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Editing and publishing the gap: attempting to catch what otherwise might fall through

Abstract:

This paper is an act of history making rather than a theoretical engagement. The paper is co-authored by a number of Australian-based editors of peer-refereed journals who explore the leap that is ‘editing and publishing the gap’. It charts the establishment and development of a series of journals, as well as how, as editors, these individuals engage with the academic writing community in terms of genre, writing forms (including minority and experimental forms) and create a space for non-traditional and non-normative writers, researchers and scholars.

Biographical notes:

Dr Karina Quinn is a Melbourne based writer, poet, and spoken word performer. She placed second in the 2013 Newcastle Poetry Prize and another of her poems was recently projected onto the side of a building in Krakow, Poland, for the International Lights Festival. She is the Managing Editor of *Writing from Below*, and recently completed her PhD in English at La Trobe University.

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Associate Professor Dominique Hecq works at Swinburne University of Technology. She edits *Bukker Tillibul: The online journal of practice-led research* which particularly welcomes submissions by postgraduate students and early career researchers. She co-edits *Double Dialogues* and is on the advisory board of, among other journals, *TEXT*, *New Writing* and *Writing from Below*.

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Keywords: Creative Writing, editing, publishing, critical theory, *Bukker Tillibul*, *Polari Journal*, *TEXT*, *Writing from Below*

Introduction

This paper is co-authored by a group of editors who have many years of experience between us and, by producing a series of brief case studies, explore the creative and professional leap that is ‘editing and publishing the gap’ in terms of discipline-related content production and dissemination. We believe that, as editors, when we set out to publish what could be classified as ‘the gap’, we set out to try to catch writing that is important – even necessary – but that, in its particular temporal and other context – resists easy categorisation and classification and, thereby, might be missed, rejected or overlooked. In this, we also set out to give space to ‘other’ kinds of voices and subgenres that might not otherwise be published, whether in the broader disciplinary context, or in terms of genre, content or approach. This includes texts that lilt between the creative and the critical: theory, recipes, poems, body essays, ficto-critical engagements, manifestos, memoirs, creative work as research; texts that, inside the academy – and often outside it too – did not (and, in many cases, still do not) fit in the journals that already existed. Charting how this has changed across the past two decades, this paper describes the motivation behind the genesis of these publications as well as how they have developed and operated to publish across the gaps in publications.

In doing so, we investigate a series of questions. These include how these publications came about and what keeps them in production. It explores how these publications embrace these gaps without setting up a didactic ‘us and them’ relationship. It also asks how we can edit and publish in hybrid genres without creating another box, or narrow category, to slot these texts into, or making hierarchical judgments. How ‘gappy’, reaching, experimental writing is peer reviewed and how a platform for emerging and established writers can be created that is respectful of form and intent, but still meets the relevant institutional and governmental definitions of publication in that area are other questions we contemplate as editors working into and inside identified gaps. The survey begins with the most recently established journal.

***Writing from Below* (founded 2012): is theory art, and art, theory?**

For the joint managing editors of *Writing from Below* (Quinn and Abblitt), the decision to publish ‘gappy’, experimental, hybrid, genre-bent, ‘outlaw’ research was

made with a sense of excitement and trepidation. These editors were/are both committed fictocritical writers, but even as emerging early-career scholars, they were already tired of regaling each other with disheartening scholarly war stories of rejected publications, tales along the lines of: ‘We just didn’t know where to place this,’ or ‘Is this critical or creative?’ or, even, ‘This needs a more explicit critical framework, some theoretical scaffolding.’ The obvious, if somewhat labour intensive, solution was to create a new space for such works, to found a new journal; a journal that did not just accept this kind of work, but that actively encouraged it. In this way, Quinn and Abblitt found themselves editors of an interdisciplinary, online, open-access journal publishing across the full gamut of critical and creative research occurring inside, outside and across academia.

