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Editorial

Politics … and portfolios

Can literature affect political change? was the title of a session at the Melbourne Writers Festival last year (scheduled as part of the Edinburgh World Writer's Conference). Amanda Lohrey provided the keynote address (unable to attend, her speech was read by Alison Croggon) which began 'My argument in brief is that the novel has little power to make an effective political intervention' and ended:

> In other words, mythic story-telling offers substitute gratification within, and compensation for, a fraught reality. As such the primary function of narrative is the opposite of reformist; it is to console and pacify, to dissipate rage rather than to incite it and to relieve the pain of the incomprehensible. To borrow from that prodigious reader Karl Marx, story-telling is the heart of a heartless world. Is it then the opiate of the masses? Probably. [1]

There was an animated discussion following Lohrey's speech and it was clear that many of us in the audience – writers, readers, critics and academics – having come along expecting to hear Lohrey, whose fiction has often been political, mount an argument for literature's potential to affect political change, were disappointed.

I recalled Lohrey's speech as I read through the articles we are publishing in this issue of *TEXT* and was pleased to find that several contributors explore, reflect on and make an argument for the way that literature – in its various forms – actively takes up social and political issues.

The articles in this issue also extend across a wide range of topics including writing practice, pedagogy, theory and research. They highlight the inevitable connections and links between the writer/academic's creative work, their teaching and research and the complex issues arising from living in a contemporary global society. In response to Lohrey, we might well ask can the writer's role be anything other than political?

Meera Atkinson ('Strange body bedfellows: *Ecriture féminine* and the poetics of trans-trauma') argues that the poetics of transgenerational trauma qualify as *écriture feminine*. This is *écriture feminine* in its most non-essentialist guise, sharing with the poetics of trans-trauma a desire to liberate the unconscious and speak the unspeakable. Focusing on *The Lover* (Duras) and *By Grand Central Station I Sat Down and Wept* (Smart) Atkinson considers the affinities and points of departure between *écriture feminine* and trauma writing and makes a strong and eloquent case for trauma writing (as it testifies, gives voice and bears witness to traumatic history) as revolutionary and political.

Taking an autoethnographic approach Jenny Baker ('Autoethnography as creative expression: What my story could have been…') reflects on the challenges of writing a television drama series that has as one of its core aims social change. Baker situates herself alongside other feminist writers who critique post-feminism's claims that equality has been achieved when clearly gender inequalities continue to exist in all sectors of the community. Television drama with its access to large audiences provides, Baker argues, an ideal format for tackling these issues.

Janie Conway-Heron's novel *Beneath the Clouds* is a hybrid novel, part fact part fiction that centres on the lives of three women each one forced to confront the challenges resulting from our violent colonial history. In this interview ('Wandering beneath the grace of clouds: An interview with Janie Conway-Herron') originally taped for a Masters seminar on Australian identity at the University of Barcelona, and Renes talks to Conway-Herron about the politics behind her creative agenda, 'the history wars', the masculinist nature of Australian society and the challenges of writing in the voice of an Indigenous woman. Conway-Herron talks openly

about some of the risks and challenges of writing *Beneath the Clouds*, a novel that is intentionally political in its aim to tell 'lost stories' that challenge notions of 'truth' and history.

And there is plenty of politics involved in the area of biography, especially where authors experiment with form and content. Donna Lee Brien's '"Welcome creative subversions": Experiment and innovation in recent biographical writing' maps current biographical experimental practice and enquiry against the background of innovation during the twentieth century. A literature that has been thought to tell straightforward, factual life stories, has been – as a literary form – the site of considerable inventiveness.

To politics of a different kind. Research and publications are crucial in the academy and it is increasingly unlikely that academics will be appointed even on short-term contracts unless they have a strong publication record. This requires familiarity with and skills in academic writing and publication. In their article, '"I now know I can do this now": Indigenous women and writing in the Australian higher education sector', Bronwyn Fredericks, Kyly Mills and Nereda White argue the under representation of Indigenous women in the academy is at least in part a result of the undervaluing of indigenous styles of writing. The authors focus on The Tiddas Writin' Up workshop as a model of an innovative mentoring program aimed at developing the academic writing skills of indigenous women. Supportive and culturally appropriate, the program had a number of positive outcomes including the publication of a special issue of the *Journal of Australian Indigenous Issues.*

The history and development of creative writing teaching in the academy and has been the focus of a number of articles published in *TEXT* over the last 18 years; there have also been several books on the subject published in Australia and overseas. However, the history of the discipline and its development remains incomplete. In this article 'Re-encountering Christina Stead: Why read "Workshop in the Novel"?' Alison Burns and RA Goodrich focus on a series of notebooks kept by Christina Stead in the early 1940s, when she taught three creative writing workshops in New York. Stead's approach was analytical and her use of Georges Polti's Thirty-Six Dramatic Situations is fascinating not only for what insights it gives us into her teaching but also into her own development as a writer. Burns and Goodrich's article and their work (in conjunction with Ann McCulloch and Adrian Alder) makes a valuable contribution to our understanding of the discipline's history.

