

Great Writing paper June 2015

Proposed title: Minding the gap: what gap?

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Abstract:

Just as we're enjoined as we step from the train to "mind the gap", this paper attempts to 'mind' gaps which have opened or which are being filled in in the teaching and work within of creative writing, in the academy, especially as a snap shot of such thinking in Australasian universities and tertiary institutions.. Passengers on the British railway and underground must 'mind the gap' because it's dangerous not to. In a state of embarking or disembarking, passengers must stay aware of the small but significant space separating the stationary from the moving. The contemporary practices of writing and reading are in constant motion, and the phrase 'mind the gap' captures an essential aspect of the way language and literature progress as they pass through any number of social, technical, and political exchanges. 'Minding the gap' also suggests an awareness of the always shifting distance between the expected and the unexpected, the ordinary and the impossible, the familiar and unimagined. Creative writing is the stuff of betwixt and between and the sides that divide them.

Creative Writing as an academic discipline is into its fourth decade in Australasia and, increasingly, academics and practitioners are being challenged to balance their contributions to the growing canon of writing about writing against the impact of the reality of a dwindling print media industry. Long cherished as the love-child of the arts and humanities, creative writing is now flirting with sciences, social media and business, as these disciplines develop new emphases upon storytelling and narrative. Gaps between disciplines are closing as the former 'silo' structures of academic programmes become merged. The title and some of the papers I will refer to started life at a conference of the Australasian Association of Writing Programs (AAWP) at Massey University, in Wellington, New Zealand, in November 2014, where the original call for papers under the title of 'Minding the gap: writing across thresholds and fault-lines' attracted a wide range of papers and discussions—well beyond the imagination of the convenors—to consider concepts and practices such as 'writing across the gaps, reading between the lines, unearthing writing, writing across thresholds, fault lines and storylines". With an eye to the physical gap between the two nations of new Zealand and Australia, and an ear to the rumbling of earthquakes in our region, we also encouraged papers about building and

rebuilding writing, survivor stories, strategies for writers across gaps of time and place. Many of these fine contributions can be found on the website of the AAWP, [www.aawp.org.au](http://www.aawp.org.au), published under the conference proceedings.

This paper follows on from that conference, advising us to mind the gap between the way writing and reading are experienced today and the possibilities for their perception tomorrow. Those who write, teach, or study within a stone's throw of the academy are aware of the unprecedented changes and challenges facing creative writing and the associated fields of creative practice and literary study. In an era when the interest in literature and the links between literature and popular culture are more pronounced than ever before, the bodies that fund, evaluate, and enable creative writing in the academy have grown increasingly dubious of the value of a tradition that has, until recently, been seen as crucial to the progress of knowledge—indeed, as Camus once remarked, ‘The purpose of a writer is to keep civilization from destroying itself’. While those of who practice creative writing and reading—and both require innovation and originality—remain convinced of the urgent need for creative writing in today's world, there is no question that we are being tasked with finding new ways to make words speak against the white noise of digitisation.

The range and breadth of papers we called up with our call for papers, like some ancient necromancers also call attention to the gappy nature of language itself. Like the spaces that pepper each sentence, language and literature operate across, between, and sometimes in spite of the breaks in meaning, genre, and cognition. Meeting the challenges of new conceptions of and expectations around writing means we have the opportunity to find new ways to conceive of what it is we do and how we go about doing it. While the cultural role of creativity has never been more central, our charge is to craft fresh articulations of the primacy of the literary imagination. Writing across gaps requires cooperation and connection, and in the conceptions of writing in the conference and subsequent publications we find new configurations of genre, and fresh approaches to creative research, innovative approaches to old questions around practice, failure, and ‘*readerly*’ cognition. Novel understandings of the ways in which language functions inevitably lead to new possibilities for pleasure: in the gap that once separated memoir and fiction arise new understandings of genre; in the space between real and invented languages appear new possibilities for creation; in the white space surrounding textual fragments emerge new constellations of meaning and nuance.

Minding the gaps in language and literature also involves paying attention to the gaps that form the identity of those performing the writing and reading. Each act of composition, each episode of reading and interpretation is grounded in the particularities of an individual experience constituted in

terms of culture, ethnicity, class, and gender. Every voyage of imagination launches from its own shore, and every landfall reconstitutes the space between near and far.

As a long standing member of the AAWP executive and the only kiwi on the group I was most fortunately supported by creative writing colleagues at Massey University's campus in Wellington, New Zealand which incidentally has run creative writing programmes in NZ since the 1970s and indeed pioneered the teaching of this subject in my country. With my friend and colleague Thom Conroy who is a novelist and based at the Palmerston North campus of Massey, and a group of his Massey colleagues plus one other person from Victoria University's writing programme (not the creative writing school) we formed a small nucleus of people spread through 4 campuses in the north Island of NZ and the 3,000 emails in my inbox that arrived in the latter part of last year, prove that we organised it virtually with only one meeting in person together, two months before the event. With such a small team and with my extra sense of responsibility for the AAWP membership who have been so supportive of me over more than ten years, I was in the privileged position of being convenor of papers and coordinator of the double blind peer reviewing process; a unique position as I alone oversaw the range viewed the whole picture of what came and went.

