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Living on the Edge: Creative Writers in Higher Education

Abstract
The writing discipline in the 21st century is a territory with contested boundaries. This paper focuses on creative writing for simplicity and considers how we might write across and beyond boundaries between genres, between disciplines and between audiences. It postulates that exploiting a concept of writing research as fluid and multifaceted enriches the discipline's study and practice at all levels. Research is about understanding what established pathways have been followed or what new methods, tools and entry points researchers have discovered to negotiate their way through unexplored terrain. Using Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizomes as well as principles from action research and practice-led research as jumping off points, it suggests that rather than making absolute statements, writing research can also be about 'surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 4-5). This paper goes on to examine WH Auden's poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (composed 1938) to demonstrate this approach. Then it introduces Heinz Insu Fenkl's theory of 'interstitial' works (Fenkl 2003: 1) and considers how it relates to fluid conceptions of research in the 21st century that can reinvigorate writing as well as teaching. It concludes that writer-teachers do not need to offer students rigid templates; they can encourage them to see research methodologies as if they were travel guides, enabling them to explore new frontiers themselves.

1 Introduction to the territory: where are we, who are we?

> '... the places where margins and mainstreams
> intersect or meet and what might come of that …'
> (AAWP conference theme 2009)

The writing discipline in the 21st century is indeed a territory with contested boundaries. Its incredibly rapid growth, its fluid shape and its successes and challenges can be said to reflect the unstable temper of a global society worried about climate change and terrorism, where the boundaries between legitimate and rebel governments threaten to undermine national integrity. Can a discipline with an amorphous designation like 'writing' have a fixed space, some kind of disciplinary integrity; and who rules it as an area of study? How clear are the pathways that connect those sister realms that differentiate themselves by the umbrella adjectives 'creative' and 'professional'? How do those disciplines interact with established elders in education? These are questions that writing teachers and researchers need to ask themselves continually in the context of volatile institutional and research environments as well as variable student bodies. For simplicity I will focus on creative writing, although the struggle for legitimacy as a teaching and research area applies to

professional writing too. Many people already have or will at some time during their careers teach both, and the disciplines frequently share students.

Defining writing as a discipline that has a fixed type of knowledge and principles does not promise a harmonious outcome. By the mid-20th century, literature in general had a firmly established history of avant-garde movements, a sense of practitioners pushing against genre norms by subverting them. At the present moment some authors who actually make a living at their craft still admit that they must be clever enough to slip out of the prison of genre without calling attention to their escape. Dave Luckett, a prolific Australian writer of fantasy, science fiction and historical fiction, confesses that his constant challenge is to elude the 'cookie cutter' genre templates that publishers give him (Luckett 2009).[1]

This formulation of the challenge of being a career author points to the existence of boundaries, the first focus of this essay. How do we write across and beyond boundaries between genres, between disciplines, between audiences? UK writer Rebecca O'Rourke pointedly asks, in relation to creative writing as an area of study, 'Is there a universal "we" here - or are there conflicts within and between modes and domains of practice?' (O'Rourke 2008: 58). Clearly some believe that there are differences in agendas, and in stakeholders' knowledge of what the discipline has accomplished. The *Australian*'s recent report (Trounson 2009) on Scott Brook's University of Melbourne PhD concerning student preferences about outcomes from their writing programs testifies to vigorous ongoing debate. While Brook's study suggests that students believe teachers do not emphasise rhetorical and grammatical skills enough, but instead literary excellence, the article also recorded that other teachers, some of them members of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, argued that these skills have a history of being integrated into writing studies.[2]

The second section of this essay involves how we can exploit a concept of writing research as fluid and multifaceted in order to enrich our discipline's study and practice at all levels. Research is about asking questions and allowing others to understand what established pathways researchers have followed to find answers or, indeed, what new methods, tools and entry points they have discovered to negotiate their way through unexplored terrain. Rather than making absolute statements, however, writing research can also be about 'surveying, mapping, even realms that are yet to come' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 4-5). I examine WH Auden's poem 'Musée des Beaux Arts' (composed 1938) as a case in point. On one level it obviously speaks back to Brueghel's painting 'Landscape with the Fall of Icarus', but it also encourages readers and critics to conceive of the poem as a gateway to a series of pathways. Readers can discover multiple meanings that resonate with the complexity of art, history, mythology and poetics, depending on their interests.