In their first call for papers, they asked authors to consider:

all the ways that writing and researching differently from within the academy, against the grain, (up) against the university, from down here, down below, creates change. Artists, independent researchers, those of you whose work slips between genres and creates ruptures: do not exclude yourselves. If you think your work belongs here, then it probably does (Abblitt and Quinn 2013).

The editors had obviously struck a chord and received a wide variety of submissions. They were not the only ones who had perceived this gap and had accessed the small but exquisite tradition of cross-genre writing in Australian universities. This includes writing across creative and critical borders from inside the academy that inhabits the institution in a way that presents a loving critique of its formal and generic foibles. Memorable instances of this include Stephen Muecke’s ‘The fall: fictocritical writing’ (2002), Anna Gibbs’s ‘Fictocriticism, affect, mimesis: engendering differences’ (2005), Susan Bradley Smith’s ‘Memoir as suicide’ (2010) and *TEXT* journal’s Special Issue, *Mud Map: Australian Women’s Experimental Writing* (2013), edited by Moya Costello, Barbara Brooks, Anna Gibbs and Rosslyn Prosser.

Writing from Below received poetry, poetics, visual art, autobiography mixed with theory, conversations, collaborations, short fiction, a sound piece and some more conventional – but nonetheless invigorating – academic papers. So, then the editors

had to enact their editorial promise, written in the call for papers, that ‘All submissions (including creative works – we do not privilege one type of work over another) will be peer reviewed’ (Ablitt and Quinn 2013). While committed to thoroughly peer reviewing all work, the question they faced as editors, and one they asked their valiant army of peer reviewers to consider: ‘How does one peer review a poem, or a sound piece, or a conversation?’ Both had been told at one time or another that their work would not be peer reviewed as it was ‘too creative’ or ‘not theoretical enough,’ or simply needed to be more explicit in making its arguments, and the editors realised the great importance of applying scholarly rigour to liminal forms and genres.

Ablitt and Quinn believe that they know from personal and professional experience that fictocritical, cross-genre and creative works are often infused with, and stand upon, a foundation of deep engagement with theory, and that the charge of not being ‘theoretical enough’ was often made in error and ignorance – because we know full well that ‘knowledge of an object of study may be obtained without conceptualisation or explanation’ (Ulmer 1985: 94). As researchers, writers experience ‘knowing as making, producing, doing, acting’ (Ulmer 1985: 94) and so, as editors, Ablitt and Quinn remain suspicious of the odd privileging inherent in situating critical theory hierarchically above creative research practice. In his autobiographical essay *Circumfession*, Jacques Derrida quotes Marcel Proust on the relationship between art and theory: ‘A work in which there are theories is like an object on which one has left the price tag’ (in Derrida 1991: 62). Derrida describes such an attitude as ‘the grimace of a good taste naïve enough to believe one can efface the labour of theory’ (63). This might well be identified as the anecdotal impetus propelling *Writing from Below*.

The editorial solution was uncovered slowly, with faltering steps. It was imperative the editors sourced the ‘right’ peer reviewers. They had to consider submissions carefully, with respect, and ensure these were sent to reviewers who not only had experience in an aligned field of research, but also a creative sensibility. Often, they received one resounding ‘yes’ and a clear ‘no’ in response to the same submission, and realised this was often a result of not selecting a reviewer who understood the author’s intention, motivation or foundational creative conceit. The editors then often found ourselves sending submissions out for a third review, and came to understand

that peer reviewing creative and cross-genre work was a fine art. It was not, however, any finer than reviewing purely critical work – just one which has been practiced less.

The resulting first issues of the journal were a joyful, flexible, diverse, divergent criss-crossing of critical theory and creative practice, while, at the same time, the editors were trying to offer its consumers ‘a good read’. Most feedback was overwhelmingly positive, and since then, the editors have had the privilege of publishing work from a broad range of scholars, artists and writers at varying stages of their careers. The introductory issue was a single, forty-eight page offering from Marion May Campbell. Titled ‘Trajectories of desire in Genet and Witting’ (2012), it is a theoretical and creative *tour de force*. The second issue placed art theory and practice (Phillips 2013) next to conversations about low theory (Abdulrehman et al. 2013) and Foucault and Deleuze (Ng and Watson 2013) and an open letter to kin, friends and mentors encountered at international sex conferences (Stardust 2013).

