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### **The exegesis now: where are we, and where are we going?**

This Special Issue asks: what does the creative writing PhD exegesis look like today? Related questions include whether it is still – and, indeed, if it ever was – called an exegesis across all, or most, institutions; and does it still primarily exist as a separate, written document that accompanies the creative work? Representing a series of key institutions and creative writing academics across Australia, this Special Issue of *TEXT* draws together supervisors and candidates to reflect upon and provide rich, experience-based accounts of what the exegesis looks like and how it functions today. One of the aims of this is to start to think about the future of the form; indeed, where the exegesis might go next.

In the framing of this Special Issue, we draw in part from Nigel Krauth's *TEXT* article about the 'radical trajectory of the creative writing doctorate in Australia', in which he uses his vast experience of supervising and examining to argue that while creative works have stayed much the same since the 1990s, 'the exegesis [has] metamorphosed' (2011). As he writes, in the early days of creative writing doctorates the expectation of the exegesis was 'a sort of critical journal, a reflective account of processes undertaken while creating the accompanying work, having a close umbilical relationship to it' (Krauth 2011). Over time, however – arguably in response to questions of rigour and originality – the accompanying written work has shifted 'from reflective text, to parallel text, to plaited text' (Krauth 2011). We thus now regularly see many styles of critical and/or exegetical writing, dictated by factors such as form, genre, the practitioner-researcher's previous experience, and cultural – even institutional – contexts. If the creative writing exegesis 'has picked up momentum on its liberating trajectory [and a] similar trajectory is now predicted for the creative component' (Krauth 2011), creative writing researchers, supervisors and candidates are starting to consider a new question: how might this influence our understanding of the form, fabric and function of the PhD as a whole? What *is* a creative writing PhD?

Articles in this Special Issue also use as their foundation the work that appeared in the 2004 *TEXT* Special Issue, 'Illuminating the Exegesis', edited by Julie Fletcher and Allan Mann. That Special Issue resulted from a conference on the exegesis, which drew on the thinking and practice of a range of supervisors who, at the time, were still grappling with the notion of undertaking research with/for/through creative writing. In working from, and reflecting upon, Fletcher and Mann's influential collection, this Special Issue considers if, and how, the exegesis in creative writing has developed and changed since 2004. As editors, we asked our contributors – experienced supervisors in the discipline – to think about whether institutional, supervisor and candidate

expectations and understandings of the critical component to the PhD have changed since this time, and if so, how. We also asked them to comment upon where these ideas might take us in the future. This Special Issue thus comes from a place of much more – though certainly not complete – certainty about creative writing research, with significant numbers of Australian (and international) PhD completions since 2004, and scores of academics becoming not only qualified and competent supervisors, but also eminent research leaders in the thirteen years since.

We asked a range of PhD supervisors to co-write with at least one of their current or recently completed candidates. Those chosen supervisors represent a range of creative writing forms and genres, as well as a variety of theoretical approaches to what we are still calling herein ‘the exegesis’. In this choice of commissioning type, we were consciously acknowledging the central importance on the supervisor-candidate relationship; however, we also stressed the focus was not to be on this relationship or supervision processes. We were more interested in how these teams might explore and articulate their shared and/or divergent understandings of doctoral writing, in order to generate what we believe are original, specific and authentic discussions about the current state of the exegesis across Australian universities. These writing teams were given a series of prompt questions<sup>1</sup> to respond to, although – as can be seen from the results – they were encouraged to do this in ways that suited their creative and critical preferences. As a result, the articles produced not only articulate a range of approaches to the exegesis, but in some cases also perform these approaches with playful and creative modes of address.

