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### **‘Good to think [as]’: uses and methodological advantages of character in research**

#### Abstract:

Researchers in many disciplines recognise the potentials of creative writing as a methodology – a means of not only presenting but also generating research (Richardson 2000; Pelias 2011). Discussions of creative-writing methodologies commonly mention character, but there is little elaboration on character in particular. This paper therefore explores ways in which character has and can be used in research writing, and considers character’s methodological advantages. Rephrasing Webb’s (2010) claim that creative writing is ‘good to think with’, I ask how characters might be ‘good to think [as]’. In particular, I examine the phenomenon of characters behaving beyond prediction or control, exercising seemingly ‘autonomous agency’ (Taylor, Hodges & Kohanyi 2002–03, 361). This can lead writer-researchers to consider things we otherwise wouldn’t in ways we otherwise couldn’t, often with beneficial outcomes for research. However, the premise that characters possess agency invites scrutiny. I turn to Butler’s (1999) theories about performativity, and to theories regarding character construction and interpretation. Considering these in tandem enables a description of the discursive mechanisms through which character agency emerges, which offers insights into character’s methodological uses and advantages.

#### Biographical note:

Amelia Walker is a PhD candidate at the University of South Australia. Her thesis considers poetry’s role in everyday life. She is also a published poet and spoken-word performer. She has published three poetry collections, most recently *Sound and Bundy* (IP 2012), and three poetry teaching resource books (*All you need to teach poetry ages 5–8, 8–10 and 10+*, Macmillan 2010).

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‘Do I speak or does something speak in me, something no smaller than the entire culture with all its multiple capacities?’ (Goldberg 1985, 119).

### **Introduction**

Since the establishment of the AAWP and *TEXT* in the mid-1990s, Creative Writing has become a well-established discipline in Australian universities (Camens & Wilson 2011, 1). Webb (2010) posits ‘creative’<sup>1</sup> writing as ‘good to think with’ – a means of not only presenting but also *generating* research. Indeed, a growing number of researchers from disciplines other than Creative Writing itself now use and/or advocate creative writing’s methodological benefits. Richardson explores and encourages ‘creative analytic practices’ (2000, 929–36) while Pelias recommends a process of ‘writing into’ rather than ‘writing up’ a topic: ‘a process of using language to look at, lean into, and lend oneself to an experience under consideration’ (2011, 660). Creative-writing methodologies are increasingly common in ethnography (Popovic 2012; Burford 2012; Fitzpatrick 2012; Lang 2012; Davies 2009; Deane 2010) and in the emerging field of Queer Indigenous Studies (Cajete 2008, 489–90; Driskill et al. 2011, 23–24). They are even being adopted in traditionally ‘positivist’ fields (Azul 2011, 13).

Discussions of creative-writing methodologies commonly mention character (Richardson 2000, 931; Richardson & St Pierre 2008, 494; Brewster 2009, 136), but there is little elaboration regarding character specifically. A detailed consideration of character’s particular functions and methodological advantages is therefore needed. This paper will explore, firstly, some ways in which character has and can be used in research writing, and secondly, character’s methodological benefits – how characters can be, rephrasing Webb (2010), ‘good to think [as]’.

Drawing on my experiences as a student writer-researcher, and on the published accounts of other writers, I note that characters frequently behave beyond a writer’s prediction or control, seeming to possess ‘autonomous agency’ (Forster 1927, 46; Catron 1993, 65; Grenville 1990, 36; Bird 1988, 7–8; Taylor, Hodges & Kohanyi 2002–03, 361). In this way, characters can lead writer-researchers to consider things we otherwise wouldn’t in ways we otherwise couldn’t. Or, to borrow Richardson’s argument for creative writing more generally, through characters a writer-researcher can ‘discover new aspects of [their] topic and [their] relationship to it’ (2009, 923). Character therefore presents some significant methodological opportunities.