Like Christina Stead most of the contributors to *TEXT* are both practicing writers and academics teaching creative writing and therefore it is not surprising that insights gained from personal writing practices and processes raise issues and questions about teaching and research.

For me (Enza Gandolfo) writing has always been a political act. The stories we choose to tell as well as the way we choose to tell them. As writers we often venture into the dark side of our characters, as writing teachers we often encourage our students to do the same, this is part of the writing process – but there are consequences in our lives. In this article, 'Take a walk in their shoes: Empathy and emotion in the writing process', I use my experience of writing a novel to explore the impact on the fiction writer of taking on dark and traumatic subjects, of creating and placing characters in traumatic situations and ask how do we deal with those consequences? How do we support the student writers we are teaching and supervising so they are prepared to deal with the consequences?

Most writers seek feedback on their work in progress, sometimes this is from editors, publishers and literary agents, but more often from other writers. Having found little scholarship on the experience of having work in-progress read, and on the effect of criticism on writers' final drafts, Neave ('Being read: How writers of fiction manuscripts experience and respond to criticism') uses her own experience as a writer working on a novel, current discussions in creative writing scholarship about reading student manuscripts, interviews and some archival material by published writers, to ask: how do writers respond to feedback? and how that does feedback impact on the final work? Neave also discusses the important role of writing groups and other networks and argues that these 'communities of practice' have benefits for both the individual writers and the literary culture.

In 'Mapping the soul of place' Linda Lappin details some of the activities she has incorporated into her travel writing class for the USAC study abroad program in Italy. Lappin gives an overview of creative, anthropological and theoretical writings that she has taken into the classroom to generate discussion about place and the types of stories that different places evoke. This is followed by a description of some of the activities – walking, pilgrimage,

working with deep maps – undertaken by the students to familise themselves with the area so that they can reflect and then write about the places they visit.

In her article, 'The play of research: What Creative Writing has to teach the academy', Julienne van Loon begins with her experience as a mother playing with her young child and the observations and questions that those experiences raised about the role of play in the formation of subjectivity and the development of human relationships. She follows this with a survey of the interdisciplinary field of play studies and the role of play in fiction writing and research. Although creative writing is now accepted as part of the academy, understanding and appreciation of the discipline's approach/es to research and knowledge production is negligible. Van Loon argues that play and playfulness are crucial for fostering innovative research that will lead to the development of new knowledge and understanding. For her creative writing, with its understanding of the importance of play, has much to offer researchers across the disciplines.

Anthony Macris' *Great Western Highway: A love story* is, as its subtitle indicates, a novel about two people and their search for love. The novel is set against a backdrop of high capitalism and the fast paced rise of digital technology. In his article 'Adding to the hall of mirrors: A fictocritical response to Anthony Macris' *Great Western Highway*', Julian Murphy is writing a fictocritical response to Macris' novel with a particular focus on the presence of technology in the novel, and the way technology is shown to shape relations between individuals and between the individual and the world. In this article Murphy is creating his own 'Generative *mise en abyme*' or 'textual hall of mirrors' (Macris' label) that is both about the *Great Western Highway*, technology and the individual and about writing itself.

Eileen Herbert-Goodall ('The impacts of technological change upon narrative') shares Macris' and Murphy's interest in the widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICTs), including computers, smart phones, and e-readers. Her aim is to understand the impact of these technologies on how narrative is composed, presented, accessed and published. With examples including both contemporary and classic texts, Herbert-Goodall investigates some of the current and proposed developments technologies to demonstrate the way the technology is directing the morphing of literary practices that alter the way texts are written, read and interpreted.

– Enza Gandolfo

There are two special issues with this issue of *TEXT*. Niche, but significant, areas of writing, editing and publishing continue to attract scholarly interest, with an important special issue, Number 25 in our series, titled *Introducing Australasian magazines: New perspectives on writing and publishing*, guest edited by Dr Rosemary Williamson and Dr Rebecca Johinke. While, as the editors and a number of contributors note, Australasian magazines are an important source of writing and editing work for professional writers and editors, and are widely purchased and read, scholarship on this particular form of publication, which is often conflated with periodicals more generally, is in it infancy in Australasia. *TEXT* is, therefore, especially proud to be able to support the publication of a special issue that foregrounds not just a range of the exciting and valuable research currently being conducted into Australasian magazines, but also outlines the fertile areas for further research in the field. We also hope this stimulates more submissions in this area of inquiry.

