

Flinders University

Katrina Finlayson

Encounters with future selves: crafting an identity as a creative-writing academic

Abstract:

The production and submission of a thesis document, representing an original contribution to the existing body of knowledge, is the tangible product of a creative writing doctorate in Australian universities today. However, a doctoral candidate aspiring to a career in academia is often simultaneously trying to establish credibility in a new profession, to build what Hall and Burns (2009) term identity capital. The candidate crafts an academic identity based on observed behaviours and perceived values of the new discipline. Social and family background, previous experience and pre-formed identity scripts brought by the doctoral candidate to the doctoral experience also play a significant role in identity development (Hall & Burns 2009; Kalin et al 2009). The uncertainty of self that is experienced in this transformative time can lead to increased stress for the candidate. Supervisors and other established academics can help smooth the process as the creative-writing postgraduate explores and evolves their ideas about what it means for them to be a writer, to be a researcher, to be a teacher: to be an early-career creative-writing academic.

Biographical note:

Katrina Finlayson is a Creative Writing PhD candidate at Flinders University. Her doctoral research explores how contemporary creative writing might be informed by the psychoanalytical theory of the Uncanny. She mostly writes realistic prose and creative nonfiction, often concerned with themes of anxiety, identity and travel.

Keywords:

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'Who are you?' said the Caterpillar.

This was not an encouraging opening for a conversation. Alice replied, rather shyly, 'I – I hardly know, Sir, just at present – at least I know who I was when I got up this morning, but I think I must have been changed several times since then.'

'What do you mean by that?' said the Caterpillar, sternly. 'Explain yourself!'

'I can't explain myself, I'm afraid, Sir,' said Alice, 'because I'm not myself, you see.'

'I don't see,' said the Caterpillar.

'I'm afraid I ca'n't put it more clearly,' Alice replied, very politely, 'for I ca'n't understand it myself, to begin with; and being so many different sizes in a day is confusing.' (Carroll 1999, 47)

Like Alice's disconcerting experience of shifting identity, a doctoral candidate seeking to build a career in the academy enters a state of potential transformation. During this state, they will try on various identities and will most likely experience a prolonged period of uncertainty of self as they explore what it might mean for them to shape an identity as an academic. In Australian universities, creative-writing doctoral assessment focuses on knowledge production, in the form of the doctoral thesis, the most tangible outcome of the doctoral experience (Brodin & Frick 2011, 134, Johnson et al 2000, 138), and as a result, a large part of the candidate's time during the doctoral studies process is likely to be spent on activities that will directly contribute to the production of the thesis document. But for the doctoral candidate aspiring to become an academic in their field, at the core of the doctoral experience is the ongoing process of crafting a new, complex identity (Green 2005, 153; Walker et al 2008, 9) For many postgraduates, doctoral studies are not an end point but a beginning and fit with Anne Austin's comments that 'the doctoral experience is the first stage of the academic career' (Austin 2002, 95). This paper accepts, as a starting point, the idea that identity is fluid and constantly under construction (Hall & Burns 2009, 51), and explores some of the considerations and challenges which lie before a creative-writing doctoral candidate seeking to craft an academic identity.

Institutional boundaries, the experiences of other faculty members and the candidate's supervisor's values all affect the doctoral candidate's understanding of possible academic identities (Hall & Burns 2009, 60). In addition, every discipline has its own research culture (Austin 2002, 97), which values certain researcher characteristics more highly than others (Hall & Burns 2009, 56). As Carol Colbeck notes, while acquiring skills and knowledge as part of the doctoral experience, students 'observe the behaviours, attitudes and norms for social interaction prevalent among practitioners of their profession' (Colbeck 2008, 9). Through this process of observation, the doctoral candidate is likely to recognise the value placed on certain behaviours by the discipline, and will choose to adopt or reject behaviours. With each behaviour comes an associated potential increase or decrease of what Hall and Burns term identity capital, the value other academics ascribe to the person (Hall & Burns 2009, 51). Candidates who display favourable characteristics are more likely to be given additional opportunities by their supervisor, other faculty members and other members of their profession (Hall & Burns 2009, 55). As Hall and Burns point out, this raises an important question: 'who gets to decide which identities and characteristics are the 'right' ones for professional success?' (Hall & Burns 2009, 60).

