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Both sides now: the fear-less exegesis

Abstract:

Fear is an overlooked aspect of the PhD experience, both for the creative writing doctoral candidate and the supervisor. The exegesis can be a source of fear precisely because of questions around what it is and what it should look like. Drawing on experiences on both sides of the supervisory relationship, this article proposes that clear structural models for the exegesis allow students to focus their efforts on the substance of the academic component of their research project. We also argue for the rewarding nature of a research project that engages both in practice-led research and critical scholarship. We propose that alternating between the exegesis and the creative project can yield surprising results for creative writers attempting a large-scale academic work for the first time.

Biographical notes:

Shady Cosgrove is an Associate Professor at the University of Wollongong. Her novel *What the Ground Can't Hold* (Picador, 2013) tells the story of a group of people stranded in the Andes, all of whom have links to Argentina's Dirty War. Her memoir *She Played Elvis* (Allen and Unwin, 2009) was shortlisted for the Australian Vogel Literary Prize, and her short stories and articles have appeared in *Best Australian Stories*, *Antipodes*, *Southerly*, *Overland*, *Sydney Morning Herald* and *Melbourne Age*. She has also written about the ethics of representation and teaching of creative writing. For further information and free downloads of her work, see www.shadycosgrove.com.

Hayley Scrivenor is a creative writing PhD candidate. Her research project examines contemporary fiction that engages with the first person plural point of view in significant ways. Her fiction and non-fiction has appeared in *Seizure Online*, *SCUM*, *Mascara Literary Review*, *Phantasmagoria Magazine*, *SWAMP* and *Verity La* and she has been shortlisted for *Overland's* Story Wine Prize. Hayley is the Director of annual Wollongong Writers Festival: www.wollongongwritersfestival.com.

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The meeting

I knock on the closed door, turning the handle at the muffled *come in*. I take my seat with an exaggerated silence, waved in by my supervisor who holds a bulky phone receiver to her ear. I pretend to use my phone so she won't see that I'm nervous about my latest chapter. The Elvis pictures calm me down, remind me we are on the same side. I take the printed chapter out from my bag, sliding it across the table in one smooth, furtive movement. The call ends and she is reading my words. In the quiet room, I can hear my own heart thudding. I thrust my hand into my pocket, feigning nonchalance. There is a coin in there; I pluck it out and turn it with my right hand, feeling first one side and then the other with my thumb. I try not to look at Shady as she reads. Are my words enough?

Hayley knocks on the office door. Maybe I'm finishing a thought, staring at the computer. Maybe a phone call is wrapping up. She enters the snug space – walls lined with bookshelves and portraits of Elvis. Today we're talking methodologies but we are not alone. Ghosts of research students hover in the doorway. The candidate no one else would supervise (anger issues). The writer more accomplished than me with the unfortunate examiner (no, the project is not about Foucault, it will never be about Foucault). The student who submitted – Hallelujah, he submitted – in spite of himself. One day Hayley will join that eclectic group, standing in the doorway, but right now we're looking at the bright, shiny coin she holds in her hand, and we're talking – so loud, so excited.

Telling it from both sides

How do you write a joint article about two sides of a shared experience? We took our inspiration from Joyce Carol Oates's 'The turn of the screw' (1971) where two characters' versions of events are presented side by side. One account sometimes outstrips the other, but white space is used to synchronise the two points of view at set points in the narrative. Following this format for our discussion allows us to be clear about who is speaking, and facilitates easy comparison. The responses from Hayley, the candidate, are on the left, and those from Shady, the supervisor, are on the right. In English, we read from left to right, and this structure echoes the way that a student may approach a supervisor with an idea or a piece of writing that begins an ongoing conversation. These columns also suggest the pathway from student to supervisor, as most supervisors have been supervised in their own research degrees before they take on their first PhD candidate.

So, what do I do?

It wasn't until I began researching for this article that I became aware of many of the debates surrounding the exegesis – what it is, what it should be – many of them meticulously chronicled in *TEXT*'s pages.

The exegesis was first explained to me as 'a long-form academic work that usually complements the creative work'. As my understanding of it developed, I would extend that definition to say that the exegesis is a document that grounds the creative work, gives evidence of critical engagement and makes a persuasive argument that I, and my work, have something new to offer. Understood in this way, the exegesis seemed to be not only a useful space to flesh out ideas, concepts and theories relevant to my creative work but worthwhile for its own sake.

In many ways, I am glad I was not aware of the debate surrounding what an exegesis can and should be when I started my research project. It is obvious to me that I have benefitted from not only an institutional clarification of what the exegesis is in the intervening years between some of the first creative writing doctorates and my own, but from my supervisor's experience supervising and marking creative writing exegeses. Even as my understanding of the exegesis becomes more nuanced, in this article I want to speak to the ways in which clear definitions and strong direction on structure from my supervisor have helped me come to grips with my PhD project.

