

University of South Australia

Amelia Walker

Re-collecting the self as an o/Other: creative writing research matters

Abstract:

This paper addresses a major obstacle against widespread acceptance of creative writing as a mode of research: the romanticist belief that creative originality derives ‘from’ the self. Beginning with an account of how this belief undermines the perceived relevance and thus significance of creative writing research, the paper proceeds to critically (re)consider the question of where creative writing comes ‘from’. This (re)consideration involves careful examination of ‘originality’ and ‘the self’. Drawing on creative writing research, literary theory and theories of subject-formation, I argue that creative writing comes ‘from’ a subject or self always-already o/Other to itself. This self’s o/Otherness links it with the research topic and field, which strengthens the relevance and legitimacy of creative writing as research. Overall, my aim is to contribute to the growing body of academic literature arguing for arts practice as a means for knowledge generation, and thus to further ongoing collective efforts towards the acceptance of creative research approaches in and beyond the field of creative writing.

Biographical note:

Amelia Walker, a current PhD candidate and Creative Writing tutor at the University of South Australia, has published three poetry collections and three books on teaching poetry in the primary school setting. Passionate about live performance poetry as a mode of social (re)engagement, she has presented her work at international as well as Australian literary festivals and events including the 2011 Transeuropa Festival, the 2008 World Poetry Festival in Kolkata, Word Forward in Singapore, the Queensland Poetry Festival, the Emerging Writers Festival, This is Not Art, Overload and two past AAWP conferences.

Keywords:

Creative writing research – method/ology – knowledge re-making – self – ERA – disciplinary survival

Introduction: how romanticist beliefs undermine creative writing research

[T]he other enters into the composition of the same... the identity of a person or a community is made up of these identifications with values, norms, ideals, models, and heroes, in which the person or the community recognises itself... a process comparable to that of habit formation, namely through the internalisation which annuls the initial effect of otherness, or at least transfers it from the outside to the inside (Ricoeur 1992, *Oneself as Another*: 121).

The following excerpt from Gerson's *The Voice of the Muse: Answering the Call to Write* (2008) is just one example of what I consider a major hurdle against the acceptance of creative writing¹ as a valid research practice in contemporary Australian universities:

[T]ap into that pool within you... all you need to know lies within you... in your deepest heart. Write your fire. Write your truth. The only knowledge that is unique to you is the knowledge of your heart, the wisdom of your soul, the force of your passion. Write from those places that no one else can (Gerson 2008: 81).

Further examples arise in creative writing advice books that foreground the importance of the 'authentic' 'inner writing self' (Vandermeulen 2011: 58) and/or recommend developing characters 'from the self' (Hunt & Sampson 1998: 39). The hurdle or problem is the persistence, in contemporary Western societies, of romanticist beliefs about original creative processes (including but exceeding creative writing) deriving 'from the self'.

Why is this a problem for creative writing research? The issues primarily relate, I contend, to the *kind* of self the belief implies. This is, as Morgan (2012) and Dietrich (2012) have separately observed, predominantly a romanticist self: a fully bounded, idiosyncratic entity that pre-exists and remains fully detachable from o/Others and from its situation. This undermines the perceived relevance of creative writing research – relevance being a major and longstanding criterion for research evaluation in Western societies (Denis & Lehoux 2009: 372), one arguably fundamental to current Australian research evaluation demands for 'significance' (ARC 2015), for if creative writing research findings seem derived from a self fully distinct from o/Others and its situation, there remains limited scope for arguing that those findings bear importance to anything beyond the individual writer. Colloquially phrased, why should anybody else give a stuff? Repercussions of this scenario are observable in the social sciences, where those pursuing practices of autoethnography have faced charges of self-indulgence and navel gazing (Delamont 2007) while practitioners of fictocriticism must continually defend their approaches against the looming 'spectre of scientific discourse' (Rhodes 2014: 2). As for the academic field of creative writing itself, belief in creative originality deriving from the romanticist self is probably among the reasons why creative writers in universities are often seen as 'muse-ridden and irrational' (Boyd 2009) and why we continue to battle persisting (mis)conceptions of creative practices as separate from, even opposed to, scholarly rigor (Hecq, Hill & Theiler 2015).

