The University of Melbourne

Rachel Hennessy, Elizabeth MacFarlane and Jessica Yu

From the ground up: Perspectives from "Thinking Writing" classrooms on the critical creative nexus

Abstract:

The "Thinking Writing: Theory and Creativity" postgraduate course at the University of Melbourne asks creative writing students to consider, and practice, the critical-creative nexus. The core questions of the syllabus are: what is the relationship between ideas and practice, between critical and creative, between thinking and writing? Running since 2009, the course sits among many Australian university creative writing programs that aim to equip their students with knowledge of cultural and literary theory. But why is this necessary? And why do many creative writers still find their encounter with capital 't', Theory, so challenging? Our paper explores some of these encounters through a polyvocal enactment, using the experiences of three instructors of "Thinking Writing" to unpack the problematics, inadequacies and fears raised by attempting to be critical theorists and creative writers at the same time. Focussing on historical and personal anecdote as its primary site of elucidation, we map different moments when clarity struck as we find models for how creativity should interact with theory neither singular nor linear.

Biographical notes:

Dr Rachel Hennessy is a writer and Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne. She is the award-winning author of novels *The Quaker*s (Wakefield Press, 2008), *The Heaven I Swallowed* (Wakefield Press, 2013), *River Stone* (MidnightSun, 2019), *Mountain Arrow* (MidnightSun, 2020) and *City Knife* (MidnightSun, 2023). Her nonfiction and academic work have been published in *TEXT*, *New Writing*, *The Conversation*, *Overland*, *Kill Your Darlings*, *The Lifted Brow* and *Daily Life*.

Dr Elizabeth MacFarlane is a writer and Senior Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne where she teaches Short Fiction, Graphic Narratives and Thinking Writing: Theory and Creativity. She is co-director of graphic novel publishing

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

1

house Twelve Panels Press, and co-directed artists' residency Comic Art Workshop from 2015 to 2019. She is currently the lead chief investigator on the Australian Research Council Linkage Project "Contemporary Australian Comics 1980–2020: A New History". She writes short fiction, experimental fiction, and autobiography, and has published several articles and a monograph on the work of J. M. Coetzee.

Dr Jessica Yu is a writer of fiction, non-fiction and poetry. She is a Lecturer in Creative Writing at the University of Melbourne. In 2021, she was shortlisted for the Victorian Premier's Prize for Literature Award in the Unpublished Manuscript category. Her debut novel, *But the Girl* was published by Jonathan Cape (UK) and Penguin Random House (Australia) in 2023 and with Unnamed Press in the US in March 2024. Her essay collection, *All the Stain is Tender* is set to follow.

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

2

> In creative writing, our ability to lead writing, editing and publishing will only be enabled by each of us reflecting on our own situationality within the local history of the discipline.
> – Cassidy (2020, p. 5)

In this article, which is also a conversation, we reflect carefully on our own situations within the discipline of creative writing in relation to the critical-creative nexus. We consider and connect the threads of our education in the discipline – its local history – in Australian schools and universities across the '90s, '00s and '10s to the ways we approach being educators in the 2020s.

Debates around whether literary and cultural theory have a useful or appropriate place in the teaching of creative writing are ongoing, but perhaps reached their peak in the Australian context in the decade from the late 1990s to the late 2000s. In a 2009 article for *TEXT,* Mike Harris asks: "Are we being called upon to take on board all 'theory' because it's simply *good* for you, like greens? And if it is, are we and our students expected to absorb it *en masse*, like whales sucking in plankton?" (Harris, 2009, para. 3). Harris examines the disconnection – historically, practically, philosophically – between theory and creative practice, and calls for creative writing academics to resist the "dazzling tractor beam of inappropriate literary theory" (2009) in favour of a focus on aesthetics, poetics and the writing process. Harris quotes from Hazel Smith's 2006 article in *New Writing* as representative of the alternative point of view: "Because critical theory is an important part of literary studies, it is extremely appropriate for it to be integrated into the teaching of creative writing" (Smith, 2006, p. 25). Though not included by Harris, Smith's sentence here is followed immediately by "(similarly the practice of writing can help students to understand theory more fully)" and indeed Smith presents a pedagogical model of theory and writing in favour of "how the two can be in symbiosis with each other" (Smith, 2006, p. 26). Paul Dawson's 2003 article "Towards a New Poetics in Creative Writing Pedagogy" investigates this interaction at the site of the creative writing workshop, observing that "the 'practical' nature of writing workshops, focussing as they do on improving the draft material brought in by students, causes the critical principles which underpin and allow discussion (reading) to remain invisible and under-theorised" (Dawson, 2003, para. 4). Dawson goes on to interrogate common principles of creative writing, observing the inextricability of aesthetics and politics: "craft must therefore be conceived as a conscious and deliberate intervention in the social life of a discourse as well as a series of aesthetic decisions regarding the artistic quality of a work" (Dawson, 2003, para. 44).

Anyone working in an institution's Creative Writing department is likely familiar with these discussions and debates simply from corridor chats, curriculum development sessions, program planning days and subject development workshops. Within each department, individual staff members would likely situate themselves at different points along the spectrum of "whales sucking in plankton" (Harris, 2009) to "symbiosis" (Smith, 2006, p. 26).

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

3

At the peak of these discussions, the subject "Thinking Writing" (formerly "Theory for Writing") was designed in 2009 at the University of Melbourne. It continues to be offered to Honours and coursework Masters students. Many of these students will also write a minor thesis of 15,000 words, which must comprise 50% creative and 50% critical writing. Some will then go on to complete PhDs in Creative Writing, which again, at the University of Melbourne, will be half critical, half creative. These sums, we know, tend not to add up. They have become sites of play for many students. There is the artefact of the Bridging Statement in theses, deployed to explain the relationship between the critical and the creative, which we can think of as a wooden, moss-covered structure that guides the reader from the straight urban edges of the critical component and softly into the curves and dales of the creative. We imagine that shoes are left behind on that bridge. The trace of absurdity and comedy in delineating thinking from writing, ideas from practice, and critical from creative, forms the basis of the subject "Thinking Writing", although rather than basis, which suggests a solid foundation, it is the subject's style, ambience or atmosphere that is infected by these traces. The three authors of this article have all taught "Thinking Writing" and it continues to be a site of intimidation, play, emergence and resistance for both teachers and students.