My understanding of the term 'exegesis' is pragmatic, situated within the realm of the ERA rankings and HDR degrees. The exegesis places a creative work within an academic context, and demonstrates the reflective thinking that underpins a creative project. It provides a place where the creative author can critically situate their work within a broader context, demonstrate analytical tools and then argue for their work to be considered within those paradigms. It offers a clear site where the creative writer can make a case for the inclusion of their work within a larger creative canon.

This practical definition has helped steer the successful completion of many HDR projects, however it implies that critical thinking is somehow an entrée to the main work of the creative project, which is not accurate. I do encourage students to tackle their 'critical' research before beginning the 'creative' (or at least at the same time) because the ideas and thoughts explored in this research often then take shape within the creative in surprising and interesting ways. But to be clear: it's the ideas that propel the project. The critical offers one way of engaging with them (clear arguments, evidence) and the creative offers another by 'storying' those same ideas into narrative. While they are often separate entities for my students (fictocriticism is not my specialty) both are essential in thinking through a creative writing thesis.

You can do what you want, but I can tell you what works

Josie Arnold states that when it comes to the creative writing exegesis ‘the *terrain* of structural discovery [can be] seen as some outward-bound struggle that the candidate must first discover and then overcome’ (2005: 37, original emphasis). During the initial planning stages for my exegesis, I read all the creative writing research higher degree projects I could get my hands on. I read for tone, I read to discover just what counted as a ‘new contribution’, but above all I read for structure.

The novel that forms the creative component of my PhD is written entirely in the first person plural. Over the course of several discussions with Shady, I outlined that I wanted to begin my exegesis by situating the creative work in reference not only to other fiction, but in conference with critical and narratological discussions about the first person plural. This fed into a methodology chapter that allowed me to investigate concepts central to my developing theory, followed by a case study chapter where I used the information from these first two chapters to analyse three key works. This would be followed by an exegetical chapter where I applied a similar process to my own creative work.

More than any other part of preparing this article, it is most interesting to me to see how clearly Shady has elucidated what she feels the academic component of a research project should look like, and how clearly this structure is reflected in my own work.

Some research students, like Hayley, approach me with ideas that fit neatly into this structure:

- Introduction
- Literature review
- Methodology
- Case study
- Conclusion

With this, they demonstrate an understanding of the field (literature review), how they engaged theoretically (methodology), and then applied that theoretical understanding to relevant novels or short stories as case studies (including their own creative work). My understanding of this structure arose from my own PhD studies with Dr Rosanne Kennedy at the Australian National University.

Hamilton and Jaaniste offer another structure (2009: 3):

- Introduction
- First main section: SITUATING CONCEPTS
- Second main section: PRACTICAL CONTEXTS
- Third main section: RESEARCHER’S CREATIONS
- Conclusion

In this example, the situating concepts frame ‘the research through an explanation of the key concept/s that situate the research’ (3), the practical contexts situate ‘the practice in relation to its broader field of practice’ (3), and the researcher’s creations describe ‘the creative practice ... at the heart of the project’ (3). Hamilton and Jaaniste state that this structure ‘should not be considered a prescription and neither should it be interpreted as a “recipe”’ (3). However, I am less wary of this. Students can follow similar structures (even identical ones) and still write very different projects, as discussed below. What is important is that the exegetical structure serves the needs of the themes under examination.

Why do it?

Donna Lee Brien, in the third *TEXT* Special Issue, notes that in research she undertook in 2004 ‘100% of respondents [that she interviewed about the timeline of their creative writing research higher degree] ... completed the creative project before completing the exegesis’ and there were those who found the exegesis component ‘a complete waste of time’ (1). Far rarer are those like Greg Nash who ‘completed 80 per cent of the exegesis before starting the creative outcome’ (Nash 2011: 3).

As this special issue asks us to speak to our specific experience of the creative writing PhD, it’s worth noting that ‘a complete waste of time’ is not the term that springs to mind when I describe my exegesis. I am also not convinced (as Nash seems to be) that the creative component could not be written without the research I am doing. As writers, we engage with many ideas that *need* critical exploration. It is important to acknowledge however that you cannot write a novel to prove an academic point, and you are in trouble if you need an exegesis to make your novel ‘work’. If nothing else our article wants to reassure potential candidates (and their supervisors) that both aspects have their own inherent value, and both can help flesh out the other.

Also, there are positive reasons for tackling both at once. Like many of the creative writing PhD candidates I know, this is the largest fiction project I have attempted. As I am writing the academic work at the same time as my creative project, I increasingly feel my project is like a coin that I can turn over and over in my hand, admiring first one face, and then the other. It is in oscillating between the two (the heads and the tails, the creative and the academic) that I make some of my most exciting discoveries.

