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Why I don't write (much): per-forming failure in and as creative writing research

Abstract:

The need to reconceive failure as something potentially creative and productive is well recognised within the field of creative writing (Motion 2011, Brien, Burr & Webb 2013, Kroll 2015, Webb 2015). Although a solid body of existing literature attends to this need on the theoretical level, there remains a need for more practitioners to share their specific, situated narratives of working with and through failure, for such narratives can act as models and offer hope to others facing similar scenarios. This paper aims to offer one such narrative in the form of the script for a speech I delivered at the 2016 AAWP conference. The speech acknowledges that the paper I initially intended to present had fundamental flaws—flaws only addressable, the speech suggests, via collaboration with others, and via engagement of slow scholarship principles (Hartman & Darab 2012, Bird Rose 2013). The speech is here accompanied by a summary and context statement, which explains how admitting failure in public at the conference helped me to find the collaborators I sought, and thus to continue pursuing the same objectives, but via an enhanced methodology, and with the benefits of the lessons failure affords. The context statement also discusses the curious ways in which my pragmatic 'speech' was (re)conceived by witnesses as a creative 'performance', and of how their responses led me to perceive the script's potential usefulness to other creative writing researchers, particularly research degree candidates, as a narrative modelling possibilities for working with and through failure *in* creative writing research by reconceiving failure *as* creative writing research.

Biographical note:

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Creative writing – writing-as-research – silence – failure – slow scholarship

'Why I Don't Write (Much)' Summary and Context:

> Failure can lead practitioners in new directions, close pathways, solve specific problems that turn out to be more significant than the project as a whole, and suggest more fruitful questions to pose (Kroll 2015: 143).

'Why I Don't Write (Much)' is the script of a speech I presented at the 2016 AAWP conference in place of the critical stream paper I had originally submitted and planned to present on the topic of 'not-writing'. The original paper treated 'not-writing' ironically, as something that could in fact involve a great deal of private writing, but without recognisable publication outcomes, and argued for the need to reconceive 'not-writing' as a socially-engaged activity, as opposed to withdrawal, self-involvement or passivity. Paradoxically, I ultimately decided not to present the original paper, which effectively became an instance of the very phenomenon it attempted to discuss. This decision was based on peer review feedback that alerted me to a core problem – namely, that my initial methodological approach, that of a self-case study, offered but limited insights into the complexities at hand. Receiving this feedback six months after the original paper's composition, I was relatively distanced from my initial work, and thus able to agree wholeheartedly with the reviewer's helpful advice. I could also perceive an effective address to the problem: the paper's rigor and scope could be strengthened through collaboration with others via duoethnography – a dialogical research methodology where two or more researchers compare and contrast experiences and perspectives on a certain topic (Norris, Sawyer & Lund 2012).

Indeed, as I continued to read and reflect, it came to seem that my initial submission had never really been a paper at all, but rather an unknowing call for potential collaborators. I thus decided not to submit the paper for the conference proceedings, but since it would inconvenience others to pull out at late notice, the best course of action seemed to be to use my presentation slot to open dialogues regarding 'not-writing'. I was horrendously nervous about standing up in public to admit that I had failed. The attendees, however, were incredibly warm and generous in their responses. Our dialogues continued not only immediately after the presentation, but right across the three days of the conference. Indeed, those dialogues remain ongoing, for I was approached by a number of people keen to collaborate, and we are now in the early stages of creating a new duoethnographic paper interrogating writerly silence, failure and other related themes

An additional, unexpected outcome of the presentation was that many attendees responded positively to my public admission of failure as a valid 'performance' in its own right. I place that word, 'performance', in quotation marks because it was the word most people used to describe what I had done, yet a word that perplexed me, for I had not considered my speech in that sense. When I wrote the speech, I was thinking pragmatically about how to communicate my situation and my desire for collaboration. Yet the enactment of these pragmatic aims in the context of a

conference presentation was (re)conceived by those who witnessed it as 'a performance of failure' – that is to say, as an artistic act, or at least statement in its own right. Although the production of a performance or creative work was never my conscious intent in writing and presenting the speech, the responses prompted me to understand how and why it might be viewed as such. This unexpected re-interpretation of my speech as a 'performance' now seems quite paradoxically 'performative' in the sense Judith Butler (1996, 1997, 1999) outlined in her early writings – namely, by 'hailing' or naming the piece a performance, the respondents re-formed and transformed it to become one, in my eyes as well as theirs.[1] They thereby invested the piece with significances I had not anticipated, but came to appreciate through conversations that followed the per-forming of my speech as a 'performance'.[2] This respondents' role in transforming speech to performance was, in reflection, quite pertinent to the 'authorised theft' theme – an effective illustration of broadly postmodern theorisations of the crucial ways in which readers actively (re)create, rather than passively receive texts. In other words, reader-writer relationships always-already entail multiple collaborative exchanges, and perhaps acts of un/knowing theft, albeit mostly not in the pejorative sense.[3]

