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When your practice is the research: A symposia-led model for the creative writing PhD

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When your practice is the research: A symposia-led model for the creative writing PhD

Abstract:

With PhDs in creative writing becoming more valued and valuable in both local and international contexts, the question of models that are fit for purpose has never been more pressing. This paper discusses a case study of an approach to PhD pedagogy underway with writers from across the Asia-Pacific. It is a model of advanced practice-led research in creative writing, which helps established and mid-career writers to deepen their oeuvres and careers. The model poses the question: What if a PhD in creative writing focused its site of research on a practitioner's ongoing *practice* as a writer? How might this deepen the practitioner's engagement with the processes of and contexts for writing, and enable shifts in and for their future writing practice? This paper invites educators and writers to reconsider how a *PhD by practice* in creative writing contributes new knowledge – on literary approaches, forms, genres and cultures – to the discipline, at the same time as it provides a writer with insights to transform their practice. Faculty and student perspectives of a trans-cultural, multidisciplinary, low-residency program, based in Vietnam and Australia, reveal how this unconventional approach is making a difference to PhD pedagogy and creative practice research.

Biographical notes:

Michelle Aung Thin is a Lecturer at RMIT University in Australia. Her most recent novel, *Hasina* (Allen & Unwin 2019), is about Rohingya ethnic cleansing and is published as *Crossing the Farak River* (Annick 2020) in Canada and the USA. Her first novel, *The Monsoon Bride* (Text 2011), is set in colonial Burma. Her academic interests range from the cultural history of hybrid identities, such as Anglo-Burmese, to contemporary creative practices in Myanmar. In 2017 she was a National Library of Australia Creative Arts Fellow (supported by the Eva Kollsman and Ray Mathew Trust) and in 2014, the first Asialink writer in residence to Myanmar (funded by Arts Victoria). She received her PhD in Creative Writing from The University of Adelaide in 2013 for the thesis: 'The Skin of a Writer' consisting of a novel, *Winsome of Rangoon*, and an exegesis, 'Representing Anglo-Burmese Subjectivity'.

David Carlin's books include *The After-Normal: Brief, Alphabetical Essays on a Changing Planet* (Rose Metal Press 2019), *100 Atmospheres: Studies in Scale and Wonder* (Open Humanities Press 2019), *The Abyssinian Contortionist* (UWAP 2015), and *Our Father Who*

Wasn't There (Scribe 2010). He received his PhD in Creative Writing from The University of Melbourne consisting of a memoir and accompanying dissertation looking at the issues at stake in the translation of traumatic memory into narrative. His recent collaborative projects include the *Circus Oz Living Archive* and WrICE. Co-President of the NonfictioNOW Conference, he is a founding Contributing Editor of *Speculative Nonfiction*, and Professor of Creative Writing at RMIT University where he co-directs the non/fictionLab.

Alvin Pang is a poet, writer and editor whose broad creative practice spans two decades of literary activity in Singapore and elsewhere. His writing has been published worldwide in more than twenty languages. In 2020 he earned a Creative Writing PhD through RMIT University's Practice Research Symposium (PRS) program – one of the first graduates to do so.

Francesca Rendle-Short is Associate Dean Discipline Writing and Publishing at RMIT University. She received her DCA (Doctor of Creative Arts) from the University of Wollongong in 2009 for 'Bite Your Tongue: Novel' and 'A Book of Pineapple: Theoretical Annotation on the Novel'. She has published five books and is co-founder of WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange) and the non/fictionLab Research Group.

Jessica Wilkinson has published three verse biographies, *Marionette: A Biography of Miss Marion Davies* (Vagabond 2012), *Suite for Percy Grainger* (Vagabond 2014), and *Music Made Visible: A Biography of George Balanchine* (Vagabond 2019). She is an Associate Professor in Creative Writing at RMIT University, Melbourne. Jessica has a PhD in Creative Writing from the University of Melbourne, consisting of a literary-critical dissertation examining the oeuvre of Susan Howe ('Recovering Traces: The Contemporary Poet-Historian and the Articulation of Marginal Voices') and a biographical poetry manuscript ('Marionette').

Keywords: practice, creative research, creative methodologies, immersion, PhD, PRS (Practice Research Symposium)

Introduction

Creative writing as a research discipline in universities is comparatively young; dedicated doctoral programs in creative writing have only emerged over the past three decades (Webb & Melrose 2013). Four of the authors of this essay – Michelle Aung Thin, David Carlin, Francesca Rendle-Short and Jessica Wilkinson – completed PhDs or DCAs in various Australian universities, each of which has established its own guidelines as to how the doctorate should be structured, what the balance and relationship should be between the creative work and the critical component (which is sometimes referred to as a dissertation, elsewhere as an exegesis), and how the contribution to knowledge required for a doctorate will be situated and presented (Milech & Schilo 2004; Fletcher & Mann 2004; Rendle-Short

2010; Krauth 2011; Batty & Brien 2017). The fifth author – Alvin Pang – is one of the first graduates of a new PhD program in creative writing at RMIT University called the Practice Research Symposium (PRS), for which Aung Thin, Carlin, Rendle-Short and Wilkinson formed the initial team of academic supervisors.

We begin this essay by surveying the range of doctoral programs for creative writing practitioners, in order to identify the distinguishing features of 'doctoralness' in this field. We then trace the genealogy of the PRS as a creative practice research training model that was initiated at RMIT in the disciplines of architecture and design, and more recently adopted in the discipline of creative writing at PRS Asia – a degree program taught from both Australia and Vietnam. We discuss and elaborate three claims for what makes the PRS model distinctive and innovative as an approach to research training for creative writers. These pertain to interconnected questions of 1) How the candidate's *ongoing writing practice* can become a productive and valuable focus of the PhD research; 2) How a *community of practitioners* drives the program, through symposium gatherings and the outward-facing, publicly engaged nature of the PRS; and 3) How the PRS journey guides writer-practitioners towards a *shift in their practice* and transformation into a practitioner-researcher, leading not only to new academic knowledge but to industry development.

