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Writing for the new social media marketplace: a direction for creative writing in the university

Abstract:

The creative writing classroom tends not to be "market-focused" (Radia, Pavlina; 2012) yet, with a new marketplace, the social media marketplace, there are more opportunities than ever for the creative writer. This paper begins by defining the social media marketplace and explaining why we should be encouraging our creative writing students to write for a new marketplace from within the classroom. The main focus of the paper is on how to write for this new marketplace.

By conducting research into the history of creative writing in relation to the marketplace, I made the discovery that the student writer has "permission" to develop creative work in relation to social media and the social media marketplace and to approach a marketplace in a way that has not previously been recognized.

This paper looks at the question: What creative writing outcome might a creative writing student produce with "permission" to work with social media and the social media marketplace without expectation of having to sell?

Without slipping into other fields such as media studies, business, or transmedia writing, we can negotiate new territory for creative writing and perhaps even consider some ways to assess creative artifacts without theory or even a canonical approach.

Biographical note:

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Introduction

The goal of my research has been to examine the relationship of university-level creative writing to the marketplace. In 2013 I described approaches for undergraduate classroom engagement with social media [1] in ways that honored academic traditions and standards (Suchy 2013). The editors of *TEXT* journal describe my work as asking 'the tricky question of how the creative part of creative writing and the market place find each other, and how the classroom might make deeper contact with students through the incorporation of social media into what the students are asked to do' (Krauth et al 2013).

Since the time of this publication, others in the field have also been looking to address how creative writing classrooms can engage in meaningful ways with social media. For example, at the University of Pennsylvania, Kenneth Goldsmith plans to run a creative writing course in 2015 for undergraduates called 'Wasting Time on the Internet'. The course drew media attention and was described as follows:

> The higher purpose of the course is to shape the detritus of the Internet into meaningful works of art. As the description asks prospective students: "Could we reconstruct our autobiography using only Facebook? Could we write a great novella by plundering our Twitter feed?" Those are big questions for some of the nation's best and brightest, who will begin to answer them this coming spring. (*Time* 2014)

The idea of sorting the detritus of Facebook into story is already being commercialized by companies like Memoirs. [2] Memoirs uses algorithms to sort the data of Emails and Facebook conversations into bound books. Although technology is certainly changing publishing and is impacting fields like journalism [3], algorithms and robot writers are not a problem for the creative writing classroom because inherently creative writing is a 'human activity' (Harper *Inside Creative Writing* 2012: 1). Creative writing is a way of seeking knowledge through a creative process, is performed by an individual, and is 'experiential' (Hecq 2012: 3).

Goldsmith himself recognizes that plundering the Internet for creative purposes is not new territory. The larger goal is to locate a human digital experience within a literary tradition. In Goldsmith's case the aim of doing this with his students is to demonstrate that (seemingly) wasted time spent on the Internet can be reconceived as worthwhile (Goldsmith 2014).
There is value in examining the writer's experience in relation to the Internet, for 'experiential evaluation is, after all, frequently the starting point for the creation of new knowledge' (Harper

Creative Habitats 2010: 1). To that end, this article examines my own experience of creating an artifact for a dissertation from data gathered on the Internet (thus anticipating the 'higher purpose' that Goldsmith's undergraduate class will be pursuing) in order to consider what it means for a postgraduate to work in a particular social media space in relation to the marketplace, to argue some of the benefits of having students work in this space, and to introduce questions that might be used for the assessment of creative writing artifacts.

The marketplace and the history

My work began with the recognition that with digital technology a new type of marketplace with new opportunities has emerged and that the line between selling and buying and social interaction has blurred. In this digital space, writers now engage in the exchange of information and ideas, whether bought, traded, bartered or given freely, whether for commercial or cultural capital gain or without expectation of any profit, and much of this interaction occurs while the writer is working with social media in what can be referred to as a social media marketplace. This social media marketplace is 'all about participation, sharing, and collaboration, rather than straightforward advertising and selling' (Kaplan and Haenlein 2010:65). This new way of looking at the marketplace is useful for university-level creative writing because the threat of a marketplace imperative (to sell a creative work) is reduced and this fits with traditions of academic creative writing.