Special issue Number 26 takes a quite different approach to writing, editing and publishing, presenting a range of papers on the theme of *Taste*, edited by Dr Adele Wessell and *TEXT*'s Special Issues Commissioning Editor, Professor Donna Lee Brien. This special issue arose in association with another open access journal *MC Journal* on this theme. When the editors noted that almost half the papers were focused around writing, they asked authors to develop these further for *TEXT* which has resulted in a fascinating selection of new work on this theme. *TEXT* would like to thank Dr Dallas Baker for his ongoing special issues editorial assistance.

– Donna Lee Brien

And on the ARC front…

The Australia Research Council has announced draft submission guidelines for the next round of Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA) to take place in 2015 [2]. Of particular interest to Creative Writing academics is section 5.4.9. Non-Traditional Eligible Research Output Types where the following are listed as eligible:

- Original Creative Works;
- Live Performance of Creative Works;
- Recorded/Rendered Creative Works;
- Curated or Produced Substantial Public Exhibitions and Events; and
- Research Reports for an External Body [a new category]. (47)

A 'clarifying' point is made:

> The exhibition of an original creative work can be used to demonstrate that the work has been made publicly available, but each instance of such a research output can only be claimed once. Exhibited creative works can be submitted as either:
>
> - a single item exhibited as an individual creative work (equal to one research output); or
> - a portfolio of works exhibited as a cohesive/thematic collection of the work of a single creator (also equal to one research output). (49)

This guideline on portfolio-ing does not clarify issues for writers, even if the word 'exhibited' is meant also to cover 'published'. A vexed issue for creative writers (as it was in the last ERA round) is the weight to be given to short, medium-length and long works. The refereed article is the classic 1-point benchmark output, the academic book is 5 points. What is a poem worth? Or a ten-minute filmscript? A one-act play? A novella? Indeed, what is a novel worth? It seems that the highest weighting available for a creative work – massive research novel or massive research exhibition notwithstanding – is 1 point.

The description of a 'Written work' in the Original Creative Works category is: 'a creative work that is not eligible to be submitted as a book or journal article, such as a novel or art review' (49). A novel is apparently not a book, and not equivalent to one either. One presumes that a novel, a book of poetry and a book of short stories are clear 1-pointers provided that the argument of the Research Statement proves that they are 'a cohesive/thematic collection' (49) and that they 'demonstrate coherent research content' (47). But what constitutes a 1-point *portfolio* in this context? Must it be a group of uncollected published works equivalent to a book of poems or short stories? Or can it be 'smaller' than that? Just what is the difference between a major and minor creative work in this context – a context where the major work of the novel (as conceived by creative writers) is a minor work for ERA.

The concept of portfolio-ing exists to cater for the situation where a sufficient number of minor minor works (e.g. in ERA several poems or stories) can go together to be a minor work (i.e. equivalent to a research article – a 1-pointer). An institution can portfolio a group of works, and so can an individual.

> Institutions may submit a portfolio of works as a single non-traditional research output. A portfolio is a collection of individual works that are derived from the same underlying research endeavour but do not in themselves constitute research. The portfolio must be able to demonstrate coherent research content. In addition, the individual works should be related in a way so that the resulting the portfolio [sic] constitutes research. For such works, institutions must identify the relationship using a portfolio name and portfolio number. (47)

The odd statement that the items in a portfolio 'do not in themselves constitute research' until they are portfolio-ed, relates to the ARC's definition of the 1-point research output basic unit. No mention is made of how many poems, stories or short filmscripts constitute an eligible portfolio, nor how many words/pages might be involved. We are left to guess, or at least make the case for our portfolio-ing in our insightful Research Statement analysis of 'coherent research content'. Here it seems the academic creative writer needs a very good understanding of what constitutes the research content – and the amount of it – in a refereed journal article, which is then applied comparatively to the creative work/s.

There is much that is still unclear about creative writing submissions to ERA.

– *Nigel Krauth*

Notes

[1] Lohrey's speech can be accessed at: http://www.edinburghworldwritersconference.org/should-literature-be-political/lohrey-in-australia-keynote-on-should-literature-be-political/ (accessed 10th March 2014) return to text

[2] *Draft ERA 2015 Submission Guidelines* available at http://www.arc.gov.au/pdf/ERA15/Draft%20ERA%202015%20Submission%20Guidelines.pdf) return to text

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