As one former student of the subject writes, "combining the critical with personal creative pursuits can be confronting. It is not uncommon to emerge somewhat bewildered and indignant" (Quilford, 2016, p. 3). This sense of bewilderment and indignation is not just a common reaction from students, it is the activating kernel for the subject's design. It is a subject that necessarily must observe and critique itself – its place and its scope – at every step, eliciting some of the most remarkable and distinctive written responses to its provocations that we have had the privilege of reading as teachers. All three of us entered the "Thinking Writing" classroom with our own relationship with critical theory. Here, in writing an anecdotal and experiential paper, we use our own encounters – both as students and as teachers – as the primary site of research, thinking through the ways we have enacted the debate as to how the critical and the creative overlap. We asked ourselves: what were the moments that stood out over the years and how did our histories influence our encounters with the subject?

Birth, Love and Death

Liz

My father, after completing a PhD in botany and working as an early career researcher at the University of Dundee and then the University of Adelaide, decided to quit botany, move to Geelong, study at the Reformed Theological College, and become a preacher.

When I was a teenager, I asked him why. He said that one day he was working in the lab. He was dissecting a plant. He used a razor to remove the stamen of a bloom and observed the anther and filament. He sliced the stamen and anther in half to observe them closer. He carefully wiped pollen onto a piece of cotton. To observe the female parts, he removed the pistil and observed the ovary and stigma, then cut the structure in half to look at them through a microscope.

There came a moment when he stopped. He couldn't go any further. He looked at his table, and the pieces of plant laying in small, dead clumps.

<div align="center">*</div>

For a long time as a high schooler, I felt deeply upset by the process of critical analysis. It took away an intimacy I felt I had established with a text, a sense that the book had been written for me, that it spoke just to me. I had the feeling that analysis stopped me from being able to enjoy a book's beauty. It felt like taking a razor to a flower and picking out its components with tweezers, laying them out, deadened, onto the lab table of my essay.

With the encouragement of a wonderful VCE English teacher – shout-out to Dr Wendy Warren – and lecturers at Deakin University in Geelong – Professors David McCooey and Brian Edwards – I began including expressions of my discomfort about criticism within my critical essays for literature classes at school and university. I feel relieved I cannot find these essays now as I am sure they would be finnicky, embarrassing things, but they did act as a creative space for me to work through my ambivalence about literary dissection via dissection itself. I continue to experience ambivalence when it comes to the relationship between creative writing and critical theory. It's the bifurcation that hurts – the "ambi", the "valent". Why, I wondered then in high school and still wonder now, must I make a statement about a text in a voice that indicates it is always-of-course-true? The voice and style of the critical literary theory I was reading (dominated in the early 2000s by postmodernists) spoke in sentences that made me feel stupid. Not just, "the pastiche the author uses means exactly this," but "I can't believe you didn't realise that this is what the pastiche means" I craved critical writing that allowed for excess, doubt, emotion and alternatives. I think about my dad and that flower in the lab all the time. The plant is more than its parts. The artwork, too, is more. The critical voice I wished for was one that said, "when I read this pastiche, it made me think of this, and it made me feel this".

I continued to submit these strange, wonky essays throughout my literature degree. They were always couched in personal padding, swaying to and fro between wanting to say something meaningful about the text and feeling repelled by any hint of an authoritative voice in myself. I laboured over these essays deep into the night, drinking teapots of strong tea and then riding the dawn bus to campus to submit them through the slot before the administrative staff arrived to stamp the date.

When I began my PhD at the University of Melbourne under the supervision of Kevin Brophy, it became quickly clear that it (again) wouldn't be possible for me to engage in the act of critical analysis without simultaneously expressing my doubts about its worth. I wrote about the post-2003 novels of J. M. Coetzee, novels which also waver between saying something and hating to say anything. "I have beliefs but I do not believe in them", says Elizabeth Costello in the final chapter of Coetzee's novel of the same name (Coetzee, 2004, p. 221). "*Always it is not what I say but something else*", cries Lady Elizabeth Chandos in the postscript to the novel

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

5

(Coetzee, 2004, p. 229). I counted myself among these Elizabeths; speaking but swallowing the words back, writing but retracting, offering an interpretation but also offering its opposite. My beliefs and feelings about criticism, after 20 years, haven't changed much. In a recent essay about my research project on Australian comics, I wrote: "So, my love [for comics] is expressed through analysis and, though this word's double-meaning often gets it maligned, criticism. By criticism, I mean comment, I mean appreciation, I mean unpacking, interacting with, looking beneath, making connections with, I mean *loving*" (MacFarlane, 2020, footnote 3). Is there a way to dissect and love? Is there a way to love with a razorblade, tweezers and microscope? I guess my response is usually: let me be operated on too. Let the text dissect me.

<p style="text-align:center">*</p>

Writing the PhD became an important way for me to understand that I don't necessarily need to solve the ambivalence I feel about the distinction between criticism and creativity, philosophy and practice, thinking and writing. Simultaneously with discovering that it wasn't possible for me to write critically without also expressing doubts, love, memories and experiences, I found it was also often impossible for me to write creatively without also consciously expressing ideas, ideology, philosophy. Since high school and my early university years, I found those writers who (of course) present analysis alongside love and doubt. Jane Tompkins, Judith Butler and Sara Ahmed, in particular, thrilled me. Their scything intellect did not need to be held (at arm's length) apart from their desks, their socks, their grief and their bodies. When I read Ahmed's longing for Husserl's table in *Queer Phenomenology*, it was a recognition, an affirmation, of my own longing:

> Husserl's writing makes an impression on me when he offers this glimpse of the domesticity of his world. How I long for him to dwell there by lingering on the folds of the materials that surround him. How I long to hear about the objects that gather around him, as 'things' he does 'things' with. This is not a desire for biography, or even for an impossible intimacy with a writer who is no longer with us. This is, rather, a desire to read about the particularly of the objects that gather around the writer. It is also a desire to imagine philosophy as beginning here, with the pen and the paper, and with the body of the philosopher, who writes insofar as he is 'at home' and insofar as home provides a space in which he does his work. (Ahmed, 2006, p. 29)

Bound up in the recurrent, intense (and not uncommon, anecdotally) feeling of impostor syndrome I experience as an academic in the Creative Writing program, is the idea that I am "failing" at both creative and critical endeavours. That my critical writing comes out all floppy and soft, backing away shyly from making authoritative claims, drawing attention to my body and my motherhood and my anxiety, conversing awkwardly with texts under discussion rather than making clear and astute examinations of them. That my creative writing emerges all rigid and flat, reading more like a research statement than a story, equivocating and hedging rather than breathing. In my moments of confidence, and when I perform confidence in my classroom, I see these failures and ambivalences as sites of trouble and reckoning that spark the kind of curiosity, excitement and deep joy that Jasmine Donahaye describes as "a grace moment of research" (2011, p. 202). She continues:

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

6

> when something speaks to you because it's what you're looking for it can be hair-raising, in a physical, not metaphorical sense – hair rises, prickling on the back of your neck on your scalp, as you go cold and slightly sweaty with discovery ... suddenly you *know* something with a kind of certainty of connection that has nothing to do with the facts you've just learned, and everything to do with *creation*. (Donahaye, 2011, p. 202)

In this way, my experiences as a student have been foundational to my understanding of the inextricable relationship between theory and creativity. I encourage my students to read against the grain of the frameworks set up to delineate and separate these two forms of writing. To read theory for the voice and rhythm of its sentences, the imagery and metaphor it frequently deploys, the rising and falling suspense, the creative and curious sparks it elicits, the way it encourages you as a reader to respond and engage. And, likewise, I encourage students to read creative writing for the ideas at work in the stories: ideas about class, race, gender and sexuality, and ideas about writing itself and what it can do. The title of the subject "Thinking Writing" has always been pleasing to me in a punny, Dad-joke kind of way: the way each word can be read in its verb or noun form. It reminds me of Coetzee's notion of the "middle voice" which operates between active and passive:

> The phantom presence of a middle voice ... can be felt in some senses of modern verbs if one is alert to the possibility of the threefold opposition active-middle-passive. 'To write' is one of these verbs. To write (active) is to carry out the action without reference to the self. To write (middle) is to carry out the action (or better, to do-writing) with reference to the self. (Coetzee, 1984, p. 11)

I love operating in this phantom middle space; where thinking writes and writing thinks. The love is not comfortable nor passive, it is operative; it is "to do-loving", to love with reference to the self, to love and doubt the love, to love while your hand dissects.

Finding self

Jess

In the final year of my PhD, I reached an impasse. I felt like I couldn't do it anymore: this talking about postcolonial theory as if the histories, ideas and discourses I was considering had nothing to do with me.

My parents came here from a former British colony once called Malaya. My mum went to a convent school in Butterworth and became "foreign labour" at seventeen in the NHS system in England. As part of the colonial handover, my dad was trained in the British navy at 18. And me, I ended up here on stolen land, another British colony.

How could I write about postcolonial theory as if none of this was real to me? The tools I had been given were failing me. There was something intensely alien about the way I was writing. There was a coolness, a distance, and even an otherness, about the words on the screen in front of me. It began to feel like the form of academic writing was the same form as the colonial

discourses I was critiquing: the false godlike objectivity in the voice I was writing in; the violence with which I brutalised texts; the fetish for classifications and clean lines. I am struck by the image of Liz's father dissecting a plant and then looking down at what he was doing and seeing death. I too was enacting a kind of death by writing about theory in this way.

During this time, I remember being given metaphors that were meant to help me about what I was supposed to do. I was told to write a literature review that cleared space in a forest of other people's thoughts. But I didn't believe in deforestation. I was told that writing a thesis was like fitting an octopus into a jam jar – one tentacle goes in, and another falls out. But I found myself wanting to break the jam jar and throw the octopus back into the ocean.

Like Liz I was looking for some way to express the love I felt for books, reading and writing and the love that had enabled me to sit at my desk and do this. My parents were always working when I was growing up: my father waking up at 5am to eat his bowl of two-minute noodles before driving out to Monash where he worked as a technician. In the opposite direction, my mum would drive to her night shift at Sunshine Hospital. I sat at home with my grandmother who microwaved the rice porridge my mum had cooked and frozen for me the day before.

All these violent images of theory felt so dissonant with the love for reading and writing that had compelled me to begin my PhD in the first place and the love given to me by my family that enabled their daughter to sit at her desk and study. I wanted a methodology that felt compelled by love, not death.

It was around this time that I met Maria Tumarkin, who became my supervisor and encouraged me to write my thesis in a way that made sense to me and when I couldn't write, to write about why this was the case. I began writing about all the difficulties I was having with the critical mode and reading around the subject. I found the postcritical work of Rita Felski, Susan Fraiman and Lisa Ruddick. Ruddick seemed to write about my own experience when in her essay, "The Near Enemy of the Humanities is Professionalism", she used an image from a story of the Desert Fathers in which a monk takes his hood off his head, throws it on the ground and stomps on it to symbolise his willingness to renounce his selfhood as a metaphor for graduate school (an American term but one that felt comparable to my experience) (Ruddick, 2001). Ruddick and Fraiman also wrote about the cool, tough-guy posture of the literary critic and the depersonalised hollowness of assuming this role to play "the game of academic cool" (Ruddick 2001, p. 71).