In the creative writing classroom today, we tend not to pay much attention to either the marketplace [because of the belief that we are not 'market-driven' (Radia 2012: 165)] or to the digital world [because we are 'rather low tech and quaintly humanistic' (McGurl 2009: 21), although students and teachers do come to the classroom digitally 'connected' (Selwyn 2011: 2)]. [4] The digital engagement of a traditional creative writing classroom is part of the reason why Goldsmith's class made news; yet, the marketplace relationship has not been discussed in this situation. [5]

While the marketplace still may not be the focus of most creative writing classrooms, there have been times when marketplace outcomes were valued and worked toward. In fact, one can argue that the introduction of creative writing for credit in the university by Barrett Wendell at Harvard (between 1890 and 1913) was based on a market interest. Wendell taught students how to write on the basis of his own writing aspirations and accepted verse and fiction for classroom credit (Myers 2006: 48-49). Importantly, he also provided information on publishing to his students (Adams 1993: 70). George Pierce Baker represents another example

of a teacher concerned with real world outcomes. In 1904 he declared his vision 'to aid the development of an artistic and commercially viable indigenous American theatrical tradition' (McGurl 2009: 95), and Baker and his students (American greats such as Eugene O'Neil, Edward Sheldon, and Phillip Barry) began to accomplish this goal (Kinne 1954). A third example of being market-focused can be seen in the 1930s-1950s in the U.S. when students were being trained in Iowa under the program conceived by Norman Forester and furthered by Paul Angle. There was a sense of vocational outcome toward the mostly male war veterans and a belief that they were being prepared for the marketplace (Swander 2005: 168). While these are three examples of historical times where working with the marketplace was important to particular creative writing classrooms and programs, I am not arguing that the university should expect vocational outcomes from creative writing students (although there is certainly a need for that discussion). I am arguing that there are times when creative writing classrooms have worked with the marketplace and that the academy has recognized real world opportunities yet still managed to negotiate a space that is not market-driven. The unique negotiation of engagement with the marketplace while maintaining a non-market driven position characterizes creative writing in the university and can be considered one of university creative writing's 'markers of professional difference' (Ritter 2001: 208; Donnelly and Harper 2013: 132). [6]

While an understanding of the marketplace and the history provided an important foundation, the ideas needed to be practically applied to the production of a full-length dissertation creative artifact. I began by determining accepted assessment criteria for a creative dissertation and found that academic expectation directed outcome.

The creative project: gaining permission to not sell

Academics recognize the complexities of assessing non-traditional research outputs and seek to provide some clear guidelines. For example, the AAWP is encouraging the use of the ERA 2015 submission guidelines from the Australian Research Council in revision of creative submissions for the 2014 conference proceedings. The guidelines require a creative work to be accompanied by a research statement that identifies research background (the field, context, and research question), contribution and significance.

My work was being conducted in the field of creative writing studies in the context of the marketplace, so the research question now needed addressing. Development of the research question was aided by the insights of Tara Brabazon and Maggie Butt. According to Brabazon

the exegesis should 'articulate the artifact' not in ' "how" ' the student created the work, but in ' "why" it was made' (2010). In seeming conflict, Maggie Butt points out that the PhD by Publication 1997 UK Report (1997: 10) states that 'an academic art researcher is obliged also to map for his or her peers the route by which they arrived at that product' (2013: 10). This idea might appear to suggest that one should show 'how' a work is created (which would contradict Brabazon's 'why'); however, Butt goes on to explain that the goal is not to provide a 'how to', not 'a mere autobiographical chronicle of what was done' (Butt 2013: 11). Rather, the candidate needs to explain: 'what drove the thinking and production of the texts and/or artefacts' (Butt 2013: 12).

For my case, the research question that drove my thinking and ultimately the production of the creative work was: how does a postgraduate creative writing student write for this new social media marketplace?

