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Reflection and Reflexivity: The Archive and the Creative Process

Abstract

This article attempts to address some of the limitations currently felt by creative practitioners in the UK (with wider implications) when presenting their practise-led work as research. Taking as a starting point the self-reflective critical component generally accepted as a key criterion in the recognition of practice as research, I ask if a case may be made for metafictional devices being recognised as legitimate forms of practice research methodology. Using a current creative work in progress that focusses on the question of how one may represent the past without simply appropriating it to one's own position, I investigate whether it is possible for a self-reflexive component internal to the creative work to fulfil the requirements for the formal recognition of practice as research within the UK's research structures and processes whilst also serving as an inter-generative, vital part of the creative process.

Keywords: reflection, metafiction, practice research

When you look at her strange life, you wonder what kind of language you can use to talk about her – through which discipline will you approach her? (Mantel 2004: 14)

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Dust. Careful as I was, a small puff of dust rose from each of the first three depositions – 2 April, 4 and April, the confusing 5 February – as I placed them on the desk, determined to make as much headway as possible on my second day in the Archives.

Every page I lifted from the acid-free cardboard box came away with a similar exhalation of the tiny particles of detritus accumulated over several centuries. How much survived from the courtroom in Morpeth? How much of the paper fibre, ink specks, textile filaments, human hair, animal hair, plant pollen, minerals from the soil, human skin cells, minuscule creatures, volcanic ash and burnt meteorite particles as well, for all I knew, along with other microscopic elements I could hardly guess at, had Anne herself breathed in and out in the courtroom, or carried in from Birches Nooke, Stocksfield, Prudhoe, Edmundbyers, Muggleswick, Eddysbridge, Corbridge, Riding Mill itself – the picturesque villages encircling my home that I was learning to see in a different light as they swum up to me out of their past, leaving their powdery trail?

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This is a brief extract from a work in progress, a novel entitled *The Ghosting of Anne Armstrong*, in which a complex seventeenth-century court room drama is interwoven with an historian's attempts to recover a voice effectively lost to the legal and historical record.

In 1673 a fourteen-year old servant girl appeared before a number of Justices of the Peace in Northumberland to accuse residents of various remote villages in the Tyne Valley and surrounds of holding witches' meetings in which they danced with the Devil, rode upon wooden dishes and eggshells, and assumed the shapes of cats, hares, greyhounds and bees. Anne Armstrong's accusations appear to have been dismissed at the Morpeth Quarter Sessions, but she testifies again and again in other locations before other officials, telling of being bridled and ridden like a horse by a neighbour in the form of a cat to nocturnal gatherings. At these, she said, the celebrants, in the presence of the Devil, swung on ropes from the ceiling, which magically delivered whatever kind of food or drink they desired. On each occasion, as far as can be ascertained, her testimony was rejected.

JA Sharpe, one of the leading historians of the law of that period, considers Armstrong's pre-trial depositions 'among the most remarkable texts in the history of English witchcraft' (1997: 279). For all their compelling detail, however, Armstrong's accounts fall short of full historical contextualisation. No records of a trial following on from her depositions have been found, which leaves us unsure as to whether her accusations ever came to trial, or whether the trial records have been lost. As far as the historical record is concerned, after her vivid, powerful statements before the Northumberland Justices [1], Anne Armstrong simply disappears.

Her story is, however, still regularly retold in the area where she once lived. Reproduced in ever-shifting and often highly inaccurate versions in everything from tour guides and local newspaper articles to advertisements for residential properties in the area, it is particularly associated with the building she is said to haunt, the Wellington Inn in Riding Mill. It was here that many of the more bizarre incidents Armstrong reported were supposed to have taken place and local lore has it that once her accusations were dismissed, she was found hanged in its scullery. Whether a suicide or murdered by those she accused, Armstrong's 'cringing little ghost' is said to haunt the room where her body was found (see Atkinson 1975a, 1975b).

Armstrong's case is thus a combination of specific detail and tantalising openness, both in terms of its truth status – as a case of witchcraft or a ghost story – and its historical contextualisation. Whilst this does make her story an attractive subject for a fictional recreation of an historical incident, *The Ghosting of Anne Armstrong* explores and reconstructs the gaps in the evidence and problems of interpretation with a thorough respect for the available evidence – more than that, speaking reflexively, this work takes seriously the conventional archival work necessary for Armstrong's story to be re-created to the point where its full strangeness challenges attempts at 'knowing,' 'understanding,' or, in that most telling of terms, 'mastering' it.

The real significance of the historical material in such a project lies in the resistance it presents to the theoretical constructs and creative practices brought to it. As such, *The Ghosting of Anne Armstrong* is a 'ficto-critical' combination of experimental fictional techniques, archival and field research, and investigations into relevant areas of cultural theory, combined to explore the fundamental problem of historicism: how does one represent the past without simply appropriating it to one's own position.