This paper seeks to address the problems described so far. My aim is to convincingly argue for creative writing's capacity to generate significant research findings – new knowledges that can *matter* in terms of both importance and of real-world outcomes.² This aim resides within a broader project of ongoing collective efforts towards the acceptance of creative research approaches in and beyond the field of creative writing – efforts that I, following Webb (2010, 2012) and Gibson (2010), among others, believe must presently be pursued via demonstrations of how creative practices can operate as means for knowledge generation or inquiry.³ This paper's approach towards the stated aim involves re-examining the notion that creative originality derives from the self – which in turn involves re-examining two key concepts: one, originality, and two, the self. Why these? Originality is not only strongly tied to contemporarily enduring romanticist understandings of creativity and of how creative writing texts may be perceived as bearing literary merit (Dietrich 2012), but is also, like relevance, a key research evaluation criterion – one reflected in a contemporary Australian research evaluation emphasis on 'innovation' (ARC 2015). Meanwhile, regarding the self, it is, as earlier explained, primarily the assumption of a *bounded* self that undermines creative writing research relevance. But if the self is not entirely bounded, then writing 'from the self' may not be contraindicated to research relevance after all. Via examination of these themes, this paper ultimately constructs its case for the significance of creative writing research – an account of how and why creative writing research matters.

Reconsidering originality: creative writing research perspectives on creativity and composition

From a romanticist point of view – still among the most commonly-accepted points of view in contemporary Western societies – creative 'originality' tends to imply two things: newness, meaning the sense that a creative product notably differs from its predecessors; and the sense of a pure and spontaneous origin or source, one associated, where writing is concerned, with the notion of a writer's own unique textual 'voice' (Page 2011). However, both of these criteria have since the twentieth century at least been seriously questioned and disputed (Page 2011). This paper therefore seeks an alternative understanding of originality, and it seems to me most sensible to draw that understanding from the field in which this paper arises, the body of literature to which it primarily speaks – that is, the literature of the Australian creative writing research field.

In an early article, *Reproducing Originality*, Brophy (1997) argues that the aesthetic *impression* of originality – that is, of newness and a unique voice derived from a pure and spontaneous self-as-source – is an illusion paradoxically dependent on the enlistment of 'unoriginal' resources, or in other words, of things *not* derived from the writer's supposedly unique, bounded self. For example, the deployment of 'unoriginality' might mean the engagement of known literary forms and devices, archetypal characters and plots, familiar metaphors and symbols, cultural allusions, and so on. As Brophy (1997) points out, a purely 'original' text that did not engage any of these things would actually be illegible – devoid of the shared reference points

that make communication possible. Even James Joyce, who virtually invented new languages in which to write his major works, did so with reliance on existing languages – not to mention certain seminal texts (Clark 2010: 114).

In a more recent paper, Carlin (2013) affirms and extends Brophy's (1997) argument via the fitting illustration of how he (Carlin) accidentally rewrote Brophy's 'original' article and indeed published the piece (Carlin 2011) before later realising – with a 'vertiginous shock of familiarity' – the uncanny similarities between his 'unconscious rewriting' and the article that he had earlier read, but forgot (Carlin 2013: 3). Carlin's (2013) piece therefore affirms Brophy's argument for creative originality as 'an act already mapped out, already begun in imitation' (Brophy 1997, n.p.). However, Carlin (2013) adds an emphasis on the unconscious, unknown nature of the unoriginal borrowings that enable originality (meaning the illusion thereof). This psychoanalytic approach is very compatible with – and quite likely informed by – Brophy's later writings on creativity and composition (Brophy 1998, 2003, 2009). Yet Brophy's 1997 article does not actually mention the unconscious or its role.

Considered together, Brophy's (1997) and Carlin's (2013) writings enable an understanding of originality as something born of an unoriginality often imperceptible to the writer themselves. This imperceptibility perhaps explains why creative writers and teachers of writing are sometimes among the most passionate subscribers to romanticist beliefs about creative originality (Hunt & Sampson 1998, Gerson 2008, Vandermeulen 2011). Reconceiving originality as unoriginality can support this paper's aim of arguing for the relevance and significance of creative writing research, for if 'new' writings derive from unoriginality – from the reading and unconscious rewriting of existing texts and cultural resources – then the creative writer produces original works by engaging with the resources that culturally connect them with o/Others and/or with the situated circumstances they share with those o/Others. This means that creative writing texts can provide data reflecting cultural scenarios and patterns of human relation. Analysis of this data can enable the generation of research findings to guide outcomes in the form of cultural action, interaction, intervention and engagement. In these ways, creative writing research can *matter*.