The methodological validity of character depends, however, on characters possessing ‘autonomous agency’ – a premise that demands scepticism and inquiry. In common-sense terms, the writer fully creates and controls each character. Through what – if any – means can characters escape and even usurp that control? I turn to Butler’s theories about performativity, in which the subject is constructed in discourse and in which agency – including that of the writer-researcher – is always limited (Butler 1999, 4–12). Considering the performative construction of the subject in relation to

theories regarding character construction and interpretation, I posit that characters, while not ‘real’ people, can be considered real subjects in that they are constructed in discourse through the performative citation of norms. This means that characters do not ‘possess’ but rather *enact* agency as an effect of discourse; character agency is therefore not autonomous but limited by discourse. Crucially, though, the agency of the character is limited in *different* ways from that of the writer and interactions with characters can expand the limitations on a writer’s own agency, enabling us access to thoughts and modes of thinking that our subjectively limited agency would ordinarily foreclose. Character may therefore present a methodological approach to (but not an escape from or a way around) subjectivity in research.

### **Character in research writing: advantages for the presentation of research**

Before delving into character’s methodological aspects, it is worth considering some of the ways in which character has and can be used in research writing, as well as some benefits character offers in terms of presenting research. The use of character in research writing is more common than one might expect. In fact, it can be argued that *all* research writing uses character: ‘the voice of theory is a fictional device like any other’ (Deane 2010). In first-person research writing, the ‘I’ that appears on the page can never exactly represent the person writing (Azul 2011, 15; Butler 1999, 4–12; Muecke 2008, 13). The supposedly ‘objective’ voice of third-person research writing can also be considered a character – albeit one whose defining personality trait is a lack thereof – a literary device that serves to mask the impossibility of true objectivity in research writing (Sallis 1999; Deane 2010).

Some writer-researchers explicitly foreground the textual, constructed nature of the ‘I’ in research writing. Muecke describes his first-person, fictocritical writings as ‘self portraits’ (2008, 13) – an apt metaphor for how the ‘I’ of the page, like a portrait, presents a person from a particular angle, at a particular point in time. It is necessarily limited and stylised, including certain details, omitting others, and perhaps fabricating some aspects to satisfy the needs of the text.

Another approach to presenting the ‘self’ in research writing is to split the self into several characters. Examples of this approach include the works of Azul (2009; 2011), for whom multiple voices are both topic and approach, and Popovic (2012, 36–37, 41), who stages ‘innerviews’ with various parts of her body to offer an autoethnographic account of yoga practice. Such approaches point to the ways in which the self is not singular, fixed and coherent but rather multiple, fluctuating and contradictory (Sinfield 2006, 28) and enable the staging of dialogues and debates between various selves.

Research writing can also involve dialogues and debates between the researcher and another character or characters. In the conclusion to *Archaeology of knowledge* (1972), Foucault presents what is commonly read as an imagined conversation between himself and a hypothetical critic. Through this device he can be seen to anticipate and responds to potential criticisms of his work.

There is, however, no need for any one specific character to represent the researcher themselves. An early, and unlikely, precedent for the explicit use of character in research writing exists in Galileo Galilei's *dialogue concerning the two chief world systems*, which is presented as discussions between three philosopher characters (Galilei 1953). For a more recent example there is Muecke's *The fall*, written in the voice of 'Monsieur Mouche', who is curiously both human and fly (2008, 18–25), and Davies' *Life in Kings Cross*, an ethnographic radio play featuring characters Davies describes as 'fictional, albeit inspired by the people I see around me' (2009). As a final example, Deane's *Theorising the madwoman* (2010) stages 'a dialogue between the madwoman and the feminist literary critic'. Deane:

...take[s] up a range of positions, sometimes speaking as the madwoman, sometimes as the feminist critic, to perform the split in feminist theory and destabilise the voice of the objective scholar, while continuing to lay some claim to it... [making] an incursion into, rather than an interpretation of, women's 'madness'... The madwoman appears as a character who interrupts, challenges and resists the interpretive project...

Although Deane's use of this device may initially seem identical to the example I cited earlier from Foucault, a key distinction is Deane's outright assertion that the 'researcher' character represents feminist literary theory and academic conventions, not Deane herself.

One significant benefit of using character (explicitly) to present research is that it enables the exploration of multiple and conflicted points of view. Furthermore, there is no need for any single point of view to appear privileged over or more 'true' than others. Often a writer-researcher may be torn between several points of view, or may have a point of view, but recognise it as problematic. Through character, these conflicts and uncertainties can become fertile territories for exploration and inquiry, rather than inconvenient frustrations to be glossed over, disguised and swept aside in order to preserve conventional research writing's illusions of coherence, permanence and a single, sustained, objective (as recommended by Winkler & McCuen 1989, 10; Lester & Lester 2005, 159).