Finally, I will turn to works that academic, novelist and translator Heinz Insu Fenkl designates 'interstitial' (2003: 1), and explore his contention that individual examples in fact can form a new genre, even though their nature lies in transgressing boundaries. His theorisation of an interstitial class enriches current fluid conceptions of research that can reinvigorate our writing as well as our teaching.

2 Boundaries and border crossings

Writing is, in many senses, a postcolonial discipline that acknowledges that divisions are artificial. In a 2001 edition of *TEXT* Marcelle Freiman argues just that by approaching the teaching of it as a fruitfully disruptive practice that at once 'undermine[s] knowledge criteria for literature teaching' as it 'offers to transform the way in which literature subjects are taught' (Freiman 2001). On the political front creative writers in the academy have laboured to prove that they are not 'soft' scientists or funky humanists. Like colleagues in other postcolonial disciplines, such as Australian or New Zealand literature, they have tried to shift the centres of power. Most 'post' areas of study, however, find that they venture regularly into neighbouring territory and exploit useful methodologies. The notion of what it means to be within the mainstream or out on the margins has been reconceived. As Homi K Bhabha explained as the new millennium approached:

> If the jargon of our times - postmodernity, postcoloniality, postfeminism - has any meaning at all, it does not lie in the popular use of the 'post' to indicate sequentiality - *after*-feminism; or polarity - *anti*-modernism. These terms that insistently gesture to the beyond, only embody its restless and revisionary energy if they transform the present into an expanded and ex-centric site of experience and empowerment. (Bhabha 1994: 4)

Whether we use geographical, political or military metaphors to express writing's raids on other camps of thought, the truth is that writing finds its energy and innovativeness in just this uncertain and unsettled state, its sense of being on the edge, in being in transition. Perhaps writing practitioners and teachers should cultivate a Zen state of mind about these challenges.

Certainly the disciplines of creative and professional writing interpenetrate. Take a topic called creative nonfiction or simply nonfiction, which could easily be taught as part of either writing program. The teachers and students involved have multiple identities that might merge at points; they might be undergraduates, postgraduates, journalists, essayists, memoirists, novelists, poets and, more recently, bloggers, a group who are the fastest growing population of aspiring authors: 'According to a count by *Business Week*, there are more than nine million currently active blogs, with some forty thousand new ones appearing every day' (Baron 2009: 165). Nonfiction authors frequently address more than one audience through a range of media given the varieties of prose they generate. Lee Gutkind, father of the journal *Creative Nonfiction*, founded in 1994, discusses on the journal's website the hazy birth of the term, the arguments about its meaning and what he calls the 'frenzies among literary and cultural critics' (Gutkind 2005) every time a contentious book is published or a dishonest author is found out. As the 'flexibility and freedom' (Gutkind 2005) of the form draws in more writers as well as readers, the debates about the demarcations of the genre will continue.

In 2009 Lee Gutkind was appointed 'Distinguished Writer-in-Residence in the Consortium for Science, Policy & Outcomes and a professor in the Hugh Downs School of Human Communication at Arizona State University' (Gutkind 2010). The mélange of disciplines signalled by the titles of his affiliations demonstrate how Gutkind himself embodies the restless, cross-disciplinary thrust of writing in the 21st century, the personal and public faces of the genre.

Considering the revolution that education and technology have initiated, as well as the development of new forms such as creative nonfiction, fictocriticism and the blog, it seems self-defeating if not bloody-minded that

creative and professional writing have been, and in some institutions still are, as Michael White reports about the United States, 'marginalized within our own departments and schools' (White 2005: 49), especially given their increased student numbers. Brook's research discovered that 'the equivalent full-time student load for the written communication discipline cluster rose by 52 per cent between 2001 and 2006' in Australia (2009: 1), far more than the percentage for literature and related disciplines. As far as high school and tertiary education are concerned, the UK has organised their troops effectively. In the *National Association of Writers in Education* (NAWE) journal, O'Rourke comments: 'Creative Writing as a degree subject in the UK is now firmly on a trajectory from margin to mainstream. As it makes this transition, it has to negotiate its own professional and pedagogic values as well as its relationship with existing sets of aesthetic, commercial, ethical and use values, although it rarely does so explicitly' (2008: 57).