In working towards this, it is necessary to research as deeply and responsibly as possible, well past the point of having enough background information to simply get on with the story. The research needs to approach a point where the world being conjured up overwhelms whatever narrative strategy is being brought to it, causing the story to twist, buckle, give way before the strangeness at hand and the even greater strangeness always just out of reach.

Gathering the evidence necessary to both generate and challenge a story for Anne Armstrong has involved, as indicated above, various modes of research, but for the purposes of this article, it is aspects of the archival work that will be foregrounded. One reason for choosing to focus on the archive is to think through the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council's forceful exclusion of 'content research' from practice-led research. 'This route excludes research to provide content,' states the guidelines for the 'practice-led and applied route' (since discontinued as a route in its own right, although its principles still inform bidding in this area [2]): 'For example, if you wished to write a novel about refugees, the research questions should be about the process of writing the novel, not about the experience of the refugees' (Arts and Humanities Research Council nd).

Good enough advice in itself, keeping as it does the creative process at the centre of practice-led research; it does however risk underplaying the ways in which 'content research' can act back upon the creative process. If one wishes to take seriously the ethics of otherness and recognise the materiality of the 'content' informing a creative project, this means not making that 'content' secondary to the 'process of writing the novel' – allowing it to resist, as best one can, the imposition of narrative structure or 'theme,' or any other fictional devices that risks, even encourage, the appropriation of a historical subject's story. Research here is meaningful to the degree that the 'background' material for the fiction forces writers to enter another place, one in which they are strangers, with their initial ideas and concerns tested against, altered by, and dis-located in the imaginative experience of that world of otherness.

A similar concern with the appropriating nature of narrative has emerged in archive studies. In *Exploring Archives: An Introduction to Archival Ideas and Practice in South Africa*, Verne Harris explicitly compares the work of archiving and interpreting archives with the writing of fiction, but he does so in a way that identifies the potentially distorting or erasing effect of the narrative mode on archival understanding. 'Archivists tell stories about stories, they tell stories with stories,' he writes, but it is for this reason that it is essential that the archivist acknowledges 'the reality of storytelling' in his or her work:

This might sound like a case of catch 22, an impassable pass, an aporia. We cannot construct meaning without narrative; the same narrative poses a threat to meaning construction. But it also sounds a call to creative engagement. To know always that we are telling a story – not detaining 'reality' or 'the truth' – and to make this plain to our readers and listeners. To trouble the narrative form, pushing its capacity to accommodate confusion, contradiction, shapelessness and partial or multiple closure. To remain open always to other tellings of the story, to retellings and to the holding of competing stories. As the receivers of story, the aporia calls us to be ever vigilant. To cherish what it gives us, but always to probe its telling, explore other tellings and other stories. (2000: 87-8)

Archivists then, in explicitly recognising their use of narratological devices should use this recognition to ensure that the stories they construct around archival material do not close down the latent potential of that material to generate other valid, even competing, stories, or

erase the fundamental strangeness that confronts them. Like the more reflexive of novelists, they need to recognise the potential of experimental narrative forms to foreground and even destabilise the ways in which stories are constructed, the ways in which they are used both to give meaning and close down other possible meanings.

This is more than an appeal for the use of the by now well-worn stratagems of metafiction to keep the fictionalising process open; it is to argue that, as a testing, contesting, constantly challenging aspect of the fiction-writing process, a case may be made for the recognition of metafictional devices as legitimate forms of practice research methodology. In particular, it is to consider the ways in which the self-reflexive element that is a defining feature of metafiction can fulfil the requirements for recognising practice as research whilst also serving as an inter-generative, vital part of the creative process.

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The problem is that there is so much missing from the evidence you have to hand. And you need so much more to have any clearer understanding of Anne. What has this collection of pre-trial depositions led to, after all? On their own, they are a combination of compelling detail and tantalising openness, a way into a story that has gripped you but has no clear plot or outline, a confusing beginning and nothing like a conclusion.

The documents you have are at risk, despite all your hard work, of being entirely misread, given the way they float free of any more complete sense of legal process. No other records of the court proceedings having survived: no bill of indictment, gaol calendar, no list of Justices or jurors, no recognisances, no presentments, not even precepts to the sheriff of the county to prepare for the Session. As soon as you try to reach out beyond the pile of greying, dusty depositions archived under ASSI 45/1/1 - ASSI 45/40/2, your hands find nothing, fumble about in the empty dark.

So, the court records exhausted, the archives at an end, you could turn to the parish registers, any parish within the probable reach of a seventeenth century Northumbrian serving girl, around fourteen years of age.

