-and-no-more. Certainly, it can be a kind of excruciating nightmare when there is little to no possibility of being seen or understood as you are (rather than as you are said to be). Think of the domineering parent, as just one example of this, where the demand is that the child be as the parent insists regardless of the child's experience of themselves. In an ideal scenario there would always be the possibility for transformation and of surprise (that is with the unknown) within a binary. Particularly given there is no singular *me* that encounters a singular *you*. We are always already multiple. In her 1971 lecture, *Thinking and Moral Considerations*, Hannah Arendt draws our attention to the meaning of consciousness as "literally, 'to know with myself'" (Arendt, 1971, p. 441). Interestingly, the word "conscious" is derived from the Latin *conscius* meaning "sharing knowledge, privy, privy to a crime or plot … inwardly aware, conscious of guilt, having a guilty conscience, guilty" (OED, 2023). We can see here a similar sense of danger, even murder, that my Greek language teacher pointed out in the etymology of method. As if to be aware, or to know, always already contains the danger or risk of violence. This is perhaps why ethics is so integral to any pursuit of knowledge and consciousness.

5.

As I have already emphasised, criticalcreative (there's that flip again) practices are known for their interest in decentring the all-knowing subject and upending traditional hegemonic and phallocentric authoritative styles and approaches. And *yet* these decentring, experimental, or avant-garde strategies tend to be overrepresented by white European and North American artists and researchers. As Cathy Park Hong articulates: "To encounter the history of avant-garde poetry is to encounter a racist tradition" (Hong, 2014), and we might add the histories of avant-garde writing, scholarship and art practices more broadly – including the autotheoretical and fictocritical. There would seem to be a tendency for creativecritical texts to be more readily recognised for their subversive interventions when they are made – and read – by white artists and theorists. Hong points out that:

> The avant-garde's 'delusion of whiteness' is the luxurious opinion that anyone can be 'post-identity' and can casually slip in and out of identities like a video game avatar, when there are those who are consistently harassed, surveilled, profiled, or deported for whom they are. (Hong, 2014)

Let us not mistake the erasure at play here. Insofar as we are to argue that the creativecritical mode is subversive and anti-authoritative, it is important to be attentive to what gets overlooked in defining the genre. In a white supremacist dominant culture, like Australia where I live and write [17], there tends to be a continual reaffirmation of recognised forms of resistance. The trouble with the logic of recognition is that it orients all creative and intellectual practices

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around similar problematics or indeed around similar certainties. This logic of recognition risks not recognising, or misrecognising, practices and traditions that eschew Eurocentric binary thinking altogether, and/or that find such binaries necessarily irrelevant.

In Note 36 of Christina Sharpe's *Ordinary Notes*, a powerful book of creativecritical reflections "toward a dictionary of untranslatable blackness" (Sharpe, 2023, p. 233), she recounts an experience at the National Memorial for Peace and Justice in Montgomery, Alabama [18]:

> A white woman approaches me tentatively. 'Excuse me,' she says. We are walking in the same direction. She is crying. I don't know at first that she is speaking to me, and I can't imagine what she wants. I turn partially and reluctantly toward her. 'Excuse me,' she says again, 'I just want to say that I am sorry'—and she gestures toward where the monoliths are laid out like coffins—
> 'I am so sorry about all of this …'
>   I do not reply. (Sharpe, 2023, p. 55)

There is a familiarity to the intrusive behaviour of the white woman described in this scene. While her tears could present an opportunity to turn towards the painful legacies of slavery being commemorated, they could just as easily be used as evidence of not being implicated in the systems of violence and oppression represented by the memorial. The equation becomes something like *I am distressed by x therefore I am necessarily not x* [19]. This is a very powerful culturally sanctioned dissociation made particularly poignant by Sharpe not replying to the woman and therefore refusing to participate in its logic.

This brings us back to the limits of recognition and to a cultural tendency to deny what is unrecognisable. Insofar as we orient our values, practices, tastes etcetera around that which we already recognise, we run the risk of engaging only the familiar. Or of continually reinforcing the status quo. Which is one recipe for sameness.

6.