Although the publication of conference proceedings happened in February, another book of essays is in progress and several other articles and creative pieces which were performed, presented or as workshops, have been published in TEXT online journal and other such publications, this omniscient view of such creation seemed something to celebrate and share. Each time I engage with any of these publications or articles I am impressed by the ingenuity of writers and their writing about writing.

First a few statistics, then a content analysis:

140 attendees

134 presenters

87 papers presented

12 performance pieces or readings of original creative work

3 key note speakers

44 peer reviewed papers published in the conference proceedings on the AAWP website

12 in Book for Cambridge Scholars to be published later this year

4 in April's *TEXT* journal

There were 6 books launched at the conference

Who knows what lives many of these ideas have gone on to have since that iteration? What new gaps have opened in thinking and writing for those writers?

But now I'd like to present a quick content analysis of the conference proceedings to see what key themes emerged and what new ideas were activated as these writers stepped off the train and onto the platform.

What were some of the gaps that opened or closed? Were attended to? And did they mind being minded?

In terms of clusters of ideas, three themes stood out:

1. The most obvious was that of pedagogy: our writers are dedicated to teaching writing and teaching it better. These titles come to mind: Writing seismotics, the value of distance, teaching short fiction online, teaching flash fiction, new spaces on the page and in the academy casual university teaching pleasure pitfalls and realities, methodologies, interstices of the academy – one of the more colourful titles being 'Taking it up the arts' about interdisciplinary research among other things...The was a strong emphasis , as returning in the academy one might say, to the value of the essay as a teaching tool. There was failure panel, in which Jeri Kroll, Scott Brook and Jen Webb and Julian Meyrick reflected on aspects of failure as a significant yet regularly overlooked component of writing and art. In 'The creative writing doctorate as survival story: Minding the gap between success and failure', Jeri Kroll examines the gap between failure and success in Ph D candidature in the arts and cites two particular 'successful failures' in science and architecture as indications of where the mentor

and supervisor might be encouraged to see that ‘the full articulation of a project might only be possible in the future’ and not necessarily at the moment of submission of a thesis. She argues, ‘Failure can lead practitioners in new directions, close pathways, solve specific problems that turn out to be more significant than the project as a whole and suggest more fruitful questions to pose’.

Jen Webb is similarly concerned with failure in her paper “Ovid’s artists and mythic failure”, and interweaves her current collaborative research project of interviewing poets from across the ‘Anglophone community’ where failure is repeatedly reported as an incentive to ‘fail better’, with stories of artist who ‘fail well’. She widens the scope of the chapter with rumination upon the life of Ovid and a selection of the artist vignettes whose stories he recounts in *the Metamorphoses*, ‘as object lessons for the emerging artist: a list of things to do, and not do, in order to avoid ending up banished to outer Romania, or turned into a flower or torn to shreds by angry Maenads.’ This chapter brings us back from our original initiative of minding gaps in writing and reading for today and anticipation of these for tomorrow, to a reminder that yesterday and beyond that into myth and the earliest utterances of our kind, it has always been fearless perseverance which has taken the artist across the gap between failure and success.

2. Gaps in the world – literal geographical, historical gappyness was the next most prolific collection of papers, with accounts of writing about place and or historical gaps in knowledge for fiction, creative nonfiction and biography in particular. Several papers addressed exile belonging, the migrant situation.

As Diane Comer so beautifully expresses it:

Unlike those who never leave their home country, migrants have crossed a frontier into the unknown. When Hélène Cixous observes that “writing forms a passageway between two shores” (1993: 3), this is especially true for migrants who have left one shore for another: geographic, cultural, linguistic. Every migrant has crossed a literal and existential shore. The route of the migrant is the journey of the stranger who comes to town. For migrants these two archetypal narratives, a man goes on a journey and a stranger comes to town, are elemental, real, and combined.

3. Writerly concerns; methodologies and approaches to writing by writers was the next most significant collection of gappy thinking, from panels on editing and publishing the gap to papers on writers who have leapt gaps – such as Janet Frame, in Dominique Hecq’s tautly argued prose, or Nigel Krauth’s discussion of the *calligrammes* of Apollinaire where text and image are released from their segregated modes. Denise Beckton’s paper, ‘Lost in translation; using fictional language as a form of narrative’ moves to considerations of invented languages and bridges gaps between literary writing, children’s writing and popular culture. She discusses the nature and function of the unique languages created by Tolkien, Adams and G.C. Martin, among other writers, and their effect in each narrative as enriching and enhancing the worlds and the works created.
4. And next to this area was a large section of papers concerned with being, identity – that of the writer, or the student, or even when both inhabit the same body. A new interest in the merging of science and writing begins to show, both pertaining to psychology or neuroscience, and memory is an element that occurred in several papers. In ‘Playing with gaps: Science and the creative writer’ Lisa Smithies investigates the complex relationships underpinning cognition, literature, and reading, especially as they apply to American short story writer Lydia Davis. The gaps in the way our brains process information, Smithies argues, provide cognitive structures that literary writing can exploit to various ends. Smithies turns to the work of Davis as a striking example of the ways writers can manipulate elements of cognitive function to create meaning and evoke emotion.
5. Poetics as a theme was unexpectedly lower in representation—I feel like I’m giving an annual report on the stock market now; but this was a surprise. While it was the repository for much of the performance work of the conference, ideas of practicing ontology, semiotics and poetry, blurred lines between dreams and poems, were also located within this category. Increasingly the writers are considering the relationship between the words and the experience of the words for listeners, readers and writers; ‘Is a poem the words?’ asks Monica Carrol?