Of course, if Anne Armstrong had walked back to the Riding and, as local lore to this day would have it, hanged herself, a Christian burial and a place in the church records would have been forbidden. Hopefully there were no adherents of Minister Samuel Bird in the area, demanding that her body be dragged face down through the streets as a deterrent, a spectacle gruesome enough to dissuade others of a self-murdering mind; at best, Anne would have been buried at night, no mourners or clergy present, the location of her grave kept a secret.

There are hints in the registers that could suggest a happier end. A number of Anne Armstrongs are recorded as being buried at the time: is she perhaps the Anne Armstrong buried in Lanercost, Cumberland, in September 1674? If so, she would have married one Richard Bell before dying, possibly in childbirth. And if she'd headed east instead of west, she could be one of the three Anne Armstrongs buried in Newcastle, one in May 1686, another in July 1687, yet another April 1689. If she'd

walked away to the south, she could be the Anne Armstrong buried in 1680 in the village of Hart, County Durham.

If she had been found hanging from a beam in the scullery of the Riding House, perhaps her father was able to call upon the good will of a churchman who, possibly familiar with *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, shared Burton's sympathy for those who took their own lives – 'Who knows how he may be tempted? It is his case; it may be thine. We should ought not to be so rash and rigorous in our censures as some are, charity will judge.' It would however have taken a generous soul indeed to extend such sympathy to a girl of the coarse and insensitive lower classes. Still, there is a record of one 'unknown female' buried on 9 December 1673 in Corbridge and, stripped of her name, Anne could have found a place in consecrated earth.

There's no way to settle this, of course, no conclusive evidence: as far as the records go, she may have achieved what you choose to believe she so earnestly wanted at the end – simply to disappear.

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Allowing – indeed, depending upon – alternative readings of the material one is researching to surface, to shape and impact upon the choices one makes for the story one is telling, brings to the fore the creative role of reflection in the research and writing process. In doing so, it reclaims reflection from the passive, retrospective role it tends to play as part of its conventional place in a scholarly research context.

Bruce Brown, in his address at the Goldsmith's symposium on *The Future of Practice Research*, stressed his opposition to reflection as an after-the-fact activity. In his view, a process-based approach to reflection is vital for a good research report submitted in the UK's research evaluation exercises (REF)[3]: as Chair of Main Panel D (Arts and Humanities) in REF2014, he noted that the 'best examples were not done after the research for the assessment'; 'they were,' he said, 'done as part of the research and part of what it means to be a scholar in practice-based areas of research.' As such, they were 'not a post hoc exercise,' or 'a post-hoc description of the research' (2015)[4].

Implicit in this is an important shift in the idea of the reflective commentary accompanying a practice research output: if '*reflection* can be defined as "thinking about" something after the event,' the role it plays in the practice research needs to be informed and expanded by an increasing emphasis on *reflexivity*, 'a more immediate, dynamic, and continuing self-awareness' (Finlay and Gough, 2003: ix fn; my emphasis).

A concentration on reflection alone can marginalise the vital element foregrounded by reflexivity – that is, the *productive* role the critical reflective component may play in the practice research process. Seen in this way, it is possible that the self-reflexive component can fulfil the requirements for recognising practice as research whilst also serving as an inter-generative, vital part of the creative process. Considered as part of the creative process, reflexivity can be identified as a defining feature of the practice itself, rather than the externally imposed requirement for evaluating an output for research council or research assessment procedures into which it has sometimes lapsed. Here the relationship between the creative and reflective components becomes generative and interactive, with the creative and

the critical feeding into and driving each other in a dynamic process identified by Haseman and Mafe:

Reflexivity ... occurs when a creative practitioner acts upon the requisite research material to generate new material which immediately acts back upon the practitioner who is in turn stimulated to make a subsequent response. Within this looping process authorial control can be fragmented, raising doubts about purpose, efficacy and control. A kind of chaos results and it is from within this chaos and complexity that the results of the creative research will begin to emerge and be worked through. (2009: 219)

Building just such a process into the finalised text, leaving its imprint in the work it has played a fundamental in generating, leads to what Paul Williams calls a 'performative' approach to reflexivity: this prioritises 'the discourse of tentative, playful, creative endeavour over explanatory, traditional research discourse' (2016) and, when it comes to archival work, it also allows the sheer physicality of the research process to find its way into the creative work as an immediate, identifiable felt effect.

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Dust, blackening the palms and getting under the fingernails, irritating eye and nostril, obscuring the already painfully difficult to read handwriting, also gave a special aura to the archival research, the sensation, yes, the physical sensation that one was somehow closing in on the subject of one's research, only a film of dirt between you and a hand you could reach for, a body, a whole person who could be conjured up through the surface of the document.