Despite this, not everyone was happy. The editors received an email from a well-known editor not long after the issue was published, which we would love to publish the content of, but which was sent as private correspondence. The aspect of the journal that had rankled him enough to write was the editors’ statement that ‘theory is art and art, theory, after all’ (2013) and he briskly went about disabusing them of that notion. The disgruntled writer felt there was a clear divide between making and thinking about making, and that to suggest otherwise was problematic to say the least. But, on reflection, perhaps what the editors had failed to articulate was the deep sense that when authors create ‘gappy’ writing, and when editors and reviewers have the privilege of reading ‘gappy’ submissions, these creations/submissions are almost always underpinned and informed by theory.

These editors suspect this situation has to do with minority voices always feeling the urgent need – necessarily or not – to be more secure than majority voices, and to justify their occupation of the discursive spaces they inhabit. So, on the one hand, readers as editors can witness writers, artists, poets and scholars bravely stepping beyond the disciplinary borderlines, mixing and remixing and mashing together genres, moving outside the bounds of what is ‘acceptable’ (and what gets research points in an era of increasing managerialism and concomitant fiscal conservatism in universities), who also, therefore, need to ground their argument and more rigorously justify the scholarly integrity and research outputs of their creative practices. On the

other hand, we can witness the guardians of the disciplines, replete with interdisciplinary insecurities, anxiously attempting to shore up their own credibility, leading to a scholarly conservatism that closes the gaps within which the more experimental forms of research might exist.

On the flip side, if theory isn't also art, then, what is it?. If theory and art don't rub up against each other, and in that rubbing, make a cellular exchange, then what world does did this email writer live in? A world of *this or that, here or there*, a world where nothing leaks, a world without gaps? As Muecke writes:

When criticism is well-written, and fiction has more ideas than usual, the distinction between the two starts to break down. It is a little crisis because criticism can't be relied upon to 'keep its distance,' and fiction can't be relied upon to stay in its imaginary and sometimes politically irrelevant worlds. The whole artifice of literary criticism was built up in order to do one thing really: to unmask the secrets of art. And the fiction was always there re-enchanting the world by putting on the beautiful masks again and again (2002: 108).

When the editors publish an issue of *Writing from Below*, they believe that:

we jump into the gap. We fall and fly. We publish art that is theory that is art. We unmask the secrets of art and make a place for beautiful masks to be put on and taken off. We make a place for writing that doesn't fit anywhere else. We hear a clamouring of voices: look, look, look. This is what we know: fictocritical, genre-bending, experimental forms belong to now (Abblitt and Quinn, in Quinn et al. 2104).

In this, they are speaking back to an increasingly neo-liberal academic environment. In her introduction to *Mud Map*, Anna Gibbs writes that

the experimental seems a mode particularly suited to the present, to shattered subjects, diaspora and displacement, and to the fragmentation of daily life, increasingly composed of interruptions, disconnections, and contradictions (2013: 8).

Adding into that interrupted, disconnected, contradictory space, the editors choose to publish work that ‘queers’ the academy, that makes readers tilt their heads in thought, that requires them to read twice to catch meaning. They privilege, they state, ‘voices and forms that are often hidden, and we remain deeply committed to this privileging’ (Abblitt and Quinn, in Quinn et al. 2104).

***Polari Journal* (founded 2010): The gap as viewing point**

Our second case study suggests that gaps can be ambiguous spaces. A gap can feel like a border, a moat that quarantines zones, but it can also provide a space, a distance, so that what is on the other side can be seen more clearly. A gap can be an irreducible chasm that separates one position from another, but it can also be an opportunity to build bridges between those positions. This idea of the gap as viewing point, as an opportunity for connection, is the approach the editors at *Polari Journal* prefer to take.

