

**University of Canberra**

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**Talking it over: the agony and the ecstasy of the creative writing doctorate**

Abstract:

This article is co-authored by three writer-academics who have been collaborating as supervisors, doctoral candidates and co-authors over the past decade. Jen Webb supervised Jordan Williams during her creative PhD in digital poetry and Deleuze (awarded 2006); Jordan and Jen co-supervised Paul Collis's creative PhD in fiction and Barkindji identity (awarded 2016); and he has long supervised both Jen and Jordan in their (informal) education in Indigenous epistemology. Over these years, the supervisor-candidate relationships have unfolded, developed, changed and folded back on themselves. We explore how this long-term relationship between three mature-aged writers and scholars, from three very different cultural backgrounds, has inflected our individual approaches to the preparation and writing of creative research, including the exegesis. We begin, therefore, with our own understandings of what the word 'exegesis' means to us, how it mobilised (or hindered) the generation of creative knowledge, what models are of value to us, and what we envisage as its possible future/s. We write this in the form of a three-way conversation, with scholarly annotations.

Biographical note:

Distinguished Professor Jen Webb is Director of the Centre for Creative and Cultural Research. Recent publications include *Researching Creative Writing* (Frontinus, 2015), *Art and Human Rights: Contemporary Asian Contexts* (Manchester UP, 2016), and the OUP bibliography entry for Bourdieu (2017). Her poetry includes *Stolen Stories, Borrowed Lines* (Mark Time, 2015), and *Sentences from the Archive* (Recent Work Press, 2016). She is Chief Investigator on the ARC Discovery projects 'Working the Field: Creative Graduates in Australia and China' (DP150101477), and 'So what do you do? Graduates in the Creative and Cultural Industries' (DP160101440).

Associate Professor Jordan Williams teaches literature and creative writing at the University of Canberra with a teaching and research focus on emergent forms of literature. She supervises the work of research degree students working on practice based research projects. She also pursues a research focus on the role of creative practice in mental health. Her own creative practice sees her working in poetry using textile or media forms.

Dr Paul Collis teaches in Creative Writing at the University of Canberra. He is a Barkindji man from Bourke, on the Darling River in north-west New South Wales. He is a fiction writer and poet who draws upon both Aboriginal and Western narrative traditions in his work. In 2016, Paul Collis's novel, *Dancing Home*, won the David Unaipon Award for unpublished Indigenous authors.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Higher Degrees by Research – Supervision – Exegesis – Aboriginal Epistemology

## Context

It is an old tradition: call it master-pupil, or elder-initiate, but the relationship between the one learning and the one teaching has traditionally been cast in hierarchical terms.<sup>1</sup> While hierarchy is downplayed in the contemporary PhD context, HDR relationships still function on the understanding that the supervisor is more knowledgeable than is the candidate, at least during the early stages of their research training. By the end of their candidature, the student is expected to have become the expert on their topic, and to have been gradually inducted into the world of research. Their developed capacity is demonstrated in the form of scholarly writing; and on graduation, they are translated from novice to peer (Kroll and Webb 2012).

This is not, though, the whole truth of the matter. In this paper we discuss the relationship between supervisor and creative writing doctoral candidate, and how it is played out in the production of the critical accompaniment to the creative artefact. We three are all about the same age, and share a similar passion for creative practice and contemporary cultural theory. We differ in our national and cultural identities though: one of us (Paul) is a Barkindji man; the second (Jordan) is an Australian woman; and the third (Jen) is a migrant of no fixed cultural identity. Our relationship began when Jordan enrolled to do a PhD in digital poetry, with Jen as her supervisor. Jordan drew her theoretical framework from the writings of philosopher / psychiatrist / political activists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; Jen uses analogue modes of writing, and specialises in cultural sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and philosopher-historian Michel Foucault. A poor fit, one might say, but their shared concern for intellectual rigour and creative experiment meant that Jordan completed an excellent doctorate (Williams 2007), and Jen learned a great deal about digital poetics and about the affordances provided by Deleuzian thinking. Some years later, Paul obeyed the impulse to enrol in a creative doctorate, and asked Jordan and Jen to be his supervisors. Paul's focus was the problem of contemporary Indigenous Australian masculinity, and especially Barkindji masculinity; and his creative research project was a road novel (Collis 2016). Again, this sounds like a poor mix. But in 2016 Paul's dissertation received almost-perfect examiners' reports, and he was awarded the first arts/humanities PhD at the University of Canberra. In addition, he won the David Unaipon Award for his creative work; and Jordan and Jen had been schooled in Indigenous traditions and epistemologies.