Creative writing doctoral degrees: Approaches and principles

In 2001 Nigel Krauth noted that creative writing doctorates were hard to get anywhere in the world (Krauth 2001). At that time, in the northern hemisphere, the MFA or Master of Fine Arts was generally considered the terminal degree (Krauth 2001). In the US this is still the case today [1]. The MFA as a practice-based postgraduate degree in the creative arts, offered primarily in the US and UK and also in the Asia-Pacific (for instance, the MFA in creative writing at the University of Hong Kong), is considered the preferred option for those who wish to continue to practice as an artist, musician, designer or writer [2]. While PhD-level qualifications are being offered in the creative arts in the US, these tend not to be as popular and are designed for students who want to pursue an academic career in order to continue teaching and researching.

Krauth argued that Australian university writing programs were considered pioneers when it came to the development of the creative writing doctorate (Krauth 2001) [3]. Krauth's initial survey found that the creative writing doctorate in Australia is a 'resource of international significance' (2001); and that all doctorates of that time appeared to demand a contextualising research study of 'a substantial critical/theoretical essay, or an exegesis of 20,000 to 30,000 words – that conforms to the overall demands of the generic PhD' (2001).

A professional doctorate, as distinguished from a PhD, is focused on a particular field of practice; for example: the Doctor of Creative Arts (DCA). The University of Wollongong

was the first university in Australia to offer a DCA in creative writing in 1986, including poetry, fiction and drama (Dawson 2005: 153). In Australia and increasingly in the UK, according to Jen Webb and Andrew Melrose, the main difference between a PhD in creative writing and a DCA is in candidate selection and motivation: the typical DCA candidate wants to revitalise their practice, and is focused on developing a well-grounded creative practice, whereas the typical PhD candidate, who will also produce a creative artefact, takes a more ‘conventional scholarly’ approach to practice-led research (Webb & Melrose 2013: 141).

Cheryl Stock argues that the professional doctorate can be distinguished from the PhD by the former’s industry focus, wherein the candidate’s workplace becomes ‘a site of learning, knowledge and knowledge production’ (Stock 2013). A candidate coming into a professional doctorate program must have substantial experience in their practice and bring that ‘practitioner agency’ into the postgraduate study (Stock 2013). The candidate is expected to contribute experiential knowledge to the research endeavour through critical and reflexive thinking in relation to their practice (Stock 2013). Some professional doctorates, such as the Doctor of Creative Industries at Queensland University of Technology, have included integrated coursework as part of the study (worth up to a third of the final result), which candidates complete before pursuing an individual research project (Stock 2013).

In 2011 Krauth described how creative writing PhDs had evolved over time, most noticeably in the shape of the scholarly exegesis. He made a case for ‘further radicalisation’ of the creative writing PhD: ‘both exegesis *and* artefact, it seems clear, have to evolve’ (Krauth 2011, original emphasis). Krauth argued that, for ‘the sake of progressing the literature and knowledge’, PhDs in creative writing must become sites of ‘radical experimentation’ (2011).

Nicola Boyd’s survey of PhDs and DCAs submitted in Australia and New Zealand by June 2008 found that almost all of the 199 creative writing theses awarded consisted of some form of single-volume creative work presented alongside an exegesis and/or thesis in response to the creative work or as a companion to the creative work (Boyd 2009). The most common creative work submitted was in the form of a novel, at 70.4 per cent of submissions, not including verse novels or novellas (Boyd 2009). Boyd’s survey included thirteen ‘blended theses’ – where the creative forms were ‘blended or the subject of experimentation’ (2009) with exegetical and creative elements interspersed as ‘ficto-critical or theoretical exploration in which the academic voice was blended with the creative voice’ (2009). Krauth typified these blended varieties as parallel exegesis, plaited, or ‘exegesis as runaway text’ and ‘outlaw’ (Krauth 2011) [4].

The PhD by Publication, as championed in Australia by Deakin University (West 2020), offers a contrasting approach to the form of enquiry and submission. The argument for this ‘PhD of the Future’ is that it advances ‘industry engagement and social justice outcomes in the doctoral degree (research)’ (West 2020). The PhDPriorPubs, as it is called, or ‘Deakin quickie’ (West 2020), seeks to attract candidates who are recognised in the field nationally

and internationally for a substantial body of work, and are engaged in developing a practice-led research methodology. Over the equivalent of one-year full-time, students produce an exegesis accompanied by a '*portfolio creative product* that critically and reflectively curates and/or recomposes' a selection of at least three prior creative outputs (West 2020, original emphasis). The doctoral task is to allow prior publications to steer the research endeavour. By formulating the creative portfolio, the candidate either brings the prior work up to date, or recasts the prior creative work, and/or 'generate[s] a dialectical synthesis, of initial energy and mature reflection' as a way to develop the research potential (West 2020).