It was during this time that I also began to read the work of scholars and writers who wrote about race, gender, identity and the postcolonial in ways that felt human and honest to me. I read bell hooks, who wrote: "[d]are I speak to you in a language that will move beyond the boundaries of domination – a language that will not bind you, fence you in or hold you?" (hooks, 1989, p. 81). I needed to find a way of speaking this language. I read Trinh Minh-Ha who said:

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

8

> I am profoundly indifferent to [the] … old way of theorizing – of piercing … through the sediments of psychological and epistemological 'depths.' I may stubbornly turn around a foreign thing or turn it around to play with it, but I respect its realms of opaqueness. Seeking to perforate meaning by forcing my entry or breaking it open to dissipate what is thought to be its secrets seems to me as crippled an act as verifying the sex of an unborn child by ripping open the mother's womb. It is typical of a mentality that proves incapable of touching the living thing without crushing its delicateness. I undeniably prefer the heterogeneity of free play in a dice game to the unity and uniformity of dissection, classification, and synthesis towards a higher truth. (Minh-Ha, 1989, pp. 48–9)

I loved this painterly image from which I learned it was possible to respect the inherent opacity of texts, show gentleness in my approach and to play with texts rather than destroy them.

Finally, I was given permission to be myself in my work by Linda Martin Alcoff, who wrote:

> Minoritized peoples often use subjective experience to criticize and rewrite dominant and oppressive narratives. The legitimacy of some subjective experiences, we argue, is based on the objective location of people in society; in many crucial instances, "experiences" are not unfathomable inner phenomena but rather disguised explanations of social relations, and they can be evaluated as such. (Alcoff and Mohanty, 2006, pp. 4–5)

From this personal and subjective experience that I felt Alcoff and Mohanty had allowed me to write from, sprung something new. I learnt how to write back to my own education and to the ossified ways of thinking that I had inherited and even felt safe inside. I learnt to write in a way that was rigorously personal yet deeply theoretical, I started to think of my subjective experiences and ways of moving through the world as a kind of theorising, given that they came from my "objective location" (Alcoff and Mohanty, 2006, pp. 4–5) in Australian society.

I began to think of the methodology of my thesis as one of "nourishment". I wrote at the start of my thesis:

> This is the thing that matters most: if I was told I couldn't speak English, that I couldn't speak at all, I knew I could go to the home where I was taught phonetics on a small whiteboard in the kitchen. The kitchen where I had been shown my intrinsic value at great personal cost to the people who created it. Somehow there were always complicated yam-cakes topped with fried shallots left out on the counter, frozen rice porridge to defrost, chilli paste mixed with fried anchovies somewhere and lots of pens and pads of paper my dad had found forgotten by students on the university campus where he worked as a technician. When a teacher told me my bad manners should shame the parents who raised me, I could go to a place where I didn't have to always be on my guard. (Yu, 2019, p. 12)

So, I don't want to contribute my part of this article the way I began my PhD. I want to use not just my "academic voice", but the voices of my family.

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

9

Dad: Out of all the colonisers, the British were the best and the nicest to us.

Mum: They brought us over to England to do all the jobs their own people didn't want to do. Terrible, isn't it?

Brother: Mum and dad never told me we were going to leave Malaysia. Dad just bought me an ice cream one day and then I knew something was up.

Could these voices constitute a kind of theorising? Actually, I think this is theory at its best: deeply honest and strange, complex and clear.

The life that is your own
Rachel

During my postgraduate degree at the University of Adelaide, I sat with my lecturer and a fellow student at The Exeter Hotel, a well-known watering hole for those like us, and debated the reasons why we write creatively. I could label myself as naive, as I advocated for the position of "changing the world", but I like to hold onto the vestige of hope within such a stance. Both men laughed loudly at my assertion, though. How could writing change anything, they asked? What kind of change was I imagining? Literature, in their view, was mere window dressing, an aesthetic outpouring which should not touch on the political. Literature was only the excavation of a self hermetically sealed away from the grubbiness of the real. It served no real purpose beyond helping the ego of the writer and, although I still argued publicly for radical potential, I recognised myself in their vision of a writer.

I cannot hide behind the idea that I was a critically conscious writer from the outset. My education in high school was focused on the idea of the canon and the superiority of Shakespeare. At my Australian university in the 1990s, this barely shifted, with English Literature still focused on the biographical self who was able to tap into their uniqueness and pour forth their individual vision, a vision which was invariably not-Australian, only occasionally female and often driven by loneliness. Janelle Adsit, in her deconstruction of the unquestioned assumptions of what a writer is, unpacks how these ideas continue to circulate:

> The value of individualism embedded in constructions of the writer's voice extends further as the writer is regularly constructed as necessitating separation from the masses … Admonitions that the poet should separate himself from society are articulated repeatedly in the Western aesthetic tradition … this construction brings with it the assumptions that the lonely, contemplative writer in his solitude offers more to society than direct community engagement would. This serves to produce a conception of the writer as gloriously alienated, and this alienation is a direct reflection of privilege, tied to the genius writer. (Adsit, 2017, p. 23)

I admit to buying heavily into this notion that I had to be separate from others to fulfil my own genius. My choice to move to Adelaide to begin my studies in Creative Writing was influenced

by the fact I had no friends or family in that city. I will not rewrite my history, and must admit that, for a time, I was happy in my isolation. But – and this is a big but – it didn't last.

In one of my first classes in that hot town – where I was, indeed, to write my first novel – the lecturer asked the question: "who has ever felt like an outsider?" All of us raised our hands. We then gave our reasons for this feeling of alienation. The answers ranged around issues of gender, class, race, and health (both mental and physical). I cannot now remember exactly what my answer was. I have brown skin, from ancestors unknown – which has often led to the insidious question "where are you really from?" – but I am culturally white and cannot honestly trace my outsider status to issues of race. I am educated, economically secure, cisgendered. From where did my outsider status originate? But, then, is this even a question that has to be answered in terms of why we write? Does writing have to spring from this singular notion of being disconnected? Is this just a reinforcement of the Western aesthetic that undermines the notion of community and focuses on separation and isolation?