This situation may be beneficial to perpetuating values the profession holds dear, but, conversely, can lead to a reproduction of normative roles, unless the student is an aware and active participant in the process (Hall & Burns 2009, 55). This process of acquiring discipline-specific characteristics is known as socialisation (Austin & McDaniels 2006, 421). Socialisation is a dominant concept in literature on the doctoral experience, but it does not account for all aspects of the experience (Bieber & Worley 2006, 1010).

Colbeck describes doctoral identity experimentation almost as a process of trying on clothes; in encounters with future selves, students try on possible professional selves to see how well they fit, as part of ‘crafting a sense of identity as a particular type of professional’ (Colbeck 2008, 9, after Ibarra, 1999). Randal Franz describes this crafting of identity as a process of building character, and he draws an analogy with increasing physical fitness (1998, 65). In the same way multiple exercise sessions build physical fitness, character must be developed through hard work, over time. Jazvac-Martek et al agree with Franz that identity is crafted over time, through multiple and varied experiences:

The cumulative experience of students negotiating their intentions in activities and interactions, and in navigating difficulties contributes to the complex process of developing an academic identity and establishing oneself as an academic. (2011, 18)

For a creative-writing postgraduate, identity crafting might occur through sessional teaching, research assistant work, publication opportunities, lecture delivery, conference presentations, attendance at faculty events, research workshops with other faculty and students, writer’s residencies, and other such opportunities. Each situation offers glimpses of a possible future academic identity (Jazvac-Martek et al 2011, 21). However, each additional academic-identity-building activity requires time, a scarce and precious resource for a doctoral candidate in the current Australian climate of pressure on the completion date. Discussing the findings of a recent five-year research project into the experiences of doctoral students in Canada and the UK, which focused on their stories of identity, Lynn McAlpine reports that the increasing pressure for ‘timely completion’ means that some students, often on the advice of their supervisor, do not take up academic opportunities outside of those perceived as essential for the completion of their research project (2012, 43). While this might be strategic in the short term, McAlpine reflects, it is ‘potentially detrimental in the long-term for students intending academic careers’ (2012, 43). Dibble and Van Loon (2004) speculate that the current Australian climate of pressure on timely completion could lead to not only a less rich experience for doctoral candidates but an institutionalised preference for ‘safe’ research projects. Beyond the individual, this has dangerous implications for a creative discipline.

A further deterrent to pursuing extra opportunities is the stress that can come from situations where multiple identity roles conflict. Conflicting identity roles, where the person must prioritise different academic identities, can ‘intensify feelings of time-related pressure and stress’, Colbeck suggests (2008, 11). For example, a candidate who prioritises thesis research activities above publication may feel their time spent writing an academic paper for publication is stealing from their core research time.

One way to resolve this conflict is to exit one or both of the roles altogether. Alternatively, becoming aware of the identity crafting process of becoming an academic can resolve this conflict and even increase overall productivity (Colbeck 2008, 11). Where the candidate perceives both activities as parts of the whole process of crafting an integrated academic identity, they may find a way to combine roles and activities to their overall benefit. Specifically in regards to publication, Kroll (2009, 6) notes that publication can increase a candidate's confidence in their creative and critical work, so an apparent digression may have a significant effect on the candidate's success.

Where individuals conceptualise themselves as having an identity as an academic, Sue Clegg suggests that 'this multiple and shifting term exists alongside other aspects of how people understand their personhood and ways of being in the world' (2008, 329); personal roles and spheres of influence also affect the identity formation process (Colbeck 2008, 10). All the past and present selves that a person brings to their doctoral experience shape the way the doctoral student develops in response to the new environment (Austin 2002, 102). The personal and professional cannot be separated, despite the lack of attention to the personal in literature on the doctoral experience (Jazvac-Martek et al 2011, 19). This is perhaps especially true of creative-writing students, whose craft so often involves some form of personal experience. A perceived scarcity of time may cause the student's non-academic roles to be neglected, or may force the student to engage in these roles with a guilty sense of stolen time (Denicolo & Pope, 126), but maintaining an active engagement in both academic and social roles contributes to self-esteem, physical and mental well-being (Colbeck 2008, 12). A balanced approach may be necessary for the successful completion of doctoral studies.