What unites the intention of doctorates of any type in the Australian and UK university systems, as defined by Webb and Melrose, are a number of broad principles:

> [a doctorate] must make a contribution to knowledge; must demonstrate originality; and its creative and critical elements must be relevant to the intellectual or practical problem that is the topic of the doctorate. (Webb & Melrose 2013: 144)

In all these doctoral variations, the hope, when examining the value and impact of the creative writing doctoral degree, is that the end product of creativity, or 'movement-and-arrest', is 'a thinking, "knowing" work of art, behind which lies a research endeavour' (Webb & Melrose 2013: 135). The outcomes of doctoral research in creative writing are recognised as having the potential to influence and impact a variety of stakeholders, including the practitioners themselves, their peers, research institutions, creative writing pedagogies, literary/creative industries, policy-making, funding distribution models and more. R Lyle Skains, herself a creative writer, notes:

> When we as practitioners pursue our art as research, we not only offer insights into art and the practice of art as it occurs, but can throw new and unexpected light onto a range of topics including cognition, discourse, psychology, history, culture, and sociology. (Skains 2018: 84)

Along with numerous others who have contributed discourse to the field (Candy & Edmonds 2018; Ednie-Brown 2017; Barrett 2010; Smith & Dean 2009; Scrivener 2002), Skains draws attention to the skills and rich knowledges, unique to practitioners, that can be deployed, interrogated, reflected upon and articulated, in order to 'extend the frontiers of research' (Barrett 2010: 1).

There seems to be a general consensus amongst most practice-researchers that an artwork alone will not communicate knowledge. Instead, the knowledges embedded within, and which arise from, creative practice, must be articulated 'in excess' of the artefacts/artworks themselves. Batty and Holbrook, for example, note that

> [a] danger of sidelining the importance of articulating contribution by letting the creative work "speak for itself", is that without rigorous scaffolding it can be hard to convince readers that the work does in fact contain new knowledge. (Batty & Holbrook 2017)

This is where the dissertation component of a practice-research PhD establishes significance. Ednie-Brown refers to the rich resource that an exegesis or dissertation that accompanies practice in practice research can offer:

> In part this is about using the process of writing to discover something already lingering but previously unrealised, and in part it is about generating "stories" that help to make sense of things. The impact of this articulation feeds into actions and practices in profound ways, and vice versa. (Ednie-Brown 2017: 132-133)

As Skains notes, various subsets of practice research are often defined and distinguished 'according to the relationship between the creative practice and the communication of scholarly knowledge generated by such practice' (Skains 2018: 84) [5]. In the context of a PhD, the approach taken by a candidate may be influenced by university guidelines – for example, some institutions require creative writing candidates to submit a literary-critical thesis alongside a creative work, rather than an exegetical document [6]. The chosen approach has consequences for the format in which the material is submitted for examination, the manner in which 'contribution to knowledge' is communicated, and thus the way in which the program is conducted pedagogically.

In summary, while the various doctoral models above follow the same broad principles driving the advanced study of creative writing, each suggests different approaches and emphases. These differences pertain to the types of candidates for which the programs are designed, the modes of enquiry, submission and examination, and the relations posited between creative practice and knowledge production.

It was into this already rich and diverse landscape of doctoral programs, then, that RMIT's PRS program in creative writing launched in 2016, offering a further variation to the field.

Context for the PRS in creative writing

RMIT's PRS model was first devised and elaborated in the discipline of architecture, commencing in 1987 and led by Professor Leon van Schaik. It was originally established as a 'post-professional masters degree' (Blythe & Stamm 2017: 53) into which high-profile practitioners were invited to enrol. Over time it grew into a PhD program, from which the first graduate emerged in 2002 (Blythe & Stamm 2017: 53). The established pattern was that noted architects with active industry practices were invited to reflect on their mastery of their

discipline, as demonstrated in an acclaimed body of work. Through an enquiry propelled by curiosity about 'the natural history of creative practitioners' (van Schaik 2011: 15), the PRS intended to give practitioners an opportunity to '"evolve their practice through their own self-interrogation and re-discovery"' (Heron qtd in van Schaik & Johnson 2011: 9) [7].

A concise summary of the process of and rationale for a PRS PhD is provided by RMIT architecture scholars, Richard Blythe and Marcelo Stamm:

> It involves reflection on an existing body of peer-acknowledged work and reflection during the production of new works produced concurrently with and informing the doctoral research. The works, processes and methods of the practice are placed in a broader disciplinary context which allows the research to be theorised from within the practice discipline and to clearly identify contributions to disciplinary knowledge. Thus, the research work of the PhD examines, and is also transformative of, the practice within which it is situated. (Blythe & Stamm 2017: 53)

We felt that a doctoral program in creative writing using the PRS model would appeal especially to mid-career and established creative writing practitioners in the Asia-Pacific region. The discipline- and location-specific impetus for this grew out of an Asia-Pacific-based cultural exchange program initiated by Francesca Rendle-Short and David Carlin in 2013: WrICE (Writers Immersion and Cultural Exchange). The WrICE residency program brings together different writers at different stages of their careers from across the Asia-Pacific region to develop an international literary network, new cross-cultural literary work, and new cultural understandings (Sing Lit Station 2020.) Writers (sixty-two to date) invited to participate in the program have so far come from thirteen countries across the region, including Singapore, the Philippines, China, Indonesia, Vietnam, Papua New Guinea, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Japan and Australia.

The WrICE program's invitation is for writers to come together in the one space, face-to-face, to connect with other writers, to share their work, stories, cultural contexts, writing practices, vulnerabilities, joys and successes – and failures – in order to change and broaden the stories we tell and listen to (Carlin & Rendle-Short 2016a). The collaborative residency has a twin focus, both inwardly on the process of writing, making and sharing as a group, and outwardly through a program of public events to audiences across the region [8]. In this way, perspectives and networks are enlarged and transformed, and this in turn acts, it is hoped, however subtly, to stir and shift national and transnational literary cultures (Carlin & Rendle-Short 2016b; 2019).