We rehearse this background because it is not unusual, in creative writing HDR programs, for candidates to select intellectual frameworks or even creative practices that are not closely aligned with the skills and tastes of their supervisors. Ours are more fluid research projects than are usually found in other disciplines, and supervisors need to be open to learning about elements beyond their own training, and to accommodate various and complex juxtapositions of theory, method and practice. Nor are our HDR cohorts similar to the cohorts in STEM, whose students often progress directly from school through undergraduate to doctoral degrees. Indeed, across the campus, while PhD candidates are typically in their 30s, creative writing PhD candidates have often returned to university after decades of doing other work. They arrive with maturity, knowledge sets, a range of skills, and with heads full of deep, rich and broad contextual material. Where STEM PhD students are often establishing their first domestic

relationships and beginning to build a family, creative writing PhD candidates are typically older, and carrying a range of family and social responsibilities.<sup>2</sup> What this often means is that supervisor and candidate share a context, a generational framework, and a set of expectations, and this can lead to genuine friendships: relationships characterised by mutuality rather than by hierarchy.

We consider that our own individual and our collective relationships, built as they are on institutional functions, creative fascination, and friendship, offer a model for thinking about creative doctoral work, and the approaches that might be taken to the writing of the scholarly component of these degrees. Accordingly, we met over coffee to rehash our relationship, and what we each did and thought and learned in the process. In what follows, we present that conversation in the form of a script, starting with the simultaneously vexed and banal question of the exegesis: what it is, why it is, and what on earth that word means.

## Conversation

### *Getting started*

Jen: When I arrived at UC at the end of 1999, I had never seen a creative doctorate. In fact only a handful of Australian universities offered the option at that point, and one of my first tasks was to build our own program. It was only the next year, Jordan, that you enrolled in a creative masters and then upgraded to a doctorate. At that stage I had had only two creative PhD students commence, and none complete; and I had never done a creative doctorate myself, so I was really underprepared for a very abstruse area of practice.

I thought at the time that the word *exegesis* was unnecessarily recondite, and I still feel that. And I really wasn't sure what the exegesis was for, or what it was good for. It felt, then, as though it were there simply to provide the justification for calling a major creative work *a doctorate*.

Over the years I've changed my mind, and it seems to me that the creative work truly is research practice, and that the exegesis is an explicit speaking of that research practice while the creative work speaks about it implicitly, or tangentially, or poetically.

Jordan: Yes; the word can be a bit misleading, especially when you're new, and you don't know what to do. So you look up the word *exegesis*, and you see its history as basically commentary on the Bible, and you think 'Oh OK, so I've got to do a commentary on my creative work'. And then you educate yourself a bit more broadly. So yes, it is unnecessary, and it's actually an inappropriate term.

Jen: Jordan, your exegetical writing was like a conventional PhD, though not in a sense that it was long. You had your creative work, but for your

exegesis you basically did a 40– to 50,000 word version of what is done for an 80– to 90,000 word dissertation.

Jordan: Yes, I did.

Jen: And Paul, yours moved back and forth between various modes, and I think it settled eventually on being, like Jordan's, a mini-thesis, but in a very creative and very confident voice that says *I'm part of a tradition of 60,000 years of storytelling*.

Paul: That's a work unfinished yet with me, I think. In the notes that I sent you yesterday when you asked me, 'How would you change the exegesis?', I said 'The thing I'd change is the way in which the creative work sits almost outside the academic research'.<sup>3</sup>

Jordan: The special issue of *TEXT* (Fletcher and Mann 2000), along with Tess Brady's essay (2000), has been really influential, a bit of a touchstone. It laid out a huge range of options,<sup>4</sup> and I'm wondering whether those options have shifted much. But in both Paul's and my case, we wanted the PhD to do everything that we would ever do. We had the creative side of things, but we also wanted to make a whole lot of points in the exegesis, so the exegesis tended to become a separate document with just a slight link to the artefact.