Polari Journal was founded in 2010. Part of the journal’s mission statement was to publish work occupying the intersections between: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender (LGBT) literature studies; creative writing research, teaching and practice; and queer theories. The editors refer to scholarly and creative work occupying this nexus as ‘queer writing’ (Baker 2010). From the outset, the journal was conceived as responding to a lack of publishing opportunities for the creative work of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender academics in the discipline of creative writing and the journal was conceived and brought to fruition by a collective of writing academics and published creative writers from around the globe. *Polari Journal* intended to address this lack by providing the world’s first peer-reviewed queer creative writing journal.

The cumulative experience of the founding editorial collective was that LGBT creative writing academics were further disadvantaged by a near total absence of

support for research and publication of queer creative writing scholarship. *Polari Journal* aimed to address this issue, especially for LGBT writing academics in Australia and the United Kingdom, where there was, and is, significant pressure to produce and publish quality research outputs. Another motivation behind the establishment of *Polari Journal* was the collective's shared perception of a drastic downturn in LGBT publishing which began in the 1990s. In Australia, the closure of LGBT press, Black Wattle, meant that there were no LGBT publishers in that country at all. *Polari Journal* intended to step into that gap and provide a publication venue for LGBT writers, with an emphasis on queer creative writers who have completed a Masters or Doctoral qualification.

Polari Journal, furthermore, hoped to address the historic underrepresentation of LGBT writing in mainstream literary publications. In Australia, this lack was acknowledged a year after *Polari Journal's* inception by the editors of the literary magazine *Overland*, who wrote about disproportionate gender representation of men over women in literary journals: 'it is undeniable that a similar situation exists for writers who are queer' (Overland 2010). In an act bordering on tokenism, the *Overland* editors addressed this problem by dedicating page space to a single queer writer in a single issue (issue 203) of their journal (2011). This space was taken up by a gay male writer with an established profile, namely Rodney Croome. The issue also, perhaps coincidentally, included a piece by another gay male writer, Benjamin Law. This raises another of *Polari Journal's* aims, that of addressing underrepresentation within LGBT literature itself, which has a strongly gay male bias. To address this bias, the journal favours, wherever possible, transgender, bisexual and lesbian writers.

The first issue of *Polari Journal* was published in April 2010. Since then, the journal has released two issues almost every year and, in the five years since its inception, nine issues have been published. In those nine issues, hundreds of pieces of refereed creative and scholarly writing were published under a double-blind peer review system. Most of these pieces are works that, without *Polari Journal*, would have struggled to find a home and readership. The double-blind review system means, moreover, that the work of LGBT Creative Writing academics published in the journal, both scholarly and creative, can be seen as quality research outputs.

The pieces published in *Polari Journal* consist of a wide range of genres of writing – from poetry, plays and short fiction to scholarly essays and fictocritical work. All

work is archived on the site as well as by the National Library of Australia, and all issues of the journal are freely available online. At present, the journal receives hundreds of unique visitors each month, mostly from the USA, Australia and the UK, but also from a range of countries including Indonesia, India and Brazil. In this way, *Polari Journal* has used the gap in publishing LGBT writing and scholarship as an opportunity to build connections between readers and LGBT academic writers. The journal has also assisted queer creative writing academics to build and/or maintain a quality publications record. Furthermore, *Polari Journal* now acts as a repository of scholarly and creative work from an emerging field of practice and research, that of queer writing.

***Bukker Tillibul* (founded 2004): practice-led research and creative research in action**

Bukker Tillibul was first published in 2004. At the time, the main goals of the journal were to provide Swinburne University postgraduate students in writing with an outlet for their work and to promote a dialogue for academics across disciplines at that university. A lesser, though not inconsequential goal was to foster links with the wider community, and this is why a link was made with a then-local publication *Woorilla*.