### **Descriptions and discussions of the exegesis**

The exegesis, or however it might be named within institutions and disciplines, has been the subject of theorisation across various contexts, including national projects on, or that engaged with, doctoral supervision (as for instance in projects by Phillips, Stock and Vincs 2008, Hamilton and Carson 2013b, Webb, Brien and Burr 2013); books that aim to define disciplinary territory (including Barrett and Bolt 2010, Batty and Kerrigan 2017, Kroll and Harper 2012, Nelson 2013); and a plethora of book chapters, journal articles and refereed conference proceedings from creative writing, other creative arts disciplines and the broader area of doctoral education. While, on the one hand, all of this literature addresses the same things – regarding the composition, supervision and rigour of doctoral degrees in the creative arts, and means of ensuring student success – on the other, it becomes apparent that there are a variety of expectations about the exegesis. This occurs not only in terms of its form, but also its function. Some of the articles in this Special Issue speak to this disparity, and it is perhaps not too much of a stretch to suggest that it is often the history of the discipline *and* the institution concerned that results in such a wide range of views. For example, there is likely to be a different expectation of the exegesis in a traditional, research-intensive university from that of an art school situated within a newer university – even though national qualification bodies (the Australian Qualifications Framework in Australia) dictate a set of agreed upon standards.

In 2008, Janene Carey, Jen Webb and Donna Lee Brien surveyed all the policies on creative theses and examination guidelines for creative research higher degrees then available in Australia. Data was collected from twenty-eight Australian universities identified as offering these degrees. This study found that ‘the policies and guidelines across the surveyed universities are far from uniform’ with (among other inconsistencies) ‘significant differences ... found in terms of ... the description and composition of the exegesis, [and] its relationship to the creative work’ (Carey, Webb and Brien 2008: 1). This study not only found significant variability in the policies and guidelines across Australian universities, and a worrying inconsistency about the meaning and relative importance of key terms such as ‘creative’, ‘original knowledge’ and ‘research’, but also ‘a continuing lack of certainty in the field regarding the exegesis’s role, function and form’ (1).

Five years later, Jillian Hamilton and Susan Carson again wrote of the different ways the exegesis has been described: ‘It has variously been described as an explication of the practice, a framing document, and a thesis’ (2013a: 4). Other nomenclature we have seen used to describe the exegesis includes ‘dissertation’, ‘critical response’, ‘critical paper’ and ‘contextual document’, and although when describing the doctorate, as alluded to above,

the proportion of practice to theoretical aspects varies between institutions ... all of the partner institutions [in this study] recommended that the ‘dissertation/exegesis’ component and the creative component be integrated and examined as one, conceptually coherent project. (2013b: 4)

This raises an important question regarding the exegesis: what is its actual purpose? If it is to be read and examined alongside the creative component, what should it contain and how much should it refer to that creative component? Does the exegesis, for example, provide a background to the research which is then seen ‘in action’ in the creative work; or does it contain research findings of its own, which draw from, speak directly to or support the creative work?

As Hamilton and Carson report from their project on doctoral supervision in the creative arts, grappling with the function of the exegesis in this environment can put a strain on supervisors trying to guide and manage their candidates:

For supervisors, this coherence presents one of the greatest challenges to candidates. Supervisors spoke of the difficulties of creating a project that not only demonstrates excellence in creative practice *and* written research outcomes, but also integrates them into a unified whole. (2013b: 4)

They also found divergences in the extent of ‘innovation in the form and presentation of the exegesis’ across universities ‘with a great deal of experimentation at [one university] (where the medium of the practice tends to influence the approach to the exegesis), while at another university innovation is encouraged in the creative practice, but is discouraged in the exegesis’ (Hamilton and Carson 2013b: 5).

