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Research methodologies employed by writers of fiction

Abstract:

This paper is concerned with non-Indigenous writers writing about Indigenous themes and subjects and it explores the research methodologies that fiction writers engage with that have a nexus with the research methodologies of academics and professionals in other fields and disciplines. The four methodologies considered in this paper are: participant observation most readily associated with anthropology; oral history interviews, which are traditionally the domain of historians; the ubiquitous methodology of textual research; and a process of empathy, that writers call upon to imagine the inner lives of characters, sharing a process that is grounded in psychology.

This paper argues that as creative writing continues to strengthen its position within the academy with the increasing scholarship of creative writers contributing to the expansion of new knowledge, it might be expected that these research methodologies will become more readily associated as methodologies employed by writers of fiction.

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Writing a novel requires multiple phases of research, reflection and writing – often over a number of years – as writers transform their original vision into a completed manuscript. This paper explores the research methodologies deployed by non-Indigenous fiction writers during the process of creating a novel that includes Indigenous themes and subjects, and it proposes that the research phase for fiction shares many of the methodologies employed across other academic and professional disciplines.

The four methodologies considered in this paper, all of which I employed as part of the research for my thesis novel, are: participant observation, oral history interviews, textual research, and a process of empathy to imagine the inner lives of characters. These research methodologies are more traditionally recognised as methodologies of other fields and disciplines, and this paper explores how the methodologies relate to the work of non-Indigenous fiction writers in the context of their research of Indigenous themes and subjects. I also provide examples from my own work, to illustrate the ways in which the material I collected through these methodologies have contributed to and enriched my thesis novel.

In proposing that fiction 'borrows' from these more traditional disciplines I am not suggesting that these research methodologies offer a new approach to the way in which fiction writers collect their material. I imagine eighteenth-century novelists would have engaged in a similar process of collecting information in various ways from their surroundings. The shift that has occurred is the burgeoning of creative writing as an established academic discipline, particularly over the past fifteen years (Boyd, 2009), and with this comes the necessity to categorise and deconstruct process and methodology. Hence, while I introduce each of the four research methodologies within the context of its academic discipline or professional field, and set out to explain the way in which fiction writers share these practices, I imagine that, as time progresses, these research methodologies will become recognised and accepted as devices employed by fiction writers in the creation of their work.

Participant observation

Observation is arguably the most established research methodology of fiction writers: whereby they observe and contemplate the world around them and through their fiction recreate a mediated interpretation of society. This device might more formally be recognised as one of 'participant observation' when fiction writers place themselves in particular surroundings for the primary purpose of creating fiction. Participant observation is a methodology commonly employed by anthropologists and journalists, and is a term employed within a context of the participant observer being immersed in a culture, society, or an event that is in some way foreign, and then reflecting upon and writing about that experience. For example, an anthropologist might be identified as being a participant observer if undertaking a research project in an Indigenous community, and a journalist might be described as taking on this role when embedded with a division of the army within a war zone.

Anthropologist Ruth Behar (1996) speaks about the peculiarity of participant observation as a research methodology: 'You put yourself in its way and it bodies forth and enmeshes you … Nothing is stranger than humans watching other humans in order to write about them' (5). Behar says anthropology as an academic field is at a juncture, because its methodologies of 'bearing testimony' are now employed across so many other academic disciplines (which I propose, includes creative-writing scholars) leading her to ask: 'Has anthropology become dispensable?' (163). While some anthropologists are responding to this by pushing for a deeper emphasis upon scientific research methodologies within the discipline, Behar is an advocate for the inclusion of personal experience to be incorporated within the field in order to 'lead to a greater depth of feeling about those we write about' (165). I propose that Behar's desire to write about people, particularly 'the other', with empathy, in a way that 'scrutinise[s] the intellectual and emotional connection between observer and observed' (14), is an approach she shares with many fiction writers, particularly those whose fictional representations either derive from, or are based on, direct experience in a cross-cultural context such as non-Indigenous writers writing about experiences in an Indigenous community. Empathy is explored later in this paper as a research methodology of fiction writers.