In 2007, the editorial board felt that *Bukker Tillibul* needed a new focus and broader forum. The number of postgraduates had increased dramatically, academics in creative writing studies were debating issues of research quality, creativity and assessment, whilst students and supervisors were discussing and devising models for practice-led research. Because the question of practice-led research had been vigorously discussed for some time in professional journals, within the circles of the Australian Association of Writing Programs and in other arenas overseas, the editors decided that this would be *Bukker Tillibul*'s new focus. The journal thus became *Bukker Tillibul: The online journal of writing and practice-led research*. As its editor-in-chief, Dominique Hecq had it registered with an international standard serials number and invited additional referees onto the editorial board. In 2009, the journal was accredited by the Australian Research Council (under the Excellence of Research for Australia evaluation exercise) and interest in it grew. Increasingly, poets and

fiction writers from overseas submitted texts, some in languages other than English. Last year, 2013, Hecq felt that it needed a wider audience and a sexier look. A web designer was hired to remodel the site and it now has an international board of referees that includes academics and freelance writers as well as postgraduate students.

Apart from scholarly essays on practice-led research, fiction, creative non-fiction, poetry and reviews, it now also encourages pieces of ‘creative research in action’ which foreground the act of art-making. Works are published online as soon as they are refereed. As an online journal, *Bukker Tillibul* has the flexibility to reach across distance and to connect participants – both creators and researchers. Because practice-led research is now an established field which invites further academic insights into, and explanations of, just how practice operates in the production of knowledge, the editors are hoping to broaden its scope in order to facilitate discussions in the context of historical, socio-political and contemporary ideas relating to practice.

Higher degrees in research (RHD) in writing around the globe are increasingly led by practice (Kroll and Harper 2013: 1). An articulation of the process and its significant focus through the exegesis or research paper(s) is essential to locating creative work within the field of practice and theory. It is also part of the replication process that establishes writing as a stable research discipline able to withstand peer and wider assessment and hence be validated alongside other fields. With the implementation of the various quality frameworks across the globe, it is also of critical importance that RHD candidates as well as academics be offered the possibility to publish their research as well as their creative work in specialised journals. The editors believe that *Bukker Tillibul* fulfils this aim.

Bukker Tillibul also referees its creative writing pages, which publish poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction. The journal uses a definition of research that is consistent with the broad notion of research and experimental development as comprising ‘creative work undertaken on a systematic basis in order to increase the stock of knowledge’ (OECD 2009). Indeed, increasingly, creative work is granted the status of creative writing research if published in a refereed journal. This is by no means an established trend, but it is developing globally and underpins the MA (Writing) and PhD by artefact and exegesis at Swinburne University. Further, while there are journals that specifically invite intellectual exchanges between researchers on

practice-led research such as *TEXT*, *New Writing* and *In/Stead*, none of these target postgraduates and early career researchers. *Bukker Tillibul* fills this gap. From 2007 onwards, the journal has not only proactively sourced work from postgraduates, but, since 2009 has also enlisted doctoral students as referees, and has encouraged a mentoring system. In this way, *Bukker Tillibul* has recognized and responded to a gap in creative writing research publication.

Identifying disciplinary gaps: *TEXT* journal (founded 1996) and the *TEXT* Special Issues series (founded 2000)

TEXT journal was founded in 1996 as a foundational strategic output of the newly formed Australian Association of Writing Programs. The founding members of the new professional organisation – aiming to represent and network programs in universities across Australia, for problem solving and the advancement of the discipline of creative writing in Australia – understood that both the communication, and archiving, of key discipline-related information, issues and problems; professional development needs and opportunities; research findings; and strategy discussions and related documents regarding all these areas would be an important task for the new association. As natural for a discipline based on writing and publishing, it was identified that One way of doing this was through a publication. The first issue was published in April 1997.

To date, as *TEXT* approaches its twentieth year, 64 issues – 36 issues biannually each April and October since 1997, plus 28 themed issues (known as *TEXT Special Issues*) – have been published online. In these 64 issues, more than some 1,000 refereed articles plus reviews and editorials have been published. All work is archived and all issues and their contents, past and present, is freely available.