There are other accounts of the exegesis that point to similar issues, some of which are unpicked and unpacked in the articles in this Special Issue. For example, writing of her *Future Proofing* study, Sue Baker reports that

the written dissertation was probably the greatest point of difference across the sector as were the many diverse models of examination processes ... nearly every institution had a different approach to the dissertation [... and at] the crux of these differences was the nature of a research methodology in the arts. (2014: 47)

In their study of doctoral examination in the creative arts, Donna Lee Brien, Jen Webb and Sandra Burr offer a definition of the exegesis that points to the range of options more than it offers a single function: ‘an accompanying written theoretical, critical and/or analytical dissertation (usually referred to as the “exegesis”) that underpins, supports, expands, documents or otherwise relates to the creative output’ (2014: 101). Similar to the work of Hamilton and Carson, while their research revealed widespread agreement on the importance of the written component, they also found ‘a considerable range of expectations across the sector in relation to what the exegetical component comprises, how it related to the creative work and against what standards it is – or should be – examined’ (Brien, Webb and Burr 2014: 101). Interestingly for us here, and research degrees creative arts more generally, this study also problematises the very nomenclature we tend to rely on, finding:

Another point of commonality among the participants in our project was an almost universally expressed dislike for the term ‘exegesis’ [... namely because] it does not convey an appropriate meaning for the essay, or the function it is expected to perform in the dissertation package. (2014: 103)

In relation to the music doctorate, Anne-Marie Forbes argues ‘for the critical importance of the exegesis in clarifying the research intent and enabling the differentiation of professional practice from performative research [...] or practice-led research’ (2014: 266). For Forbes, it is important that the exegesis ‘outlines the reasoning behind the research and the underpinning methodology’ (2014: 276), which should not become ‘an intensely personal and subjective reflection on activity [...] as it may undermine the research imperative of the doctorate’ (76). Speaking to the underlying function of the exegesis, Forbes provides this simple definition: ‘the exegesis is critical for situating the performances [creative work] themselves as an active mode of scholarly enquiry and critical reflection’ (276). In other words, ‘the written component provides the lens through which to view a concert not just as a performance examination, but as a research outcome, and thus to evaluate the merits of the final recital as an embodiment and form of dissemination of the results of three years of full-time research’ (269).

Alongside definitions and purposes of the exegesis, one of the themes that has emerged within this Special Issue concerns the *fabric* of an exegesis. While we might draw on examples of formal and stylistic innovations to speculate about that the exegesis might look like next, this can only be achieved if there is agreement on its required content. In concert with the question we posed above, does the exegesis contain research findings of its own that either draw from or speak directly to the creative work? On this, Forbes is clear:

While the primary audience for an exegesis is necessarily the examiners [...] there must be recognition that the exegesis should contain original research outcomes and

reflections that would be of value to other practitioners in the field and that have been or will be submitted for refereed publication. (2014: 275-6)

This raises another important question about the exegesis in regard to standards: should the content from the exegesis be of a good enough quality for publication in refereed journals and similar outlets? While the obvious answer is ‘yes’, the real answer is, ‘only if the material contains research findings’. If, as is the case with some doctoral work, the exegesis provides mostly background context or reflection on process, will there contain sufficient research findings for publication?

A very useful model for this type of writing is that of the ‘connective exegesis’, as proposed by Jillian Hamilton (2014). According to Hamilton, ‘As a medium for exploration, planning, reflection and drawing conclusions, writing is integral to the research process’, not just the writing up of the research conducted (2014: 369). As reported by Jenny Wilson in her study of doctoral candidates in art, design and performance, one of whose research interviewees said, ‘we have always had to write about our work’, we can and should equate ‘the creativity of writing with the production of artworks’ (2014: 209). Thus, the ‘successful’ exegesis, perhaps, is that which connects creative and critical components seamlessly by the careful use of a well-crafted research voice; one that speaks of the various components as a thesis – as a whole – rather than individual parts that are brought together to form the doctorate. For Hamilton, this connective exegetical voice ‘requires the reconstitution of multi-perspectival subject positions: the disinterested academic posture of the observer/analyst/theorist, and the invested, subjective stance of the practitioner/producer’ (2014: 370). It can be framed ‘against theoretical and philosophical discussions on non-linear, polyvocal texts, and [can] consider precedents from creative fields that connect differently oriented perspectives, subjectivities and voices’ (370), and ‘requires negotiating a range of writing styles, postures and speech genres: from formal academic exposition and the polemical voice of the theorist to the emotive voice of reflexivity’ (372).