### **'Good to think [as]': character as a methodology**

The above section has explored some of the benefits character offers in terms of presenting research. However, a crucial aspect of Webb's (2010) argument for creative writing in and as research is that it serves as a means of not only *presenting*, but also *generating* research. Richardson (2000) and Pelias (2011) present similar points. What, then, might be the methodological benefits of character? That is, how might characters benefit the research generation process? How might they prove, rephrasing Webb (2010), 'good to think [as]'?

A common claim among writers is that characters have the ability to 'escape control' and 'take over' the writing process (Forster 1927, 46; Catron 1993, 65; Grenville 1990, 36; Bird 1988, 7–8). In a study that interviewed fifty writers, all but four reported experiences of characters exhibiting apparently 'autonomous agency' (Taylor, Hodges & Kohanyi–03, 361). In my practice as a student writer-researcher, I

have made similar observations, and also noted that, by behaving wildly beyond my prediction or control, my characters often prompt me to consider issues I otherwise wouldn't in ways I otherwise couldn't. This phenomenon is not only surprising, but tends to be surprisingly beneficial for my research.

To illustrate, in one chapter of my thesis, Ern Malley's<sup>2</sup> ghost attends a current-day poetry reading and reflects on 'the scene'. I made Ern narrator because, being a ghost, he could be a detached 'fly on the wall' who would (I imagined) give a straightforward account of egos and tensions. However, Ern proved to be quite attached, voicing numerous (often dubious) opinions regarding his own legacy and influence. He exhibited quite an ego himself. There have been many poets who 'never lived – Mort Brandish, Walter Lehman, Adore Floupette etc. – but only Ern 'lives on' (Harris 2003).<sup>3</sup> Curious about his own 'success', Ern demanded an investigation.

Ern's behaviour was not just surprising. It turned out to be surprisingly relevant. Although Ern seemed to be driving things away from the 'real' topic, Australia's contemporary poetry scene, his questions actually proved vital to it. Ern prompted me to consider aspects of the scene I previously hadn't, and to rethink seemingly contemporary and local issues in much wider geographical and temporal contexts. 'From' Ern I learned new ways of thinking about the local scene's entanglements with literary history and politics – and how I too am implicated.

This example supports arguments for the benefits of creative writing in and as research. In Richardson's terms, Ern helped me 'discover new aspects of [my] topic and [my] relationship to it' (2000, 923). It appears that, through their unpredictable behaviours, characters can enable writer-researchers to consider possibilities we otherwise wouldn't in ways we otherwise couldn't, expanding research possibilities. Character therefore seems to present some significant methodological advantages. However, the methodological validity of character depends on characters possessing 'autonomous agency' – a premise that demands skepticism and inquiry. In common-sense terms, the writer fully creates and controls each character. Through what – if any – means can characters escape and even usurp that control?

### **Not real people, but real subjects: character construction as performative and character agency as an effect of discourse**

To investigate the (ostensibly ludicrous) possibility of characters possessing 'autonomous agency', I will now turn to Butler's theories about performativity, and consider these in relation to theories regarding character construction and interpretation. Drawing on Foucault, Althusser, Austin and Derrida, among others, Butler describes subjectivity as constructed in discourse through the performative citation of norms. For example, when a doctor calls a baby a girl, 'she' becomes a girl, compelled to cite certain norms. Even subversions of norms cite and reinstate them. There is no original subject or 'I' who precedes this construction. The notion of 'I' itself is constructed in discourse, unable to stand outside it. This means that agency is always limited – though not impossible (Butler 1999, 4–12). For writer-researchers, subjective limitations on agency mean limitations on what and how we are able to

think, and therefore on research findings. Certain potentially relevant possibilities are foreclosed as impossible, indeed unimaginable.

Butler's theories bear some interesting correlations to theories about the construction and interpretation of characters. Contrary to the common-sense notion that writers work independently, fully creating and controlling all aspect of their texts, many writers and theorists posit writing as an intertextual, collaborative process in which writers select and rearrange existing materials including language, culture and other texts (Pope 1998, 177; Kelen 2000). Character creation can be understood as bricolage – the rearrangement of existing materials in new ways and contexts (Barker 2004, 17). These existing materials can also be viewed as parts of discourse, which characters cite.