Bieber and Worley (2006, 1032) have found that most people enter doctoral study with predefined narratives of what it means to be an academic. A commonly imagined identity for 'an academic' is a figure wearing a tweed coat, who inhabits a library filled with leather-bound tomes (Johnson et al 2000, 139), and this is usually a masculine figure, even when women scholars imagine a future academic self. The academic fantasies of a person beginning postgraduate study are usually 'productive and sustaining of a desire to be a certain figure, the independent scholar' (Johnson et al 2000, 139). These 'ideal scripts' (Bieber & Worley 2006, 1024) represent a doctoral candidate's beliefs about present and future researcher identities. They are usually formed during undergraduate studies or even earlier and are based heavily on what a person sees with their own eyes (Bieber & Worley 2006, p1021-22). These scripts can persist despite contradictory experiences during doctoral studies. Differences between the script and the experienced reality can cause the doctoral candidate to question their own suitability for the profession (Bieber & Worley 2006, 1023). As Hall and Burns note: 'most students' conceptions of possible researcher identities are incomplete, inaccurate, or both' (Hall & Burns 2009, 57).

The identity crafting process is defined by Lynn McAlpine in terms of an 'identity-trajectory', which is the idea of a path based on past identities, situated in the wider life context of the student and the perceived opportunities available to the present identity, which progresses towards potential future identities through the intentional

actions of the postgraduate (McAlpine 2012, 39). The student's personal goals, within the context of their 'past and present experiences, relationships and responsibilities' (McAlpine 2012, 45), will affect the choices they make about their doctoral studies, as well as their commitment to various measures of success. Hall and Burns agree: 'Students' perceived identities and aspirations inform how they engage with doctoral education and mentoring processes alike' (2009, 56). Australian creative-writing programs 'attract a considerable proportion of mature-age students' (Kroll & Brien 2006, 6), and these students bring with them established identities and existing responsibilities.

Viewing the doctoral experience as essentially the process of crafting a new identity enables an understanding that this is a time of fundamental transformation. Colbeck (2008, 9) notes that identity is resistant to change, but during stages of transition to a new role, such as during the doctoral experience, 'adaptations to one's sense of self are more likely to occur'. However, this transformative process of questioning and reshaping the self destabilises the current self, so it is little wonder that, as Metz states: '[Doctoral education] can feel like a dangerous place; it stirs a lot of emotion that clouds the already difficult cognitive tasks' (Metz 2001, cited by Hall & Burns 2006, 62). Hall and Burns note that the doctoral experience can challenge any certainty of identity previously held by students, and during this process the perceived core identity becomes vulnerable (2006, 57). In order to make room for the future self, the current self must be pulled apart and reshaped, and 'subjectification as quintessentially a process of (un)becoming is fraught with tension, uncertainty, ambivalence... in [the case of doctoral study], subjectivity – becoming and being a subject – is *always already* unfinished business' (Green 2005, 154). This is an emotionally difficult process, which involves a fundamental uncertainty of self.

This uncertainty is reflected in the terms used to describe the doctoral process by academics that have already made their way through it. Jeri Kroll (2009, 8) terms the doctoral experience a 'rite of passage' and writes of the student having to find their way out of the 'research maze' so that 'their thesis can embody an individual vision' (16). Terri Givens relates a sense of deep gratitude for those who have helped her in 'navigating the choppy seas of an academic career' (2009, 2). Margaret Kiley describes the doctoral experience as a series of thresholds (2009, 293). These descriptions suggest that the identity of a doctoral student resides, for an extended time, in a liminal state, which enables transformation but which can also be confusing and emotionally challenging. A lack of understanding of what a doctoral identity transformation requires of them or the potential effects on their identity (Hall & Burns 2009, 56) means that students must rely on early-stage academic skills and knowledge and also on a combination of reflexivity, courage, and a healthy dose of proprioception, to feel their way through the identity puzzle.

If 'how to be an academic is a moving goal; moreover, one that is fraught with ambiguity' (Clegg 2008, 336), doctoral students would be wise to embrace uncertainty; this uncertainty of identity may continue past their thesis submission date. Fortunately, creative-writing doctoral candidates have often already spent considerable time in the liminal space of uncertainty, home to much creative work (Anderson 2008). Author Rebecca Solnit describes this uncanny process of making

the unfamiliar belong to the self, a process that can be applied to doctoral creative writers:

It is the job of artists to open doors and invite in prophecies, the unknown, the unfamiliar; it's where their work comes from, although its arrival signals the beginning of the long disciplined process of making it their own. (2006, 5)

And Helen Garner, in a keynote lecture for a 2008 Australasian Association of Writing Programs conference, said the following in speaking to the theme of creativity and uncertainty:

You don't know what terrors you are going to have to expose yourself to, or what tests of nerve and character you're going to be confronted with. You don't know which form this dark thing wants you to write it in. You don't know what sort of person you will have become if you ever drag yourself out the other end of whatever it is you've started. (2008)

Garner was talking about the uncertainty inherent in the creative-writing experience, but she might just as well have been talking about the process of creative-writing doctoral studies and its disruptive effects on identity.