This short summary of definitions, purposes and approaches reveals that there is still much to say about the exegesis, not least about what it needs to do, let alone how the work might go about doing this. This Special Issue thus aims to contribute substantially to these ongoing debates, specifically from the perspective of genres and forms within the discipline of creative writing. As the articles in this issue demonstrate, it is not just the case that some supervisors encourage particular types of exegetical writing because of their experience of – and confidence in – certain approaches to, and philosophies of, research education. It is, instead, also that, often, different sub-disciplines of creative writing are developing their own ways of working, perhaps as a result of the other research domains from which they draw (e.g. creative non-fiction and essay studies; screenwriting and screen studies).

### **So, where is the exegesis now?**

Although we recognise that readers access journal articles individually, and dip in and out of journal issues, we have structured the set of Special Issue essays in this issue in a manner that takes readers through a journey of exegetical explorations. This moves

from conceptual ideas about, experimental approaches to, and form/genre-specific discussions, to universal considerations. These supervisor-candidate insights are then wrapped-up with a more general discussion of contributing to knowledge in creative writing from the perspective of doctoral education. Collectively, therefore, these essays not only map the rich terrain upon which we currently operate in terms of the exegesis, but also propose and speculate about where we might go next, to further develop the discipline and enhance the quality of the research degrees being produced. Importantly, we hope that these essays will be of equal value to supervisors, candidates and those working in research education and development roles and settings. We also include reviews of two texts that are important to recognise in terms of this discussion. There are, of course, many more that could be included – and we direct readers to the excellent and expansive reviews section of recent general *TEXT* issues.

The Issue opens with Elizabeth Claire Alberts, Willo Drummond and Marcelle Freiman's 'Exegetical thinking: a methodology and two expositions'. This article focuses on the creative and cognitive practices brought into play in carrying out PhD projects by creative work and exegesis, proposing that 'exegetical thinking' is enmeshed in both creative writing and research processes in a growing 'spiral' of complexity and innovation as connections are made between the thesis components in producing original research.

In 'Both sides now: the fear-less exegesis', Shady Cosgrove and Hayley Scrivenor recognise that fear is a central, but overlooked, aspect of the PhD experience, both for the creative writing doctoral candidate and the supervisor. Drawing on the experiences of both sides of the supervisory relationship, this article proposes that clear structural models for the exegesis are valuable because they allow students to focus their efforts on the substance of the academic component of their research project. Cosgrove and Scrivenor also argue for the rewarding nature of a research project that engages both in practice-led/based research and critical scholarship.

Jen Webb, Jordan Williams and Paul Collis's 'Talking it over: the agony and the ecstasy of the creative writing doctorate' is co-authored by three writer-academics who have been collaborating as supervisors, doctoral candidates and co-authors over the past decade. This article explores how these long-term relationships have developed and changed, and have inflected the authors' individual approaches to the preparation and writing of creative research, including the exegesis. This article is presented in the form of a three-way conversation, with scholarly annotations in the endnotes.

In 'The potential of the exegesis and the challenge of symbiosis', Katrina Finlayson, Jeri Kroll and Annabelle Murphy investigate the symbiotic relationship between creative and critical aspects of a project and how they can function most effectively through two thesis case studies. Kroll, as the supervisor of these projects, explains how she drew on her experience in order to help these candidates to select the most effective thesis structure and to realise the potential of symbiosis.

Craig Batty, Kathryn Beaton, Stephen Sculley and Stayci Taylor, co-authors of 'The screenwriting PhD: creative practice, critical theory and contributing to knowledge', explore 'the exegesis now' from the perspective of the screenwriting practice PhD. Fittingly, this article mobilises a playful homage to traditional screenplay structure, the

archetypal Hero's Journey, in mapping the landscape and offers examples of how the screenwriting exegesis/dissertation is occurring at their university. Guided by their supervisor 'mentor', two candidates and one recent graduate explore what the screenwriting practice PhD can do and look like, in the process raising important points about the purpose and form of the dissertation.

