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Responsible writing: choosing how to tell the stories of marginalised characters.

Abstract:

I am a writer whose PhD thesis concerns the process of telling imagined stories about marginalised characters. These fictional characters are based on non-indigenous multi-racial individuals living in Papua New Guinean society prior to independence. My challenge is to ensure that in the telling of these stories I do not reinstate the colonial hierarchies to which individuals were subjected. As a writing student, my journey has dual aspirations: a search for the white runway lights that will lift my creative writing towards dizzy imaginative heights of creative writing practice and one that will direct my exegesis towards a solid landing of completion. Informing both endeavours are Anne Surma's (2000) essay 'Defining professional writing as an area of scholarly activity' in *TEXT* which argues that writers should 'imagine themselves as part of a communicative social network, one which incorporates a complex of writers and readers, each shifting their positions (as the inscribers and as the interpreters of meanings) according to their changing roles as writer and as reader in different writing/reading contexts' (4); and Linda Alcoff's 1991 essay 'The problem of speaking for others', the subject of which is evident within its title. Kate Grenville and Sue Woolfe (1993), in *Making stories*, see the process of writing as a process of making choices. If we adopt this view and also remind ourselves that we are part of Surma's 'communicative social network', then perhaps, as we make our writing choices, what we imagine and write and how our work is read and interpreted will draw us closer to realising our obligations and responsibilities as writers while enable us to creatively imagine our characters. In this paper I use a reading of Lloyd Jones's (2010) *Hand me down world* to consider my own choices.

Keywords:

Process – choice – responsibility – marginalised

My doctoral research considers the process of writing, specifically the part of the process that relates to the responsible telling of the stories of marginalised characters. For this purpose, I have adopted the view, expressed by Grenville and Woolfe in their 1993 text *Making stories*, that the process of writing involves a process of exercising choice (283). My research considers the ethical demands of such activity as I imagine characters whose lives are loosely based on an actual community and its experience of certain events. Because I am researching the writing of fiction, and some of that fiction is based on personal experience, I need to resist imagining this as a writing project undertaken by an individual about a topic for which she feels passion. Even passion entails responsibility. Responsibility and imagination should travel together along the writing journey. In this paper, I consider the choices already made by Lloyd Jones in his 2010 novel *Hand me down world*, ironically about a journey, so that I might test some of my own choices and, perhaps, simultaneously glimpse into some of the many choices available to a responsible writer.

Behind my choices

The lives of the characters of my fiction are based on individuals from a unique community, several generations of which made their home in Papua New Guinea (PNG) during the century prior to self-rule. My observations of this community are by no means drawn from any formal anthropological study but come through my experience of living in PNG and a loving curiosity about family and friends, and their ancestors – my nieces and nephews are descendants. I am proud of this connection, and I base my fiction on my perceptions of this community, but despite this relationship, I am only (at best) a sympathetic observer of lived experience. Therefore, my exegesis is really about how I, as a writer, engage in that part of the process concerned with writing about others, and essentially those who have for some reason been marginalised. As difficult as it is to place family under the umbrella of the term ‘others’, the implied distancing from the familiar associated with its use serves to identify the subject group and their experiences as distinct and ‘different’ from my experiences and me. Conversely, it is that same distancing that makes me uncomfortable to use the term ‘others’ to talk of the writing of fiction. While an historical re-telling might narrate the PNG community as a group and might describe the politics and social conditions that marginalised it, a novel – according to novelist Margaret Atwood (cited in Harper, 2010: xv) – ‘is always the story of an individual, or several individuals; never the story of a generalized mass’. Fiction is about being close and personal, in order to induce readers into the imagined lives and concerns of individual characters. But, as Shameen Black (2010: 1) argues, alterity is also fundamental to the making of literature.

Choices

If, as Grenville and Woolfe (1993) claim, the process of writing is a process of making choices, the question of this thesis is not only about responsible telling but also about what informs and directs choices. Do I, as I write my fiction, merely satisfy a private desire to grant my nieces and nephews the ability to claim as part of their identity a past presently denied them in official accounts? Certainly this desire has been a silent but constant motivation to write. Equally important is my awareness

those same relatives could become, in the future, critical readers of my stories. Thus, beyond any ethical impulse to write in a particular way about my subject – as any writer might – there is also a personal incentive. Again I remind myself, these are not my experiences – so how can I responsibly tell these stories?

Speaking for others

Linda Alcoff's 1991 essay 'The problem of speaking for others' removes any doubt about why I cannot, without risk, speak/write for/about others. These are a few of Alcoff's warnings.