The answer to how to write for the social media marketplace is to write without thinking about how to sell creative work in the marketplace. This is a comfortable and traditional position for the university creative writing student, and that answer may seem obvious. However, it was not. The reason for that answer is because looking at and working in the social media marketplace does not mean having to think about selling in any traditional way, and that is significant. Using the interactive dynamics of social media as an agora for the exchange of ideas, a postgraduate can gather content and discover research possibilities. Quite simply, the creative writing student can have 'permission' to develop creative work in relation to social media and the social media marketplace and can approach a marketplace, rather than avoid it. Avoidance of and non-interaction with the marketplace are not uncommon experiences for the creative writing student because 'the teacher's primary role is to support the students, to help them gain confidence in their vision and in developing their original voice' (Harper *Teaching Creative Writing* 2006: 104), and this primary role often precludes marketplace preparation and is due to the belief that the teacher should 'stress process over product' (Harper *TCW* 2006, 104), that is, students are learning a craft process and not working for the market outcome of a published book during their time of study. Under the tutelage of educators encouraging this approach, students naturally become more inward looking, less connected to the marketplace. There are, no doubt, good reasons for keeping students 'cocooned in their own insular world' (Starkey 2006: xii); however, in still holding to pre-digital marketplace ideas and not accounting for the modern agora, students become restricted in their thinking and can be missing out on potential social media marketplace relationships that can enrich their writing

and publication outcomes.

However, simply accepting that a student can work in the marketplace is not sufficient. A student also must not be concerned about selling. For example, in my case, thinking about how to sell a creative work in the social media marketplace was leading to the creation of a business plan. My initial proposal for the artifact was to create a script divided into 10 X 10 minute segments to be put on YouTube. This was easy enough to draft; however, the outcome was a script that seemed stilted in terms of a relationship to the research. A business plan would be needed to address issues such as how an audience would discover the work when so much content is available, what would be the monetizing model, and so forth. One might write a business plan as part of a creative writing project, but business plans are not conventionally a part of the discourse of creative writing courses.

A second example of not understanding the appropriate relationship to the social media marketplace was my attempt to be 'socially' engaged and producing creative work in collaboration with others, that included creating works presented in digital social media spaces in combination with live performances and readings. While these projects utilized the social media marketplace in a variety of ways, the need to conform to the length expectations of a novel or screenplay were pushing me toward transmedia writing which involves developing story across multiple platforms. Transmedia writing's roots are in the area of gaming and it is heavily used for 'franchise' enhancement (Gomez 2013). Again there is the push toward selling. Additionally, the approach is collaborative. While other academic fields (for example, media studies) do develop transmedia projects, 'schools as institutions have been slow to react to the emergence of this new participatory culture', which shifts 'the focus of literacy from one of individual expression to community involvement' (Jenkins et al 2006: 4). In the university creative writing field 'collaborative writing is relatively rare' (Butt 2013: 8). Writing expressed as part of a 'community' would complicate assessment. Additional research could help to provide arguments against those barriers.

Once a creative writing student understands she/he has 'permission' to work with the social media marketplace without expectation of having to sell, the student can begin to engage in a more traditional and organic way, that is, in the way a creative writer usually works in thinking about developing story (as recognized by writing programs today) and in a way that fits well with what the social media marketplace is 'all about' (see earlier reference to Kaplan and Haenlien 2010: 65).

Locating a 'creative habitat' and finding the creative work

In negotiating new territory for university-level creative writing, first recognizing that meaningful creative work can and is being developed from the 'detritus' of the Internet within the social media marketplace is a starting point. Next the writer might identify a specific 'creative habitat' (Harper *Creative Habitats* 2010: 3), a space (real or virtual) where the writer can be found working, a more specific place than the Internet at large. This need for identification can be seen in Goldsmith's description of works students might be creating. The student might be working in Facebook (to create an autobiography), in Twitter (to create a novella), and so forth. I needed to determine a more specific location to work. My position as researcher, a traditional story development source (that is, a journal), and my pre-existing engagement with a social media space helped me to clarify my 'creative habitat'.

As a postgraduate researcher working in the field of creative writing and the social media marketplace, I needed to create an artifact that fulfilled both the condition of 'research' and of 'utilization' of the social media marketplace. Importantly, this idea of researcher clarified the role of the creative writer utilizing social media and the relationship of the writer to the social media marketplace. A researcher makes meaning from massive amounts of information, an essential skill in our current data-heavy digital environment, and in particular in the social media marketplace where massive amounts of information are gathered and exchanged. Engaging online requires filtering practices and addressing questions like: What does all this information mean? How can I manage the information? How can I create meaning from the information? The writer too seeks answers to these questions (and has always done this), and the outcome of the filtering is presented on the page, in the finished artifact. Also, the creative writer often asks a question, or has a problem to explore. In dissertation parlance, this is the research question. In a creative work, the problem and answer may be indirectly or directly presented. For example in Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, a problem being examined (or a theme) is how do we find happiness? [7] This is how the researcher makes sense of data and so does the creative writer. A more contemporary example can be seen in James McBride's memoir *The Color of Water* (1997). McBride wants to know: who is this woman that is my mother? [8]