Inevitably, I made friends and, thankfully, my brother and his wife moved to Adelaide a year into my studies. I abandoned the role of the isolated writer, unable to sustain myself without connection. Alice Walker, in her essay "Saving the life that is your own: The importance of models in the artist's life", writes:

> What is always needed in the appreciation of art, or life, is the larger perspective. Connections made, or at least attempted, where none existed before, the straining to encompass in one's glance at the varied world the common thread, the unifying theme through immense diversity, a fearlessness of growth, of search, of looking that enlarges the private and the public world. (Walker, 2004, p. 5)

My mother is a poet and we have talked, at different times, of how reading and writing have saved our lives. Finding models, threads that connect, maintaining hope that words make a difference.

Often students claim they want to keep politics out of their writing, to deny any role for theory, for this critical voice we have all encountered at different points in our creative writing journeys. Despite the conversations we have in the "Thinking Writing" classroom about all acts of writing as political, as coming from a position, as bound to the experience and body of the writer, students maintain that they just want to tell stories. There is fear, here, of didacticism, of messaging, of writing works that will not be popular in a particular way. But there is also the privilege of never having thought of their writing position as political, of the ongoing myth of the universal, of considering their bodies to be unmarked.

Seeing self

Jess

I studied at the University of Melbourne from 2012–2020, going straight from undergraduate degree, to honours, to PhD. All through my time as a student at this institution, I remember

being really happy. I felt my mind being opened in so many different ways. I didn't notice, then, that almost all the writers on my reading lists were white and sometimes wrote about people of colour in ways which flattened them, made them both invisible and hypervisible. I didn't notice that most of my lecturers and tutors were white.

Here's what I did notice: once a tutor was sick and couldn't teach so we had a replacement tutor who was Asian-Australian. I felt really strange seeing him in a position of authority (authority with a capital A) and didn't know what to do with that feeling. I didn't notice my own erasure or feel uncomfortable with it but what I did notice was when that was, for one week, very briefly reversed. And that was what made me feel uncomfortable.

I tell this story as a way of writing towards my own education of erasure – one comprised of canonical writers I loved and still love, teachers I respect and still respect, and me – a person who has to work out what to do with all of those years of my own mis-seeing and unseeing of myself. I was, in many ways, a model creative writing student: winning prizes, being included on the Dean's lists, high grades, internships, publications, genuine love for the things I was reading and learning. And I was happy. Like Rachel, I can't rewrite the narrative now to fit it in with what I understand today. I was happy. But I do wonder what part of me this education rubbed out for good and how I can un-erase that self and the other selves that I now see looking at me from the other side of the lectern.

When I was given the opportunity to coordinate "Thinking Writing" I asked myself these questions. Now that I was the one making decisions around what we would do in these classrooms, who my students would see, read, think alongside with, what would I do? What would I undo?

A lot had changed, and for the better, since I was an undergraduate student at the University of Melbourne. The course I inherited from Liz was beautifully designed. I loved the way she spoke to the students in her own voice about her own experiences in the study plans she had written. I loved how accessible it made difficult concepts like structuralism and poststructuralism. I loved also watching students feel seen by different aspects of it – as they looked at texts and their own writing through lenses of disability theory, queer theory, postcolonial theory etc. I felt so aligned with this course's aims and so glad students were not still learning only the white male writers of my undergraduate years or the detached, distant "father tongue" (Tompkins, 1987, p. 174) of the cool, masculine theorists of my PhD years.

The main things I changed in this course were the way it began and ended, that is, its narrative structure. A new week on "Theory and the Self" now sat toward the beginning of the course and a week on postcritical theory ended it. I felt it was important to begin with theory and the self and have students read Alcoff, hooks and others like them because I didn't want students to think about theory as an estrangement from the self, the way I had done. I wanted them to feel that theory belonged to them and was for them and that they could think about the ways it permeated their everyday lives. It was a way of making sure they didn't feel they had to use theory to "burn through whatever is small, tender, and worthy of protection and cultivation"

(Ruddick, 2015, p. 72) as I had. I also wanted to make theory less intimidating to students who were more interested in creative writing practice and craft and had little experience with it.

I arranged the course so its final week was on postcriticism, a theoretical framework described by Rita Felski as a way of reading texts which invites us to move beyond thinking of the critique – or what, borrowing from Ricouer, she calls "the hermeneutics of suspicion" – as the only possible mode of interpretation. In *The limits of critique* she writes that postcriticism is:

> interested in testing out alternative ways of reading and thinking. What it values in works of art is not just their power to estrange and disorient but also their ability to recontextualise what we know and to reorient and refresh perception. It seeks, in short to strengthen rather than diminish its object – less in a spirit of reverence than in one of generosity and unabashed curiosity. (Felski, 2015, p. 182)

Given the open-ended nature of postcriticism and the way it acknowledges the limits of suspicious reading as the only mode, placing it at the end of a course on theory allows students to reflect and even re-think theory. Did they agree with what they had been taught? Were there other modes of interpretation and other methodologies that they could think of besides critique? Postcriticism's open-hearted attitude toward texts also finds its home very naturally in the "Thinking Writing" classroom – a space which merges all kinds of readings of texts with the writing of creative works, a space in which authors are both dead and very much alive.

There were still failures and mistakes: students asked me why the week on disability was primarily about visible disability thus perpetuating the constant erasures of those living with invisible disability. They also asked me about the segmented nature of the course: why indigenous voices were confined to a single week when they should have proliferated the entire course? I was happy to hear these criticisms and suggestions from students because it gave me the impression that something had profoundly changed since I was an undergraduate student; where I would have accepted whatever I was taught, my students were feeling empowered to challenge their education. Where I would have remained silent, complying with the rules I was given, my students felt confident to break them. Among all my own failures, this felt like a huge success to me.