This is the challenge for the disciplines of creative and professional writing - to clarify assumptions, methodologies and values to all stakeholders, as well as to provide contexts for the variety of products produced. In the field of innovative education, Canadian David Cormier asserts that any new discipline 'on the bleeding edge' (Cormier 2008: 1) needs to audit itself in order to validate its research and practices, especially in an environment where established 'experts are arbiters of the canon' (Cormier 2008: 2). If nothing else, the defunct Research Quality Framework (RQF) and its replacement, the new auditing regime Excellence in Research for Australia (ERA), have encouraged debate at conferences and in print about research definitions, quality and peer review as well as formal and informal assessment trials (I have been aware of this from my own experience and anecdotally) [3]. This is the type of debate our colleagues in New Zealand and the United Kingdom have undertaken before their assessment trials. Nevertheless, conflicts about which writing genres or artforms belong where, and how they should be evaluated, persist.

To complicate matters, writer-academics and students boundary hop, often training in one discipline and working in others, with hearts and research focus in many areas at once. We are truly intellectual and artistic 'global nomads' by virtue of this mix. As Schaetti and Ramsey define it, 'global nomads are persons of any age or nationality who have lived a significant part of their developmental years in one or more countries outside their passport country' (Schaetti and Ramsey 2006: 1). It is useful to expand that definition now since what qualifies as 'developmental years' for academics and artists seems no longer only a decade or two. In my case I trained in conventional literary studies and over the years transformed from a 20th-century British and American scholar into a poet and fiction writer for all ages who also taught in three countries, researched in poetry and children's literature, then finally in creative writing as a discipline. Judging from my knowledge of colleagues in Australia and the UK, I can say that my experience is not unique.

How relevant is my initial understanding of what constituted the mainstream - the literary canon - and the methods for analysing it now? It provided a necessary base, but any serious researcher, let alone arts practitioner, has to leave home to see what exists over the horizon, to pass beyond the margins of civilised study and venture into uncharted territory. In the 21st century too, technology confronts us with an entirely new virtual space and its attendant challenges. As Baron explains it in *A Better Pencil: Readers, Writers, and the Digital Revolution*, we must consider:

> how we deploy these new technologies to replicate the old
> ways of doing things while actively generating new modes of
> expression; how we learn to trust a new technology and the

new and strange sorts of texts that it produces; how we expand
the notion of who can write and who can't; and how we free our
readers and writers while at the same time trying to regulate
their activities. (2009: x)

Baron's study, which begins with a history of writing, reveals just how complex
those challenges are, as 'the digital word has radically redefined public and
private space' (Baron 2009: 246), those spaces we once thought we could
control. So those demarcations we rely on to codify and analyse are not simply
physical, intellectual and artistic but now virtual. Cyberspace is another
universe where most forms of expression that the human race has developed
have been absorbed and remixed, joined by exciting as well as threatening new
modes.

Let's consider for a moment what living on the cutting edge entails, especially
now when the writing discipline has been pushing for acceptance in the
mainstream. The *Macquarie Dictionary* offers standard meanings for cutting
edge, such as 'to be in the forefront of a particular field or activity,' to be in the
vanguard. The *Macquarie Thesaurus* provides 'bleeding edge' under the
umbrella term 'Newness' and refers to those at the edge as 'apostles.' Finding
managers, policy makers and higher degree examiners sympathetic to our
innovative research can be problematic. The military and messianic overtones
of 'cutting edge' highlight the strategic challenges.

3 Researching on the edge/falling into multiplicity

Let me now consider in detail what incarnations creative writing research can
take and how they can help teachers and students to maximise their potentiality.
Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, philosopher and psychoanalyst, speak about
what they call 'affirmative nomad thought' (1987: xi), which attempts to
overcome artificial divisions in our perceptions of experience. In their
boundary-breaking work, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), they develop the
concept of the rhizome, which is one (not the only, I hasten to add) way of
approaching the multifaceted project of writing research and the variety of
nodes that connect types of knowledge. Sympathetic to the similarities between
philosophy and the arts, Massumi, their translator, asserts that:

> one of the points of the book is that nomad thought is not
> confined to philosophy. ... Filmmakers and painters are
> philosophical thinkers to the extent that they explore the
> potentials of their respective mediums and break away from the
> beaten paths. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: xiii)