Where one speaks from affects both the meaning and truth of what one says ... [and furthermore] ... there is no possibility of rendering positionality, location or context irrelevant to content' ... [moreover,] following Foucault ... certain privileged locations are discursively dangerous ... [and] ... all contexts and locations are differentially related in complex ways to structures of oppression (5, 9).

Therefore, my good intentions – to speak for or write about – risk perpetuating or reinforcing the oppression of those about whom I speak/write. The problem with speaking for or writing about others is a social one, the options available to us for speaking for or writing about others are socially constructed, and the practices we engage in cannot be understood as simply the result of autonomous individual choices (Alcoff, 1991: 5). As I write about these friends and relatives, I am (according to Alcoff, 1991):

engaging in the act of representing other's needs, goals, situations, and in fact, who they are is based on ... [my] own situated interpretation. In post-structuralist terms ... [I am] ... participating in the construction of their subject-positions rather than simply discovering their true selves (5).

Writer responsibility

Alcoff (1991) is not talking about the writing of fiction. Only when Anne Surma (2000) reminds us about the place of writing – *all* writing – within society, do we become aware of the relevance of Alcoff's warnings to any writing, fiction included. Within her essay about professional writing, Surma says:

texts are written as well as read, motivated and intended as well as interpreted and responded to ... [writing is] about imagining the social, cultural and economic place of the reading other(s) ... [to write] is to be self-conscious about one's place of and purpose for writing; to be, as far as possible, deliberate about the rhetorical and ethical choices informing the communication practice; and to anticipate ... the ramification of one's words, one's text, on individual readers and their worlds (1, 3, 5).

Surma (2000) asks that writers:

imagine themselves as part of a communicative social network, one which incorporates a complex of writers and readers, each shifting their positions (as the inscribers and as the interpreters of meanings) according to their changing roles as writer and as reader in different writing/reading contexts (4).

Within Surma's (2000) network, writers make their choices, thus our responsibility, as writers of fiction, is to remain aware that our imagined characters and their stories

also contribute to an understanding of and insight into particular worlds. Novelist Kim Scott shows that ethically aware writers of fiction can choose to be unfettered by archival restrictions, such as historical accounts and assumed perceptions; their imagined worlds can be conceived ‘against the grain’. About his novel *That deadman dance* Scott (2010) uses the phrase ‘inspired by history’ – that is, inspired by, rather than to ‘write an account of historical events’ (398). Scott chooses to represent the indigenous people of Albany – the Noongar people – as he finds them. For Scott, the Noongar people who greeted the ‘visitors’ (the British) ‘appreciated reciprocity and the nuances of cross-cultural exchange’. This view of the Noongar people is not the one seen through the ‘distorted lens’ of the visitors in their record of meeting for the first time people they did not understand. Although Scott’s characters speak for themselves, they do not entirely counter yet certainly ‘explain’ enduring presumptions (397-400).

Possibilities

Like Kim Scott’s characters, I hope I find a way to enable the characters of my work in progress, the fiction for my PhD (yet untitled), to speak for themselves. As I look to Alcoff (1991) and Surma (2000) and think about my responsibilities, I am inspired by the way Lloyd Jones (2010), in his novel *Hand me down world*, uses energetic bursts of diverse voices to tell his story. I imagine possibilities for my characters, of lived experiences, past and present, drawn out of one certainty, a certainty I can articulate because I share it: the certainty of human fears, desires, motivations, and limitations in the voices of individuals across five generations of my imagined family, each one a solitary voice advancing the narrative, each offering a unique perspective and location, that speak of everyday concerns. I imagine the stories of contemporary times – ones that are still unravelling – distinguishable from those of the past that represent the lost history of the community. For my contemporary characters that loss blurs recognition that the past has shaped contemporary identities. I imagine the crossing of voices from past and present to be an articulation of my belief we each intuitively recognise a cultural past, of which traces swirl around us in our daily lives: traditions, sayings, habits and the inherited traits of our bodies though sometimes recognition of those traces are lost, forgotten, misinterpreted or devalued yet inevitably, past, present and future are irretrievably linked. Perhaps an exploration of Jones’s novel will show the way this might be achieved and why using multiple voices might be seen as responsible writing.

Jones’s choices

Lloyd Jones’s 2010 novel is a retrospective account of a journey by a female traveller retold by many to an inspector. The narrators include the traveller herself, those she encounters, and the inspector’s own reports. Like Jones I will use multiple voices to summarise his novel.