While Kate Grenville has published her exegesis on the writing of *The Secret River* (2005), *Searching for the Secret River* (2006), mainstream publishers are generally wary of the long-form exegesis. My shorter exegetical work has appeared in academic journals, book chapters and conference publications, however those essays are not in the 30,000-word scope of my PhD. Nonetheless, scholarly research provides the foundation for my creative works. That is, I explore ideas critically, via the essay form, and this engagement informs my creative practice. The critical and the creative offer two ways of engaging with ideas. Neither is better, but I am obsessed with how ideas convert to narrative, and what it means to ‘story’ our ideas. This focus is important, differentiating the field of creative writing from English literatures.

For example, with the memoir *She Played Elvis* (2009), I explored work by critical theorists such as Philippe Lejuene and Paul John Eakin to consider the relationship between autobiographer and reader. I was also intrigued with ideas about narrative structure and veracity. I wrote essays that explored these ideas and then ‘storied’ them with my creative work. In this sense, there’s a hint of Paulo Freire’s ‘praxis’ where theory meets practice (1972). With *What the Ground Can’t Hold* (2013), I conducted research on apologies and authenticity before writing, and this work informed the structure of the novel, as well as characterisation and plot, though only in ways I have been able to glean with time and distance (which is interesting in light of increased timeline pressure for research degree candidates). Critical research informs my creative writing process and provides the thinking-ruminating-stewing time essential to my creative process.

Redefining the exegesis

This special issue, by encouraging a discussion of the form the exegesis takes across a range of institutions and candidates, is really asking what an ideal exegesis might look like. Having considered a wide range of ‘paths’ for the exegesis, I am all for those that show that ‘bit of creative flair’ that Jeri Kroll called for in her *TEXT* article ‘Uneasy Bedfellows’ (1999: 1). The ideal exegesis, for me, would be one that adds to my creative work, without being necessary for the enjoyment of it as a work of fiction. I want comfortable bedfellows, but not needy ones.

I anticipate there will be considerable scope in this special issue for a discussion of PhD as ‘a site where radical experimentation, for the sake of progressing the literature and knowledge’ (Krauth 2011: 11) takes place. But that is not an article that Shady and I could write together. I hope this article speaks for the value of the clearly defined path for the exegesis. I feel a connection with Arnold when she states that ‘[s]urely, establishing a research question, adding something new to knowledge in the area, reading prodigiously of academic literature, collecting data, and writing up is a large enough task in itself without also having to discover elements of the *structure* of the PhD’ (2005: 37).

A defining feature of the PhD is that it is reviewed by a small number of people who decide if the candidate has made a serious contribution, or not. With that in mind, coming to a definition that works ‘across institutions’ is all the more vital. A clear set of guidelines, even if for some people those guidelines become something to push back against in interesting ways, is a worthy goal and one this issue should go some way to achieving.

The parameters for the exegesis must be worked out between HDR candidate and supervisor. Each will be different, and this is not because students are looking at different topics. Vivienne Plumb, a writer of Australian and New Zealand heritage, undertook a DCA with me, where she wrote a collection of short stories about women and hitchhiking. In her exegesis, the literature review could have followed many different paths: does she undertake a survey of women-centric texts that explore the freedoms and constraints of the road? Does she focus only on short stories? Does she examine novels? Does she limit it to Australian and New Zealand representations? Does she contain herself to literary representations or does she survey the field of feminist theory about women in liminal spaces? Another candidate Angela Williams examined memoir as self-surveillance in her PhD, and her literature review explored the field of surveillance studies, as this was critical in setting up her methodology. Her case studies were all contemporary Australian memoirs. My point here is that either of these critical works/exegeses could have been structured in wildly different ways, but both demonstrated the candidate could situate their creative works in thoughtful and original ways, within an academic context. While I think clear academic exegetical structures are important for HDR students, they do not have to be limiting.

The future of the exegesis?

We have, I hope, moved beyond the argument of whether the Creating Writing exegesis is a valuable component of a creative writing doctorate, or the question of whether creative writers should be engaged in academic and critical work. For me, it's a non-question because I am surrounded by people who are both creative writers and active critical researchers. Many of the issues around defining the exegesis seem to surface because of the relationship between funding and the requirement for academically rigorous work.