Jen: That's right! When I did my creative doctorate, at first I wrote nothing in my exegesis that said anything about the artefact; it was all about rational arguments (Webb 2008). And my supervisor Martin Harrison said, 'You know, you do kind of need to make reference to the creative work'. So I put in a paragraph or two about where the whole work started – which was with a creative question. But that's all I said about the creative artefact, because I felt that the whole thing, creative and critical, was one unit; and that the two sides, lyric and theoretical, were tackling exactly the same questions.

Jordan: I reckon I was similar, and you were too, Paul.

Paul: Yes absolutely. But the thing about my project was that you both continually reminded me, thank god, to write to the exegesis, write to the theory, while I was writing the novel. And so the stuff around disenfranchisement, issues of mental illness, violence and power, continual jailing, being locking up, locked away, locked in, locked out: all that stuff appears both in the novel and in the exegesis. Both of them are about being locked out of being Barkindji – that I can't be Barkindji any more, not like my grandfather was. Judith Butler gave me a clue about it in her stuff on performance, on that which is done; and Fanon speaks about it too in *Black Skin, White Masks*.<sup>5</sup> And what they said about performativity becomes the experience in the novel.

Jen: So for you, the novel is the lived experience, the material experience of all that theoretical material and its apparatus?

- Paul: I'd even go further, and say that they are the same; that maybe all work is creative work.
- Jordan: I remember what I had to learn about the exegesis with you, Paul. It was really important to you that you spoke Aboriginal ways of knowing, and I had no idea what that might end up looking like.
- Paul: It was a voice that was missing, everywhere that I'd looked.
- Jordan: You had everything mashed in together, story and theory and commentary, and I'd look at it and think, *oh my god, this doesn't look like a PhD, but am I just being, like, a white person?* And, in the end, we had to learn it was actually a matter of form. Then we started using what is available to us in print, in the use of italic fonts, and spaces, to have multiple voices in the parts where it was needed.
- Paul: You gave me the freedom to write like that too, and time to consider it. And to realise I could say more by saying nothing. I would never have thought of that, because I thought that being involved in an academic process was all about the written, not the unwritten. But there's lots of introverted, introspective thoughts in the novel that explore that empty space, or that silent space.
- Jordan: Do you remember you used to get so angry about the exegetical practice? Or at least, the reaction that I saw was anger about what you used to say was *just bullshit jargon*. When I was doing my PhD, I'd also just get incredibly insecure and think I was stupid.
- Paul: I think my insecurity came out in anger.
- Jen: And Jordan, yours came out in despair.
- Jordan: It did. I'd just take off.
- Paul: And I'd be completely blown away. I found myself up against a wall with nowhere to go, and those things were incredibly difficult to deal with. But it came back to writing: writing was the problem, but it was also the freedom. So not understanding what an exegesis was, to start off, was probably a blessing in many ways. I didn't do anything the right way. I didn't read the Gold Book<sup>6</sup> which was my great dilemma. I was intimidated by the amount of admin, and I relied too heavily on you to make sure that I'd get there. I just wanted to concentrate on what I was doing.<sup>7</sup>

### ***Mutatis mutandis***

- Jordan: I think one thing that has changed is that students can be a lot more confident about mixing what they do in the exegesis, because we know we're going to be able to find someone to examine it, someone who has the literacy to do so.
- Jen: By 'mixing', you mean different theoretical frameworks?