As part of my exegetical research for my creative writing PhD, I undertook interviews with Australian authors who have published novels that include Indigenous themes and subjects. One of the authors I interviewed was Nikki Gemmell whose novel *Cleave* (1998) is based in an Aboriginal community in the Northern Territory where Gemmell spent five years working as a radio journalist based in Darwin and Alice Springs. Gemmell's role as an outsider in these communities might be described as one of 'participant observer'. During my interview with her, Gemmell said the main reason she writes fiction is to make sense of her surroundings: 'That's something I do with all my writing. I write to understand. I went into a very closed community in Antarctica [where her novel *Shiver* (1997) is set] and once again I was an outsider in that and I wrote to understand that, to make sense of that world' (2010). In line with Behar's (1996) comments about sharing stories to create empathy, Gemmell also speaks of wanting to then share this process with her reader by allowing the reader: '[to see] through my eyes', to access these worlds she is trying to make sense of. These comments about the way in which Gemmell had privileged access to closed communities (firstly Indigenous communities and then in Antarctica) propose a similarity in practice between a novelist and an anthropologist through participant observation. Gemmell also says her training as a journalist has contributed to the style of fiction she writes: 'As a [radio] journalist … you go through cadet training where you're taught to write visually; you have to describe … It's quite a skill to create a very vivid picture, and I'm really grateful for that training, and I guess I carry that through into my fiction' (2010). This style of vivid description is common among fiction writers and thus provides a further example of a device shared between writers of fiction and non-fiction.

In my experience, as a creative writer who has conducted 'on the ground' research in the Kimberley, I feel a slight unease in describing myself as a 'participant observer' – perhaps because, for so much of the time, I was simply a participant, enjoying friendships, experiences and conversations with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in an unselfconscious way, presumably in the same way Gemmell would have done both during and beyond her role as a journalist. However, on reflection, the fact that I have since transplanted some of the observations I made during these experiences into fiction in some way might therefore suggest my work fits into this category of research. I will share one example, among many I might choose from, to explain the process by which this occurred, which arose from a conversation with an Indigenous friend who lives in Broome. She told me that whenever ‘government mob’ or customers phoned the office where she worked to ask for information, she had learnt to say, ‘just let me check’, and put the phone on hold for a few seconds before returning to the caller to give them the information, having pretended to check with her boss. She said she started doing this because so many callers would distrust her information and would ask her to confirm it with someone. Although she was laughing as she told me this, her story suggested so much about the subtle erosion of self-esteem that continues to be levelled at Aboriginal people that I decided to recreate this story in a scene in my thesis novel, within a completely different context to that of my friend in her workplace. Throughout my fiction I have included similar snippets and anecdotes that have arisen from my observations, gathered over several successive years of visiting the Kimberley. The academic in me calls this role ‘participant observer’ but it is one I might otherwise call ‘living my life’.

It is relevant to note that this role of ‘participant observer’ in the Kimberley is one I approached within an ethical framework, mindful to protect the privacy of individuals and respectful of confidences and culturally sensitive material. Where I have borrowed snippets or observations from my experiences, I have transformed them so as to disconnect them from the original experience, in a way that author Malcolm Knox describes as ‘organ transplants [which] lose the quality of being that person when you cut it out and put it into another thing’ (in Wood, 2009: 75).

Oral history

Oral history at its most basic level refers to people sharing stories with one another, and has been around for as long as humans have told stories. It has developed as a discipline, evolving from university history departments, and is now established across a range of scholarly fields as a qualitative research methodology that involves the recording of oral history interviews in a question-and-answer format (Robertson, 2006). Although described as a form of history, oral history also includes contemporary research and interviews that collectively form a snapshot of a place and its people, as popularised by the work of American oral historian Studs Terkel (1974). The value of this methodology is described by Thompson as follows:

> Oral history is a history built around people. It thrusts life into history and widens its scope. It allows heroes not just from the leaders, but from the unknown majority of the people … It makes for contact – and thence understanding – between social classes, and between generations … In short, it makes for fuller human beings (Thompson, cited in Robertson, 2006: 3).