Rachel Robertson, Daniel Juckes, Marie O'Rourke and Renee Pettitt-Schipp's 'An ambiguous genre: thoughts on creative non-fiction and the exegesis' moves to another genre of creative writing – creative non-fiction – exploring the parallel, 'independent' articulation of creative and academic responses required at Curtin University. This article by a supervisor and three PhD candidates all writing in the genre of creative non-fiction, suggests that the boundaries between the scholarly and creative in creative non-fiction works are far from clear and that this reflects both contemporary non-fiction publishing and new movements in scholarly writing.

Nigel Krauth, Chris Bowman and Zoe Fraser's 'The exegesis and co-authorship: collaboration between supervisors and research students' considers the important issues associated with collaborative writing and publishing between supervisors and their students. In examining co-writing in the supervisory space and, in particular, in the doctoral exegesis, the authors propose the many benefits from co-authoring. This article is based on a survey taken recently and this provides a very recent perspective on at least some supervisor-student collaborations.

The article, 'Exegetical essentials: a framing structure and template for a comprehensive exegesis in the creative arts', by Donna Lee Brien, Alison Owens, Gail Pittaway and Irene Waters, identifies common definitions and challenges associated with the exegesis and proposes a number of strategies that may provide greater certainty and alleviate some of the anxiety for candidates and their supervisors. It includes a universally-applicable template for a comprehensive exegesis and two ways the exegesis can be structured to form a rigorous frame around, and supportive complement to the creative work.

Craig Batty and Allyson Holbrook's 'Contributing to knowledge in creative writing research: what, where, how?' comments on both many of the articles in the Issue, as well as general questions about the exegesis, prompted by the (what should be) foundational question: what constitutes an original contribution in the field of creative writing? Drawing on the growing literature on creative doctorates, reference to a number of examiner reports collected for a larger project, and reflections on supervising and examining creative writing PhDs, their article explores the various forms of contribution that characterise the discourse on knowledge creation and dissemination in creative writing research. Their intention is that by encouraging supervisors and candidates to think hard about notions of originality, contribution and significance, work produced in the discipline might reach an even higher standard.

As editors, we developed this Special Issue of *TEXT* as we know we are not alone in being genuinely and enduringly interested in – and, even fascinated by – the exegesis, its current form and role in research degrees, and its future potential. Together, these articles and reviews reveal that this is a topic worthy of such consideration, and we hope that they provide a refreshing, current perspective on this most unusual, and

sometimes polarising, form of research writing. We are also sincerely grateful for the opportunity to publish this work in *TEXT*, where – as is evidenced by the citations in the articles presented in this Issue – so much of the discussion and debate about the exegesis has been published and disseminated over the past two decades. We hope this Special Issue will provide as much discussion and debate, and inspire others to ask further questions about the exegesis ‘now’, in order to help shape both the future of the exegesis and the creative writing research higher degree.

## Endnotes

1. The questions listed in the call for papers were:

What does the word ‘exegesis’ mean to you?; How would you describe the exegesis to someone outside of the creative practice research field?; Does the creative work plus exegesis form suit the research you are conducting? An indication of thesis genre/form could be included here; What have you noticed from reading other exegesises?; If you could re-define what an exegesis might look like and/or function as, what would that be?; What do you consider the relationship to be between a creative writing text and an exegetical text?; How might this relationship look on the page (or otherwise)? (We welcome graphic illustrations/representations here.); Do you feel that your own research / research methodology has informed your understanding of the exegesis?; How much are you thinking about the exegesis as an artefact; are you questioning it at all?; Where do you look for models of academic writing that inform your own writing?; and, What do you think is the future of the exegesis? (Batty and Brien 2017)

Despite the range and scope of these questions, the topic was also left open-ended with the inclusion of the final question: Anything else you would like to raise/consider/discuss? (Batty and Brien 2017).

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