In *The Poethical Wager*, Joan Rettalack writes: "A poetics can take you only so far without an *h*" (2004, p. 26). She continues, "a poetics thickened by an *h* launches an exploration of art's significance *as,* not just *about,* a form of living in the real world" (p. 26). It's an interesting place to arrive, with an evocation of the real. It's certainly not where I expected to end up. Writing this article has been like that from whoa to go. As with most of my writing, I didn't come to it with a fully realised plan. I only knew that I was interested in beginning with something I recognised and admired in Cvetkovich's interest in beyond predictability. Everything else came about on the page and through the thinking and writing. It came slowly and began during cold winter days when I was even more bogged down in the domestic than usual. During school holidays, two winter bugs, a bout of croup and nights of little to no sleep listening closely to my daughter's wheezing cough and strained breathing. Wondering each morning if I would ever manage to finish this piece at all, as the through-line of the text kept slipping and sliding from under me. I went down more than one despairing hole, thinking about

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the long-past radical moments at the beginning of postmodernism and how we seem to be left with the residue of a never-ending ahistorical loop (Fisher, 2009) of anything goes (Jameson, 1984) and nothing means a jot. Where our experience of reality is so often replaced by a facsimile of the real (Baudrillard, 2001) that in addition to the paranoid thinking so well described and critiqued by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2020) we might be up against a certain ennui such that, no matter the innovation, it gets folded back into the hyper-commodified dominant culture and sold back to us. In fact, while I was writing this article my then 7-year-old daughter brought home a Barbie backpack she was given at the local shopping centre where a pop-up stall offered free Barbie yoga and crafting to kids (speaking of commodification) as a promotion for the new Barbie movie directed by Greta Gerwig and co-written by Gerwig and her filmmaker-husband Noah Baumbach. The film takes up all the techniques of irony and double entendre as it winks at its audience throughout and reinvents the iconic Mattel doll for a new generation. A doll that previous generations of feminists have either refused to buy for their daughters or have been concerned about buying given what the unrealistic body size and high-heel-ready feet sets up for young girls and their already complex (or soon to be made complex) relationship with their bodies and desirability. Or more accurately, with the narrow heteronormative desirability revered by the dominant culture and taken up by advertising, toys, computer games, television and cinema alike. As it happens the film uses Barbie's feet becoming flat as a metaphor for her becoming more grounded such that she can see there is something unreal about her life. If an independent filmmaker agreeing to make a Barbie movie while supposedly engaging critically with patriarchy isn't postmodern in the worst possible way, I don't know what is. I would go so far as to say that the cultural capital Gerwig brings to Barbie is priceless [20]. The "real" word of Barbie couldn't be further from Retallack's real world [21], which I take to mean beyond the traps and tropes of language and representation. This is not to unwittingly set up a high vs low binary or to insinuate that popular culture cannot be subversive, nor is it meant to suggest that literary and critical theory is more real or meaningful than other modes of cultural production. But it *is* to draw a distinction between gimmick [22] and political or artistic resistance. The desire to find a language that adequately resists the impossible binds and often toxic dissociations we live with remains as essential as ever. If we are to bear the often crass, kitsch, nihilistic swamp of appropriation and commodification where nothing is off limits (not even mining the moon for precious metals) there is a need to be canny in our discernment of the real, and its postmodern and hyper-consumerist capitalist distortions. It is to enter a poethics (and notice that ethics enters the scene) [23].

In the public lecture "Ficting and Facting" for the Riga International Biennial of Contemporary Art McKenzie Wark says:

> there's a weird way in which both words [fact and fiction] refer to similar sorts of concerns in terms of their origins and etymology: they're both practices. Fiction comes from *fictio*, *fingere*, which means 'to shape' clay for example. The word fiction comes from making. Interestingly, so does fact, or *factum*, which means 'event', 'a thing that happens' (Wark, 2020).

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She goes on to ask:

> what if rather than fact and fiction, we think about ficting and facting? What if we reengage the acting sense of those words so as to think of them as practices that do things? (Wark, 2020)

McKenzie Wark's "ficting and facting" is in good company with Rettalack's poethics, and with other well-known creativecritical interventions such as Saidiya Hartman's critical fabulation (2008), Jack Halberstam's counterintuitive modes of knowing (2011) and Sara Ahmed's sweaty concepts (2016) [24]. These are all ways of doing, making, knowing and thinking that go *beyond* and upset the paradigm.

7.

While it is perhaps tempting to see the creativecritical mode as in-and-of itself a 'solution' to the 'problem' of the entrenched critical/creative, nonfiction/fiction, objective/subjective binaries, I have argued that to unsettle, to merge and to resist the definition of these terms as always already separate is not in-and-of-itself what is most radical about this approach. To engage in the blurring, the blending or the upending of the categories of the so-called creative and the so-called critical, is to enter the question of what can be done by combining these practices that cannot be done otherwise. In the context of scholarly research, it is to trouble what constitutes a contribution to knowledge. Nevertheless, it is worth being alert to the ways in which any mode, including the creativecritical, can become worn and clichéd. To the ways it can stop *thinking*, in Hannah Arendt's terms (1971). As Anna Gibbs, again, reminds us, "Fictocriticism is a way of writing for which there is no blueprint and which must be constantly invented anew in the face of the singular problems that arise in the course of engagement with what is researched" (Gibbs, 2005, p. 1).