This commentary captures the essence of why oral history can also be so valuable to writers of fiction. As well as making for ‘fuller human beings’, oral history testimonies provide the basis for fiction writers to create ‘fuller’ fictional characters that represent what Thompson calls the ‘unknown majority’ of people, and, in doing so, can create ‘understanding’ between readers and the subjects of fiction. For example, works of fiction can give access and understanding to the broader Australian population about life and people living in remote Aboriginal communities.

Over three years I had the privilege of undertaking a series of oral history interviews as part of my research with a range of Indigenous people living in the Fitzroy Valley area. This research was approved as part of a high-risk ethics application through my university and also governed by a research agreement I signed with the Kimberley Aboriginal Law and Culture Centre. These interviews informed my fiction in a valuable way. I might never have had access to the depth of knowledge I was able to gather within the context of the oral history interviews if I relied solely upon casual day-to-day discussions. The settings were private, with a contract of confidentiality, and a clear understanding that the interviewee could stop the interview at any moment (though none of the interviews were ended in this way). It was through these interviews I was given an insight into the Indigenous world of the Kimberley from an insider's perspective. My research resulted in 11 interviews and more than 60,000 words of typed transcriptions. Following is a brief excerpt from an interview I had with a teenager during which we had been talking about domestic violence, particularly among young people:

> My ex-friend, last year was just during Christmas or New Year, she just got crewed like a dog, man, everyone saw it. She just kept going back and back, she couldn't get the word 'no' or 'go away' or 'fuck off', you know, to her ex-boyfriend, she just kept humbugging him … she was bleeding from the head 'cos she was laying on the ground and the guy just grabbed her by the hair and just pulled her head back and just bang on the ground and done it probably five times, in front of everyone, everyone saw it. I tried calling the ambulance for her, she just didn't want to listen, she told me not to.

These oral history interviews have been valuable to my research and informed my novel in a number of ways. They have assisted me in capturing the essence of language as it is used in the spoken word in the Kimberley and given me confidence to create a strong voice in the dialogue of my Indigenous characters. Although my novel is written from the perspective of a white protagonist, there are many Indigenous characters and these oral history interviews helped me create 'fuller characters', offering momentary glimpses into their lives, hearts and minds as they are revealed, sparingly, to the white protagonist and therefore the reader.

Textual research

Textual research is a foundational methodology employed across humanities disciplines, including that of creative writing, and refers to the knowledge gathered from works of fiction and non-fiction, primary and secondary reference materials and journal articles. The degree to which a writer of fiction is likely to rely upon textual research will vary significantly, depending upon the genre of their fiction writing. For example, a writer of historical fiction is likely to place heavy emphasis upon textual research, while other writers might draw from texts minimally to enhance plot or character. My novel has been heavily informed by textual research of both non-fiction and fictional works, and this research supported me through my creation of a fictional world. The three categories I relied upon for my own research are: texts that include specific stories from the Kimberley; academic texts that focussed on national issues of Indigenous history, politics and society; and works of fiction that include Indigenous themes and subjects.

Collectively, these texts enabled me to build a solid base of understanding before I began the geographical and observational components of my research and later provided important reference material during the writing and redrafting phase. This textual research also instructed my other modes of research. F or example, I was able to ask more relevant and specific questions of the Indigenous participants during my oral history interviews because of the background knowledge informed through textual research. In addition, the fictional texts enabled me to contemplate the various ways in which Australian novelists have explored the nexus between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, and to contextualise my own work and research within this broader body of Australian fiction.

Empathy

In creating fictional characters, it is common for writers to speak about getting inside the heads of their characters, and this section explains how this occurs through an intellectual and empathetic process similar to the approach undertaken by counselling psychologists and psychoanalysts. Empathy is distinct from the three previous external methodologies outlined in this paper in that it is a research method of the imagination. Empathy refers to an imaginative process of coming to understand another person’s point of view, thoughts and feelings; it is used by fiction writers as they create strong fictional characters, and by counselling practitioners as they come to understand the psychology of their patients and clients.