There is, however, a new problem: arguing for the relevance of creative writing research on the basis that new creative writing texts are produced through processes of unoriginality potentially undermines the significance of creative writing research on another front – that of originality itself, which is, as earlier noted, another key research evaluation criterion (Denis & Lehoux 2009: 372). As a redress to this problem, this paper's next section seeks to explain how unoriginal creative writings, if not necessarily 'new' in the commonly-accepted sense, can nonetheless provide *strong* processes for innovative knowledge (re)generation.

'Strong' unoriginality: queering Harold Bloom

If, as per Brophy (1997) and Carlin (2013), original creative writings come into being via paradoxical processes of unoriginal, albeit unconscious borrowing from existing texts and cultural materials, how can creative writing research be said to bring

anything new and thus significant to the existing body of research knowledges? In response to this question, and as a reproach to the potential problems unoriginality produces for the significance of creative writing research, this section discusses Bloom's historic account of *The Anxiety of Influence* (1973). Relayed in necessarily brief and simplified terms, Bloom's theory states that poets create new works by misreading and rewriting their predecessors' works, but because this truth is unpalatable to the latecomer poet, their psyche melancholically denies it, which breeds anxiety, plunging poets into subconscious battles for the spoils of literary inheritance. This perspective bears important similarities as well as differences with the accounts of un/originality found in Brophy's (1997) and Carlin's (2013) works. The similarities include, one, the depiction of creative originality as vitally tied to tradition and/or existing materials, and, two, the treatment of this process as a largely unconscious, unintentional and unknown one in which the 'latecomer' writer is seduced by the illusion that they are producing something original, spontaneous and utterly their own.

A key point of difference between Bloom (1973) and the Australian perspectives (Brophy 1997, Carlin 2013) is the former's persistent insistence that unknowingly unoriginal creative writings can, although not necessarily 'new' in the outright sense, nonetheless be considered 'strong'. By Bloom's account, 'strong' poems are ones that affect impressions of newness because the latecomer poet has unknowingly misread and rewritten their predecessors in particularly unusual, indeed inventive ways (1973: 5). For instance, the latecomer poet may have misinterpreted a predecessor's poem in senses that contradict, extend, fragment, swerves away from or otherwise (re)invest the text with something more than what was obviously 'in' the original (but which was nonetheless enabled by it) (1973: 14-16). Or the latecomer poet may misread and rewrite multiple texts into the 'one' apparently new poem, and, doing so, may recombine and re-present what may have seemed disparate and unconnected materials and ideas in previously unexplored ways (1973: 14). This can support an argument for creative writing as 'innovative' and thus 'significant' by current Australian research evaluation standards (ARC 2015). Indeed, and on the broader level of research in most Western cultural settings, if one considers the longstanding academic traditions of literature reviews and of research responding to problems identified through previous research (Oliver 2004: 109), Bloom's (1973) account of how strong poems arise through misreading and rewriting therefore makes it possible to assert that creative writing does what research has always done, just in ways that superficially appear a little different.

But enlisting Bloom's theories to solve one problem raises others. The first – perhaps a problem for me personally more so than an outright problem for the aims this paper pursues, but nonetheless a problem I feel I cannot leave unmentioned – entails Bloom's politics, which are broadly anti-feminist, anti-postcolonial and indeed anti most things that are not dead, white and male (Bloom 1994: 20).⁴ The second problem – which, I shall shortly suggest, may be connected with the first – is that Bloom's account of how latecomer poets are able to remain impervious to their misreading and rewriting processes strongly relies on the Freudian theory of melancholia – briefly,

that the melancholic denies something, and simultaneously denies the very act of denial, thereby forcing both the denied knowledges out of consciousness, but allowing their continued unconscious operation as modes of o/Otherness unknowingly internalised into the self (Freud 1914-1916: 243-258) – but discussion of melancholic denial and its relationships to self-formation remains minimal in Bloom.