At the end of their WrICE fellowships, some of the writers spoke of their desire for more of this kind of face-to-face contact; for a space to further explore new ideas and the development of creative work. It was noted (as Pang, one of the 2014 WrICE writers from the Penang residency, points out below) that there was a dearth of creative writing Higher Degree

programs, which might provide a more sustained engagement with peers and practice, for writers based in the Asia-Pacific region. We began to think about ways that the academic discipline of creative writing, and in particular, Higher Degree Research, might offer something to these and similar writers – their networks, communities and careers – in a way that would respect and support industry practice beyond the academy. Such a program could offer a space for creative research scholarship where writers could: speculate on the future of their writing, 'in the context of the ongoing work' of their practice (van Schaik 2011: 20); identify their own community of practice, of which WrICE is part; present their findings publicly with the support, critique and validation of peers; and tease out 'boundaries and gaps as a provocation to future work' (Blythe 2011: 36).

The first cohort of writers invited into the PRS Asia in creative writing commenced in Ho Chi Minh City in 2016 alongside peers in Architecture and Design [9]. They included a number of WrICE alumni, among them Alvin Pang, co-author of this paper, who reflects:

From my roots as a poet, teacher, journalist and editor in my native Singapore, I had developed an international literary practice spanning two decades, national awards, a dozen publications, and writing translated into over twenty languages worldwide. Although I studied English literature as an undergraduate, my writing practice (like many of my peers) had been self-taught – there were no creative writing programs in Singapore I could turn to for guidance. Even today, there are only two substantive and relatively new graduate creative writing programs offered in Singapore (at Nanyang Technological University and LASALLE College of the Arts).

So, with no courses I could take nor role models or mentors I could follow, I undertook years of self-directed, at times pioneering, 'on-job training', learning all the ropes from scratch. As a literary practitioner, this learning-by-doing was rich, intense and fruitful – in terms of my own creative work and in contributing to the growth of a new generation of Singaporean writers. By 2015 these experiences led me to become interested in a deeper consideration of certain aspects of my writing practice than I felt I could investigate on my own. I wanted to make sense of what I had done over the past twenty years, and what I could still do – drawn by questions I felt had yet to be asked about what it means to be a writer in Singapore.

When I was invited in 2016 to come on board as an inaugural candidate for PRS, I jumped at the chance. My intent was not to convert my doctoral qualification into an academic career – realistically, chances of that are slim in Singapore, and I already had a comfortable income as a consulting editor. Instead, by embarking on a guided period of deep research that was practice-centred in approach, I hoped to step back and reflect on my years of headlong creative activity, and in the process refine and advance my craft, critical sensibilities and communication skills.

Mechanics of the PRS: Creative practice under pressure

There are three elements that, when combined together, distinguish the PRS model from other doctorates in creative writing. These are: (1) focus on a holistic investigation and development of a candidate's established and ongoing creative practice rather than on an individual project, with supervisory attention directed to developing the capacity for critical reflection on, and theoretical framing of, the candidate's creative practice; (2) pedagogical emphasis on collaborative discourse and public engagement concentrated in the intensive biannual symposia events; and (3) a tripartite set of examinable outcomes with a distinctive combination of creative folio, dissertation and public examination.

A typical PRS creative writing candidate will enter the program as a mid-career or established writer with a significant track record of publications and a public profile as a practitioner – as Alvin Pang's background illustrates. PRS candidates will have at least one published book of poetry, fiction or nonfiction, and/or at least one produced play script or screenplay; frequently many more. As with any PhD program, they must also have an appropriate academic track record [10]. This would usually be an Honours degree or equivalent, although students without such a qualification, who still demonstrate a significant publication record, may be admitted at Masters level and apply to upgrade at the one-year milestone.

Potential applicants are required to observe a PRS in order to get a feel for the program in action; if they want to proceed towards a formal application, they then do a 'pre-application' presentation before a panel from the cohort of supervisors, the members of whom will assess whether or not the applicant is suitable for the program. In part, the 'suitability' of the applicant centres around questions of whether or not they appear to be ready and willing to place their practice under the sorts of pressures required throughout the PRS program. 'Pressure' in this sense is applied in a number of ways. For one, as per (1), above, the PRS requires the practitioner's practice, viewed holistically, to be the focus of the research. In contrast to other PhD programs, the PRS model invites the candidate to remain embedded in their ongoing practice but to produce disciplinary knowledge related to that practice through an additional layer of practice: that of critical reflection. To return to Blythe and Stamm's definition, this is both 'reflection on an existing body of peer-acknowledged work and reflection during the production of new works produced concurrently with and informing the doctoral research' (Blythe & Stamm 2017: 53).

One effect of this emphasis on *practice* rather than on a single, delineated *project* is to encourage candidates to ask themselves 'what is my practice?' In doing so they are encouraged to question the plurality of their creative work, as well as the parts of their practice which they might not have considered 'creative'. Many creative writers, like other artists, find themselves with diverse practices. For example, Pang the poet is also a fiction writer, essayist and translator; also an anthologist; also a community organiser of literary

events; also an international advocate for Singaporean literature; also an editor of a public policy journal:

The opportunity, through PRS, to examine and explore my whole all-over-the-place practice became key to my doctoral research. Instead of being limited only to the 'literary' aspects of my varied career, as is likely the case with a more conventional PhD program, I was able to take stock of the different streams that inform my wider practice: including my role as an editor in the field of public policy. This broader perspective then led me to reconsider the orthodoxy of making too stark a distinction between literary and non-literary domains of activity, and to examine instead how these apparently unrelated streams – of what Bernard Lahire (2010) has called the 'double life' of a writer – do in fact contribute valuable accounts of activity and relation; different ways of knowing and doing: to creative processes and outcomes, as well as to the intellectual life of society.