6. New and adventurous media are also represented in the figures in this content analysis, - and the presence of a welcome clutch of papers on journalism, news, TV cooking shows, comedy, bears testament to the point made in my introduction, of the merging lines between the disciplines within the academy, but also through new media. Trans media is a term now well advanced in use, but add to that trans lit, and vlogging;

In 'Writing across platforms: Adapting classics for social media' Jessica Seymour traced the means by which works of Austen, Fitzgerald and Brontë are not only being adapted, but rewritten, re-imaged, re-dressed and revised for onscreen and online games and web-series. Seymour provides a comprehensive introduction to the language of vlogging, transmedia texts and the world of online fandom, while arguing for the relevance of extending Foucault's concept of heterotopia to include these electronic texts.

7. 'Ficticiousness' A typical piece from this category, which explored the gaps between fiction and reality, fiction and research, legacies of history and connections with fiction is a paper from Shady Cosgrove, provocatively titled, '*Masturbating with Prostitutes: Research and the Realist Novel*'. Cosgrove grapples with the intersection of research and ethics in realist fiction. The chapter distinguishes between two forms of research essential to realism: fact-checking—which involves the gathering of real world details relevant to the story—and a second form of research which Cosgrove calls 'the production of new knowledge'.

8. Two final categories emerged— one being genre, which, as has been alluded to, tended to investigate meaning or closing gaps between genres across fault lines and ley lines of digital or paper spaces; boundary bursting between history and fiction, straddling and flashing identity and identity; of course most papers could be categorised here — there is usually a category called 'other' in any quantitative analysis; but ideas from genre offering new opportunities for hybridisation seem a popular focus in writing, especially among post-graduate creative writing students, who incidentally made up 40% of the attendees at this conference. .



9. I was startled when I first began using this title that it is also the name of a soft porn fantasy group – the gap between legs at the top of the thighs – and a quick google search brings a display of many lithe long tanned legs, in bikini pants, like swimwear calendar girls. We chose the fantail as our symbol as it is an image we used in the previous NZ based AAWP conference. I was intending merely a link between the two conferences across time but in place; my place, NZ. But in this image of course I subconsciously selected the greatest gap closing myth of NZ culture; that of the demi god Maui who tried to return to his mother's womb. It's a story that links us to contemporary culture and Maori mythology.

"In those far off days Hinenuitepo, goddess of night, goddess of death, lived, as she does today, in the underworld of spirits. As mother of mankind she has decreed from the troublesome earliest days of creation that man should live one cycle of life, then die. Maui wanted to give mankind everlasting life. He sought to kill Hinenuitepo and by doing so abolish death forever.

When Maui asked his father what Hinenuitepo looked like, he replied: "you will see that her body is like that of a human being, but is of gigantic size, with thighs as red as the setting sun. You will see eyes of greenstone, flashing like the opening and shutting of the horizon in summer lightening. You will see teeth as sharp as flaked obsidian and a mouth like that of a barracouta, and hair like a tangled mass of sea kelp".

Maui chose several bird companions besides the fantail to accompany him on his great quest. Because he had the ability to change into many life forms, he was able to travel with these birds to the underworld as a sparrow hawk.

Maui's objective was to enter the womb of Hinenuitepo when she was sleeping and by passing through her vital organs to her mouth, to destroy death. He said to his companions, "My command is that when I enter the womb of Hinenuitepo, you must on no account laugh."

So Maui, having taken on the form of the noke worm, then entered the womb but as he disappeared within, Tatahore, the whitehead, burst out laughing whilst the fantail rushed out and began dancing about with delight. And then was roused Hinenuitepo who closed her legs and strangled Maui and killed him.

Riley, Murdoch, (2001).Maori Bird Lore, Viking Sevenses NZ.

## Conclusion:

In 'Minding the gap: Writing across thresholds and fault lines' we tried to develop a gap-closing thread of ideas: from considerations of the writer as activist researcher to the writer as reader; to the reader and the reader as writer; onto the writer as mentor and student; and, finally, to the writer as artist. Perhaps more of a mesh than a thread and maybe more of a spiral than a circle is stitched, but we are confident that in these chapters, in the minding of gaps, we pay attention to the delicate shifting ground of our graft—past, present and future.