Perhaps Bloom neglected to elaborate on melancholia and the self because he assumed he was taking the concepts directly from Freud (1914-1916) without significant changes, and that any reader wanting clarification could thus consult the original. By my evaluation, this is a particularly ironic move for a theorist of misreading, for as the past eighty-odd years have shown, Freud's theories can be re-read and re-deployed in a multitude of highly different ways. For instance, there are feminist readings of Freud (Grosz 1990/2013: 72), and then there are some *not-so-feminist* readings – bluntly, ones tending to privilege hegemonic masculinities, Western cultural dominance, and all the problematic trappings (as discussed in Grosz 1990/2013: 72). Bloom's deployment of Freud is, I suggest, of the latter variety. This is why I earlier remarked that the problem of Bloom's inadequate explications of melancholia and the self may bear connections with that of his politics. Now I venture that if the problems are connected, perhaps so too may be their redress. The next section of this paper therefore raises Butler's (1990, 1993, 1997)⁵ early works on subject-formation. Butler also engages (with) the theory of melancholia, but offers far more detail regarding how she interprets Freud in order to complexly theorise how selves – in Butlerian terms, subjects – are formed. Furthermore, Butler pursues a queer ethicality geared towards unsettling hegemonic power relations and remaking the possibilities for being in less violent, more liveable ways. Hence the next section of this paper introduces Butler in order to queer Bloom (1973) and thus to find ways beyond the new problems this section has noted.

Writing from the self subject as an o/Other: why creative writing research matters

This paper's introduction explained that in order to reconsider the presently enduring romanticist notion of creative originality as something derived largely from the self, I would examine, first, originality, and then, the self. The previous two sections have discussed originality. This one broaches the self, and does so via an approach driven by what has arisen through the investigations of this paper so far – that is, the need to queer Bloom's theories about misreading (1973) by turning to Butler's (1990, 1993, 1997) early works on subject-formation. This section begins by discussing differences between the Butlerian subject and the romanticist self, then explains how Butler's theories can articulate with Bloom's (1973), as well as Brophy's (1997) and Carlin's (2013), to support this paper's case for the relevance, originality and significance of creative writing research.

According to Butler's early works (1990, 1993, 1997), the subject is a figure that tends to perceive itself as 'a self' in the romanticist sense, but which differs from the romanticist self in that the subject forms, and is continually re-formed, in 'discourse'

(Butler 1990: 2) – including but exceeding the various discourses conventionally associated with creative writing. Butler’s treatment of discourse and subject-formation draws substantially on Foucault’s (1980, 1983, 1984, 1988, 1997/2007, 2002) extensive investigations into these same topics. However, since a full exploration into Foucauldian discourse and subjectification would, I believe, form an unwieldy distraction from the aims at hand, the key point this paper draws from Butler’s early works is as follows: the subject forms in relation to o/Others and its situation (meaning the shifting ways in which each subject is situated in discourse – but this in no way detracts from the ‘realness’ of the scenario, for by Butler’s account, discourse *matters* in very material ways).⁶ The Butlerian subject is thus constructed from o/Otherness – or as Butler notes in a slightly later work, the subject is always-already an o/Other to itself (2005). This distinguishes the Butlerian self from the subject in two ways: one, it is not bounded or extractable *from* others, but rather relationally *bound to* and *dependent on* them; and two, it is ‘unoriginal’ in the sense that it does not arise spontaneously or pre-exist its surrounds. However, the subject can nonetheless be ‘original’ in the sense of being different, for each subject bears a particular (shifting) position within its shared situation and bears specific (changing) relations to the o/Other subjects who encounter situations and relations in their ‘own’ (shared-but-distinct) ways.

