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The Margins and Mainstreams Papers: the refereed proceedings of the 14th conference of the Australian Association of Writing Programs, 2009

Editorial introduction

This collection of papers is the third publication of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) conference proceedings, a practice that the Association established in 2007 in order to make freely available the valuable contributions emerging from these annual conferences. The refereed papers in this volume were presented by participants at ‘Margins and Mainstreams’, the 14th conference of the AAWP held in Hamilton, New Zealand, in November 2009. Their publication exemplifies the wide-ranging, yet also focused and in-depth, research generated by the 2009 conference. These papers represent a particular moment in Australasian research in writing, a moment in which Australasian researchers are taking a leading place within academic research frameworks internationally. One of the hallmarks of the academic discipline of writing is its engagement with the sometimes uneasy, but always stimulating and creative, space between creative practice and research. In what has, at times, seemed an insurmountable challenge for academic writing practitioners—that of presenting both creative and academic work as research—the authors of these papers do not shy away from engaging with both the possibilities and the challenges for writers and researchers committed to responding to this requirement, and the desire to position their work within the research culture of the contemporary academy. This is evident in the research strength of these works as well as the range of difficult, creative and exciting ideas canvassed in these papers. As creative writers, teachers of writing, scholars, postgraduate students, and published and unpublished authors, the writers of these papers passionately maintain their commitment to both their writing practice and conceptualising it.

One of the most interesting aspects of this work is its close engagement with writing as both activity and product with the writers of these papers asking questions around the issue of ‘what is writing?’ These questions include how does writing relate to the writer’s sense of self, to their psyche, emotion or mind? To what extent is its meaning dependent on interpretation by its intimate readers, or by the face it presents to the public world? These papers often ask: ‘what is it that I do when I write?’, ‘what do my students learn

when they write?', 'how do students or members of the public read?' and, significantly, 'what do I come to know in the process of creating this written form?' As, and like, research, all writing practice is an engagement with such questions, the exploration of possibilities representing the need to solve problems and posit answers to questions raised by the writing project. While this is the case for all the creative arts, the art of writing alone engages with these questions in written language. As these papers attest, writers and scholars use written academic discourse and scholarship in different ways to bridge the often fuzzy lines of research and the creative, problem solving formulation of possibilities of language and form—and the writing practice involved in producing writing in other genres: different narrative forms and fiction, poetry, graphic novels, and research based writing produced within the teaching context (to name but a few manifestations of writing practice dealt with in these proceedings).

The Margins and Mainstreams conference this year was hosted by the Waikato Institute of Technology in Hamilton. This was the first time that the AAWP's annual conference has been held outside Australia and this inaugural event marks what has long been the organisation's association with New Zealand. This association has indeed been a part of the AAWP's formative identity for many years. New Zealand writers and teachers of writing have been active, foundational members and participants at our annual conferences, including Professor Bill Manhire, who has been a keynote conference speaker, and the convenor of the 2009 conference and active member of the Association's Executive Committee of Management for a number of years, Gail Pittaway. The connection with New Zealand confirmed at this conference becomes a metaphor for the event as a whole: its location south of Australia, on New Zealand's north island, functions as a metaphor for the conference theme of margins and mainstreams that richly has produced so many intriguing papers in this collection.

To ask questions such as 'where is the margin?' and 'what is the mainstream?' and concurrently, 'where is this (or, my) writing practice positioned?' has produced a range of thoughtful responses. In this, it appears that there is no question of the implied binary of this paradigm resting easily with a spirit of scholarly inquiry. Antonia Pont's essay unsettles the notion of 'edge', arguing for 'the fine rivers of aporia' in thought that can lead to what is 'most radical in writing and other creative practices'. Kevin Brophy's essay explores the possibility of a 'Post-Neo-Avant-ism' in contemporary poetry that 'might re-connect art and literature with a contemporary world and rescue the unfinished project of modernity', while Dominique Hecq explores how Australian prose poetry questions the 'boundaries between creative and critical material whilst negotiating between notions of a public language of prose and a marginal language of poetry'. Wendy Glassby writes of the integral role of marginality in the creative processes of Ross Gibson's use of photographs of marginal characters in writing *The summer exercises* (2008) and Josie Arnold explores the concept of voice or 'sub-voice' as liminal in the work of Roland Barthes and other autobiographical texts.

The relationship of theoretical and philosophical approaches to the practice of writing and its integral relationship to reading is of great interest to reflective scholars and teachers, who, in various ways, apply theory to their teaching, both as a means of teaching writing and of teaching theory. This approach is fundamental to research-based tertiary teaching practice. Claire Woods considers ways of enabling undergraduate students to see themselves as researchers through their experience of researching their writing, and to 'understand the representation process as poetic, rhetorical and referential, and one which allows them space to re-inscribe themselves in the process'. Joshua Lobb describes how he adapts 'two post-structuralist psychoanalytic concepts: Brooks' notion of 'narrative desire' and Barthes' concept of the 'dilatatory space' as approaches to teaching the role of narrative desire in writing, and through writing.