I will only summarise the concept of the rhizome briefly in order to move to
some specific arguments about theory and practice. In nature, Deleuze and
Guattari assert, 'A rhizome as subterranean stem is absolutely different from
roots and radicles. Bulbs and tubers are rhizomes' (1987: 6). Rhizomatic
systems include such entities as orchids, wasps, even viruses (1987: 10), which
interlink. As something that is 'a *map and not a tracing*', which furthermore
'has to do with performance' (1987: 12), it makes a useful parallel for creative
works that foreground process and engage consciously with audiences.
Educational specialist David Cormier conceives of this interplay as a general
'model for disciplines on the bleeding edge where the canon is fluid and
knowledge is a moving target' (2008: 1).

Many aspects of *A Thousand Plateaus* have encouraged educational and
creative arts researchers to use the rhizome as a template for their disciplines'

theoretical orientations (Cormier 2008; Smith and Dean 2009: 19-22), since it has affinities with practice-led research loops and action research, as I have previously argued (Kroll 2008; Tripp 2008; Dick 1999). New iterations of arts-based sociological research demonstrate similarities too, in their emphases on a '*holistic approach*' (Leavy 2009: vii) to the process. In particular, sociologist-poet Patricia Leavy is concerned with inclusiveness that has underpinned 'advances in qualitative theorizing' (2009: 65), the push to generate new methods to hear silenced voices and to fill knowledge gaps. Significantly, one of the most important characteristics of the rhizome is that 'it operates by variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots' (2009: 21). The polyphonic discourses of experimental writers and/or creative theses come to mind:

> the rhizome pertains to a map that must be produced, constructed, a map that is always detachable, connectable, reversible, modifiable, and has multiple entryways and exits and its own lines of flight. (Leavy 2009: 21)

Let us go back in time for a moment to consider what thought processes might have underpinned Deleuze and Guattari's work in *A Thousand Plateaus*. In 1972, Deleuze had a conversation with philosopher Michel Foucault where they discussed, among other things, 'the relationship between theory, practice and power'. Deleuze's analysis bears directly on the development of creative writing research and its thrust to smash through disciplinary boundaries and its sometimes antagonistic relationship with established neighbours who occupy a powerful position in the academy that they want to maintain:

> The relationships between theory and practice are far more partial and fragmentary. Practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another. No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall. (Deleuze, in Foucault and Deleuze 1972: 2)

In other words, the two activities must cooperate at various points, otherwise they cannot advance. Progress entails breaching metaphorical walls in order to pass through to virgin territory. A reductive analysis that postulates that theory should simply be applied to practice misconceives the relationship. Taking Foucault's study of insanity and confinement, *Madness and Civilisation* (1961, French edition), and his subsequent work in asylums and prisons as a jumping-off point, Deleuze remarks:

> The emphasis [is] altogether different: a system of relays within a larger sphere, within a multiplicity of parts that are both theoretical and practical. … Who speaks and acts? It is always a multiplicity, even within the person who speaks and acts. All of us are 'groupuscules'. (in Foucault and Deleuze 1972: 2)

The multivocal artist who manipulates a variety of materials from a multiplicity of traditions can be compared, then, to the philosopher/theorist/social activist who theorises, acts and theorises within and among various institutional and private communities, thus moving in many directions. In this regard, we can understand how Deleuze comes to the position that:

> a theory is exactly like a box of tools. It has nothing to do with the signifier. It must be useful. It must function. And not for itself. ... We don't revise a theory, but construct new ones; we have no choice but to make others. ... I leave it to you to find

your own instrument, which is necessarily an investment for
combat. (in Foucault and Deleuze 1972: 4)

In this call to theoretical arms, Deleuze argues for a dynamic, integrated system
that is driven by each individual's vital purposes.[4]

How might this approach to research affect how we explain the connections
between disciplines to undergraduates or to suggest possibilities to
postgraduates who engage with creative writing as a site of knowledge? In a
2007 Editorial in *New Writing*, Graeme Harper uses the example of a picture as
metaphor, Joseph Danhauser's painting (1840) of Franz Liszt, drawing attention
to its complex cultural context where the audience for the performance
contributes to understanding the music's as well as the painting's meanings
(Harper 2007: 94). Harper goes on to assert: 'What is clear, however, is that the
final "text" of this interaction is only a small portion of the interaction, only
one element of it - neither a beginning nor an end, but a portion' (2007: 94-95).
In fact, the work itself and works generated before and after it become 'points-
of-entry' that 'are not sealed from each other' (2007: 95). This is the kind of
vital interpenetration that the metaphor of research as a rhizomatic system
models. Students at all levels can be encouraged to choose various ways to
access a 'text', therefore, and a variety of associated modes of discourse with
which to embody results.