The predominant significance respondents ascribed to my speech/performance was its demonstration of failure's capacity to benefit creative and/as critical processes: writing and silencing the initial, flawed paper became vital steps towards opening the dialogues necessary for working with and beyond those flaws. Although there have already been multiple explorations into failure in creative writing research (Motion 2011, Brien, Burr & Webb 2013, Kroll 2015, Webb 2015), responses to my 'performance of failure' indicated that many members of our field nonetheless perceive an ongoing need to expand the existing array of accounts detailing specific instances of failure. In particular, several respondents suggested that my story could provide a useful model for new postgraduate candidates experiencing anxieties and/or uncertainty regarding what to do if and when failure occurs. Hence I am (re)presenting the script with minor footnotes and annotations so that it may perhaps offer some hope, or at least lessen the sense of isolation, for someone else potentially feeling foolish and/or wondering how to fix the mess they've made. To you I say: all messes are beautiful, in some way; it's just a matter of discovering how.

'Why I Don't Write Much' Script:

> … small pieces, self-scrutinising, also sought to elide themselves. Employing a kind of un-speak, disassembling themselves into tinier fragments, the poems made a show of bringing his writing to an end' (Lawrence 2011: 201).

1.

We were sitting, sipping coffee, my friend and I, talking, laughing, catching up on old times.

Then she leaned over the table and asked me the dreadful question:

Would she, as an aspiring poet, be likely to benefit from postgraduate studies and a university career, or would academic demands supersede and stifle her creative pursuits?

2.

The day before, I was at a poetry reading, and everyone kept asking about my thesis.

– *Bloody Hell!* I shrieked. *I thought when you finished the damn things people were meant to stop asking.*

– *Bloody Hell,* the poets laughed back. *We thought when you finished them you were meant to stop being so touchy about people asking.*

They had a point, as poets sometimes do.

– *So anyhow, when are you going to publish it?* They persisted. As if that were an easy thing, even for those who actually want to do it.

– *I'm not,* I replied through gritted teeth. *I embargoed that damn thing. I don't want it read.*

– *Why not?* They persist. *Because it's academic rubbish?*

– *No, because the process was valuable but the product problematic.*

There's some rolling of eyes, but they accept the response. Or at least, they let the thesis go, and open fire on a new line of questioning.

– *What about poetry? When are you going to start writing poetry again?*

– *I am writing poetry – and not again – I never stopped.*

– *Well come on, give us some on the open stage,* they demand.

– *No!*

– *Why Not?*

– *I just don't want to – there shouldn't have to be a reason. I'm here to listen – to relax.*

– *Is it because the poetry you're writing is no good? Because all that soul sucking theory went and drained your creative mojo dry? Good bloody advertisement for creative writing programs you are… You go into the damn things, and then you stop writing!*

– *I told you, I am writing. Just nothing I feel like sharing. At least not the poetry. At least not right now.*

3.

The two scenes I have just related both connect to a seriously uncomfortable issue for many creative writing academics: we enter the university environment because we're

passionate about a particular form or genre of creative writing – for me, poetry – but then once in the university environment, we find ourselves writing or at least publishing less and less work in that form or genre.

One obvious and easy answer to this question is that academia places all kinds of other demands on a creative writer – for instance, teaching, marking, critical writing, and the pressure to generate research points. None of that can be disregarded. However, there's sometimes a risk of those things overshadowing other reasons why writers sometimes don't write – reasons that might actually be crucially relevant to our field and to the ongoing project of proving, as Kroll signalled as early as 2002, 'the value of what we do' (Kroll 2002, n.p.). For writing and not-writing are inextricably linked, the one providing the conditions for the other, and thus capable of illuminating its characteristics. The reasons why we don't write can act like the negative space of an artwork: they define and make thinkable the reasons why we do.