- Jordan: Yes; or, as in Paul's case, where a lot of the exegesis is actually storytelling mixed in with the theoretical work. The examiners don't say, 'Well make up your mind, it should be one thing or the other'; or they don't say 'It's an exegesis, why are you telling me a story?' Maybe that's a change in the creative doctorate. I think of a thesis I've recently examined where the candidate spent a whole chapter of the exegesis justifying why he'd done a creative thesis, and I thought 'Oh really? I think we've moved way past that'.
- Jen: So you think there is more creativity possible in the critical writing, and in the examiners' capacity to evaluate it?
- Jordan: Yes.
- Paul: I got the exegesis confused with the artefact, but in fact I turned the artefact into the exegesis anyway. So maybe there has been a change in how it works, and maybe that change has been recognised, or ratified. There is now a blurred line between the artefact and what would normally be referred to as the pure theory, or the exegesis.
- Jordan: Did you see the exegesis as a hoop you had to jump through? Or did you want to do it? Because I wanted to do it.
- Paul: I definitely wanted to explain, because again that voice was missing in all the stuff that I'd read. I only found either a folksy kind of writing – you know, stories about droving, or some kind of cowboy song.<sup>8</sup> Even in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the voice that we often hear is a Northern Territory voice, or it seems to be; and somehow I don't hear contemporary urban Aboriginal voices.
- Jen: Jordan, you said you wanted to write an exegesis, and Paul, so did you. Why did you want to do it? What was it about the idea of the exegesis that appealed to you?
- Jordan: For me the whole doctorate was all about ideas, whether it was the creative work or the exegesis: ideas and concepts and knowing the world more confidently. And doing both a very theoretical and also a creative work was really attractive to me. And the other thing that was attractive was translating the theoretical into the creative, and vice versa. The theoretical research gave me a ready-made inspiration for my creative work, as opposed to what I usually do which is to say, 'Oh, I know that I want to make this [creative work] ... but what will it be about?' So, in that sense it was actually safer than normal life, in that one way of thinking and working feeds off the other.
- Paul: A lot of what Jordan said is true for me too. I certainly wanted to be seen to be able to play in that big pool, and I found research liberating in so far as it confirmed what I'd been writing and thinking about. And for the doctorate, there was a ready-laid plan written down, and all I had to do is find it; and then, in the discovery, other things came up, which brought forward a more intense novel, I think. The scholarly stuff was very

important because I wanted to prove to myself, I suppose, that I could be a scholar. So the process of doing the exegesis didn't really intimidate me, but the words did: finding language was difficult.

Jen: You struggled to write; and Jordan, you wouldn't stop writing!

Jordan: We've got different approaches to it, yeah.

Paul: It took me a long time to consider things. We'd been discussing the mystery surrounding racism, and especially internalised black racism, black-against-black people, for a long time, but I wasn't getting anywhere. I couldn't quite find the words for what I was saying. But I kept going back to reading, and the more I read, the more I interrogated writers. I still don't know the answers, but issues being raised in the research was the thing that I enjoyed probably more than anything else. In fact that's the best part about studying: the discovery of the new.

Jen: So for you, Paul, it was affirmation of your own feelings of being; but Jordan, you were reading Deleuze and Guattari, which seems so far away from our culture, our context.

Jordan: But it's not really, not when you actually read *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* or *A Thousand Plateaus* – it's very Marxist really. So, even though it's kind of exotic, and even though it's actually a bit bourgeois, nevertheless it had a lot of interesting things to say about boundaries and the lack thereof. When I started my PhD, I was acutely aware of my class background, and I was always interested in class barriers, and how you could straddle them, and how to have tolerance for craziness.

Paul: I think Stuart Hall gets very close to that line too, about bourgeois exoticism. He says it's one thing to be viewed as other, and quite another thing to see yourself as other.<sup>9</sup>

Jordan: But I wasn't motivated like you, Paul, to do something useful. I knew that I had to make a good story about a contribution to knowledge, but for me, it was my time out to do something that was purely about knowing, at the end, something that I didn't know at the beginning. I thought 'And after that, I'll go back to the real world'. I think I have a very different approach now: I think I am in the real world, even though I'm in academia.

Paul: That's one of the great things about having gone through this – I would not doubt anything now about myself, about my capabilities or my limits.

Jordan: I would say the same thing. I emerged thinking 'Oh shit, I actually did that!', and now I could do anything.

Paul: Yeah, I am very proud too. Leading up to the point of submitting, I would shake, I would tremble putting my shoes on in the morning, knowing that I had to come in and face another empty desk and another



blank page and the pressure of ‘What am I thinking?’ It was horrible. But as soon as I handed my dissertation in to the research office, it was like this flood of information came back to me. I could quote chapter and verse from that stuff; it was as clear as looking at both of you now, and it was all there in my mind.

Jordan: Were you as pressured by the exegesis as you were by the novel? Like, did one pressure you more than the other?