Furthermore, for Fowler, the interpretation or 'intelligibility' of characters relies upon the enlisting of 'social persons' – 'abstract models of the person that act as a cognitive framework for the apprehension of character, notions of the person against which the character's outline is seen and judged' (Fowler 2006, 59). Fowler illustrates the process using Shylock from *The merchant of Venice*. Shylock 'calls upon a number of familiar social persons – the Jew, the merchant, the tyrant father... inviting the audience to recognise Shylock in relation to that social person'. Shylock's complexity lies in his 'particular combining of relatively incompatible social persons', which engages the audience in processes of 'cognitive measuring and altering' (2006, 58). Keen similarly theorises reader-character identification as dependent upon readers' knowledge of 'schemas and stereotypes, including models of the social person' (2011, 299).

'Social persons' can again be viewed as discursive norms that characters performatively cite. Fowler perhaps hints at this when she remarks that each social person comes 'trailing clouds of the inglorious discourse in which it is drawn' (2006, 59) and through her use of Butler's theories in other sections of her work (2006, 58). Further support for this view comes from Newman's claim that 'while, on the one hand, fictional characters are fully embedded in their discrete fictional contexts, their intelligibility is enlarged by the application of framing principles their study shares with our understanding of real human beings' (2009, 73).

Some writers will here object that their characters are not based on texts, language, culture, social persons or other aspects of discourse, but on 'real' people. Catron (1993, 71–74), Bird (1988, 10), Grenville (1990, 36–37) and Kress (1988, 74–80) all recommend that writers create believable characters by 'borrowing' aspects of themselves, their family members, friends, acquaintances etc. However, from a Butlerian point of view, the subjectivities of 'real' people are always already constructed in discourse through the citation of norms (1999, 4–12). The distinction between the 'real' and the 'textual'/'cultural' is therefore rather hazy. 'Real' people are in many senses culturally constructed and textual, while texts and culture can be considered part of reality.<sup>4</sup>

Character construction and interpretation can therefore be viewed as performative processes, not so different from those through which the subjectivities of 'real' people are constructed and negotiated. Characters are constructed and interpreted in discourse

through the performative citation of norms. Although characters are not ‘real’ people, they can be considered real subjects, in the Butlerian sense. As such, characters can indeed ‘possess’ agency – although ‘possess’ is a misleading term. In Butlerian terms, agency is an effect of discourse which subjects do not ‘have’ so much as ‘enact’ (Salih 2002, 120).

Furthermore, character agency is not autonomous but, like that of any subject, both enabled and limited by the discourse of its construction. That character agency is limited does not detract from its methodological viability. In fact it is crucial to it. If character agency were completely autonomous, then character behaviour would be random and erratic, bearing no necessary relation to the research topic. But because character behaviour is limited by the discourse in which the character is constructed, and because in research writing this discourse *is* the discourse of the research topic, character behaviour remains bound to the research topic. This is why, as I noted in my earlier reflections on writing and thinking as Ern Malley, character behaviour emerges as not just surprising, but surprisingly relevant.

Another crucial point about the limitations on character agency is that they are *different* from the limitations on writer agency. This occurs because writer and character are differently constructed and positioned in discourse. Characters can say, think and do things the writer can’t because characters have access to thoughts and modes of thinking that the writer’s own subjectively limited agency would ordinarily foreclose as impossible, indeed unimaginable. However, character agency is not superior to writer agency – merely different. Characters may also be *unable* to think say and do certain things that the writer can.

Similarly, character agency is not fully independent from writer agency. By this I do not intend to revert to an understanding of characters as fully dependent on and/or controlled by the writer, rather to flag the mutual dependences, the complex intertwinings between writers and characters. At the outset, writer subjectivity restricts character possibilities because writer agency limits imaginable character subjectivities. However, subjectivity is not fixed but constantly changing (Salih 2006, 6). Writer-character interactions can therefore prompt particular changes in writer subjectivity.