The paper I wrote and submitted for this conference sought to examine not-writing and not-publishing in such a way. It sought to depict and argue for the creative potentials of failure and of silence – an argument for which the precedents are multiple, interdisciplinary and extensive. For instance, Jacques Derrida was and is famous for his strategic silences (Mazzei 2007: 28). More recently in the field of queer theory, Jack Halberstam (2011) has developed an inspiring concept of failure as a queer art. Within the Australian field of creative writing, there have been important theses like Derek Motion's (2011) study of creative failure and Stephen Lawrence's (2011) on 'selves' and 'silences'. There's also a great deal regarding failure in the PhD context (Brien, Burr & Webb 2013, Kroll 2015, Webb 2015). Brien, Burr and Webb (2013) draw particular attention to the important role failure played for Samuel Beckett. In the 1970s, literary critic HP Abbott similarly described failure for Beckett as 'assertive', even strategic (1975: 222). Looking to the art world, it is also worth noting the longstanding tradition of the 'art strike' (Jouffroy 1968), where artists refuse to make art much as striking workers refuse to work—yet the art strike is itself perceivable as conceptual art, just as John Cage's silent song *4:33* is music (Pritchett 2009).

Acknowledging these and other important existing works on silence and failure, there is nonetheless still room to consider how such approaches might apply to the scenario of the creative writing academic who seems, for all practical purposes, to cease or dramatically diminish their writing output in the genre that led them to academia in the first place. That was what my paper attempted to do. But that paper itself failed. I could recognise my failure when I reviewed the paper with the renewed perception months of distance and doing other things can bring. As stupid as I may feel standing up here and admitting that outright, there's a delightful irony – maybe even a kind of poetry – in the idea that a paper about silence should be itself destined for silence. It is in fact an enactment of the very argument it makes.

Yet the paper's failure is at the same time a destabilising of its argument, a re-seeing of the possibilities, of the strategies on offer. For the moment I say that it failed, I have to recognise, there was something worthwhile it failed *at.* The moment I say it is silenced, I immediately voice a certain element of it—albeit squeezed into different

shapes and sounds—the shapes and sounds, perhaps, not of silence but of slowness, as in the concept of slow scholarship, which feminist scholars Yvonne Hartman and Sandy Darab have called for as a means to 'resist the objectifying tendencies' of what they call "speedy scholarship" —in short, the ever-increasing demand on academics to 'publish or perish' (2012: 49). In a 2013 issue of *TEXT*, Deborah Rose Bird argued for the merits of extending this argument to creative writing output. For her, this was about seeking to 'diagnose the ethical paralysis that is invading our lives'; she proposed 'slow writing as one response to our impossible position as participants in and witnesses to catastrophes beyond our comprehension' (Rose Bird 2013: n.p.). In retrospect, that was probably what I was also driving at when I drafted my failed paper. But I couldn't know it at the time. I was only just getting there … slowly. I had to write to do that. And then I had to not write. And come back. And re-read, and re-think, and realise I am still only just getting there, and it still has to be slowly.

Another definite problem with the paper was methodological, for I sought to explore the creative potentials of not-writing and not-publishing via a self-case study in which I examined my own writing and non-writing phases over a period of eighteen years. But this, too, was ironic, for the theme I kept coming back to was writing as a collective, ethically-engaged activity—a means of dialogue, exchange and world-building. Yes, there are strong, important arguments for the value of 'witnessing' particular situated stories and/as personal perspectives on issues of collective concern—arguments are often tied, curiously enough, to the same broadly ethical concerns as those of slow scholarship (Williams & Webb 2008). Yet in the case of this particular paper, with the particular points it could not quite make, the single story seemed sad in the sense that it was lonely. A voice spoke of connections, yet had none. It needed other melodies to bounce off, to improvise with. It needed other stories.

The one part of the paper I thought worthwhile, when I reviewed it, was the ending, which indeed recognised the limitations of my singular story and declared the need for other narratives, that is, the need for other creative writing academics to write and reflect on their own experiences of and reasons for not-writing. As I've already acknowledged, I'm aware there is some work in this area already, but what I'm signalling is the need for more perspectives, more stories, and thus more scope for identifying connections as well as contrast, for making something from the ways the different stories, put together, throw one another into relief.[4]

Hence what I've realised, now, and must confess, is that I had written not a paper but a nervous call. A call for collaboration, and vitally, for collaborators—more directly, for others who would like to write and think together, slowly and carefully about the issues I haven't unravelled today, and to do so through duoethnography—a methodology developed by Joe Norris, Richard D Sawyer and Darren Lund (2012), in which two or more researchers share and compare stories in order to develop deepened understandings of issues bearing collective relevance. That is the call I am issuing right now. If you would like to collaborate on such a paper, or would simply like to engage in further dialogue about these issues, then please come chat with me after this presentation, or tonight at drinks. Or if not, thank you nonetheless for your

time and attention through what was probably a rather different presentation from the one you probably expected.