Psychiatry professor Arnold Modell (2003) wrote that ‘[p]sychoanalysts do not question that one can acquire knowledge of others by imaginatively entering into their experience and reconstructing their inner reality’ (172). The parallels that exist between literature and psychoanalysts are proposed by Brophy (1998), who describes Freud’s frequent use of literature to illustrate psychoanalytic concepts, and the subsequent rivalry that arose between the two fields:

> [Psychoanalysis] turned initially to literature for support for its assertions only to usurp what it saw as literature’s fundamental purpose (the understanding of the human psyche) and announce itself as the new, scientifically reliable authority on the human psyche (59).

Ultimately, however, it appears that literature has remained the more accessible way for people to understand the world-view of others. Psychologist, social researcher and novelist Hugh Mackay (2009) wrote in a *Sydney Morning Herald* article that novels continue to hold this predominant position:

> Perhaps this is why so many people claim to learn more about the human condition from novels than from works of philosophy, psychology or self-help books. Tom Peters, the management guru who set the business world off on its frenzied "pursuit of excellence", urged his clients to read fiction on the grounds that they would learn more about people there than in any

> management textbook (16).

It is the trait of empathy that helps people learn and understand more about other people, and it is this quality that many writers aim to evoke not only in the creation of their characters but also to connect their readers to their characters. Presenting on a panel at the Byron Bay Writers Festival, Australian author Alex Miller (2010) spoke of the vital role of empathy in creating characters that readers can connect with: ‘Empathy is the aspect of writing a novel that affords you intimacy with characters. People ask, ‘How do you write a character who is a woman?’ It is with empathy – by ‘*being* them’. Writers engage with empathetic processes to create characters, and subsequently seek to evoke empathy from their readers. Modell (2003) proposed that the ability to imagine that sense of ‘being them’ is a necessary skill of fiction writers: ‘Imagining other minds is the work of novelists’ (171). Modell wrote that empathy is evoked by focussing upon the similarities that exist between people, and he explained the psychological processes that occur:

> The experience that the other is ‘like me’, we describe as empathy. We know that empathy is based on identification, but it is a *partial identification*. We imagine ourselves into other minds by discovering *items* of similarity. With empathy, the identification is but fleeting and transitory; we feel only ‘as if’ we resemble the other person. Empathy involves a sense of similarity while maintaining a sense of difference (175).

It is through this ‘as if’ quality of the empathetic imagination that Modell (2003) argued that a reciprocity of feeling is experienced, from which a shared construction of reality emerges from two different private worlds. Modell wrote that this ‘intersubjectivity’ is experienced between both patients and analysts in psychoanalysis and between writers and readers of fiction: ‘The reader’s subjectivity confronts the subjectivity of the author to create a new form of understanding. It is a process not unlike that of psychoanalysis’ (182). In this way, both the reader and the analysand project their own thoughts and stories onto the novel and the analyst respectively, thus creating their own interpretation of the space that exists in the shared exchange.

Returning to the context of my own writing, a secondary motivation for the creation of my fiction has been to give the broader Australian population a sense of what the experience of life is like for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians living in remote Aboriginal communities. Creating a sense of empathy and connection with Indigenous people has been a significant consideration in writing my fiction. Such an objective can be a challenge when aspiring to achieve this as an ‘outsider’ in a cross-cultural context, and the paper I (Knight 2010) presented at the 2010 AAWP conference, ‘Creating Indigenous characters that ring true – without blowing a foot off’, proposed that a way to approach this sensitively and respectfully is to ensure sufficient research is undertaken and that characters are created with empathy. I propose that the psychoanalytical processes that writers undertake in a cross-cultural setting will be more acute and more resonant – or, in Modell’s (2003) terminology, more ‘as if’ – when informed by the research methodologies of participant observation, oral history interviews and textual research.

Research methodologies employed by writers of fiction

Creative-writing academics will necessarily have a cross-disciplinary approach to their research, given the unlimited scope from which they are able to select the subjects of and the settings for their works of fiction. For non-Indigenous creative-writing academics writing fiction that is concerned with Indigenous themes and subjects, the four research methodologies outlined in this paper are likely to provide useful tools to be included within a writer's toolkit. I propose that as creative writing continues to strengthen its position within the academy, with the increasing scholarship of creative writers contributing to the expansion of new knowledge in this field, it might be reasonably expected that these research methodologies will become more readily recognised as ones employed by writers of fiction.

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