Now I want to discuss an example that I have used with creative arts first-year
students because it performs two key functions. Firstly, it exemplifies
ekphrasis, 'a literary subgenre' (Verdonk 2005: 232) that involves 'a literary
description of or commentary on a visual work of art' (*Merriam-Webster's
Online Dictionary*). As well, it highlights the fruitful 'osmotic relationship'
(Verdonk 2005: 231) often forged between art and poetry that speaks to a
rhizomatic system of knowledge. These types of poems demonstrate how many
entry and exit points a self-reflexive work can manifest.

Pieter Bruegel de Oude, *Fall of Icarus* (c1558). Image accessed Wikimedia Commons 2010
(http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Bruegel,_Pieter_de_Oude_-_De_val_van_icarus_-
_hi_res.jpg)

WH Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts' responds primarily to 'Landscape with the
Fall of Icarus' (c1558), a famous painting by Flemish artist Pieter Brueghel the
Elder, one of those deceased white male Old Masters whom later generations of
artists imitated or rebelled against. Tellingly, the poem was composed at a
juncture in world history, the eve of World War 2, after which major shifts in
boundaries and populations occurred. On one level readers are invited to
contemplate a 20th-century poet's sophisticated appreciation of Brueghel's

painting, which was described to me when I first saw it as a supreme example of ironic understatement. Brueghel in his turn was responding to the well-known myth of Icarus, Daedalus' son, who like youths before him did not listen to his father's advice. He fell to his death because his wax wings, fashioned for escape but not thrill-seeking, melted when Icarus soared too close to the sun.[5]

The poem offers an experience that is akin to looking into a mirror and seeing another reality reflected in that mirror and perhaps another mirror reflecting another reality. At first glance, the painting upon which the poem is based appears deceptively straightforward - a skilfully executed landscape. But viewers are immediately drawn into a game, a 16th-century version of *Where's Wally?*, because they are challenged to find Icarus falling.

Auden's interpretation of the painting blends with Brueghel's interpretation of his subject, which includes not only Icarus' descent but also the ascent of bourgeois society. One artist critiques the other who in turn critiques not only mythology and the civilisation that produced it, but his own prosperous, busy agricultural and commercial world. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard remarks about 'great images' that they 'have both a history and a prehistory; they are always a blend of memory and legend, with the result that we never experience an image directly' (Bachelard 1964: 33). This is a phenomenological formulation of the reflecting mirror metaphor I offered as a guide to approaching complex poems.

'Musée des Beaux Arts' manipulates colloquial and formal discourses as well as multiple perspectives. Depending on a reader's - or researcher's - interests, entry points to the poem's levels of signification can be through the door of art history, poetry writing, philosophy, ethics, literary criticism and cognitive poetics.[6] The poem as a textual artefact has finite borders - its form - but in another sense it possesses no absolute boundaries when readers enter the multiple sites of knowledge hidden within its allusive world.

4 Researching the liminal and interstitial

I want to extend these ideas about research now by discussing liminality and how that concept relates to uncertainty, edginess and potential in writing and the types of knowledge it produces. Liminal means 'pertaining to the limen or threshold (*Macquarie*). This definition immediately reinforces the idea of boundaries, of being at the beginning of something if one crosses over. Once the threshold has been passed, what then? As Heinz Insu Fenkl observes of any of the sophisticated late 20th-century theoretical schools, they 'all rely on an implicit notion of dichotomy combined with the idea of moving from one state to another or combining (intersecting) one thing with another' (Fenkl 2003: 2). This is a very western mode of thought, he avers, to dichotomise even in the act of trying to dissolve those divisions.