But dust was also the guarantee that these documents had lain undisturbed, undiscovered by scholarly rivals, and so were in some way one's personal intellectual property. Will Ashford put his hand into the box and lifted the first page of the next deposition. Feeling carefully, he confirmed the suspicion that gathered as he studied the pages on the desk: the dust betrayed the presence of others, the trace of their having passed through before him. The coating on the depositions had that slightly greasy quality documents take on when they've been handled comparatively recently. Mingled in with the fine particles was the moisture of the fingers, breath, body of other readers, leached away by the humidity-free atmosphere of the storage facilities but leaving its after-effects on the page.

Will's first impulse was to resent whoever it was had also been following Anne's trail. He knew how foolish this was, knew full well he wasn't the first to stalk her through the thickets of history; he knew too, how jealous the most proper of researchers could become about their particular quarry, filled as they were with the vain hope that they would be the first to track down the elusive prey, finding it quivering, palpitating, trapped finally in its secret lair.

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The address to dust in the passages from *The Ghosting of Anne Armstrong* is a deliberate invocation of the geographer Hayden Lorimer's account of dust in what he calls a 'new wave of creative historical research;' 'dust,' he writes, 'is no longer to be regarded as simply a distraction from the work-at-hand, or at best an ambient side-effect to be enjoyed in wistful moments before attentions return to the proper matters of scholarship'. 'Of late,' writes Lorimer, 'dust has become noteworthy in and of itself, substantially present, and symbolic of the greater ecologies, social conditions, transformative processes and physical textures of historical research practice.' Dust, he claims,

represents an invitation to speak up imaginatively for the archive's existence as site as much as source To do so, is to assert a version of archival hermeneutics extending beyond print culture and the written word, to include the context, encounters and events that constitute research practice. By implication, it is to seek out possible methodological means to evoke more of archival life: as a particular kind of place where complex subjectivities, and working relations, are created through the act of researching the past. (2009: 249)

This is in line with Lorimer's 'more-than-representational' approach, a modification of non-representational theory which shares an interest in challenging researchers to go beyond representation and focus on 'embodied' experience. It is, says Lorimer, 'multifarious, open encounters in the realm of practice that matter most,' even when

the phenomena in question may seem remarkable only by their apparent insignificance. The focus falls on how life takes shape and gains expression in shared experiences, everyday routines, fleeting encounters, embodied movements, precognitive triggers, practical skills, affective intensities, enduring urges, unexceptional interactions and sensuous dispositions. (2005: 84)

I have found these developments in cultural and historical geography particularly useful as an informing theoretical dimension for *The Ghosting of Anne Armstrong*, as much for the novel's deep engagement with the archive, not only the 'archive-as-source', but just as importantly, the 'archive-as-subject', which focuses on 'the *practices* of collecting, classifying, ordering, display and reuse' (Ashmore et al 2012: 82, my emphasis).

A practice-based approach to the archive seeks 'to bring the material and documentary properties of archives into play' (Dwyer & Davies 2010: 89), a process which will, for example, not only acknowledge but embrace, as Sarah Mills puts it, 'the fragmentary and disordered nature of archives' (2013: 5). Mills gives as an example Caitlin DeSilvey's work on a Montana homestead where she 'salvages meaning from incomplete sources': 'the salvage of memory makes do with materials at hand,' DeSilvey writes, 'and uses this material to craft stories about people and place that might otherwise go untold' (2007: 421-2).

Anne Armstrong's story has gone untold in anything other than minor references in historical texts precisely because of the fragmentary nature of the evidence available, and part of the crafting of her story involves the narrator coming up against the problems this poses. He is reminded of them when he tracks down, in one of the 'working relations' Lorimer wants to see foregrounded in archival work, the other researcher whose presence he has sensed in the dust covering the documents he is consulting in the National Archives:

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‘Amongst the most remarkable texts in the history of English witchcraft,’ he said, with an air that made it plain that if anyone knew, he did, ‘but I’ve moved away from it. A colleague of mine was conducting a major study of the Armstrong case some years ago; had some success developing the folkloric elements of the case, but found it difficult to establish any background information to give it a more straightforward historical context.

‘A pity, as I think she’ – as opposed to you, was the implication I found impossible to ignore – ‘would have developed some interesting thoughts on it...’

I thanked him for bringing the box back, only to be told it was unlikely that I would find it useful in any way. ‘Your Latin better be good, Mr Ashford, and your knowledge of the courts of the period, as well as the script. Even then, it’s totally disorganised, lots of bundles wrapped in packets and tubes, dusty as all hell... I’ – *even I*, that was – ‘couldn’t make much of anything in there.’

The large man turned away, carrying his considerable bulk across the reading room with the dignity he believed it deserved. I took the box to my desk and found everything he had said was true. The few documents I tried to open and look at were simply impenetrable, faded, poorly written, thick with grime and dense with scrawled, abbreviated, legalistic Latin. If there were references to the Armstrong trial at the Assizes in this box, they were well and truly beyond my abilities to find. Well, that was history for you, as much about the evidence that survived and was accessible as what actually happened in the past.