Early in the novel, the traveller is nameless, mostly only recognised as the ‘black lady in the blue coat’. It is the character, Bernard, in his account to the inspector, who reveals her name: ‘At last I have a name. Ines’ (Jones, 2010: 71). What is true for Bernard may not be so elsewhere. Ines herself admits:

My first lie was to the truck driver, I told him my name was Ines. I didn't plan to. It just came out of me. Ines ... (Jones 2010: 202)

Ines's journey is epic: from a resort in Tunis to the coast, and from Africa across the sea to Sicily by way of people traffickers. How this is achieved we learn from the inspector:

To pay for her berth she had hotel sex with foreigners – counting the Dutchman who had taught her to swim ... (Jones, 2010: 20).

The ability to swim proves useful, for the traffickers drop their passengers at sea near Sicily. From there, Ines travels northward by any means available. The chess player recalls her goal. 'Berlin, Berlin. That's where she wants to go' (Jones, 2010: 43). Berlin, where her son is, where his father, a German and former houseguest called Jermayne, has taken the baby without her consent. To the inspector, Ines's former workmate explains: of all the 'floating' guests in the resort pool, it is in Jermayne that 'I can see she is interested' – when Jermayne says 'Trust me', Ines does (Jones, 2010: 9–10).

Crowded selves/crowded styles

It is timely to mention, here, Shameen Black's 2010 text *Fiction across borders*. Black suggests possibilities for representing alterity through principles that 'allow works of fiction to produce emancipatory practices ... [called] "crowded selves" and "crowded styles"' (19-66). Some of the ideas behind what Black calls 'border-crossing ethics' are a recognition of selfhood and language as socially shaped (35); a crowded self as a metaphor for subjectivity where borders of the self jostle against the edges of others and characters attempt to see the world as another does without wholly letting go of their original vision that 'helps visualise a subject that is always already multitude, flexible and open to future metamorphosis' (47); and crowded styles in which authors deploy literary devices that 'force a wedge between their own rhetoric and ossified literary conventions of discursive domination' (52). Black, I believe, would approve of Jones's (2010) method of using individual accounts that slap against preceding and succeeding versions. Jones also meets Alcott's (1991) criteria. He privileges no account and permits all accounts to be equally influenced by the narrator's social location, needs, goals situations and who they are.

Most of Jones's (2010) multiple accounts are delivered in first-person narratives, except for three third-person chapters narrated by the inspector, but even these only offer the inspection's perspective: his interpretation of what Ines has told him and his own observations as he retraces Ines's journey. Consequently, each telling within the novel reads as subjective and is valid for its narrator. It is late in the novel that Ines speaks for herself. She shares a prison cell with Ramona. 'Ramona's preoccupation – of finding how far ... [Ines] would have gone in order to carry on seeing ... [her] boy' (278) compels Ines to tell Ramona her version of the journey. This is a self-reflexive and a detached telling that demonstrates her metamorphosis to becoming a stranger, even to herself, as she imagined she had, when she arrived on the Sicilian shore; at that time she imagined she had 'shed that skin ... changed in all sorts of ways' (193). Readers may hope this re-telling will bring insights. But, like other versions, this too is partial. Ines remains, for Jones's readers, as she is for the character Defoe who tells

the inspector: 'I was curious about Ines from the start. She said little to me. There was so little of her life to look into' (133).

For me, reading these various accounts works well. However, I did not expect to find support for Jones's choices within Alcoff's 1991 essay, when Alcoff uses the words of feminist Joyce Trebilcot to argue her own case. Trebilcot says that since no embodied speaker can produce more than a partial account, and since the process of producing meaning is necessarily collective, everyone's account within a specific community needs to be encouraged (Alcoff, 1991: 12).

Interpretation/misinterpretation

The collective voices of Jones's (2010) community **highlight the practice of interpretation and the risks of misinterpretation**, not only on the part of the readers but also **on the part of his characters** from within the narrative itself. Though each of Jones's narrators confidently represents a world seen from individual perspectives, it is a view that, in another place, spoken by another individual, may not stand. This excerpt is useful for a closer examination:

We send the dogs ahead and fan out. Very soon there is a commotion. The dogs have banded together. So it is not a partridge. Perhaps it is a rabbit. Leo has a wonderful recipe for rabbit but it requires that someone, Paolo, climb up to the ridge and gather wild herbs. Or else it is a phantom. Dogs are the nerviest of creatures. We are threading our way through the brush when we hear a woman's voice. Paolo runs ahead. We can hear a woman shouting at the dogs. The dogs are barking. Paolo is being quite rough with them, cursing them, kicking them away.

As we come through the brush there is the black woman. She is wearing a blue coat. That's the first thing that strikes me. How odd to be wearing a coat like that up in the hills. No. That is the second surprise. The first surprise is undoubtedly the woman. An African woman. Once, many years ago, we thought we had stumbled on bear shit. We stood around it, photographed it. Another time we saw two parakeets. Probably domestic – escaped. We have seen the odd soul – hikers – on the tracks through the hills leading down into the first valley of Switzerland. But never a black woman. Never an African. She has her arms up in surrender. A plastic bag hangs from her hand (50).