The space *TEXT*, as the AAWP itself (now having officially changed its name to the Australasian Association of Writing Programs), continues to fill is broad, networking not only academics and students as individuals, but also their university programs, with other national and international organisations (Brien 2010). As an early adopter of the fully online, open access, no charge to submit or publish, quality peer refereed journal paradigm, *TEXT* was the first international journal solely dedicated to generating and disseminating research in creative writing, and remains the most

enduring. At the time of its establishment, this filled a significant gap in both practice and knowledge (Brien et al. 2011) and, while the focus and remit of the journal continues to expand, this foundational role in discipline terms continues.

While, of course, filling gaps where nothing else suitable existed – as, for instance, providing foundational exploration and debates around such features of creative writing teaching and research as how to teach creative writing, the creative writing exegesis, supervising/examining creative writing research higher degrees and expanding definitions of creative writing and creative writing research – *TEXT* also provides a historical commentary on issues of enduring concern as compared to those of a more momentary nature. Sometimes an article or series of articles can be charted across issues, years and even decades of the journal – while others are more transitory. No other single text, portal or publication can provide this in the field, nationally or internationally.

TEXT has, however, also filled other gaps. As a growing archive/repository of disciplinary knowledge, the journal provides a de facto although high level reading course for new scholars, researchers and university teaching staff, with many research higher degree supervisors, line managers and mentors advising new students, staff and aspiring individuals to ‘read *TEXT* first’, and many can attest to utilising the journal in this way. This is true not only of the articles and reviews themselves, but also the themes developed across issues (and years and decades) and in the themed special issues. These themes not only chart the discipline’s focus of attention and development, but has led (and continues to lead) disciplinary direction in terms of agenda setting in aspects of disciplinary practice.

The regular *TEXT* editorials – in both the general and special issues – offer another rich resource. These chart a series of editors’ observations and interpretations of the knowledge field both surrounding *TEXT*, and generated by it, and thereby provide another level of commentary that is lacking in the writing discipline in Australasia. These essays also have a historical and cumulative value in linking what is (at the time of writing) most current and up-to-date research with events of disciplinary import. This is most obviously apparent in the annual conference of the AAWP, but also in the various research evaluation exercises in Australia and New Zealand. These editorials also chart the development and contribution of new external funding opportunities, particularly the development of a significant stream of grants for

aspects of learning and teaching in creative writing/creative arts from the Carrick Institute, which became the Australian Learning and Teaching Council and is now the Office of Learning and Teaching of the Australian government.

TEXT also provides a 'home' for the work of groups of writers without a dedicated publication vehicle and those from other professional bodies whose work closely intersects with the concerns of writing in the academy, but who do not have a journal of their own. It has additionally provided an invaluable professional placement opportunity for its editors to develop their skills, knowledge and experience of not only editing and publishing wonderful and important writing, but also in commissioning, leading and shaping debates and discussions about writing in Australia.

Conclusion

As a group of editors and academics in the writing discipline, the authors of this paper have sought in the above to explore how the publications they edit have provided opportunities for meaningful engagement with the academic writing community about a wide range of issues and concerns. These can be of a discipline-specific nature; of genre, minority and experimental writing forms; or relating to specific groups and sub-groupings of writers and academics. In this, these journals and their editors have created a space for traditional alongside non-traditional and non-normative writers, researchers, and scholars. In the process, these journals have also provided a space to connect various communities to the discipline of writing and its concerns. These publications have, over a period of almost twenty years, also not only disseminated and archived writing important to our discipline, they have also assisted in setting, developing and developing important agendas and, thereby, have assisted the discipline's ongoing development and advance. Aside from the significant knowledge disseminated and shared, considerable research income has been generated for universities and departments, while individuals have had a growing number of increasingly prestigious locations in which to present their work for public scrutiny and review. It is also notable that all these journals are freely available, open access publications, with no charge to submit or publish, and no payments made to the army of editors and peer reviewers who make these publications possible.

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