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There is an echo here of an actual historian’s view of this case, as indicated above. I hasten to add that this historian is nothing like the imaginary historian using some of his words in the novel, and the views expressed are a composite citation of several different historians [5] on the difficulties of trying to understand Anne Armstrong as an ‘historical’ subject. Still, foregrounding the research in invoking one’s sources runs counter to the reported practices of many historical novelists.

Whilst gaps in the record may be the very stuff of the historical imagination, what is known and can be established is often treated as an impediment to its creative reworking. Any number of writers of historical fiction tell us that research undertaken as part of the fiction-writing process should be put out of mind in order for it to become a vivid, convincing part of the fiction. Information, they say, is the enemy of story, and they specifically invoke forgetting research as a necessary part of the process of writing historical fiction.

‘Historical’ fiction, perhaps, but the reflexive approach taken to *The Ghosting of Anne Armstrong* aligns the work with a number of significant novels more properly known as ‘historiographical’ fiction. The historiographical mode is one in which, the research material

– or, more properly, the practical, theoretical, archival processes by which that material is accessed – is explicitly ‘remembered’: presented upfront, reflected upon, introduced reflexively in and as a part of the narrative structure. This is fiction in which the coming into being of history is a process that drives, even makes, the story itself.

Creative remembering of this sort takes us from seeing the archive in the narrative as an actively produced site rather than a passive source of information to seeing the fictional work itself as ‘site not source,’ a move which gives us grounds to rethink the idea of the reflective commentary as a discursive activity.

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Now, just how careful a man was Ralph Jenison, Esq.?

His signature at the end of the testimony was firm, clear, easy to make out – *RA Jenison* – and the line he’d drawn under his name on the left of the page was confident enough, a strong and heavy sweep of the quill thickening as it progressed from left to right.

Anne Armstrong’s mark, parallel on the page to the right, was more of a mystery. Her attempt at a circle with a heavily-inked in dot in the centre looked like a mixture of assertion and retreat, an affirmation of who she was combined with a need to be protected, hidden.

After the Justice had signed and Anne had made her mark, the pages had been folded, once along their length and twice across their width. This formed an oblong on the outside of the folded up pages, into which had been written:

*The Examination of
Anne Armstrong
Contre*

*Foster Dryden and
Thompson*

Will had to turn the page sideways to read this. The document – the original document, no transcript or copy, the actual deposition taken down as Anne Armstrong appeared before the Justice of the Peace – had been opened up and smoothed flat when it was archived, making the space marked off by the creases of the folds perpendicular to the body of the deposition. The information on the makeshift cover of the deposition was in the same anonymous hand that had taken down Anne’s testimony – a clerk or scribe, he assumed, the roles probably rolled into one for the relatively informal process of a petty session.

Whoever it was had underlined the names of those accused with a single, emphatic line. But where did the document go after this neat packaging, and what paths had it travelled to get here?

Finding it had been one thing, but tracing its history since that firm line had been drawn under the names had become important in ways he couldn't quite spell out to himself – let alone anyone else: this was more by way of research than his publisher would have allowed or, more to the point, funded, and his agent would certainly have told him that this was not so much research as procrastination. The published transcriptions of the depositions are quite enough, now get on with it; there is a point where research just gets in the way of the story. All Will knew was that just beyond his fingers now as he put the cover page aside to turn again to the legal residue of the words she had spoken, lay Anne Armstrong, key in some way to something.

He leant back in his chair, looked around the Map and Large Document Reading Room on the second floor of The National Archives. Quiet, industrious heads were bent over whatever they'd ordered up from the Archive's acres of secure storage, each absorbed in the private mystery they hoped it would help solve. The obligatory silence was really a low hum, a white noise of scuffling, page-turning, pencil-scribbling (soft leaded only, pens strictly forbidden), suppressed coughs, the padded footfall of researchers carrying material to and from the seats they had chosen, the rub of clothing against desk edges and chairs, the occasional murmur of help being provided by a staff member.

He turned again to the first page of the deposition, feeling three hundred and forty-odd years of grime rub against his fingertips, work its way into their lines and swirls as he studied the pages.

The edges of the paper were worn, uneven, ragged in some sections. At times the writing almost overran the right-hand side, although there was always a comfortable margin on the left. Space for capturing the next stage in the legal process, the names of those to be investigated further. How much horror was there in the squeak of the quill in that space, the inked name trailing behind the progress of its sharp-cut point?