Butler’s account of subject-formation is articulable with Brophy’s (1997), Carlin’s (2013) and Bloom’s (1973) accounts of creative un/originality, for in both cases, something that seems bounded and spontaneous is on closer examination dependent on – and reflective of – its situation and interpersonal connections. The subject unoriginally forms illusions of an original self that in fact depends on o/Otherness, while illusions of creative originality arise through the unoriginal re-iteration⁷ of existing materials that connect the writer with o/Others. This articulation enables a renewed approach to the question of where creative writing comes ‘from’, one that can strengthen a case for the relevance of creative writing research: if creative writing comes from a seeming self that is more precisely a subject always-already o/Other to itself, then creative writing may be said to come from o/Others via the writing subject as a mediator. Creative writing research can therefore offer findings and outcomes that bear relevance to those o/Others. Furthermore, due to the writing subject’s mediating function, creative writing can do so in ways that, if not necessarily ‘new’ in the outright sense, are arguably ‘original’, or at least innovative and unique, in the sense that each writing subject bears a particular situated relationship to their situation and the o/Others who share it, which means that each writing subject combines and mediates – or perhaps *misreads* – a different range of materials in a different way. These differences make it possible to argue for ‘unoriginal’ creative writings as ‘strong’ and thus significant.

But a new question here arises: if each individual subject bears a particular position and set of relations that can offer uniquely innovative, relevant and significant findings regarding cultural situations and patterns of human relation, then why bother engaging creative writing – that is, the production of novels, poems, plays and other texts describable and literary and/or playful – as a means for accessing these insights?

Why not simply sit and pontificate our own peculiar points of view? Indeed, why not navel gaze and call it research? Key to Butler's theorisation of subjecthood is that self-o/Otherness is melancholically denied by, and thus largely imperceptible to the self (1993: 35). That is to say, the subject is largely unable to perceive how it is formed through its relations to o/Others and its situation, and is thus very limited in its capacity to intentionally retrieve the data that makes it a potential site for relevant, innovative and significant research. However, Carlin's (2013) account of creative un/originality suggests that creative writing, with its unconscious processes of unoriginal creation, enables access to and investigation of these unknown subjective relations, for during the composition process, a creative writer unknowingly draws on aspects of o/Otherness that it does not realise have been (re)sourced from elsewhere and incorporated into the self. Or at least, the creative writer does not realise this at the moment of composition itself. However, through processes of textual revision and critical analysis, it is possible for a creative writer to recognise where and how they have unintentionally borrowed from o/Others, and then to generate knowledges by asking, *what does this unoriginality suggest about the cultural scenarios and patterns of human relation pertinent to my sites of writing and inquiry?* Carlin's (2013) paper about accidentally rewriting Brophy (1997), which does not merely reiterate, but extends and adds new findings to those of the 'original', demonstrates one way in which this can work – one way in which researchers can use creative writing processes to find out *things they do not know they know*, and then to extend that knowledge further. By engaging unconscious processes in ways that make it possible to later draw those processes into conscious re-cognition (re-thinking), creative writing enables knowledge re-generation in ways unlikely to occur through straightforward self-reflection. That is to say, it offers something far more complex and valuable than 'navel gazing'. Furthermore, creative writing offers modes of knowledge-(re)generation – and thus offers knowledges – equally unlikely to occur through those research methods and methodologies already assigned widespread recognition and approval. This makes creative writing research relevant, innovative and significant: the pursuit of creative writing as research *matters*, for the findings and outcomes it enables are distinct from those of contemporarily more common approaches, which means that creative writing's inclusion in contemporary research contexts (including but exceeding Australian universities) can complement and extend the important findings and outcomes currently generated through established means.

Conclusion: this paper seeks its own obsolescence

This paper's primary aim has been to address the problems that a contemporarily widespread belief in creative originality deriving 'from the self' produces for creative writing research in current-day Australian universities – namely, the ways in which this belief undermines the relevance and thus the significance of creative writing research. As I insinuated early on, it isn't necessarily the belief in writing from the self that causes these problems, but rather the predominant Western cultural tendency to presume that the self in question is of the unique, bounded, idiosyncratic, romanticist model. However, if creative writings are said to stem 'from' the

illusionary self of a Butlerian subject, then creative writing research data drawn from the self can potentiate relevant research findings, for the Butlerian subject is vitally formed through o/Otherness – through relations to a certain situation and those who share it. It might thus be more correct that creative writing in fact comes from o/Others *via* the subject as a mediator or lens – a very crucial one, for the subject’s particular relations to o/Others and its situation enable it to re-invest existing materials with newness by rearranging and portraying them in strong, that is, hitherto unexplored, ways. If this is not quite ‘originality’ as conventionally conceived, it is nonetheless a mode of innovation, and, combined with relevance, it strengthens a case for the significance of creative writing research. Indeed, it can support the argument that creative writing does what research has always done, but in different ways – ways that enable the production of knowledge outcomes unlikely to arise through other methods and methodologies, ways which can uniquely inform the enactment of real-world outcomes that matter.