So, what was the question I was asking in the creative? At some level I was still asking how to write for this space; however, I required an emotional component to make for compelling story telling for 'emotion in the author is after all the source-spring of emotion in the story and

through it, in the reader' (Esenwein 1908: 195). So I sourced personal journals written during this research period and identified two helpful ideas: (1) I had something that looked like a story, a nagging emotional concern, and (2) I was already using the social media marketplace to reveal the answer to that concern. The idea for the creative artifact began with a personal issue—that is, the idea that I did not know the person I had spent the past fifteen years with— that the person I thought I knew was a complete fabrication. So the overriding question was similar to McBride's, that is, 'Who is this person?' Additionally, I was aware that I was already searching for the answer to that question in the social media marketplace, and the focus of this research was in the area of genealogy across several genealogical websites. [9] So, I had located a 'creative habitat' in the social media marketplace in which to work.

Genealogy in the social media marketplace for the creative writer/researcher

Storytellers have long used genealogical 'data' for their own purposes. For example, The Bible itself is a collection heavy in relating genealogy from the who-begat-who of Genesis and onward. To what purpose this genealogy is used is arguable and beyond the scope of this work, although clearly family line indicates authority and right. Contemporary utilization of genealogy for narrative fiction can be seen in novels like William Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom* (2005) an American classic that traces generations of a family to make meaning of racism, life in the South, and so forth. More recently, Alex Haley's *Roots: the Saga of an American Family* (2007) brought an understanding of the African-American heritage to the public. I offer those particular novels as examples where the genealogical significance is foregrounded in the work. Other works may draw from genealogy in less marked ways. Further, a search online with key words 'genealogy fiction' reveals that genealogical fiction appears as a category (if not a genre) of writing and there is no lack of books available. [10]

Sharon DeBartolo Carmack describes seven genres of genealogical writing as 'Technical Genealogical Narratives', 'Life Story Writing', 'Family History Narratives', 'Family History Memoirs', 'Genealogical Fiction', 'Edited Letters and Diaries', and 'Writing Guidebooks' (2009). She also offers examples under each category. The works of 'Life Story Writing' and 'Genealogical Fiction' might best fit within the classroom, but the other areas offered might also work. However, while the practice of categorizing is useful for selling purposes, works can also fall into multiple genres and be called crossovers. For example, Gabriel Garcia Marquez' *Love in the Time of Cholera* (2005) is an homage to his family's history and also a work of magical realism. Again, important to note is the idea that genealogical information

can be central to the work and foregrounded or be used in a more subtle way. Genealogy can provide texture and background, without even being referenced, so that categorization as genealogical may not be appropriate. [11] However, what is evident is a popular as well as literary context for the work researched in the genealogical marketplace and that using the space can be helpful in creation of a work. Writers can gather content and background information, as well as inform story lines, develop plot, build character, and create texture with genealogical material.

In the social media marketplace there has been a massive explosion of genealogical information, research, memories, experiences, stories, images, documents, histories, archives and all are being exchanged, sold, shared, read, recorded, and bartered; and creative writers can and are drawing and borrowing more broadly than in the past. To answer my creative research question as to 'who is this person?' the social media marketplace offered information that I wouldn't have found otherwise as well as quick and easy access to that information, serendipitous discoveries, and connection to a scattered population that is able to share information over large distances.

Interestingly, in this field, computers are already generating fairly simple stories based on some key genealogical data (for example at ancestory.com). The algorithmic generation of these types of stories gives factual highlights of the life of an individual but depend upon human input for dramatic and emotional imperatives.

Regarding the construction of my creative artifact, I planned to work with the traditional craft form while utilizing the social media marketplace. Additional research was conducted to gather the details for the story, but how I did that is not the focus of this paper. I have examined how the research is related to the creative work in the sense of why it was developed. My particular creative project demonstrates research conducted in one area of the social media marketplace, that of genealogy. The broader value of the research lies in recognizing how this type of work might change and benefit classrooms in terms of assessment and working toward more marketplace-aware outcomes.