Interestingly, Schaetti and Ramsey's study of 'global nomads' (2006) posits in sociological terms what Fenkl does in literary terms. Global nomads embrace 'marginal identity, [their] cultural marginality' (2006: 3), just as the works that Fenkl discusses (including his own) colonise liminality. Schaetti and Ramsey build on William Bridges' conception of 'the neutral zone' (Bridges 1980: 111-31 - which he in turn adapted from anthropologist Victor Turner). The neutral zone, necessary as part of a rite of passage, can be seemingly 'unproductive', a 'time-out' (Bridges 1980: 112) when reflection and revaluation should take place. As well, the state should always be temporary so that full psychic and social development can proceed. What might eventuate, however, if the state

became permanent? We cannot live forever in a chrysalis, or can we? Only perhaps if we reconceive what happens within.

Schaetti and Ramsey conceive of 'living in liminality' (2006: 1), a condition 'rich with ambiguity, uncertainty, and the possibility of creative fomentation' (2006: 2), as something that is permanent for global nomads, who 'become balanced in liminality as they learn through daily interaction that truth is contextually relative' (2006: 3). The cultivation or at least acceptance of 'multiplistic perspectives', of multiple cultural points of view about human experience, demands self-reflexivity to negotiate. This flexibility provides an instructive parallel for all writing researchers, especially postgraduates undertaking creative higher degrees. It posits a fecund, unstable state of being with which Heinz Insu Fenkl would be familiar as a child of a Korean mother and American father who has lived in Korea, Germany and America (Smithsonian Institution 2003).

Fenkl links two potent terms - liminal and interstitial - already charged with sociological, philosophical, anthropological and literary meanings, in order to posit a new genre, one that is in a position to exploit the edginess of creative writing research. According to the *Compact Edition of the Oxford Dictionary*, an interstice is:

> 1. an intervening space
> 2. a small or narrow space between things or parts; small chink, crevice, or opening

The dictionary qualifies this by commenting that the space is 'usually empty'. The botanical definition, however, is pregnant with possibility. An interstice can be marked 'by the incorporation of new matter in its substance' (*Compact Oxford*). Readers and viewers of fantasy and science fiction literature and film are familiar with beings that combine species and/or technology, often updated incarnations of classical or medieval mythology (think of Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, CS Lewis' *Narnia Chronicles* and the *Terminator* films). But what might 'interstitial' mean in terms of literary form?

Trying to understand why his first book, *Memories of My Ghost Brother* (1997) was marketed as a novel when it was really a memoir, encouraged Fenkl to adapt Homi Bhabha's understanding of cultural geography in *The Location of Culture* (1994). Fenkl proposes that 'in place of "nationness" we can think "genre" (or, more widely, "marketing category") and the parallels are quite clear' (Fenkl 1996: 4). He proceeds to discuss the seepage between genres such as 'fantasy' and 'science fiction' as well as the indeterminacy of such categories as 'mainstream fiction'. Genre is not a new topic of discussion in the latter half of the 20th century of course. Critics have analysed it, teachers have unpacked it in classes and cartoonists have found it a fruitful subject too. Charles Schultz's considerable body of work devoted to genre conventions and associated clichés (see Conrad and Schultz 2002) highlights the instability of the authorial personality in a competitive publishing market. In particular Schultz liked to ring changes on 19th-century author Edward Bulwer-Lytton's opening line of a forgettable novel: 'It was a dark and stormy night' (Devine 1995). Janet and Allan Ahlberg's 1996 children's book of the same name is a witty postmodern, metafictive play with the concept of genres. Fenkl pushes the discussion, however, in order to posit a theory about a new form that both embraces and defies genre boundaries.

First of all, he argues that genre borders can shift depending upon the cultural, commercial and temporal context. At the time of writing his essay about *Memories of My Ghost Brother*, a publisher was contemplating republishing it

as 'an ethnic memoir' (Fenkl 2003: 1-2). What was it about his work that allowed publishers to treat it in what appears to be an arbitrary manner? Fenkl reasons that some works are inherently interstitial. He defines interstice as 'a DMZ between nations at war ... a form of writing that defies genre classification' (2003: 3). Again, Fenkl paraphrases Bhabha's concept about interstices in order to adapt it. Here is Bhabha:

> It is in the emergence of the interstices - the overlap and displacement of domains of difference - that the intersubjective and collective experiences of *nationness*, community interest or cultural value are negotiated. How are subjects formed 'in-between', or in excess of, the sum of the 'parts' of difference? (Bhabha 1994: 2)

The differences, Fenkl argues, or to use Bhabha's term, the 'parts', are the characteristics of each genre, where it is obvious overlap occurs. Mainstream fiction and more recently creative nonfiction are highly valued genres but how easy is it to define them, or indeed to define those who consume them? Is there such a thing as a stable public to appreciate each and is one more sophisticated than the other? In a recent article for the *Australian* newspaper, Stephen Muecke argues for a fluid conceptualisation of audience, referring to Michael Warner's 2002 book *Publics and Counterpublics* (Muecke 2009: 1-2).[7]

It is likely that readers will belong to more than one reading public just as they might belong to more than one social or ethnic community, each of which might have diverse internal groupings. Readers might be fans of fantasy genre fiction and also consumers of memoirs or literary fiction. Fenkl certainly believes that the critical challenge of writers such as Ursula Le Guin and Harlan Ellison, whose oeuvre cuts across genres and publics, stems from their refusal to be 'marginalized' (2003: 4). It is clear that both the works themselves and their publics partake of indeterminacy or what could in fact be conceived of as fecund potentiality; we are all 'groupuscules'. Fenkl makes this ontology explicit:

> Interstitial works maintain a consciousness of the boundaries they have crossed or disengaged with; they present a clear awareness of the kinds of subtexts which might be their closest classifiable counterparts. (Fenkl 2003: 4)

In other words, their transgressive nature must also affect how they challenge readers, who have to be made aware implicitly or explicitly of these 'potentialities' (Fenkl 2003: 5). We all come to books in a particular genre with preconceived notions of their conventions. With interstitial works, these assumptions and our resultant reading habits are manipulated as we experience something that engages us on multiple levels. Interstitial works can succeed or fail with a public, therefore, depending on how well they negotiate. There are clear parallels here with the most innovative type of creative writing theses, from honours to doctoral level. This is where prefaces and introductions can function as insightful book reviews or forewords do. They suggest to readers or examiners how they should negotiate a work's pathways.

A fascinating process occurs, however, with interstitial works that parallel what often occurs with successful avant-garde movements, especially those that exploit the tensions of border crossings and cultural exchange. Success encourages consolidation, then a hardening of the category that might preclude further experimentation. Evidence of this process takes the form of 'imitations or tributes to themselves, or ... like-minded works' (Fenkl 2003: 5). 'Self-negation' (5) is the result, or at least the negating of what made the interstitial

work rebellious in the first place. What has happened is that they 'have spawned their own genre, subgenre, or even form. The DMZ they initially inhabit becomes its own nation, so to speak' (5), remarks Fenkl, citing cyberpunk as one such example. Success transforms the breakthrough and subsequent work that follows. Its author moves from being outsider to insider, is transported from the margins and welcomed into the mainstream.

This is a postcolonial, postmodern theorisation of a process that TS Eliot described in his essay published 90 years ago, 'Tradition and the Individual Talent' (1919). From his conservative cultural perspective, Eliot was speaking of 'great' new writing, those works of genius that, once recognised, immediately alter the order of everything included in the literary canon of the past, that 'ideal order' (Eliot 1919: 23) of dead creators that the second half of the 20th century began to question. Fenkl's theorisation of interstitial works suggests how that questioning can reinvigorate both past and present and how the shifting boundaries of genre can produce new aesthetic experiences.

5 Conclusion: enjoying the journey

The challenge for writers even when they produce works that push against classification is to achieve some kind of balance, a united states of meaning where elements cooperate or rebel without threatening the organic whole's integrity. Understanding from our own practice the difficulties and rewards of writing in the 21st century is what we can transmit, therefore, to our peers and students. The teaching of literature might involve appreciation of historical and cultural contexts, genre and style just as the teaching of writing craft might involve appreciation of structure and language's rhythm and texture - but these 'appreciations' might be reversed. When philosopher Gaston Bachelard talks about a full readerly response to poetry, he postulates an active, not a passive or contemplative engagement in a space where 'the joy of reading appears to be the reflection of the joy of writing, as though the reader were the writer's ghost' (Bachelard 1964: xxii). And this sentient ghost reader can access a work in as many ways as there are entry points to it, as I described when discussing Auden's 'Musée des Beaux Arts.'