The PRS brings the candidate's creative practice into the scholarly orbit. This practice (which candidates most likely feel that they 'know' deeply or tacitly) will go through various stages of reflection, critique, adjustment, shifting and refocusing, with the potential not only to provide candidates with critical tools for engaging with writing and their community of practice, but also to open new pathways for their practice directions and methodology. Through this engagement candidates may, for example, find lines of intentionality or purpose that connect their various projects (past and current); they might explore ways to strengthen the 'narrative' of their oeuvre; they might locate gaps in their knowledge of practice and process that they want to develop during (and beyond) this period of study; they will become a '"better informed writer"' (Davis qtd in Masson 2016). Depending on the candidate's research background, the job of supervisors is most likely less focused on feedback on the creative work – bearing in mind that these are, after all, mid-career practitioners – and more on developing the candidate's reflective and scholarly skill set, their ability to contextualise, discuss and articulate processes and methodologies.

The PRS became a way in which I could observe, clarify and explore some of the deeper questions that had arisen from my practice, and to which my practice responds. For instance, I had become fascinated by the multiple connections across cultural, linguistic and disciplinary lines, in the context my practice inhabits. I was interested in these issues as they relate both to my own practice and to the broader practice environment in Singapore. Being keenly aware that contemporary Singaporean literary practice has been sparsely documented in scholarship, I also hoped to generate useful, current, documented knowledge both about and for my home literary community. These became driving impulses in my doctoral work, and my pursuit of them in my research was well served by the PRS's explicit attention to industry and the conditions of practice.

Another 'pressure' placed on candidates is that they must present their progress, experiments and shifts in thinking through a structured program of six-monthly public presentations. They

are invited to reflect on the mastery of their practice to date within a critical framework, to speculate on future directions, and to present their findings in a public forum. Typically PRS students do seven PRS presentations (one roughly every six months) in addition to the examination. Three of the PRS presentations are formal milestones (PRS2, 4 and 6 are mapped to one-year, two-year and three-year milestone reviews), which students must pass to progress to the next stage. At these public gatherings of scholar-practitioners – candidates, supervisors as co-practitioners, and invited experts in the field – the practice is articulated, publicised and discussed in terms of how it contributes to generating new knowledge.

I began my PhD believing I was well placed to take on the challenge of producing fresh, exciting works from my practice research. After all, I had twenty years of experience as a successful poet, writer and editor to count on. At the same time I was concerned about my lack of critical and scholarly expertise, having started this work in middle age, without prior experience of advanced graduate work. Through the flexible practice research framework of the PRS I developed a bespoke course of enquiry according to my context: there were no set texts or required readings to start with. I took the opportunity to plunge into a range of ideas, both critical and creative, that I had not had the chance to explore before. With no map to follow, I let my writing and concurrent readings lead me to each new cluster of ideas, guided at times by suggestions from supervisors or the intense panel discussions, and at other times seemingly by serendipitous chance.

The rigorous PRS schedule imposes a series of deadlines upon candidates, so that they stay ‘on track’ and complete their PhD in a timely manner. It also provides a network of peers for support, encouragement and the sharing of ideas. As described on the RMIT PRS portal, the program’s prime purpose is to be ‘the tangible focus of a learning community – its home so to speak – set up to facilitate collective learning for all involved’ (RMIT University Practice Research 2019).

One factor that motivates established writers to take on an advanced creative writing degree, as Sophie Masson (2016) has found, is the opportunity to be part of a supportive community of peer writers in which their creative work is treated with both respect and critical regard. This becomes pertinent especially when a writer takes on creative risks by trying something new or different in their practice, that may or may not result in publishable or even attractive work. This risk is compounded for mid-career writers with established reputations – and yet that uncertainty, vulnerability and humility in the face of the new are powerful sources of innovation.

Each biannual PRS event is generally held over a long weekend, including Friday and Monday. The weekend scheduling is so that the students’ commercial creative practice is not disrupted. To date the PRS Asia for creative writing has been held in Ho Chi Minh City. Candidates and supervisors fly in from Singapore, the Philippines, Australia and America – some are already based in Vietnam. Thus, for most of the candidates and supervisors, the

PRS is an experience of a different culture and climate, a different time zone, and of sleep deficit, all of which enhances a sense of being beyond the everyday, vulnerable and exposed [11].

Fridays and Mondays are reserved for workshops on research methods, as well as face-to-face supervisory meetings. These are held in informal meeting spaces, such as in a private room of a cafe. Friday night, a visiting academic will usually give a keynote address. Saturday and Sunday, candidates present to panels consisting of their supervisors as well as a chair and independent member, drawn from the wider supervisory team and occasionally supplemented by visiting scholars. These have taken place on the RMIT campus or in meeting rooms in the city. Peers attend and the public are also invited. Saturday night, the whole group gathers for dinner and informal conversation. On Sunday evening, we hold a reading night, where students, staff and guest panellists share their latest writing efforts. There are numerous opportunities during these weekends for sharing, critique, and deep discussion. Indeed, some students have instigated collaborative projects during conversations at these events.

The diverse spectrum of lived experiences, ambitions and creative approaches grounded and lent pith to the PRS Asia experience, as candidates came to understand each other's work over time. Just as the term 'symposium' derives from the Greek term for convivial discussion among drinking fellows, the spirit of the PRS extended beyond the formal panel sessions. On several occasions conversations over meals and drinks among fellow candidates sparked significant new thinking in each other's research.

Students follow up the PRS symposium with a reflective report, detailing what they gleaned from the process and suggesting ways forward. Supervisors and candidates meet to discuss this report a fortnight after the PRS. Candidates then resume their practice for the intervening months and check in with their supervisors by video conference.