Several essays engage with the margins of writing and research, either positing writing *as* research or exploring possibilities of researching writing through a variety of interdisciplinary frames: Jen Webb argues effectively that the culturally marginalized form of poetry *is* 'knowledge' because, unlike other forms of writing, it bears a relationship to philosophy in its processes of mind and its engagement with, and 'as', phenomenal perception. Conversely, Lucy Neave questions the extent to which we can 'know' another writer's process through interview material, but argues that archival manuscript research of a writer's papers, as in her research of Peter Carey's manuscripts and papers, may provide more complex, nuanced insights. Marcelle Freiman also considers, through research into neuroscientific and cognitive approaches to writing, the extent to which writers' observations about emotion and motivation in their writing is sufficient to explain the powerful role played by affect in both writing and reading. Also, in essays on research and writing, Nicola Boyd proposes the need for a single methodology to apply to the writing process that will frame it as research, and Liz Colbert considers how practice led research 'may affect the research process' through its 'evolving, experiential and iterative nature'.

The place of writing, as the writing of places, and how these can be either, or both, marginal and mainstream, is another theme running through a number of these papers. Both Susan Currie and Ffion Murphy propose a series of links between living on the geographical margins and the practice of life writing and life writing research, whether biographical and autobiographical. Martin Andrew's paper shows how the establishment and maintenance of online spaces for writing and teaching can help to break down the feeling of marginalisation that online and distance learners experience. Brooke Davis explores a place for writing grief, while Donna Lee Brien investigates the various possibilities for writing a history of the AAWP as a supportive and positive professional space for its members. Beth Tennent and Donna Lee Brien suggest that in an era of university regulation, working with, and within, the spaces of framing policy, administrative and management structures is not only both expected and necessary in the contemporary academic environment, but can be collaborative, inclusive and to the benefit of individuals and disciplines. In this vein of disciplinary enquiry, Anne Surma asks where the discipline of writing positions itself in relation to recent public debates

that suggest that literacy is largely a matter of standards and expedient economic outcomes, persuasively arguing for an ethics of temporality. Also considering the place of writing programs in the academy, Jeff Sparrow, Rjurik Davidson, Angelika Papadopoulos and Enza Gandolfo explore the impact of the new political economy of higher education on creative writing programs.

The reading of writing has a place too in this collection. Gary Crew asks how those writing for children should approach the question of either preparing child readers for, or screening them from, contemporary reality. Sue Page examines some of the more controversial novels recently published for teen readers to demonstrate how, even in the grittiest, many authors promote a conservative ideology of conformity. Ross Watkins reads graphic narratives, considering such visual narrative forms as sophisticated sites of active meaning making and exploring the contemporary evolution of the relationship between word and image. Jan Shaw reports on the introduction of a new undergraduate course considering contemporary fantasy by women, literary work twice positioned at the margins: fantasy fiction and feminism—and that, while marginality has difficulties, it can be productive. Moving from the margins to the mainstream, Lynda Hawryluk examines three authors' lives in relation to their response to their status as celebrities: Harper Lee, Bret Easton Ellis and Elizabeth Gilbert.

Of course, as befitting a conference for writers, and students and teachers of writing, writers writing is a theme that runs across a number of these papers, including many of the above. This includes screenwriter Melanie Rodriga who interrogates the mainstream Hollywood narrative of redemptive resolution, in particular that which 'cures' the patient by integrating 'multiple identities' into one. Brooke Dunnell explores writing fiction that provides access to the thoughts and feelings of multiple characters, making available several concurrent versions of each character. Glenice Whitting focuses on some of the possibilities that emerge from the intersection of autoethnographical writing and epistolary form in literary writing. In discussing the influence of German author WG Sebald on her writing practice, Yvette Walker investigates the art of rhetoric in philosophical investigations of love and suffering in the Holocaust novel. Natalie Kon-yu discusses the number of ways in which memory may be written in, and into, the novel, suggesting that rather than simply being used as a method for recuperating the past, characters' memories can be written as incomplete, contradictory and full of omissions. Gail Pittaway also reflects on memory, comparing the myth of the mother of the muses with contemporary metaphors of the nature and function of memory, considering aging writers and memory loss.

The quality and range of questions addressed, and ideas put forward, in this collection of papers are indicative of the excellent work being done at this particular, defining moment of research in writing. This publication shows how much energy, risk taking and inventiveness can be combined with scholarly research when writers, researchers and teachers of writing respond to a conference call for papers. This publication is, therefore, characterised by a hallmark of which the editors are very proud—the extraordinary

potential for creative research that emerges when writers and researchers address the challenges of this defining moment.