Paul: Right at the end the exegesis became really difficult: that was the stuff around *what is Aboriginal, how am I Aboriginal*. But that part of problem with writing the exegesis was that I was continually writing in a creative voice. In the end, I was like ‘Fuck it, that’s the way to do it!’ It was that *thing* that I was looking for all along, that voice that was missing. The theories around racism, which came out of the post-colonial writers, and Hall, and Butler – they show us a way to break free.

Jen: Mmm, to break free, with rigour. I think we need to think about that more, in the exegesis.

Jordan: And whether it’s doing it yourself or supervising, that’s the hard thing about the exegesis. I do believe, upon reflection, that there are way more options open now to research students. You can do all these different things with the exegesis. In practice, I think many people are a little bit scared about that, because in the end, it’s got to be examined, but I don’t think that fear about the examining is there now to the same extent. Or is there now in terms of whether the exegesis is highly creative and/or highly theoretical, and/or highly traditional, and/or non-traditional, or whatever. For the student and the supervisor, and the examiner, the big question is ‘Is this rigorous?’ That’s a requirement for the PhD – there’s got to be some rigour there, no matter what you’re mixing up in it. So to me, that’s the challenge now – rather than deciding whether it’s commentary on the creative work, or a theoretical examination as a research question, we know that it can be both, and everything in between. But if it’s multi-modal, or trans-disciplinary or something else, then the challenge is to ensure that there’s some intellectual rigour in there.

Jen: And do you see the exegesis in its various forms as enabling that?

Jordan: Well, I don’t know: that’s what scary about it, isn’t it; because you discuss it and you discuss it, and finally you have to trust that it’s there; and then you’ve got to trust your examiners.

Paul: The process itself is such an isolating, lonely road. Doing the doctorate was like a two-headed snake for me. I didn’t think too much about the marker, or the marking to come. I always thought that the work wasn’t good enough. And also I had these other Aboriginal eyes and considerations in the back of my head, thinking *‘What are you talking*

*about, you shouldn't be saying that, you don't know what you're saying, it's not true'.*

Jordan: Yes, I remember when we went to that Indigenous HDR conference at Melbourne University, I became acutely aware of how bound Aboriginal students feel to do something worthy of their communities. I didn't have to do that. I could do what I wanted, as long as it would pass. But everyone else in that room, all their mentors, seemed to be trying to channel them into these bloody ruts, as if that were the only means by which you could do your community service. So the work ends up, apparently, having to be in traditional form, or in Paul's case, having to be able to prove that it's done something for the community.

Jen: I wonder if that's a safety mechanism: in that, if you've done the right thing then it is going to be okay? When I was working with Donna and Sandra on examination of creative doctorates (Webb, Brien and Burr 2013), a couple of the people that we spoke to complained that a lot of doctoral level work is fine, but it's *only* fine. The students and the supervisors are, they think, playing safe, trying just to make sure that they pass, and are unwilling to take creative and intellectual leaps, in either creative or exegetical modes.

### ***Constructing the exegesis***

Jen: We know there are big issues for candidates: there's often a sense of illegitimacy, there may be feelings of the intimidation, depression, isolation; and there's the real anxiety expressed as '*Is my exegesis really doctorate level material?*' What do supervisors need to be doing, do you think, to help build the confidence that it will work?

Jordan: Something that I do now with my students – and this might sound really banal – is to have regular meetings. That way you can always be in touch with where the student is mentally and emotionally, as well as intellectually. And also, I think, it stops them being a bad student like I was.

Jen: Why were you a bad student?

Jordan: Because I always ran away, and because I was always so insecure that I would never show you anything and I would just lie through my teeth to avoid showing you stuff because I was so insecure. And because it didn't matter how much I read – and god I read a lot – I never thought it was enough.

Jen: Yet every time you showed me something, it was brilliant.

Jordan: I would think '*Oh I'm so confused, I'll just have to quit*'. And then I'd raise the issue with you, and you'd just say just a sentence and I'd think '*Yeah, that's the answer*', and I'd carry on.