The way in which this occurs is easier to grasp by turning, momentarily, to discussions about reader-character interactions. Souter observes that texts ‘can haunt readers... nagging away until one’s subjectivity changes to admit them’ (2000, 346). Fowler similarly discusses the ways in which audiences are ‘placed on a map’ in relation to characters and the social persons (or norms) that they cite. In this way, ‘the cognitive sorting that fictional characterisation requires of us imitates and interferes with our own identifications’ (2006, 60–62).

Returning to the writer-character relationship, I posit that it is not greatly different from a reader-character relationship. If reading is a form of (re)writing in the sense that readers creatively reconstruct and reimagine existing textual materials (Keen 2011, 296; Souter 2000, 349; Pope 1998, 262), then writing – which, in line with the bricolage model, is also a process of creatively reconstructing and reimaging existing materials – may be called a particularly intense form of reading. Furthermore,

the research, editing and redrafting processes involved in writing necessitate that readers read others' and their 'own' works repeatedly and reflectively. As Hecq asserts, writers are 'first and foremost readers' (2010, 1). Writers, too, can therefore be haunted and nagged at by their characters, can be placed on a map in relation to those characters. The cognitive sorting involved in character creation can imitate and interfere with the writer's own identifications.

In this way, writer-character interactions can alter writer subjectivity, thereby altering limitations on writer agency. Alterations to writer subjectivity and agency mean alterations to the scope of imaginable character subjectivities. The writer can then reimagine a character's subjectivity in new ways, and/or create new characters whose subjectivities were previously unimaginable. These new character subjectivities further alter writer subjectivity, which alters the scope of imaginable character subjectivities... The writer can thus expand the limitations subjectivity places on agency, and so expand the scope for research. In this way, character presents a methodological approach to subjectivity in research. I stress, however, the words *approach to* – not 'escape from' or 'way around'. I by no means suggest that character enables 'objectivity'. A writer-researcher still can't get 'outside' subjectivity. They may, however, be able to 'do'<sup>5</sup> subjectivity in different ways, thereby expanding the potentials for thinking and research.

## **Conclusion**

The use of character therefore offers some significant advantages for both the presentation and the generation of research. Character enables the exploration of multiple and conflicted points of view without the need to privilege any single perspective or 'truth'. This approach may be particularly useful in situations where the writer-researcher feels torn between several points of view, or recognises their own point of view as problematic. The use of characters can transform conflicts and uncertainties into fertile territories for exploration and inquiry, rather than inconvenient frustrations to be glossed over, disguised and swept aside.

More crucially, character presents a methodological approach to subjective limitations on agency, because characters can enable access to thoughts and modes of thinking that the writer's own subjectively limited agency would ordinarily foreclose. Characters can lead writer-researchers to consider things we otherwise wouldn't in ways we otherwise couldn't, so expanding the scope for research. The use of character may hold particular applications in cases where a writer-researcher wants to challenge their own preconceptions and to think beyond the limitations of their existing subjective position. Characters are therefore indeed very 'good to think [as]' (Webb 2010).

## Endnotes

1. 'Creative' is in inverted commas because the assumed divide between 'creative' and 'critical' writing is arguably a false one. For further discussion see Hecq (2010) and Skrebels (2010). Subsequently, please consider these inverted commas implied. Creative Writing in capital letters refers to Creative Writing as an academic discipline.
2. Ern Malley was a fictional poet created by James McAuley and Harold Stewart. They assembled his poems from fragments of other texts and submitted them to an experimental poetry journal called *Angry Penguins*, where they were published. After the 'hoax' was revealed, McAuley and Stewart claimed that the Malley poems were deliberately bad and that this proved the inferiority of experimental poetry. Others have, however, questioned the honesty of the 'hoaxers' and/or argued that the poems possess merit regardless of authorial intent. For further information see Harris (2003), Rainey (2009) and Brooks (2011).
3. For a detailed study of Ern Malley in relation to other 'hoax' poets, see Brooks (2011).
4. My intention is not to suggest that there is no distinction whatsoever between 'reality' and 'texts' or 'culture'. Nor do I suggest that Judith Butler has made such a claim. All I imply is that the relationship is tangled and complex. As Butler points out, 'materiality cannot be opposed to language nor ... simply reduced to it, because although there is a necessary connection between these domains they remain radically different nonetheless' (Kirby 2002, 266).
5. Butler, following Nietzsche, theorises subjectivity as a process of 'doing' and 'becoming' (Salih 2006, 6).

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