I am offered a text. This text bores me. It might be said to prattle. The prattle of the text is merely that foam of language which forms by the effect of the simple need of writing. Barthes, 1975: 4

Often, when I tell someone that I've met for the first time that I teach writing, I'm met with an incredulous stare. "What kind of writing?" they invariably ask. I often find this hard to answer succinctly and so give the very vague answer, "Oh, all kinds." This will nearly always engender another question about where I teach, and when I tell someone who is not familiar with a contemporary academic environment that I teach writing at a university they find it almost impossible to imagine. "How do you do that?" they reply with a dismayed look on their face and I know I have touched a fearful place in them, a place where dreams can easily be shattered. That most people have a book inside them is a common notion that contributes greatly to the naturalisation of the ability to write and often a denial of the craft in writing. It's generally accepted that people need to learn how to become painters, sculptors, dancers or photographers for instance, but nearly everyone feels they can and do write. As if the level of literacy achieved at school is enough to write a novel. Many even dream of the day a book will simply fall out of them onto the pages.

So why go to university to learn to write? I'm not beginning an argument here for literature as high culture, but simply investigating what teaching writing in an academic environment entails and how a balance between the rigours of academic thought and the creative impulse can be maintained. These dilemmas are also shared by artists in all the fields I have mentioned above, however, I believe the naturalisation of the connection between speech and writing further obscures the fine line between being "touched by the muse" and notions of writing as a craft. But it's also more complex than this simple dichotomy. For we are not only talking about the way we might refine a piece of creative writing by learning particular conventions of language and narrative, we are also discussing the genesis and evolution of theories and philosophies of writing. My difficulties in attempting to describe my work at university belie the fact that in the last ten years writing courses at universities have become a growth industry. In the six years that I have been teaching writing in a university environment, enrolments have quadrupled. This has been accompanied by a rise in the number of people like myself who have
Jarnie Conway-Herron, “Wordgames”

gone on to complete Honours, Masters and PhDs in writing. But while there has been a growing acceptance of writing as an academic pursuit, within the hallowed walls of the university classroom, there has been a corresponding resistance to theory as a necessary component to learning to write. Students while happy to learn the craft of writing are still suspicious of theory. Fearful of becoming “too academic” in their approach they are concerned they might become disconnected from a perceived “natural” creative flow. “Why make such a distinction?” I ask my students. “Isn’t writing theory a creative act in itself?” It can take a while before they begin to trust or understand what I’m saying. Some never do and the ones who do take up the challenge are generally the ones who go on to further study.

Even in postgraduate study there is a history of a coming to terms with the relationship between theory and creativity. Any writer working within the academy will have a difficult time getting research credibility for their creative writing. A higher degree in any creative art usually involves writing a theoretical critique of the creative piece that operates outside of the work itself. In the case of a creative writing degree there are two pieces of writing; one creative and the other a theoretical exegesis of the creative work, and so the very processes of the academy perpetuate the dichotomy between creative and theoretical writing. However my experience in working on my own doctoral thesis is that the theoretical exegesis actually becomes another level of the creative writing—another voice, so to speak—and after submission I have actually gone on to add this voice to the body of fictional work, for publication.