- Paul: I found that with you too, you were able to do that with me, you'd find the gold in it.
- Jordan: Yes, so I do try to have fortnightly meeting. But then the danger of regular meetings is it would be too easy for me to shoehorn them into something that's comfortable and convenient. So, while that's something good we can take from the science model, I think it also comes with a caution: that it's not about me directing them. It's about having a plan, and constantly acquainting the student with the knowledge that *'Actually, we can do this, because millions have done it'*, and *'Hey look, we've got a plan'*.
- Jen: And then within that plan, you can be as flexible as you want.
- Jordan: Absolutely. You can change direction. I make sure that two days before each of those meetings, they have to give me some writing. It might be just five hundred words about something they've written, or something they've read lately that's blown their mind. I've found with a couple that a lot of those five hundred word blocks survive to the end. And anyway, by the end of the year, they may not have a structured argument, but they've got thousands of words.
- Paul: A lot of the discarded stuff remains in the mind too: questions of what to do and what not to do, and how to go about the work. I found those regular meetings vital. Absolutely vital.
- Jordan: It is a journey for everyone, and honouring that is an important thing a supervisor can do. But the other thing a supervisor, I think, has to do is to keep the channels open; don't steer into that rut; keep the whole vista open. At the same time, sometimes you've got to be the voice of reason, and there are times when you have to be pragmatic too. Like, there are times in the PhD for diverging. I actually use that word to my students, I say *'We're in the divergent phase, don't worry about goals and objectives'*. And at other times, like before the confirmation seminar, the student needs to go into a convergent phase, and that supervisor has to be responsible for saying *'It's time to converge for a while'*.
- Paul: Somebody asked me, a couple of weeks ago, about supervision, and especially about what Indigenous students need in supervision. I said 'More time'. They need more time; that's probably the most important thing, and there's got to be some recognition or understanding of that. And it's a double process: supervisors need to be supportive about the cultural issues, and students need to let their supervisors know about it. If you [the Indigenous student] explain it to them, the supervisors will change. I would have to go back up to Newcastle to do some cultural business, and I found that, even if it was only for two days, that was a great relief from here, away from study. It revitalised and re-energised me, and I'd come back and do another two weeks of work, and then go back up again.

- Jordan: I agree, and I think if Indigenous students are working on an Indigenous-related topic that there's a high risk that it's going to cause or bring up trauma. But, having said that, you know, there are single mums, there are PhD students recovering from cancer, there's all sorts of personal issues, so there has to be a process of managing it. And I think that has to be available for supervisors too. For instance, I should not be pressured at my performance review about the timeliness of an Indigenous student who has had 29 family members die during his candidature.
- Paul: Though in the end I'm glad you did put the finish line there because it would have, it could have, just gone on.
- Jen: But you had to find the shape before you could complete it. I remember reading a piece by Tara Brabazon in *The Higher Education* supplement, and she was very direct about her opinion that a creative doctorate should have what she called a 'bonsai exegesis': effectively, a mini-doctorate with introduction, lit review, methodology, method, design, findings, and discussion (Brabazon 2010). Certainly that's one model. Some years ago I examined a very good PhD where the exegesis was simply a compilation of five essays that had all been published in *TEXT*, along with a short introduction and conclusion. So that's another model. For my own creative doctorate, I tried doing a very creative, every essayistic version, and the examiners passed it without corrections. Jordan, though yours was a very intellectual exegesis, it wasn't a bonsai one: you did plenty of storytelling. And Paul, yours too was theoretical but with lots of storytelling and gestures toward traditional Aboriginal ways of knowing. I have seen a whole range of other ways of presenting the thesis. We each of us chose a different model – did they work for us? If they did, why did they work: was it just luck, or was it the right shape for the creative work we'd done, or ...
- Jordan: In my case it was right for what I wanted to explore, in the way I wanted to explore it. But does there have to be a recipe, or a model? There does have to be some intellectual depth, and there has to be some high-value intellectual work too. I feel like at one end there's the Brabazon way, and at the other end there's something that almost looks like two creative works; and it doesn't matter what the model is, as long as there is that deep intellectual work. Think of a metaphor from the visual arts: a Brabazon model might end up saying that all painting PhDs will only use the colours pink and blue. And at the other end of the continuum, there will be a whole universe of colours.
- Jen: So your point is that when we're in a creative zone – thinking here about the production of the exegesis – we should be very creative; and form is irrelevant, essentially, as long as it fits the project.
- Jordan: And the prospect that gets raised all the time is one where there is no exegesis and the creative writing stands for itself. How does that work?