"I want to be allowed to make mistakes"

Liz

One of the guiding lights when I was first designing the subject "Thinking Writing" was Jane Tompkins's 1989 essay "Me and my shadow". Tompkins writes:

> The dichotomy drawn here is false – and not false. I mean in reality there's no split. It's the same person who feels and who discourses about epistemology. The problem is that you can't talk about your private life in the course of doing your professional work. You have to pretend that epistemology, or whatever you're writing about, has nothing to do with your life, that it's more exalted, more important, because it (supposedly) transcends the merely personal. Well, I'm tired of the conventions that keep discussions

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

13

of epistemology, or James Joyce, segregated from meditations on what is happening outside my window or inside my heart. The public-private dichotomy is the public-private hierarchy … I say to hell with it. The reason I feel embarrassed at my own attempts to speak personally in a professional context is that I have been conditioned to feel that way. (Tompkins, 1987, p. 169)

Part of the reason for my strange, oscillating high school essays was this conditioning. Instead, I proposed alternatives to my very first students in "Thinking Writing", all the way back in 2009. Ideas are tied to their speaker. Ideas are spoken in the voice of their author. Criticism is bound to the body of its writer.

In having these discussions with students, a consistent topic that arises is the rule of "don't use the personal 'I' in your essays". We ask each other where this rule comes from, what it indicates about what is valued in a critical essay, and what it might feel like to reinstate the "I" in an essay written for university. Discomfort is the common answer: "Like I'm doing something wrong". Our personal selves are understood to be irrelevant and embarrassing to the realm of the critical essay. The "I" lacks rigour.

Alongside these initial discussions about our understanding of the conditioned dichotomy between the professional and the personal, we are also having discussions about what it means to foster a safe and respectful space in the classroom. In responding to my questions about what a safe and respectful classroom space is to them, "Thinking Writing" students in 2022 gave me answers that I've been turning over in my mind ever since. We talked about how in the class we will be discussing matters of identity, positionality, First Nations sovereignty, race, gender, class, disability and sexuality. These are sensitive, complex, difficult topics to talk about, even in the lounge-room with our best friends, let alone in a classroom among relative strangers. After a pause in our conversation, one student said quietly, "I want to be able to make mistakes". There was quiet attention in response and nods around the room. The student continued and said that over the course of discussions, they might say something which they begin to question or change their perspective on. They suggested that we include time at the end of class discussions for people to reflect on what they said earlier, and to acknowledge that their thoughts were still emerging and malleable. There was unanimous agreement on this suggestion from the rest of the class and we included time for this reflection during our class discussions from then on.

Mistakes and failures are part of the "I" voice that we tend to exclude from our essays and articles, from our professional voices. I have made many mistakes and omissions over the years in writing the curriculum for "Thinking Writing". In the first year it ran, the readings list was dominated by white writers and theorists. Apart from weeks on "postcolonial theory" (a deeply troubled term in an Australian context, where colonising is continuing and dominant), the theory we looked at was primarily Eurocentric – Roland Barthes on structuralism, Jacques Derrida on poststructuralism, Hélène Cixous on feminism, Adrienne Rich on queerness, and so forth. This was due to my ignorance. If I had opened the scope of my lens just a little, I would have found writers like Sara Ahmed, Aileen Moreton-Robinson, bell hooks, Kimberlé

Crenshaw and Audre Lorde, who had been writing for years against the privileged position of abstracting the personal from the theoretical. With gentle and generous help from my colleagues, and through the necessary, ongoing and painful process of self-critique, the current curriculum reflects more diverse perspectives from different positionalities, cultures, bodies, voices and feelings. "Theory" itself is a term questioned and resisted by most current discourse. There is still more work I need to do. It isn't, of course, just about diversifying the readings list, but making sure I, an able-bodied cis white woman, have the capacity to safely open and hold conversations about race, disability, class, queerness, and their representation in literature, in the classroom. My students, over the years, have become far more educated and well-versed in these conversations, and I often find my role to be one of facilitator, relinquishing authority and simply monitoring a discussion. I am grateful to my students and colleagues for naming, acknowledging and making space for mistakes, failings and reflection. If a discussion is safe, respectful and robust enough to be held open for these, it inevitably becomes richer.

Nerves and fear

Rachel

I came to teaching Theory with a nervous heart, afraid of appearing foolish to my (smarter-than-me) students. Even as I write this, I can re-imagine the moment of going into the first classroom, a bundle of over-written notes in my bag, with definitions of all the words I might get asked about, the many terms I was only just coming to understand myself. Signifier. Signified. Sign. Structures. Power. Ideology. Standing at a whiteboard once, in a class of first years, I had forgotten how to spell "Jorge Luis Borges" and the student who had named this writer as his favourite sniggered, sending waves of shame through me. This loss of Authority (as Jess says, with a capital 'A', because I tied it to my sense of self as an Author) haunted me, and teaching Theory in the creative writing classroom brought the anxiety back: the terror of not being able to elucidate, to find myself exposed as a fraud, not being able to spell the names of the famous, superstar authors/theorists (!). I wonder now at this sense of what I needed to know, that my definition of knowledge was so narrowly defined: how does one *know* Theory? Why would I have walked into the classroom believing I needed to have all the answers? What is it about Theory that evokes fear?

<div align="center">*</div>

Jasmine Donahaye's essay, "Noisy like a frog" describes an experience of reading certain kinds of critical writing:

> you struggle through obfuscation and elision, trying to cut through tangled thickets like the prince in one of the universal folkloric tale types – and once through the thicket (which threatens to spring up behind you, or does spring up behind you, so that there's no going back), you are faced with a high fortified wall or impregnable door or locked chest, hiding a heavy, opaque secret whose private language you try to learn so that you can understand its precious, inner power. And you wonder, wearily, reading the work of those who theorise or those who rely heavily on others who theorise, if there really

is a secret to unlock, or if the intent of the thicket, the fortified wall, the locked door is, in fact, to conceal an absence, to obscure for its own sake; and perhaps more urgently and dishearteningly, at particularly bad moments of ugly and impenetrable language, you begin to wonder: *where's the love?* (Donahaye, 2011, p. 203)

When I consider my reasons for veering away from an English Literature major in my own undergraduate days, I know it was driven by this question: where was the love? The English department I attended had some scholars who were, clearly, driven by passion for their subjects but their readings were still weighed down by theorists who, in essence, made me feel inadequate. Unlike Liz, I did not find mentors to help me negotiate the creative/critical divide and jumped out of the academia for a period of time because I did not want to lose my love for the writers I admired by writing of them in ways which seemed determinedly obtuse and tangled. When I returned – after years inside the world of theatre, a decidedly practical art – I chose the Creative Writing discipline, where praise was given for "clean, clear prose" (as one of my lecturers repeated frequently) and, when I began to teach, there was a strong emphasis on this thing called "craft": point of view, plot, character, structure etc. This was, comparatively, "easy" to teach. We did not have to bring the outside world into the workshop. There was never the question of *why* we might choose to write a piece, only the question of *how* we had written it. We could focus on sentence structure, voice and story.

