

Writing the Ghost Train: Rewriting, Remaking, Rediscovering

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Reading and writing, we are at once visceral and ghost-like; in our bodies and out of them; making imagined places real—Martin Edmond

Prends-garde: à jouer au fantôme, on le devient...

Beware: if you play ghosts, you become one...—Roger Caillois

Writing is a ghosting. It is never far from history and memory. But history and memory are always refigured, reused, transformed and recreated according to a writer's predilections and imaginings. There are no particular laws of limitation. Having its seeds in accumulations of the past, memories, dissimulations and fabulations, what we write as script, poetry, fiction and creative non fiction can be read in and through manifold contexts as creative footnotes to histories. These footnotes take their place in the flux between the experienced, known and recorded and the as yet to be created, between public and private, the generally agreed and the idiosyncratic.

While this conference looked back to twenty years of work carried out in the field of creative writing studies by the Australasian Association of Writing Programs, it also looked forward to that which is 'in the making'. With the title of this event, 'Writing the ghost train,' we paid homage to Martin Edmond's keynote address of 2014, 'riding the ghost train,' an insightful exploration of the creative drive of one singular writer. We also acknowledged that for the indigenous inhabitants of Australia, the white man was once – and still is, in many ways – a ghost. As the planet moves, with a grim relentless urgency toward destruction brought on by our own spectral dreams, we also noted both history and nature's examples: destruction makes room for creation. Working by association, linking the real with the imagined, the memory with the artefact, the archive with the avatar, we explored what such scholars as Todorov, Genette, Hutcheon, Eco and Kristeva have called hypotext, hypertext, genotext, phenotext, and, more generally, the recontextualisation of narrative and aesthetic motifs in our practice as writers and teachers. We also debated questions of originality.

The focus of the conference was the question of rewriting, interpreting and adapting texts. It became a fertile site for rediscovering. It showcased artistic works and highlighted creative modes of research; it enabled understandings of how we make and remake and to what ends; it provided opportunities to explore how creative artists engage with theory.

Papers were invited in four thematic streams:

1. 'Rewriting the historical event' addressed the issue of interpreting or re-interpreting the past through the filters of memory, ideology and ethics.
2. 'Recovering narratives, re-crafting texts' focused on reading drafts and archives against those rewritings that are corrective in nature and those that pay homage to the source, opening a space for modes of editing, teaching and publishing. This stream also paid attention to the art of literary translation.
3. 'Rescripting the text, visual encounters in the text' brought together an original literary text with adaptations, transpositions or variations.
4. 'Refashioning the self' explored the effects of rewriting texts or remaking images in the experiences of the subject in the text as, for example, through the processes of self-editing, myth-making, and canon-formation.

The conversation was rich and lively. It highlighted that as writers we are inhabited by voices, languages, stories and texts just as we inhabit space, time, mind and body, a point made by Kay Rozynski at the height of conference elation and near exhaustion. This is not new, of course. Long ago, Ralph Waldo Emerson, in an essay titled 'Quotation and Originality' (1859), challenged the very notion of originality by arguing that as speakers and writers we are inescapably involved in a constant process of quotation. As Freud later demonstrated, the human psyche is a kind of quotation machine (1895). It is indeed the case that the use of words involves quotation and that the past, as experience and as record, inhabits the present. Despite any changes we might wish to make to Emerson's text in order to account for the technological developments that have occurred in excess of one hundred and fifty years, we have to concede that the tension and interrelatedness between quotation and originality endures. As human beings, we are compelled to repeat (Freud 1920). And as writers, too. David Foster Wallace once put it this way: 'He could shuffle and recombine proven entertainment formulae into configurations that allowed the muse of Familiarity to appear cross-dressed as Innovation' (2007: 235).

Dominique Hecq

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