The growth in creative writing courses in the last two decades coincides with a proliferation of critical and philosophical discourses that are concerned with the discursive nature of making meaning. Teaching writing these days involves acknowledging that all texts are produced within a cultural milieu that necessitates being informed in philosophical, psychological, political as well as cultural discourses. In addition, most of these theoretical premises are usually communicated via written texts, connecting the written word intrinsically to all theoretical discourses. Is this why we have to make such definite distinctions between creative writing and theoretical writing? Perhaps this is why the theorist, Jaques Derrida, longed to give a name to “those ‘critical’ interventions which belong to literature while deforming its limits” (Derrida cited in Muecke 2002: 125). As Stephen Muecke (2001) says “the name we would have given him is fictocriticism” (125). Fictocriticism is defined by Muecke as occurring when the distinction between criticism and fiction break down, but, he points out, this is complicated by the reliance of criticism on distance and creativity on the imaginary. According to Muecke the purpose of literary criticism is to unmask the creative art of fiction which is continually trying to disguise itself via the art of enchantment. But what if the very act of unmasking is seen as being creative in itself?
There's a thin line between what is perceived as a playful working of the imagination and what is often classified as cold theory. But, when Roland Barthes wrote *A Lover's Discourse* wasn't he being a playful theorist? Didn't he make sure the faceless lover remained well within the realm of the imaginary? Didn’t Cixous in wanting to write like a painter point directly to the creative impulse behind all her writing and Luce Iriguay allude in a creative and sensual way to women's languages being contingent on lips that continually touch. Even Derrida, one of the first to unhinge language from the restriction of binary opposition is writing letters to the French president about housing refugees, taking him well into the contemporary political arena along with Baudrillard whose writings post September Eleven are pertinent to any contemporary writing practice.

But, creative work that is seen as breaking ground theoretically in one era is often classified as passé or trivialised with the passing of time. In writing about the republishing of Kathleen Mary Fallon's *Working Hot*, Allison Ravenscroft discusses the differences in the reception of the book between 1989 when it was first published by Sybylla Press, to critical acclaim and twelve years later when it was republished by Vintage/Random House. Ravenscroft describes the original text as being produced “within a heady mix of materialist, poststructuralist, psychoanalytic and ‘postmodern’ feminisms” (2001: 75). She attributes the initial popularity of the book to a feminist readership in Australia at the time, that was involved in a debate between older feminist critiques and the changes brought about by contemporary feminist discourses influenced by more pluralistic poststructuralist and postmodernist analyses. Fallon’s work in representing women’s experiences was read creatively in 1989 through a variety of theoretical lenses. Sadly these do not seem to be represented by the publishers of the new edition, where according to Ravenscroft, the previous popularity of the book created by discursive debate amongst a broad range of feminist communities is reduced by the description on the cover to “cult classic” (2001:81). However, as Ravenscroft points out, even the feminist critics who are quoted on the back of the new edition would have different readings of *Working Hot* now and she discusses the current critical value of the text as lying in its resistance to closure and fixed, certain knowledges. This seems to me to point to the creative impulse behind critical reading and writing. If we are to believe the reader-oriented theories we teach (that any text is recreated every time it is read) the difference between creativity and critique seems to lie in perceptions of playfulness in the text, and in Stephen Muecke's distinction between masking and unmasking the imaginary.

Perhaps the distinction between creative and theoretical writing lies within the interpretative nature of language. There seems to be a perceived difference between creating and being creative, between the doing and the describing of creativity. One can create things it seems without being creative and so the
deconstructive act of critiquing a text places it outside of a creative impulse that is tied to notions of a solitary writing from the imaginary. Perhaps the difficulty in interpretation has to do with the originality of the text. Writing theory is directly contingent on other texts while writing creatively allows the writer to create an illusionary world from his or her imagination as if a body of ideas from the past has not informed and shaped each act of writing. Acknowledging the intertextual nature of all writing brings about an awareness that every text is created within a specific cultural, political and economic milieu. The cultural mirroring that this acknowledgment entails causes theoretical discourses to become increasingly unfixed. Perhaps, as the distinctions between theory and creativity continue to collapse, the space of the fictocritical world will no longer be seen as a world apart from other writings.

"Janie's a doctor now," my friend told her mother Joyce, who was up visiting for the weekend.

Joyce, turned to me and smiled. "Congratulations. When are you going to open a practice?"

"Oh no, I'm not that kind of doctor," I spluttered.

A puzzled frown flickered across Joyce's forehead. "What kind doctor are you then?"

"A doctor of writing, creative writing," I answered, hoping she understood.

Her bright eyes flashed with sudden recognition as she leaned forward and patted my knee.

"Oh good," she said, "my handwriting's terrible, now you'll be able to help me."

Works Cited

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