Why, then, step back into a classroom that was all about the outside world or, at least, about the theories circulating both in the academy and outside it? I was lucky in that the desire to think more intensely about why and how I wrote coincided with the opportunity to unpack the "big" theorists – Barthes, Foucault, Derrida, Butler – to consider what these critical thinkers might offer my own creativity. The first time I taught the course "Theory and Writing" (as it was then named) I went on a parallel journey with the students, picking our way through the tangled thickets together, often snagging on the supplement or the prescribed death of the author. I still heard, often, the echo of the idea of genius; not any assertions that they were geniuses per se but where, as Phillipa Holloway writes, "acts of creative writing are often described as enigmatic, unexplainable, and rooted in talent, inspiration or mysterious external forces" (2018, p. 184). Many students were reluctant to mess with the indescribable, the whisper that creativity could not be taught, it just *was;* the worry their process might be sullied by overthinking it; the preciousness of the idea, the dream, the source. As if reading the map might destroy the destination. I could understand this reluctance – like Liz's father I could see the possibility of dissection leading to death – but I had gained a sense of robustness somewhere along the path, a belief that the creative process could not be destroyed by too much knowledge, that considering the *why* would not undermine the *how*.

<div align="center">*</div>

In her study plan notes for students Liz writes:

> Finding the way impenetrable in critical writing is normal. I tend to advise students to try to relax when they're reading critical writing that they find impenetrable. Try to let

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

16

go of the anxiety of the thoughts, I don't get this. I have to *get* this. I *should be able to* get this. (MacFarlane, 2023)

Letting go of the fear of not understanding allowed me to see the journey of the course as something more than imparting knowledge. Theory could not be poured into students, they had to find their own positions, make their connections to self.

Sitting with the anxiety

Rachel

When Theory itself no longer stands outside as a series of "isms" to be conquered – poststructuralism, postmodernism, postcolonialism – but as the connective tissue that bounds our bodies, figuratively and literally, students begin to reveal deeply personal connections to these ideas. Creative writing has always sliced into the core of who we are, but the scaffolding of critical consciousness draws students to consider the why of their practice, the power of their representations, the complications of their positionalities. These discussions are not easy. A frequently used tool (suggested by Liz and Jess) is to begin the class with a time for reflective writing, to ask students to write their thoughts down before launching into speech. In this quiet time, both teacher and student consider how the class's topic – the racial imaginary, gender and feminism, First Nations' perspectives, disability aesthetics – intersects with their creativity. We consider the most respectful way to "lean into discomfort" (as students have named it), to have discussions in an energising, rather than deathly, way.

Liz

In 2022, at the beginning of their presentation on gender and feminism, a student asked the class a strange question: "if you're comfortable and able to," they said, "I wonder if you'd mind sitting on the floor?" The student got down on the floor and explained that it felt better to them this way.

There was a general clanking and shoving of furniture aside as people settled themselves cross-legged or leaning with their backs against the wall. We were smiling and looking around at each other. A few of us talked about how it reminded us of being children, seeing the legs of tables and chairs rising like a forest, us peering around and between the objects, catching glimpses of each other. The student presenting talked about the nerves they'd been feeling and how sitting in a group on the floor helped to take away some of the expectation of authority that giving a presentation elicits. Over the course of the semester, we repeated this configuration a couple of times, spontaneously. We talked about it in relation to our bodies in physical space (something we were still poised to relinquish at any moment in post-lockdown Melbourne). The feeling of the floor rising to meet our bodies, the stretching or bending of our limbs, the un-hiding, the way desks and chairs might act as props to lend us the illusion that in the classroom we are bodiless – simply brains and minds discussing ideas. The surprise and rupture of the simple act of sitting on the floor in a classroom has stayed with me ever since. It felt like a radical representation of my hopes and intentions for the subject: a recognition that

ideas are grounded in bodies, and that our sensations, emotions, sight-lines, are inextricably entangled with theories at every step.

Jess

In week two of a 2023 semester, I taught a class that felt inspired. It was a class on the ideas I had introduced into the curriculum last year, "Theory and the Self", a topic which had come directly from my own experiences of becoming liberated to think of theory through the prism of past and subjective experiences, to understand it the way I began to believe it was always meant to be understood. I watched as the students came to their own conclusions about how these non-fraternal twins were inextricably bound together and could not be unbound. "It's like that Sontag quote," one of my students said, "thinking is a form of feeling and … feeling is a form of thinking" (Sontag, 2013, p. 65).

When Sontag says that thinking is a form of feeling and feeling is a form of thinking, I feel that research is a form of writing for me and writing is a form of research. The intellectual rigour, time spent reading and thinking about the field, the critical animus of research is absolutely crucial to creative writing for me. And the play, beauty, and clarity of creative writing is something I simply cannot dispense with when writing in the critical mode.

When I say "I feel that research is" I am insisting on my own subjectivity. But my insistence on my own subjectivity, fallibility, humanness, ways of feeling my way through things, is not to be confused with faltering or false humility. For someone whose personhood has always been bound up with what Anne Anlin Cheng calls the experience of "living and living as thing" (2019, p. 23), for someone whose survival has been secured by their "crushing objecthood" (2019, p. 1), to insist upon my own subjecthood and that I have any subjective experience at all, that I feel, that I am, is deeply important. It's me, me, me, I'm saying. These words are mine, mine, mine. And you might think I don't feel anything when you hurt me but I do. I feel it all.