We do not need to offer students rigid templates, then, but encourage them to see research methodologies as if they were travel guides, enabling them to explore new frontiers themselves. The advances of technology have opened up writing territories that were just a short time ago as unimaginable as distant solar systems. Take blogs for a stunning example of a meteoric rise to fame. Because of the incredible rapidity only possible in web space, what was at first an interstitial genre in Fenkl's terms has now become a genre with its own styles and conventions as well as moral and ethical codes (Baron 2009: 165). Following Fenkl's analysis of consolidation too, the blog now has its own history chronicled most recently by Baron (2009: 164-80), who announces that 'Merriam-Webster named *blog* as its 2004 word of the year' (Baron 2009: 166). [8]

In this environment where everyone can be an author on the web, creative writing might be close to claiming mainstream status. Is that, however, what the discipline wants? I began by considering what margin and mainstream signify. Surveying what freedoms and artistic adventures are possible from the margins, it is reasonable to ask if writers in the academy want that kind of imprimatur. When debate about creative writing as a research as well as teaching discipline began in earnest in Australia around the time of the first Australian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) conference in 1996,

many participants worried that writers would be shoehorned into pseudo-scientific boxes.

Over time writer-teachers have become more confident rather than defensive, however, willing to celebrate marginality rather than to pretend conformity. Expanding the travel regulations to include creative journeys is what many have been lobbying for all along. We have accepted the role of double agents embedded in the system, talking and writing our way into positions of power, rather than narrowing our horizons so that we only undertake approved field trips along established disciplinary lines. As teachers too, we should continue to train our students without looking over our shoulders, encouraging them to learn useful methodologies and then sending them off to range free.

Notes

1. Dave Luckett was Flinders University's 2009 May Gibbs Trust Fellow. return to text

2. Fourteen AAWP conferences and innumerable articles in prominent journals in our discipline, *TEXT* (Aus), *New Writing* (UK) and *Writing in Education* (UK), for example, demonstrate this emphasis on rhetorical and grammatical skills as well. return to text

3. The year 2009 involved much activity focused on research in the creative arts. On 9 October I attended a 'Creative and Practice-Led Research Symposium' at the University of Canberra, funded by the Australian Learning & Teaching Council (sponsored by joint grant-holders, Professor Jen Webb of the University of Canberra and Associate Professor Donna Lee Brien of Central Queensland University). In October *TEXT* published another edition of its *Special Website Series* focused on best-practice supervision in the creative arts. From 16-17 November I attended an 'Innovative Research Universities Workshop on ERA and the Creative Arts' at Griffith University in Brisbane. return to text

4. Deleuze and Guattari use the example of progressive American writers, in fact, who 'know how to move between things, establish a logic of the AND ... they know how to practice pragmatics' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 25). return to text

5. Every standard glossary or commentary on classical mythology that I have consulted over the years includes discussions of the fall of Icarus. Most commentaries on Auden's poem also note the other Brueghel paintings to which the poem alludes. return to text

6. Peter Verdonk's 2005 article focusing on William Carlos Williams's 'The Dance' provides an excellent example of how cognitive poetics can contribute to complex readings of poems. return to text

7. Muecke, too, finds spatial metaphors apt when asserting that significant new work 'creates its own public':

> What we call the public is not a self-enclosed, familiar, space of habitation, nor a homogeneous language. It is a space where negotiations establish the conditions for inclusion or exclusion from this space. Some of the clearest voices we come to call 'literary', originally came from *outside* this space. (Muecke 2009: 3) return to text

8. 'the term *web log* appears in 1997 to describe a practice that had been underway for a couple of years, and its blended form, *blog*, comes on the scene two years later in 1999' (Baron 2009: 165). 'And blogging, perhaps more than any other internet genre, has become the way to join the authors club' (Baron 2009: 164). Academic legitimacy is on the way, blogs having been incorporated into some courses and assessment models. Nevertheless, the blog has not lost all consciousness of its origins. As other forms born into an interstitial space with multiple parents, and 'even as [it] becomes more civilised, co-opted by the business world and the mainstream news media, blogs retain a certain edginess as a sign of resistance to the taming forces of mass communication' (Baron 2009: 177). return to text

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