Research statement

Research background

Across recent decades, failure has attracted increasing attention from creative writing academics (Motion 2011, Brien, Burr & Webb 2013, Kroll 2015, Webb 2015). As Kroll notes, 'Any artist who keeps experimenting, trying new materials, and shaping new forms, will risk failure', which is often 'an integral part of the learning process'; yet for academics, particularly doctoral candidates, failure carries negative implications that can destroy confidence and indeed careers (2015: 142). Observing similar issues, Webb declares the 'incumbent' need for supervisors to 'be alert' to failure's many sources and manifestations (2015: 156). In line with other recent arguments (Motion 2011, Williams & Webb 2013), Kroll (2015) and Webb (2015) separately argue a need to reconceive failure and recognise its productive capacities. They also work to redress this need, offering theoretical reflections on steps and strategies that creative writing academics can engage when facing failure. There remains, however, relatively little work broaching failure in creative writing research from the close up, personal perspective. Hence I suggest a persisting need to generate and share specific, situated narratives about working with and through failure.

Research contribution

As noted under the 'research background' heading, failure's productive potentials are well-theorised in the field of creative writing, but there remains a need for specific narratives including detailed descriptions of explicit processes through which practitioners have managed failure and/or found its rewards. The presentation of 'Why I Don't Write (Much)' attends to that need, providing a model that others experiencing failure may be able to adapt and re-model for their own situations.[5]

Research significance

The presentation and discussion of 'Why I Don't Write (Much)' contributes to existing discussions of failure in creative writing research by providing a detailed account of one instance in which failure sparked productive outcomes (albeit without leading to 'success' as conventionally conceived). The work thereby offers processes and strategies of potential use to others experiencing failures of similar varieties. The script's presentation at the conference also sparked a new duoethnographic research writing collaboration between myself and four others, which is significant by the terms of Assan, for whom a significant goal of research is to illuminate directions for 'future research'—particularly via projects that 'build on from this research, recognising and responding to the limitations' (2008: 5).

Endnotes

[1] I recognise that the concept of performativity is far more complex than this, and that it has been explored by many figures other than Butler, in many different ways. I also recognise that Butler explicitly avoided the

conflation of performativity with performance. My gesture towards Butlerian performativity in this context is, however, informed by my reading of Diamond (2000), who argued that 'performance' can in fact be more 'performative', and less consciously intentional, than Butler's efforts to separate performativity from performance tend to suggest. Importantly, I am not in any way suggesting that Butlerian performativity entails performance in the straightforward sense; rather, I am suggesting that not all performances are straightforward, and that some are only formed as performances through complex performative processes.

[2] To clarify, by 'the per-forming of my speech as a 'performance', I mean the reinterpretation and remaking of the pragmatic speech as a creative statement.

[3] The 'broadly postmodern' range of works I allude to here include works that draw inspiration from Barthes (1977) and/or from twentieth century deconstructive approaches to textual interpretation, in which literary critics sought to read in ways that would 'liberate the pluralit[ies] of meaning' (Castenell & Pinar 1993: 111) and 'demonstrate where and how a text exceeds itself or is open to something beyond itself' (Naas 2003: 161).

[4] As an additional reflection after the delivery of this speech, what I am also signalling is the need for this work on failure to include a greater number and diversity of specific, situated personal accounts, to complement the existing body of strong theoretical investigations into failure and related themes. A possible exception to this is the very personal (albeit critically 'distant') account offered by Lawrence (2011). That work is, however, risky to use as a model or source of hope for struggling PhD candidates, given that the author later ended his own life.

[5] With 'model', I am not recommending a straightforward replication of my processes, but rather the strategic use of particular elements if and where relevant. Some of these elements include, one, reconsidering initial efforts with the value of time and distance, two, recognising when a project could benefit from a more collaborative or dialogical approach, and three, producing a new creative work to reflect on the failure and its outcomes—although this third was, in my case, accidental rather than deliberate, which also incidentally demonstrates how unpredictable the creative process is, and how much if often does rely on that unpredictability, which necessarily entails risks of failure.

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