To demonstrate their progress during the six months between symposia, candidates submit a packet of written work to the panel, which details their critical and creative interrogations of a research question or proposition. Candidate presentations speak to this packet of material. It is this 'making public' of the internal mental spaces – of speaking out loud, and in person, of thinking, of ambition, of creative longing, of uncertainty – that creates vulnerability. The presentation connects the body of the writer – with their thoughts, words, desires and ambitions – to a public of their peers and supervisors. The success of the PRS is indicated by the openness and generosity of peers in the peer-review process and in the group of practitioners that gather to listen, read, review, critique, respond, dialogue and converse.

What is embodied in the presentation is the desire for transformation, which cannot be brought about without deep and often personal reflection. There is always a sense of significant risk here for practitioners as they begin the interrogation required by the PRS,

which we often refer to as a ‘slice through’ their practice. Will the fragile and mysterious creative process stand up to such scrutiny? Or will the slice through itself be fatal, revealing a terrible and critical flaw that has been there all along? Yet it is precisely because of this risk that these conversations also offer profoundly satisfying reflections on practice. And, because the process is iterative, with each PRS in the same space as the last, spaced six months apart, each successive conversation becomes a richer, deeper engagement with the research proposition.

While this was certainly a freeing and generative approach, it was also rife with anxiety. With no clear signposts or guidelines, I often felt that I was stumbling around in the dark with little by way of concrete findings or creative works to show for it: an unsettling state for a prolific practitioner accustomed to producing regular, polished outputs. In the meantime there were still deliverables to meet every six months. At first, I experienced this as a challenging tension between my two selves – the confident, articulate, prolific practitioner versus the awkward, late blooming, plodding researcher. But in the end, this pressure and vulnerability also pointed me to the core questions and assumptions in my doctoral inquiry.

At the end of the PhD a PRS candidate will submit for examination both a critical dissertation and a portfolio of creative works. As the third element of what is to be examined, they are required to do a final, public-facing event, consisting of a one-hour presentation and a one-hour Q&A with the two examiners. This live presentation and discussion can be seen as a culmination of the candidate’s previous symposia presentations, where vulnerability and openness can be demonstrated to have resulted in a transformation of the practitioner-researcher through a command of practice, its shift/s and contributions to knowledge in the field of creative practice research.

In commenting on my final examination presentation and discussion, one examiner made it a point to laud our exchange as a pleasurable and intellectually stimulating ‘conversation’ characterised by an openness to different ways of apprehending the work at hand. I feel that this was the transformative outcome of having been well-prepared by the PRS model to be comfortable with ambiguity, with robust group critique, with articulating complex ideas clearly, and with engaging challenging new ideas on the fly. Beyond the deep domain knowledge that is central to any doctoral work, these fundamental skills of communication, listening and public engagement are also vital to becoming an active, constructive member of the communities of practice and research we aspire to contribute towards.

Observations and discussion of the PRS: The shift in practice

In focusing intently on practice as research, the PRS encourages practitioners to look deeply at their past practice in order to imagine possible futures for their practice. We describe this process as a ‘slice through’ practice, a metaphor which refers to the way a CT scanner ‘slices’

into a body to capture an image of internal organs and their state of function. The PRS offers insight into the writer's body of/at work, from a perspective not ordinarily available, and at six-monthly intervals. What we ask is for candidates to make visible – and therefore intelligible – the processes involved in their writing, from tacit methodological knowledge, assumptions and biases, writerly concerns, and creative and professional ambitions, to dense, complex, 'gristly' points that reveal uncertainties around subject, intentions, perspective, permission or form. Often the probing of these gristly bits yields the greatest capacity for a 'shift' in practice, the projection forward, which is the goal of the research. Perhaps this is what Sophie Masson might call 'breaking the pattern' (2016), in an article that examines the reasons why established creative writers might pursue doctoral study:

> "breaking the pattern" in one way or the other through the period of doctoral study, stretching boundaries and exploring literary and professional options and ideas over time, is at the heart of the most successful and satisfactory experiences … refreshing a writer's outlook and options through contact with the academies. (Masson 2016) [12]

Elsewhere, Barbara Bolt paraphrases Gilles Deleuze when she states that 'in order to break through the givens [in one's practice], a catastrophe has to occur' (Bolt 2004). Both Masson and Bolt point to significant moments that can signal shifts and new directions in one's practice [13].

The PRS recognises that established, mid-career literary practitioners may not be looking for a career in the academy. Many of the practitioners in the RMIT creative writing PRS program are used to public review and critique for their creative work; some of them are seasoned performers. While they may have mastery over their respective practices, the collision with critical, scholarly thinking and ideas subjects that practice to new vulnerabilities. As supervisors, we can lead them through this PRS process, beyond mastery and towards potentially unexplored, new contributions in practice. For the 'catastrophe' to occur this PhD has a 'sandbox' ethos where practitioners can experiment with their practice, enrich their understanding of what they do, perhaps embark on a new direction or relationship with their creativity and finally bring that to bear on their industry. The alignment with the academy ensures the integrity of experimentation and interrogation; the ideas brought to bear on the practice, while the status of the practitioner and engagement with supervision ensures the rigour of the enquiry.

For me the PRS became a regular opportunity to try out my exploratory ideas in a safe and critically alert collegial setting. Every six months I would reflect on and present my recent writing and thinking related to my research interests. Each of these assays were met with both encouragement as well as incisive probing that led me to look at my practice anew. This intensive feedback, from the panel of supervisors and also from my fellow candidates, often pointed to unspoken assumptions or confusion about key ideas in my research that I might not have noticed on my own. These experiences reinforced my growing interest in the

importance of relations and interactions among practitioners in shaping thinking and practice. The insights I gained in the process, arising from my own exploration and discovery, and tempered by the intense, formal and informal exchanges at each PRS session, nudged me towards new directions of creative and critical interest to investigate. At each phase of my research I was spurred to consider a different facet of my practice, and at different scales of activity.