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Inscribing the research into the fiction as a generative element in the imaginative process does away with, or at least re-situates, the problem of where reflection stands in relation to the creative work. With the commentary in effect a part of the fiction, the reflective element necessary for the work to be recognised as practice research becomes something of an absent presence. It is demonstrably there, hopefully even meets the practice research requirements of being systematic, rigorous and communicable, but loses its status as a discrete, detached discursive mode, privileged by its scholarly rhetoric as some kind of objective address to the fiction. The creative work itself becomes its own subject, in much the same way as the archive does for the geographers when they talk of a shift from 'archive-as-source to archive-as-site'. The fiction is more than a passive 'source' of material for reflection and is 'animated' by the reflexivity informing it in the process of its coming into being. Just as, in the fiction, the usual authority accorded to the researcher discovering and giving meaning to his research material gives way to his taking shape in relation to that material, so the authorial reflection develops as a lived and equal part of the dynamic and fluid process of the act of writing creatively.

In research so conceived I find the beginnings at least of a response to Paul Dawson's thoughtful critique of the 'concept of practice-led research' as a basis for the disciplinary identity of Creative Writing. In *Creative Writing and Postmodern Interdisciplinarity*, Dawson hypothetically accepts the argument that 'the process of writing is an investigative method in itself,' in which 'researchers in the field arrive at disciplinary knowledge through the practice of writing rather than the study of writing'. However, he says this assumes,

that we know what that disciplinary knowledge is: is it simply knowledge of how to write, or is it something more difficult to define and transdisciplinary in its origins and effects, something related to the 'content' itself of the creative work? If this is the case, then the 'knowledge' creative research can deliver is as limitless and nebulous as the subjects with which writers deal. If the 'outcome' of practice-led research is the creative work itself, what, in any academically definable fashion, could this work contribute to knowledge of these subjects? Nor do I think it is clear how this sort of research in creative writing relates to scholarly (quantitative and qualitative) research about creative writing. This question is important if practice-led research is to form the basis of disciplinary identity, for it is this scholarly work, not creative work, which is really responsible for establishing creative writing as a field of study. (2008)

The assumption he is critiquing is predicated upon another assumption, a distinction between the 'scholarly' and the 'creative' that mirrors the epistemological distinction (in research terms) between reflection and creativity that if anything, undoes the true disciplinary identity of practice research. The subject of such research is the area generated by the interaction of reflection (commentary, the 'scholarly' dimension) and the creative: neither one nor the other, it is the coming together of the two, the place where they meet in reflective-infused practice, that 'is really responsible for establishing creative writing as a field of study'. The 'investigative method' is not 'the writing itself', 'knowledge of how to write', nor 'the "content" ...of the creative work': it is the coming together of all these things and more in a creative/reflexive space that is the 'basis for disciplinary identity' in practice research generally, and creative writing more specifically.

Reflection as conceived above 'works against binary distinctions between creativity and reflection in practice-led research work,' as JT Welsch argues we should in his interrogation of just such an assumption implicit in the language of the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council funding guidelines and the National Association of Writers in Education benchmarks. 'Rather than thinking of the creative and the reflective as two separate elements,' he writes in terms close to the creative/research process followed in the writing of *The Ghosting of Anne Armstrong*,

they are integrated in an interdependent reflexive process that merges the creative with the critical, reflective skills informing the creative process in what is in effect a single exploration through practice. Practice then both demonstrates and embodies within itself the 'contribution to knowledge' required of original, rigorous research. (2015)

The distinction too between the reflective being essentially abstract and conceptual whilst the creative occupies the more fully imagined part of the process gives way in such an approach. The creative text stages or enacts within itself the cultural/historical geographer's concern with 'the embodied and affective dimensions of research through a "more-than-representational" reading of the archive' (Mills, 2013: 7); a 'more-than-representational'

approach to the writing of the novel ensues that it is attuned, as Jamie Lorimer and Sarah Whatmore put it in their desire to go beyond text-based material in the archive, ‘to the sensual, the poetic, the lively and the corporeal dimensions to the practices depicted’ (2009: 675).

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You pick up the deposition for the 5th of February again, running a fingertip lightly over its tacky surface, tracing the ink.

This is it, the nearest you are going to get to Anne’s voice: inked onto paper by another hand, the writing a constant balancing act between the legal demands for precise language and faithfulness to the deponent’s language, littered with the required Latin formulations, saturated with the language of the law, infiltrated by the brevigraphs, extensions, sub and superscript, contractions, and whatever other resources the scribal practices of the time relied upon to get the information down as someone spoke, at the mercy of the vagaries of spelling at the time, whatever personal writerly habits survived clerical training in conventional orthography, the smudging of the quill, the crossings out and corrections.

The paper on which that voice, or echo or reverberation of a voice, perhaps merely an approximation of a voice was taken down, the only tracks that Anne had left in the dust of the records, all that is left of her as a once-living, breathing being.