In closing, then, what are the outcomes of *this* paper? What contribution does it offer? In short, this paper’s contribution is a recommendation – that creative writing academics under pressure to demonstrate the significance of their work can use the argument I have presented here as a means for explicating the relevance, innovation and significance of creative writing research. That argument, re-iterated one final time, is that creative writing research stems from a subject or self always-already o/Other to itself in ways that, if not necessarily ‘original’, can nonetheless re-invest existing knowledges with innovative insights that significantly matter not just to the self, but for the o/Others with whom the self bears relations, and which can furthermore *materially matter* by informing the enactment of outcomes in shared situations. In offering this recommendation and argument, I want, quite simply, to make it easier for creative writing academics, and also researchers deploying creative writing methodologies in other fields (including but not limited to the social sciences) to continue the important work they already are, and have for decades now been pursuing. Ideally, albeit paradoxically, this paper ought to help make itself obsolete, for it dreams of a world in which it would seem plain preposterous to question, and thus to defend, the significance of creative writing as research. Although one small paper cannot on its own produce the major cultural shifts required to transform this dream into a reality, I write so as to raise one more voice in an already strong and growing chorus; I write to further the broader ongoing collective effort towards greater acceptance of creative research approaches in and beyond the field of creative writing (Brady & Krauth 2006, Boyd 2009, Gibson 2010, Webb 2010, 2012, Rhodes 2014, Hecq, Hill & Theiler 2015). Or, to express things at last in the most brutal of terms, I have invested time and energy into the presentation of this paper and its argument so that creative writing researchers of the future – myself included – might face that bit less pressure to justify what we do, and may thus invest more of our time and energies into actual creative writing research.

Acknowledgements

The ideas explored in this paper would and could not have been thinkable to me without the enduring patience and support of my PhD supervisor, Dr Vicki Crowley. I also thank my co-supervisor, Dr Ioana Petrescu, and the associate head of UniSA's school of Communication, International Studies and Languages, Dr Brad West, for sound advice and support throughout my PhD candidature. Last but definitely not least, I express gratitude towards my dear friend and fellow writer Elliot Mundy, for precious *adda* (more-than-conversations), inspiration and boundless kindness. Any errors, however, remain entirely my own.

Endnotes

¹ Though it can suggest many things, I here treat 'creative writing' as the production of novels, poetry, plays and other texts describable as literary and/or playful.

² My use of 'matter' here alludes to Judith Butler's now historic argument in the foreword to *Bodies That Matter* (1993) – in brief that discursive operations, including but exceeding those of writing, can 'matter' as material and/or bodily effects, and that this heightens the senses in which discursive issues 'matter' in the sense of significance.

³ I recognise that not all creative writing or arts academics are necessarily happy with the notion of arguing for creative writing or arts practice as research. Indeed, I have my own hang-ups about the issue. However, following Gibson (2010), my feeling is that, at present, creative writers in universities need to be pragmatic and strategic: 'I can't see myself winning any argument about artists demanding some privileged exemption from the demand for verbal disquisition and debate-based defence of knowledge-claims. There may come a time when a sizeable portion of our society can sense and accept an artwork to be speaking directly and unambiguously to them in that particular artwork's own argot. Indeed, [let us] work to bring that time closer. But I feel the need to say this pragmatically, respectfully and strategically: now is not that time' (Gibson 2010: 7).

⁴ I base this remark about Bloom's politics on remarks he has made about feminists and postcolonial theorists, who he derides as a 'school of resentment' (Bloom 1994: 20).

⁵ My emphasis on the fact that I am turning to 'early' Butler is intended to acknowledge that Butler has since revised many of her theories, particularly where gender and performativity are concerned. However, where subject-formation as an alternative to romanticist conceptions of a bounded self are concerned, I feel that Butler's early ideas are still highly useful and relevant to the issues this paper confronts.

⁶ See endnote one.

⁷ I use the word 're-iteration' with thought of Derrida (1978/2002, 1988), whose ghostly influence pervades this paper much as it does Butler's early works (Salih 2002: 91).

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