Trinh Minh-Ha writes that "the minor-ity's voice is always personal; that of the major-ity, always impersonal" (1989, p. 28). I know then, that my temptation is to speak in the abstract, the objective and the far away voice, to sound like that impersonal voice. But we know by now that "the master's tools will never dismantle the masters house" (Lorde, 2007, p. 112). I've had those tools for a long time, I've loved that house but as Sara Ahmed writes, "think of this: how we learn about worlds when they do not accommodate us. Think of the kinds of experiences you have when you are not expected to be here. These experiences are a resource to generate knowledge" (2017, p. 10). These experiences are a way to generate knowledge. So rather than turning away from the personal because that is what has been laid upon me, I interrogate in my research and writing what is so minor about minor-ness and what is so important about impersonality. I feel my way through theory, touching it and loving it as a way of knowing it.

Conclusions

At the beginning of each semester of "Thinking Writing" we know we will encounter different creative writing students whose connection with, or antagonism towards, Theory will determine how the classroom discussions unfold. The answer to "what is the relationship between the critical and the creative" will shift in these classrooms as some students embrace the ways in which the two speak to each other, and others continue to resist, or be suspicious or fearful. As our own journeys show, these positions are not unusual, nor is the model for how creativity should be infected with theory singular or linear. We can come to no real conclusions as to how much creative writers need in terms of their knowledge of cultural and critical theory, only that our own encounters hint at the shift exposure can generate, at the ways we might open up creative writing to the act of critical thinking, and the creative to the rigours of critical questioning, at the new perspectives such symbiosis enables, from the ground and up.

Acknowledgements

References

Adsit, J. (2017). *Toward an inclusive creative writing: Threshold concepts to guide the literary writing curriculum*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life.* Duke University Press.

– – – . (2006). *Queer Phenomenology.* Duke University Press.

Alcoff, L., & Mohanty, S. P. (2006). Reconsidering identity politics. In P.M.L. Moya, M. Hames-García, S. P. Mohanty, & L. Alcoff (Eds.), *Identity politics reconsidered* (pp. 1–9). Palgrave Macmillan US.

Barthes, R. (1967). The death of the author. In P. Barry (Ed.). (2017) *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory.* Manchester University Press.

Butler, J. (2004). *The Judith Butler reader* (Sara Salih, Ed.). Blackwell Publishing.

Cassidy, B. (2020). Structural whiteness and the business of creative writing in Australia: Developing reflexive pedagogy. *TEXT*, 24(1), 1–20. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.17810

Cheng, A.A. (2019). *Ornamentalism*. Oxford University Press.

Coetzee, J. M. (1984). A note on writing. In M. J. Daymond, J. U. Jacobs, & M. Lenta (Eds.), *Momentum: On recent South African writing* (11–13). University of Natal Press.

Coetzee, J. M. (2004). *Elizabeth Costello*. Random House UK.

Crenshaw, K. (2019). *On intersectionality: Essential writings.* New Press.

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

19

Dawson, P. (2003). Towards a new poetics in creative writing pedagogy. *TEXT*, 7(1). https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/32009

Derrida, J. (1997). *Of grammatology* (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Trans). Johns Hopkins University Press.

Donahaye, J. (2011). Noisy, like a frog …. In. R. M. Turley (Ed.), *The writer in the academy: Creative interfrictions* (199-–19). Boydell & Brewer.

Felski, R. (2015). *The limits of critique*. University of Chicago Press.

Foucault, M. (1969). What is an author? In P. Barry (Ed.). (2017) *Beginning theory: An introduction to literary and cultural theory*. Manchester University Press.

Fraiman, S. (2003). *Cool men and the second sex*. Columbia University Press.

Harris, M. (2009). Escaping the tractor beam of literary theory: Notes towards appropriate theories of creative writing – and some arguments against the inappropriate ones. *TEXT*, 13(2). https://textjournal.scholasticahq.com/article/31609

Holloway, P. (2018). The 'wicked' problem of developing critical understanding in creative writing students. *New Writing*, 16(2), 183–194.

hooks, b. (1989). Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness. *Framework*, 36, 15–23.

Lorde, A. (2007). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches*. Crossing Press.

MacFarlane, E. (2020). Obsession and unreasonable love: Creativity and devotion in comics scholarship. *Folio Comics*. https://www.foliocomics.com/australian-comics-essays-2021/obsession-and-unreasonable-love-creativity-and-devotion-in-comics-scholarship-by-dr-elizabeth-macfarlane

MacFarlane, E. (2023, February). Study Plan: Week One "Thinking Writing: Theory and Creativity". University of Melbourne.

Minh-Ha, T. T. (1989). *Woman, native, other: Writing postcoloniality and feminism*. Indiana University Press.

Moreton-Robinson, A. (2000). *Talkin' up to the white woman: Aboriginal women and feminism*. University of Queensland Press.

Quilford, R. (2016). Conversations with Althusser, Bakhtin and Genette: The influence of theory on creative practice. *TEXT*, 20(2), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.52086/001c.25321

Ruddick, L. (2001). The near enemy of the Humanities is professionalism. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. 23 November, 2001.

Ruddick, L. (2015). When nothing is cool. In A. Bammer & R.-E. Boetcher Joeres (Eds.), *The future of scholarly writing: Critical interventions* (71–85). Palgrave Macmillan.

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

20

Smith, H. (2006). Emerging from the experiment: A systematic methodology for creative writing teaching. *New Writing*, 3(1), 17–34. https://doi.org/10.2167/new229.0

Sontag, S. (2013). *Susan Sontag: The complete Rolling Stone interview*. Yale University Press.

Tompkins, J. (1987). Me and my shadow. *New Literary History*, 19(1), 169–178.

Walker, A. (2004). *In search of our mothers' gardens: Womanist prose*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Yu, J. (2019). *Inventory of pain.* University of Melbourne. PhD Dissertation. University Library Catalogue. http://hdl.handle.net/11343/235874

TEXT Vol 28 2024 Special Issue 73: Creativecritical Selves
Guest Editors: Daniel Juckes & Stefanie Markidis
Special Issues Series Editors: Ben Stubbs & Ella Jeffery

21