But what constitutes this 'shift' in practice? What does the PRS candidate learn, and how is this valuable and to whom? In academia more generally we talk about research as making a 'contribution to knowledge' to a field within a discipline. The community of practice, for a PhD candidate in the PRS model, straddles the intersections between professional and scholarly contexts. For the emergent PRS candidate, their understanding of their community of practice will have broadened since they commenced their studies. Firstly the PRS process has required them to map and articulate the diverse range of influences, forerunners, contemporaries and close peers and interlocutors, within which their own practice is situated. Further, through the iterative course of the PRS, they will identify new members of their community of practice, as their understanding of their practice shifts. Then they will have been connecting with critical and scholarly practitioners in different fields – since critical theory, cultural studies, media and literary studies, feminist and queer studies, philosophy, anthropology, geography and more, are all, in their own right, practices.

The candidate is motivated to understand and articulate their practice as creative writers in ways that will inevitably be new to them. What emerges is not only a shift in practice but insights in relation to this shift, presented in a form such that these insights can be taken up and used by others. If the knowledge gained by a candidate is of benefit only to that candidate – for example, if they were to say 'by doing this PhD research I have discovered new directions in which I can take my novel-writing practice and I have new approaches to novel-writing I want to try' – this in itself is not sufficient to satisfy the doctoral requirement for a 'contribution to knowledge'.

The key here is in performing an ongoing dance between what appear to be opposing vectors: in one direction, the inward-looking practice of critical reflection on one's own creative practice (in other words, from a developing meta-practice of critical reflection); in the other, to an outward-oriented discussion of something 'out there in the world' that may constitute an original contribution to knowledge. Partly this is a question of breaking down the mystique and grandiosity that, for many candidates, can attend the phrase: 'an original contribution to knowledge'. How can the candidate translate their personal epiphanies into a language and form so as to be transferable and applicable by others? What is at stake? What other approaches are they running alongside?

Through the exhaustive and exhausting process of following the trails of these questions and more, the candidate starts to learn the knack of occupying a place outside their practice so as

to look at it sideways, before diving back inside to push it further – as Ross Gibson notes in his essay 'The known world': the artist-researcher 'oscillate[s] between seeking the insider's ethical authority, derived as it is from studio-founded conviction, and achieving the outsider's stance of critically distanced disquisition' (Gibson 2010). In this way they start to talk about a particular point of focus, or cluster of enfolded matters of concern, that are both fundamental to their practice and capable of being considered entirely separately from their practice, in the context of other (people's) practices.

A significant portion of my research process was taken up by the need to catch up on critical and theoretical readings. These were ideas that as a practitioner I had not previously thought of as relevant to my creative work, but which had emerged as potential ways to bridge gaps in my thinking. Relatively new to these bodies of knowledge, I was not prepared for the thick haze of discombobulation into which they would lead me. At one point I was so steeped in critical readings – feeling inadequate in my understanding of them but also fascinated by their intricacies – that my creative practice slowed down dramatically. For a time, my doctoral progress seemed not so much practice-led as research-dazed. To cope, I found myself writing into these knots and niggles, grappling with the tangle of new knowledge through my practice: thinking about writing through writing about thinking.

Although a candidate's practice as a whole may be 'all over the place' (as noted by Pang), it is nonetheless driven by overarching personal and cultural preoccupations that are theoretically and artistically contextualised and interrogated – experimentation with a stated methodology can be documented; positions can be clearly argued and supported by referenced evidence. Through this rigorous process, gaps in knowledge emerge into which the practitioner can work more deeply. This is where supervision is directed, developing the candidate's capacity for deepening critical reflection on, and theoretical framing of, the candidate's creative practice, which becomes the substance of the dissertation that is then put under examination.

Conclusion

A mid-career or established writer might choose to enrol in a PhD program for many reasons – perhaps financial (if a stipend is on offer), for personal or professional development, to begin or maintain a career in academia (as a practitioner-researcher and teacher), or perhaps to gain more creative control over one's practice, as publishing and commercial circumstances shift and change (Masson 2016). As identified in this paper, the creative writing PRS doctorate offered at RMIT University has similarities to the Professional Doctorate such as a DCA (where a candidate has substantial experience in a well-grounded creative practice and is focused on bringing that 'practitioner agency' into the postgraduate study), but it is notably different (there is no substantial coursework and the focus is not on a single creative project). The PRS has similarities to a PhD by Publication in that students are

engaged in developing their thinking through practice-led research methodology, and prior publications are included in their investigation, but it conforms to the usual PhD length of 3.5 years equivalent full-time. The PRS candidate's practice forms part of their ongoing research; they continue to practice throughout the candidature, and the research task and examinable submission are different as a result. The PRS examination is in three parts where equal weight is given to all three of those parts. A candidate prepares a critical dissertation plus a *folio* (set of extracts) of creative works, not a single volume artefact. They are also subject to a public examination in which a panel of independent examiners ask questions and offer critical appraisal. The public examination Q&A is not dissimilar to viva voce examinations conducted in the UK and US (Morley et al 2013), where candidates meet their 'first critic', a process which adds to the 'fabric of knowledge itself' (Melrose 2013). Points of difference for the PRS are that the examinable Q&A is conducted along the lines of previous symposia that are held throughout the PRS candidature as milestones and works-in-progress. It is public, subject to clear, explicit guidelines, and is conducted at arm's length by the appointed external examiners. It gives the candidate an opportunity to demonstrate the ways in which they have been transformed through the PhD process from a practitioner into a practitioner-researcher.