To consider the creativecritical as a methodology provides an active rather than a descriptive way of understanding the term. To consider the creativecritical as a methodology is to consider creativecritical writing as a mode of doing; it is to take seriously its possibilities of refusal.

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Notes

[1]   The politics of truth has become ever more fraught in the context of the increasingly normalised bald-faced lies, cover ups and denials of government leaders worldwide.

[2]   From Sophie Calle's series *Autobiographies* (1988–2003).

[3]   Derrida: "One of the gestures of deconstruction is to not naturalize what isn't natural—to not assume that what is conditioned by history, institutions, and society is natural" (Derrida cited in Royle, 2015, p. 122–123). Derrida says this in Amy Ziering and Kirby Dick's documentary *Derrida* (2002), which is the subject of Nicholas Royle's article "Blind Cinema".

[4]   In *Capitalist Realism* Mark Fisher writes: "On the one hand, this is a culture that privileges only the present and immediate … on the other hand, it is a culture that is excessively nostalgic" (2009, p. 59).

[5]   When Fisher writes, "I prefer the term capitalist realism to postmodernism" (2009, p. 7) we understand right away just how implicated the postmodern is in capitalist logics for him.

[6]   To borrow from Joan Retallack's definition of the essay as a wager. Retallack writes: "I count on the form of the essay – as urgent and aesthetically aware thought experiment – to undertake a particular kind of inquiry that is neither poetry nor philosophy but a mix of logics, dislogics, intuition, revulsion, wonder. The result can be a philosophical poetics as lively as current developments in the form of the prose poem" (2004, p. 4).

[7]   Method (a way of doing something) and methodology (the theory or study of method).

[8]   *μέθοδος* from μέθ- (< μετά-) + ὁδός.

[9]   Non-Traditional Research Output (NTRO) is the term used in Australian universities to describe original creative works, including those written, performed, recorded or curated. It also captures research reports written for external bodies such as government organisations.

[10] Creative practice research is called many things including practice-led research, practice-based research, practitioner-led research, research as practice, artistic research and research-creation.

[11] In Australia, a Research Office is typically a central hub where research funding, ethics, and doctoral research is administered and supported.

[12] For more on the philosophy of practice see Antonia Pont's *A philosophy of practising* (2021).

[13] There is plenty of bad research around. Think only of the remarkable moment in Virginia Woolf's *A Room of One's Own* where she describes going to the British Museum to consider the question "Why are women poor?" (Woolf, 2000, p. 30). She records a long list of texts about women held in collection including on the subtopics: "Weaker in moral sense than, Idealism of … Small size of brain of, Profounder sub-conscious of, Less hair on the body of, Mental, moral and physical inferiority of" (2000, p. 30). Presumably numbers of these texts were researched! This is just one example that came immediately to mind while rereading *A Room of One's Own* during the writing of this article.

[14] Though interestingly, I have had a long running disagreement with a friend (a visual artist and filmmaker) about whether to be an artist one is required to exhibit, or, in the case of a writer, to publish. I have always vehemently argued it does not. So, she will no doubt find it amusing that in the end I am placing this emphasis on peer recognition.

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[15]   I have used the word abstract here to signal that creativecritical interventions needn't be representational. However, I am aware it runs the risk of reinforcing an unnecessary split between representational and nonrepresentational artforms.

[16]   I am sticking to immediate family, given Rendle-Short's example.

[17]   And in North America where Cathy Park Hong lives and writes.

[18]   The first comprehensive memorial dedicated to "the legacy of Black Americans who were enslaved, terrorized by lynching, humiliated by racial segregation, and presumed guilty and dangerous" (The National Memorial for Peace and Justice, 2024).

[19]   There is a similar disavowal of violence in the culture that is not unrelated to what I am getting at here. As I have already argued, we have a big problem when violence is only ever seen to be occurring in others. I am indebted to Jacqueline Rose's insistence on this throughout *On Violence and On Violence Against Women*. She writes "It is a paradox of human subjectivity that knowing you are capable of violence – recognising it as your problem, instead of blithely assigning it to someone else (race, class, nation or sex) – reduces the chances of making it happen. The idea of crushing violence – of stamping it out, or eradicating it from the earth – simply increases the quotient of violence we have to face" (Rose, 2021, p. 24).

[20]   À la the Mastercard "priceless" advertising campaign.

[21]   I have taken up Rettalack's real purposely, and partly in distinction to Jacques Lacan's capital r Real, since I want to deliberately locate my thinking in the context of art and writing. This is not to distance myself from psychoanalysis, which I remain indebted to, and have engaged with more explicitly in other writing.

[22]   See Sianne Ngai's *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* for more on the gimmick in contemporary culture.

[23]   See also Denise Ferreira da Silva's use of poethics in "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of Blackness Toward the End of the World".

[24]   By no means an exhaustive list.

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