To this point, the doctoral candidate has been the central focus of this discussion, but doctoral studies involve the important relationship between the candidate and at least one supervisor (Green 2005, 154). A doctoral student does not undertake this identity formation process in isolation, and their supervisor and other faculty members can play a vital role in helping the doctoral candidate navigate the uncertainties of the complex process of identity formation (Hall & Burns 2009, 62). In Alice-the-doctoral-candidate's experience of crafting an academic identity, the supervisor is often positioned as the Caterpillar; the student forms an identity beneath the watchful gaze of the supervisor, who, as Johnson et al suggest, represents the wider discipline and academia in general, as the 'already-established researcher' (2000, 142). But the relationship is perhaps more productively conceived of as a reciprocal process, where, as Green suggests, 'each looks at the other, and sees themselves, differently' (2005, 154).

Hecq (2008, 2) suggests that the commercialisation of creativity in today's corporatised university environment promotes a type of knowledge production that relies on an assumption that the creative-writing doctoral candidate has no subjectivity or desire of their own. Randal Franz proposes that taking a view of doctoral students as customers is inappropriate, and he rejects the term on the basis that 'viewing students as customers casts them in a fundamentally passive and submissive role' (1998, 63). Franz proposes as an alternative a focus on building character, with success in character building defined as having the skills, ability and motivation to know yourself and work towards your goals. For doctoral candidates to respond to Kroll's request for postgraduates as independent scholars to take responsibility for their own research projects (2009, 16), their agency in the crafting of their own identity must be acknowledged.

This discussion illustrates how doctoral students have the ability to control their own identity development, based on their existing identities and the potential future selves

with whom they seek out encounters, in line with their social and academic goals, and responding to the environment around them, which includes how other people position and define them. This paper concludes by proposing that a creative-writing doctoral candidate is capable of crafting an academic identity from a position of uncertainty. However, this discussion suggests some important considerations for supervisors and established academics, which have the ability to assist this process, to the benefit of all involved. Firstly, supervisors can help doctoral students to understand some of the challenges inherent in crafting an academic identity. Once a self-awareness and understanding of some of the complexities involved exists for the doctoral candidate, supervisors need to take on a mentor role by creating an environment for students to reflect on their own developing identities, as an important step in the identity formation process (Austin 2002, 96; Kroll & Finlayson 2012). Supervisors can also help candidates feel included in their new community by encouraging the candidate to take up opportunities such as attending and presenting at conferences, seeking publication and becoming involved in professional associations (Kroll 2009, 12).

Further to this, Hall and Burns suggest that, for doctoral education to be an experience of human inquiry, ‘members of the discipline must acknowledge and openly explore what it means to *be* human in a discipline.’ (Hall & Burns 2009, 64). The student is unlikely to know, at the beginning of the process, the possible future selves that exist. Hall and Burns suggest talking to a wider range of academics (other than just the supervisor) can ‘help [the student] gain a more varied and deeper perspective on what it means to be and become a researcher’ (2009, 62), and supervisors can help create opportunities for these interactions. Reshaping identity can involve conflict, between traits and values previously held dear and the traits and values of the potential future self in the academic community. Where this conflict occurs, hopefully, the supervisor-as-mentor has the wisdom to see a student’s resistance as a way of seeking to understand, as a way of feeling out the differences between old and new information (Hall & Burns 2009, 59). Finally, established academics should also pay attention to the social, cultural and intellectual diversity of the doctoral students with whom they interact (DIISA 2011). Doctoral candidates need mentors who are prepared to tailor their approach to accommodate each student’s specific background and needs (Kalin et al 2009).

In the relatively new discipline of creative writing, ideas around academic identity are less established than in some of the more traditional disciplines, for example, law or medicine, and ongoing critical debate in this area has helped, and will continue to help, in creating a sense of possible future identities. While a doctoral candidate aims to create a contribution that even in some small way shapes the existing discourse, in the process the candidate’s identity is likely to be significantly altered. The creative-writing doctoral experience involves not only the production of a thesis document but also identity formation, as the candidate explores and evolves their ideas about what it means for them to be a writer, to be a researcher, to be a teacher: to be an early-career academic.

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