Again, I can only draw from my own experiences (as a current PhD candidate that seems to be the most valuable thing I have to offer in the context of a conversation like this one) but I can honestly say I embarked on the creative writing PhD because I wanted to write a novel. It was the creative project that led me here. The academic component seemed like a fair exchange for a stipend that I could live on and access to knowledge and support in the form of my supervisor. But having begun, I now can't imagine working in another way. Jeri Kroll notes that for a creative writer, the exegesis is 'a kind of insurance policy in the academic context' (1999: 6). It is reassuring, as you write, to become more aware of what your own work is doing and where it 'fits', to become more aware of the interrelated nature of 'practice' and 'research'. The exegetical component of my research project has changed the way I approach writing, probably forever, and definitely for the better.

If creative writing PhD and DCA candidates want to be situated within a tertiary context (and with that, enjoy aspects such as scholarship funding and engaged supervisors) I think it's fair to expect them to critically engage with their own and others' creative works, especially because this can act as a profound site for articulation and clarity. To be sure though, the role of the exegesis has changed.

In the 1990s initially, the expectation was that an exegesis should be 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: 1)

Students are now expected to critically engage with literary contexts and theoretical concepts. They have to articulate the deeper meaning that underpins their creative work. This shift, I think, has alleviated some of the 'anxiety' about the exegesis that Bourke and Nielsen pinpoint in their 2004 *TEXT* article 'The problem of the exegesis in creative writing higher degrees', and this works for the benefit of both supervisors and candidates. Four years is a long time to dedicate to a project, regardless of your role.

Fear-less?

The editors of this issue of *TEXT* requested articles that would ‘suggest the range of exegetical practices currently in circulation’. A key thing to keep in mind as discussion on the exegesis continues in *TEXT* is that a clarification of what the exegesis should be is valuable not simply for its own sake. Examiners and candidates alike benefit from a clarification of the required outcomes of a creative writing exegesis.

Of course, each exegesis will be different. It never would have occurred to me to include notes found on the floor of my car (Crawford 2010) or to spend years researching the relationship of exegesis to creative project in the work of over a hundred DCAs and PhDs without reference to my own creative project (Boyd 2010). I can appreciate what others are doing with the form. I remain grateful, however, that my supervisor had such a clear grasp on the structure my exegesis might take. I believe this has saved me considerable anxiety and months, if not years, of work.

Krauth has gone on record in *TEXT* to say ‘creative writing research scholars fe[el] more confident about playing with the exegesis form’ (2011: 7), but a clear idea of the structure that the exegesis might take has been instrumental in allaying my fears around the PhD project. As a candidate in the midst of the process, having a clear understanding of the path(s) available is invaluable – fear and uncertainty are, after all, deleterious to the creative impulse. It is my hope that this special edition not only provides a clear definition of the exegesis but also offers specific, structural models that candidates can take into account when they decide what form *their* exegesis will take.

Through writing this paper, one the most interesting topics that has arisen for me is fear. Fear is a common part of the HDR candidate narrative – how can I add to the body of knowledge, is my work good enough, how will the examiners respond, etc. I think too it’s worth considering supervisors and fear. My early supervisions were sometimes fearful – fearful that I would let candidates down or they would let me down. That together we would be found out, and like criminals in a holding cell we would turn on each other. And because I was supervising at a time when the exegesis was still becoming, it was sometimes hard to counsel students because so much depended on how examiners interpreted this idea of the exegesis, and their pre-conceptions about what it should contain. As psychiatrist and behavioural scientist Bruce Perry points out, human emotions are contagious, ‘If you are not calm, it’s impossible to calm someone else’ (2016: 10). The HDR creative writing rules are clearer now. The form itself – novel and exegesis – more confident, and that makes the process of supervising easier. Hayley is right – it is important candidates understand the available paths, but I still err on the side of academic rigour and clear structure when supervising because the exegesis must demonstrate the critical thought that underpins the creative project, and this seems the safer path. With three, four, or five years of a candidate’s life on the line, there is a lot at stake. I’m not advocating for a fearless exegesis – there is too much at stake for candidates and supervisors. I am advocating for an approach where students can fear less.

Writing is not typing

I think about something I read in an article by Rebecca Solnit (2016) before coming to Shady's office today. *Writing is not typing*. And I think that writing is the coin I hold on my hand. It's waiting, as Shady's eyes scan my pages. It's the conversation we have now. *Where is your evidence for this? This is good. Have you read Fludernik on this?* When the conversation ends, I gather up the pieces of paper, covered in encouraging blue pen. I slip the warm metal back into my pocket and walk the length of the corridor, weightless now. Thinking about the next thing. Ready.

Hayley stands to leave and I'm struck by the interrelation – dependency even – between the critical and creative *in the process of writing*. But it is deeper than exegesis and novel. It is also student and supervisor. It is the inspiration of discussion and the work of drafting alone. It is the life lived that enables one to write lives. In my tiny office, Hayley packs her things, and we are scanning calendars, organising another time to meet. We are both lighter now. Ready.

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