Within this excerpt there is a distinct anthropological tone to the telling of the narrator's encounter with Ines. The narrator hunter's assured assessment of the stranger, his description of the encounter with the black lady in the blue coat, and his assumption of her origins, speak of authority and certainty, and imply a privileged position that reinforces the narrator's assumed capacity to make definitive interpretations. The narrator's casual linking of the African woman with other discovered objects, such as bear shit and two parakeets, subtly reveals the hunter's biases that is overtaken by an image of Ines, hands in air, possession in a plastic bag. In the tone of delivery, though, comes understanding of Trinh T. Minh-ha's words (used by Alcoff (1991) or her own argument). For Minh-ha, too often such attempts by anthropologists become:

conversations of 'us' with 'us' about 'them', of the white man with the white man about the primitive nature man ... in which 'them' is silenced. 'Them' always stand on the other side

of the hill, naked and speechless ... 'them' is only admitted among 'us', the discussing subjects, when accompanied or introduced by 'us' (Alcoff, 1991: 2).

In the aforementioned Jones (2010) excerpt, the 'we' of the first-person account who decides the woman is African could well be Minh-ha's 'us' (Alcoff, 1991). In this passage, it is as if Jones invites his readers to intuitively recognise that the hunter's account is – to use Alcoff's (1991) words – an 'undesirable' manner of 'speaking about' and thus be cautious about the hunter's description of Ines.

But what do other speakers say about Ines? Not where she was born, only where she has been; not her education, nor her dreams, only her reality and her journey. Character Hannah explains: 'She never spoke. She sat as one does in the cinema waiting for the main feature, that is to say with a certain obligatory air' (Jones, 2010: 92). Within the novel various versions construct Ines as, if not a victim, certainly not entirely in control of her own situation and identity, a certainty belied by Ines's focus on her goal and her inner strength and unstoppable drive to locate her son with no other plan than to be near him. Perhaps those Ines meets assume her silence to be lack of languages, education or intelligence – blind man Ralf's explanation to the inspector for replacing Ines with Defoe as his companion one example: 'I needed someone else, someone with language and conversation ... Someone with conversation in him' (Jones, 2010: 108). However, readers might also interpret silence as strength, an intuitive mechanism of self-preservation – an intellectual awareness that revealing too much leaves one open to violations. And despite Ines's silence, despite her holding back, readers may acknowledge the extent of her journey, her dedication to it, and may be encouraged to construct her as a citizen of the world. Not so those she meets, who appear locked in localised worlds and concerns and hence their observations of Ines may read as limited by similarly narrow perspectives.

Mostly when we read fiction it is to feel empathy for the protagonist. In this novel empathy sweeps in with one event – Ines's abandonment by the people traffickers – and out with another – Ines stealing the blind man's belongings. This complicates the reading process. Only by chance and on occasions – if we compel ourselves to imagine the loss of a child, dependence on strangers, getting by in a foreign place – we might tenuously grasp at what motivates Ines but we are not permitted to know the true Ines. Our reward: small degrees of admiration weighted down by many unanswered questions. One: is this Jones challenging his readers? Is this how Jones obliquely demands of his readers not to make assumption, to know there is never only one way of seeing?

Conclusion

The success of Jones's (2010) choices offers a scent for me, encourages me to make choices that enable my readers to consider not only one history for my characters but multiple possibilities. And how exhilarating to realise within the choices available to a writer resides the chemistry of writing, the excitement of potential, though I cannot ignore Surma's (2000) point, that 'our "journeys" as writing subjects are not always self-directed; we are also positioned and defined by specific social and cultural constraints' (4-5). Like Surma, I turn to Benhabib (1997) to succinctly express this:

We are born into webs of interlocution or into webs of narrative – from the familial and gender narrative to the linguistic one to gender narratives and to the macronarratives of one's collective identity. We become who we are by learning to be a conversation partner in these narratives. Although we do not choose the webs in whose nets we are initially caught or select those with whom we wish to converse, our agency consists in our capacity to weave out of these narratives and fragments of narratives a life story that makes sense for us, as this unique self (50).

As creative writers, as we imagine fictional worlds inhabited by characters who, like ourselves, have been born into Benhabib's (1997) 'webs of interlocution', we must constantly remind ourselves of our place within a communicative social network and the contribution our writing makes, intentionally or accidentally, to meaning making. It is through making responsible choices during the writing process that we demonstrate our awareness of our ethical responsibilities.

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