Gingerly, you touch that ‘A’ that was her mark, her signature now, so hard fought for, so hard won, trying to guess as you do where the heel of her hand would have rested on the document. Could the contact she had made with the page still contain something of herself, something that would communicate with the graze of your fingertips over the paper?

This was the way she had worked towards identifying herself on paper, after all, a medium foreign to her, but one she was determined to master, to use to make her story known: a simple abbreviation, an initial, a mark saying this is me, this is who I am amongst the eleven million historical documents covering a thousand years of history filed away in The National Archives.

Can you not find me?

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It could be argued that a work of this nature simply falls into the category of texts which, for REF purposes at least, ‘should be submitted without additional material,’ as ‘the output is in itself deemed to constitute sufficient evidence of the research’ [6]. I am inclined to agree with Welsch that ‘The very notion of a potentially “ineligible” creative output – which somehow springs into existence without any evidence of research, self-explanation or self-positioning within the work itself’ is something of an ‘unhelpful straw man’ (2015) [7], and so difficult to

think of as a counterpoint to an 'eligible' output. Anecdotally too, certain members of the REF panels have spoken of pretty much ignoring the 300-word research statements and portfolios accompanying creative writing outputs and evaluating them on the intrinsic merit of the creative work [8]. This is only comforting in an informal way, and does not align with Chair of Main Panel D (Arts and Humanities), Bruce Brown's opinion that in future REF exercises the submission of research statements and portfolios should no longer be optional (Brown 2015). It does not either, satisfy the expectations of bids for funding from the research counsels and charities, or many of the other research evaluation processes both within institutions and across national and international research structures. In these we meet continuing expectations of at least two distinct voices, those of the creative practitioner and the scholarly-informed commentator.

Challenges to such expectations are emerging, however, even when the reflective element of practice-led research is presented in an additional or supplementary document. It is increasingly the case (mainly to be found in the Australian creative writing doctorate [9]) that in the view of practice-led researchers, the question of the voice or voices adopted for the reflective commentary should be an open one, no longer tied as a given to the conventions of the scholarly voice. If anything, this intensifies the question of the mode of the self-reflexive voice, all the more so when creative and reflexive voices are merged in a single output.

Here, fundamental stylistic choices attendant upon the fiction play out into the ficto-reflexive elements. In the writing of *The Ghosting of Anne Armstrong*, basic discursive positionings have had to be negotiated and renegotiated to accommodate the embedding of the research as process and reflection. Each of the sections in this article taken from that work in progress – only brief snapshots of the reflexive strand sustained throughout the work, where the effect is naturally amplified – is told from a different point of view to illustrate the changes the internalised commentary has undergone: one approach presents the researcher/narrator in the third person, a fictional third person which then modulates in another into a fictional first person when the third felt too distant. The effect in both modes gave something of a peek-a-boo feel to the text, as if the author were constantly peering around his creation to address the reader – an effect only emphasised by attempts to fictionalise it. In a later version, the first person became more overtly that of an actual authorial voice, adopting the mode dominant in the work of the geographers cited and translating the text into a form of creative nonfiction; much of the necessary uncanniness of the writing was lost in this 'literal' mode however, leading to the current (perhaps not finalised) use of the second person, where the destabilising effect this point of view has on notions of subjectivity is particularly useful in moving across, and blurring the distance between, the reflective and creative voices.

Such experiments with point of view are a given in the fiction-writing process, speaking to the overtly constructed nature of the narrator as a device; as an element of the creative project focused upon the research informing that project, however, the question of the appropriate voice for the researcher draws attention to the fact that in a discrete reflective commentary too, the 'author' is equally a construct, a device, a medium for a particular form of discourse. Whether the 'self-reflection' accompanying a practice research project is in a supplementary form or integral to the creative work, practical decisions as to its rhetorical positioning will always apply. One of the advantages of embedding the reflective voice within the fiction is that it is then, explicitly or implicitly, presented not only as a discursive construct, but as an embodying of the way the creative work has come into being – a lived enactment, if you will, of the research process and the questions driving it.

Is staging research and practice as an integral part of each other enough to demonstrate that the project has addressed ‘clearly-articulated research questions, issues or problems, set in a clear context of other research in that area’, as per the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s Definition of Research (2015)? This is a challenge to the practice researcher, but it is a challenge that needs to be recognised and taken into account by the administrators of research and the broader research environment, so that is understood as a valid form of ‘investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared’ (Arts and Humanities Research Council 2015).