Completing my PhD has led me to see creative practice as a confluence of processes, involving many different interactions and engagements – rather than as the individual generation of recognisable products. This has shifted my priorities away from a teleological focus on predetermined end goals (write a poem, curate an anthology, earn a PhD, change the world), towards more open-ended, unruly, liberating processes of creative making. A shift towards more unbound, inclusive, interdisciplinary and process-oriented thinking, like the one I both experienced and documented in pursuing my doctoral research through the PRS, could have encouraging implications for an emerging generation of creative practitioners – and the fresh work they aspire to make – in Singapore and elsewhere.

Through placing pressure on 'practice' and offering a regular space for candidates to be vulnerable and open about ideas, experiments and writing processes, the PRS provides a peer-to-peer program of learning through which candidates can become '"better informed"' writers (Davis qtd in Masson 2016), so that, no matter their intentions post-PhD, they can return to their practice with new insights on practice, community and industry, therefore potentially enriching literary culture in turn (Masson 2016).

As we look ahead to the future of PRS Asia, particularly in the wake of COVID-19 travel restrictions and carbon footprint considerations, we acknowledge that travel is a strength and weakness of the program. Our June 2020 PRS Asia weekend, which was conducted online, drew our attention to the benefits of digital gatherings (cost, reduced carbon footprint due to lack of travel, connecting our experienced students from the Asia program with our more recently inaugurated Melbourne program) and also the drawbacks (the difficulties of creating a sense of *belonging* for different cohorts online, significantly less opportunity for discussion,

debate and the sharing of ideas that would ordinarily take place during a face-to-face weekend event). In addition, as the program evolves, we anticipate that a growing cohort of graduates will help mitigate the implicit power differentials between Australian supervisors and Asia-Pacific candidates by inviting those graduates to be external panellists at future PRS events.

Notes

[1] Best Colleges 2020 'The Best Online Master's Creative Writing Programs of 2020', *Best Colleges*: https://www.bestcolleges.com/features/top-mfa-programs/ (accessed 30 September 2020)

[2] Find a Masters 2020 'The Master of Fine Arts (MFA) Degree – A Guide', *Find a Masters*: https://www.findamasters.com/advice/finding/master-of-fine-arts-mfa-guide.aspx (accessed 30 September 2020)

[3] It was more recently noted, by UK academics Michael Cawood Green and Tony Williams, that 'much work' has emerged out of Australia regarding doctoral developments in creative writing, and in particular in relation to the 'vigorous debate' around the 'reflective component' of the PhD in this discipline (Green & Williams 2018).

[4] Boyd herself presented her survey study of PhDs and DCAs as part of her PhD submission alongside a feminist sci-fi private detective novel for young adults.

[5] For other discussions and definitions, see Candy and Edmonds (2018), for example, who outline two respective approaches: practice-based research (whereby 'a creative artefact is the basis of the contribution to knowledge' (64)) and practice-led research (whereby 'the research leads primarily to new understandings about practice' (64), outcomes of which 'may be shared in the form of principles, models, frameworks and guidelines' (65)). Further, Batty and Holbrook address similar 'methodological nuances' using the terms 'practice-led research' to refer to contributions relating to process, and 'research-led practice' to refer to evidence provided through a creative product (Batty & Holbrook 2017).

[6] In creative writing contexts, Batty and Holbrook (2017) have provided a relatively comprehensive and detailed overview of how contributions to knowledge are put forward by doctoral researchers.

[7] As of 2020, RMIT runs PRS PhD programs based in Australia (Melbourne), Asia (Ho Chi Minh City) and Europe (Barcelona), across a range of disciplines including Architecture and Urban Design, Design and Creative Writing.

[8] Since 2014 WrICE has staged over eighty public events and workshops with seventeen industry partners including Melbourne Writers Festival, George Town Literary Festival (Malaysia), Queensland Poetry Festival, Ayala Museum (Philippines), National Library of Vietnam, Jakarta Post Writers' Centre, Footscray Community Arts Centre, Arts House Singapore, Castlemaine State

Festival, Sun Yat-sen University (China), University of the Philippines (Diliman), and other partners, reaching a combined audience of over 8,000.

[9] The Schools of Fashion and Textiles and Art have more recently started their own PRS programs at RMIT.

[10] Some of our PRS candidates have academic positions at universities – for example, in the Philippines and Hawaiʻi. They came to the program in part because their respective institutions required them to gain a PhD qualification in order to continue their position. They were attracted to the program because it allowed them to continue to undertake their creative practice, rather than to devise a new PhD project. Other candidates have entered the program in order to ‘skill up’ and to deepen their knowledge of practice, process and contexts, so that they can return to industry/practice with new potential for practice contributions. We have received recent interest in the program from writers further afield (USA, Canada, Iceland).

[11] Due to COVID-19 and restrictions on travel, our first PRS Asia for 2020 was held online in June, and our second will also be online in early December. Seeing as we were cut off from our usual face-to-face collegial engagement, we engineered some other activities to take advantage of some of the positives that the online medium afforded. Most significantly we combined our creative writing PRS Asia event with our PRS Australia event (as we had instigated a Melbourne-based PRS program for Australian writers at the beginning of 2020). This enabled the beginning Australian students to witness presentations by students in the Asia program at more advanced stages in the PRS timeline, including examinations; it also provided a chance to share and discuss cultural contexts and other opportunities.

[12] ‘Breaking the pattern’ quotes author Nick Earls, whom Masson (2016) interviewed for her article.

[13] Loosely speaking, PRS candidates will move through the following stages during their candidature: year one: reflection on past practice; year two: ‘turn’ or shift in practice; year three: new direction in practice.

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