- Jen: Personally, I see it as flawed, as doing a dishonour to the creative work which needs to be for arts' sake and have its own integrity, its own wholeness. And if it also has to be adding knowledge explicitly, then I think you're asking to do something that it wasn't designed to do.
- Paul: Anyway, you still need to know what that project is before you can get it done. I had no idea what I was doing, to start off with. I thought I'd explore different roads and then I'd find out that they'd run into a dead end. The problem that I faced was the freedom of not having a question to go into, just a broad topic.
- Jordan: That's another thing I think – I doesn't matter what the question ends up being, but it's always important to have a working question. And if, as a supervisor, you notice that everything seems to be floating off, and you have the conversation that 'How does this relate to your working question?', and then they answer 'Oh I don't really know', then it's time to come up with a new working question.
- Jen: What I say to a lot of PhD students is, 'Now that's an interesting question, but that's not for now because you're doing *this*; so put *that* to one side'.  
  
But for my last question: when Donna, Sandra and I did our project on examining creative doctorates, we found I think 24 words that are used in university policies for what we've been talking about: the bit of the dissertation that isn't the creative artifact. What would you like to see as the name for that object?
- Jordan: The thesis. No one has a problem with a traditional humanities thesis being called a thesis or dissertation, and it is in several parts. Why not call our submissions a creative thesis, and not name the two main parts?
- Paul: Yep, thesis or theory. Both elements are theoretical, in my view, and they're both creative.
- Jordan: Yes, I think that's the perfect description. There has to be a synergistic relationship. I found that really useful when I was doing my doctorate: it kept me thinking 'OK I'm doing *this*, but how does that relate to *that*?' And anyway, I can't think of another word, and I don't understand why we have to have one. Often it makes it more difficult for students, not less.

## Endnotes

1. This master-pupil logic has been a feature of the long tradition of teaching and transmission of knowledge; and it still exists, in the language used, in the German academy where the term for supervisor is *Doktorvater*, or *Doktormutter*. This relationship may be entirely benign, or may be exploitative, as Paulo Freire explicates in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1972). For Freire, education should be a practice of freedom, one that acknowledges and respects the expertise that students already possess. This is a perspective and a value that underpins the supervisory relationship in most creative writing HDR programs, but the administration of such candidatures necessarily includes a hierarchical relationship, whereby the supervisor is responsible for ensuring the ‘correct’ procedures are followed so that the candidate will complete successfully and become recognised as a peer of the supervisor.
2. Jen, with a senior colleague from chemistry, was asked to conduct a workshop for supervisors. During the workshop, the chemist observed that most of his students are distracted by ‘getting married and having babies’; Jen’s experience was that most of her students were getting divorced and being treated for cancer. Her experiences are rehearsed across the literature of supervision, and reported in publications from across Australia and Europe. Fran Molloy (2014) observes the relative age of candidates, as does a CAPA report (2012); and the OECD finds that, ‘In general, median age at doctoral graduation is lowest in the natural sciences and engineering and highest in the humanities’ (Auriol, Misu and Freeman 2013: 9).
3. During this conversation, and in many other conversations between we three, we have wrestled with the apparent divide between creative artefact and scholarly essay. Fundamentally, though, we take the position that a creative work is the product of an intellectual, technical and creative practice that can both mobilise and inform a more conventionally-framed scholarly practice. It seems reasonable, then, to let the art work be itself, and explicate the frameworks, contexts and knowledge-concerns in a separate product. While an occasional writer-researcher will produce a single volume, with the artistic and the research elements intertwined, most of us settle for an analogical movement between the two modes of expression.
4. Brady sets out her notion of the researcher as ‘bowerbird’, collecting what appear to be random objects, but in fact are objects that share important features necessary to the research being conducted. In this logic, ‘The academic and the creative slid into one another, nestled side by side so that one fed on the other, one became the other’ (Brady 2000). The exegesis, though, ‘can provide a kind of safety zone ... an exegesis which is really a mini dissertation’. Citing other writing scholars, she suggests candidates take a bolder approach: for instance, presenting the exegesis in the mode of a writer’s journal; writing a ‘lively readable’ accompaniment to the creative work; ‘embracing incompleteness’. The Special Issue similarly urges experiment in thought and style, and an associative relationship between the creative and the exegetical elements. In her paper, for example, Barbara Bolt reminds readers that we cannot guarantee our research will come up with a novel contribution to knowledge: ‘Rather, the new emerges through process as a shudder of an idea, which is then realized in and through language. This languaging is the task of the exegesis’ – which is to say, the exegesis accompanies the creative work, in the nature of a translator. Avoiding blandness was another piece of advice (in Robert Nelson’s paper); avoiding ‘auto-connoisseurship of an egotistical kind’; and be playful, be poetic, connect with the creative artifact. It is this playfulness, this pushing of boundaries, this refusal to be bland, that both Paul and Jordan took to heart in the writing of their exegeses.
5. This particularly references her work in *Gender Trouble*, where Butler argues that gender (and, by extension, other modes of identity) is not factic, but an effect of ‘the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being’ (1990: 33). Again, in a later work, Butler writes of the enduring impact of past traumas: ‘There is no purifying language of its traumatic residue, and no way to work through trauma except through the arduous effort it takes to direct the course of its repetition’ (Butler 1997: 38). For Paul, the ‘naturalisation’ of the black body as other, the normative whiteness of the world in which he grew up and was living, and the apparent inescapability of a traumatic past (and