A possible classroom value

For the contemporary creative writing classroom, I am suggesting that in recognizing how a work utilizes the social media marketplace we might be more outward looking yet also value 'the academy's conservative research club' (Brady 2000: 6). By encouraging students to

imagine creative and research approaches for utilizing the social media marketplace the creative work might be able to better 'stand alone and allow a multitude of readings' (Brady 2000) and overcome the fear that 'theory will guide, interpret, or frame the reading of [the] novel' (Perry 1998).

In assessing student work we might ask questions such as:

- Has the writer defined why she/he will utilize social media or the social media marketplace?

- Has the writer demonstrated where the interaction will take place?

- How has the writer transformed the gathered information into a coherent, whole story utilizing traditional craft techniques?

- Does the writer demonstrate a method for that transformation?

- How does the social media research inform the creative process?

- Did the social media marketplace 'data' help to answer the research question, that is, the writer's question?

- Is the particular marketplace area of engagement appropriate for the research? How has it supported the development of particular story elements, such as character, dialogue, plot, and so forth?

Conclusion: how and why to use the social media marketplace

In conclusion, what I set out to do in my research was to find out how to write for this new social media marketplace. I found that a student can utilize that space for research and, using creative imagination and details from the research, develop stories without having to think about selling while working within a marketplace. In the case of my particular creative work, the creative research question asked was 'who is this person?' The research into a particular family history revealed who that person is, as James McBride revealed his mother in his memoir/novel. The creative work also has a larger context, as McBride's does. His reflects larger social concerns about race and color. My creative work reflects larger concerns about massive amounts of information that we can gather about others. How that work will be 'shared' or sold is not the concern at this stage; and yet, I suspect, the work may be better prepared for the marketplace because of where the research has taken place. In my case the engagement lead to the discovery of the developing genre of genealogical writing, which could

aid with marketplace positioning outcomes.

The value of this work to the academy is that the research that led up to the construction of the creative work demonstrates that the creative writer working within an academic environment and looking outward to the social media marketplace can enhance and enrich a creative work with research information gathered from that space. A research approach, such as this, is outward looking to the social media marketplace, can respect traditional expectations of academic creative writing work, can open up boundaries of the classroom, does not require a sales plan or crossing into other fields, and perhaps can even provide some useful new criteria for developing and assessing creative works.

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Endnotes:

1. Social media are: 'various forms of electronic communication (such as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos).' http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/social%20media

2. Memoirs is not the first company of this sort. In 2012 a company called Walnuts enabled users to turn Facebook memories into a book. (http://techcrunch.com/2014/02/18/memeoirs-raises-300k-to-turn-your-facebook-conversations-into-a-book/).

3. http://www.techradar.com/news/computing/could-robots-be-the-writers-of-the-future--1141399

4. The 'we' throughout this paper refers to teachers and students of creative writing at the university level.

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5. In *Research Methods in Creative Writing* (2013) a range of concepts for how creative writers can and might research is revealed, including only one writer who looks toward the marketplace. Her work is about the idea of selling and of understanding numbers rather than recognizing the wealth of information that can be gained by researching in the exchanges that occur in the social media marketplace. Kerry Spencer considers statistical market research as one example of creative writing research (78). In her PhD research she asked 'whether market writing (that is, writing for, and in direct response to, the marketplace) could be really be boiled down to statistical norms' (78). While her statistical/market mode is an interesting and useful approach, I differ in my approach by asking not about 'writing for' the marketplace, but rather utilizing the marketplace and mining that information to create a work.

6. The term 'markers of professional difference' originated with Kelly Ritter in regard to training Ph.D. candidates to teach undergraduates in the field of creative writing (Ritter 2001: 208). The term has been extended by Patrick Bizzaro and Dianne Donnelly, explains Donnelly (Donnelly and Harper 2013: 132).

7. E.M.W. Tillyard claims that happiness (earned) is the universal feeling evoked in *Merchant*. Bullough recognizes that the question 'what is happiness?' is a common theme addressed in many of Shakespeare's works (Tillyard 1966: 201; Bullough 1957: 453).

8. McBride asks other questions too, about racial identity and family relations and so forth (and Shakespeare asks other questions also), but we often (or for certain purposes) need to identify a simplified and dominant question.

9. This is in keeping with the idea that students come already 'connected' (Selwyn) and we should be taking advantage of those existing digital/social connections.

10. For example see http://www.goodreads.com/shelf/show/genealogy-fiction

11. This also shows a limitation of using genre for evaluation.