Attempting to make the case for *The Ghosting of Anne Armstrong* as an ‘appropriate research method and/or approach’ (Arts and Humanities Research Council 2015) in and of itself continues to be a guiding concern in the writing of this work in progress. The real test of its success will be if the fiction manages to both pose and respond to its implicit, informing research questions – can one represent the past without simply appropriating it to one’s own position; is Anne’s story re-created in such a way as to allow its full strangeness to challenge authorial attempts at ‘knowing’ or ‘mastering’ it. And success on these terms must be determined on the basis, not of the writerly voice or the reflective one [10], but on whether, in the end, it is Anne herself who has the last word in her story.

Notes

[1] See PRO, ASSI 45/10/3/34 - ASSI 45/10/55 (The National Archives, Kew) for the original depositions, and James Raine (ed) *Depositions in the Castle of York Relating to Offences Committed in the Northern Counties in the Seventeenth Century*, Surtees Society, Volume XL, 1861, for the transcriptions of these documents.

[2] See the Arts and Humanities Research Council’s *Support for Practice-led research through our Research Grants*:

The Fellowships in the Creative and Performing Arts (FCPA) and Research Grants Practice Led and Applied (RGPLA) schemes were originally intended for capacity-building in the area of practice-led research and both schemes operated, in one form or another, for over 10 years. After considerable discussion at our Advisory Board and Council it has been concluded that both schemes have been highly successful building capacity in the field. Therefore the decision has been made not to continue with both schemes, as it is now appropriate that funding for research in this field is through our other funding mechanisms.

The AHRC remains dedicated to this area of research, and continue to provide many opportunities for researchers in the practice-led area through our established schemes, particularly our open deadline grants and fellowships schemes, where one of the four subject panels covers research in the creative and performing arts. (nd)

This useful document, which provides good guidance on practice-led funding, was until recently still available on the AHRC website under ‘Archived Opportunities.’ It has since been removed, but its key points on how research should relate to practice still hold.

[3] The Research Excellence Framework (REF) is the system for assessing the quality of research in UK universities and higher education colleges (see: <https://www.ref.ac.uk/>).

This major exercise is undertaken roughly every 6 years by the UK higher education funding bodies, and is discussed at more length in 'On Reflection: the role, mode and medium of the reflective component in practice as research,' an article co-authored by Tony Williams and myself published in *TEXT*, April 2018.

[4] All quotations are from the podcast of Brown's address, *Different Perspectives: Talk 3*. This event gave an opportunity for researchers, practitioners and research managers to explore new ways in which practice research is extending, and to influence broader agendas around assessment, funding and impact in a period of constant change.

[5] In addition to the texts noted, I engaged in a series of email exchanges with Professors Sharpe and Rushton between 2011 and 2017. My thanks to them both.

[6] See REF2014 - Submission of outputs 71:

In order to form an expert judgment on the quality of each research output, sub-panel members will examine such evidence as needed. Where the research content of the output may not be self-evident, submitting units should supply additional information as specified in b below. A 'portfolio', as specified in c below, should only be included where the research output and 'information about the research process and/or content', together, do not provide material sufficient to assess the output. Institutions should, therefore, submit only such evidence as they deem necessary to enable sub-panel members to properly assess a research output, within the following guidelines: a. Research output: This should be submitted without additional material where the output is in itself deemed to constitute sufficient evidence of the research. (REF2014 2012: 87)

[7] As per the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Definition of Research:

Creative output can be produced, or practice undertaken, as an integral part of a research process as defined above. The Council would expect, however, this practice to be accompanied by some form of documentation of the research process, as well as some form of textual analysis or explanation to support its position and as a record of your critical reflection. Equally, creativity or practice may involve no such process at all, in which case it would be ineligible for funding from the Arts and Humanities Research Council. (Arts and Humanities Research Council 2015)

[8] See REF2014 - Submission of outputs 71:

Submitting units may include a statement of up to 300 words in cases where the research imperatives and research process of an output (such as an artefact, curation, database, digital format, installation, composition, performance or event, screening, tape, creative writing, database, textbook, translation or video) might further be made evident by descriptive and contextualising information. Where the location or medium of the output is essential to a proper understanding of the research being presented this should be explained in the 300 words. (REF2014 2012: 87)

[9] See Jeri Kröll, *The Exegesis and the Gentle Reader/Writer*:

Candidates are aware that since they are creating a new type of discourse that addresses a complex audience they have to consider - in a way no straight academic MA or PhD does - how they position themselves as narrators. (2004)

See too, the many other articles cited in Green & Williams (2018), and the Special Issue of *TEXT*, *The Exegesis Now*, Batty & Brien (eds).

[10] I recognise that this exercise in reflecting on the notion of an integrated, informing mode of reflexion in so non-integrated, discursively discrete a way goes against the very points I've tried to make in this article. If a final endnote may be permitted to undo or erase the argument in which it appears, this will be on the basis of the finalised creative work holding up reflexively as a research strategy in itself. With the main edifice in place, this scaffolding can then be removed.

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