present) made sense in terms of his creative research artifact. This was heightened by Butler's expression of the formative moments in the construction of the self, and the problem of not being able to fully inhabit a unified world. Paul's grandfather had to negotiate both the Barkindji world and the white Australian world and Butler could have been thinking of him when she writes:

We all emerge into a world already mapped and understood by others, and the language we learn categorizes us as this, that, and the other. We constantly and inevitably meet images and definitions of ourselves that we neither make nor control. The process of language of those we interact with, of being hailed into being, as it were, and addressed in the language of those we interact with, cannot be resisted, as to resist it is to remain outside society, unknown and unrecognized. (Butler 1997: 29)

1. Franz Fanon seems to have anticipated both Butler and Paul himself, writing 'For the black man there is only one destiny. And it is white' (Fanon 1967: 10). Between Fanon's despair and rage, and Butler's insistence on embodied performance, Paul found concepts that galvanised the theorising in his exegesis, and helped to shape the characterisation of his main fictional character, 'Blackie'.
6. The Gold Book is the familiar name for UC's HDR policies.
7. Paul's experience is not unusual; both Jordan and Jen wrestled with the multiple demands placed on creative dissertations, to fulfil artistic expectations, knowledge generation, and administrative formats and constraints. Remarkably, virtually all of us get through this, in no small case due to the openness of examiners to reading across modes and modalities, and the willingness of HDR administrators to trust the judgement of creative arts researchers. Is this good enough, as we move into a future of increasing numbers of creative arts HDR candidates? Perhaps: all academic practices change, over time. The precedent set by the successful completion of creative writing doctorates over the past decade or two provide a rich range of approaches to the exegesis, and the relationship between creative and critical elements; and both candidates and supervisors who tap into this resource are likely to feel calmer about the complexities of the process. Section 2 of this discussion touches on this issue.
8. There is now, arguably, a wider range of doctoral scholarship on Aboriginal creative writing that locates the topic in the urban environment, but in the early days of Paul's candidature, it was difficult to find examples that moved outside the accounts of Indigenous people living on country, and still following the ancient traditions.
9. Stuart Hall was an important 'advisor' to Paul's thesis, not least because as a black man living in a dominant white culture, he offers a deep and embodied experience of being constantly othered, of having his identity undermined, and yet of never losing sight of the main issue: research into identity, and the representation of identity in cultural and political terms. This was key to Paul's creative artefact, a novel about a black man struggling to preserve culture and value; and it deeply informed his exegetical writing. Particularly this was in such sections as Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay reminding readers that identity is always 'produced in specific historical and institutional sites within specific discursive formations and practices, by specific enunciative strategies', and that 'Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us' (Hall and Du Gay 1996: 4, 6). In Paul's thesis – both creative and critical – identity is understood in terms of this notion of multiplicity and discursive formation, though filtered through, and problematised by, the context for Australian Indigenous identity.

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