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Diving into the story: ethnographic reporting as a meaningful way of conducting social research

Abstract

Ethnographers seek to be faithful to the world they are studying by immersing themselves in the lives they are observing to uncover social meaning or practices. Creative nonfiction writers, although working from a different framework - that of a professional writer – have similar epistemological aims: seeking to retell a story in a meaningful way. This paper focuses on *Brothers in Arms*, the first of a series of true crime books that I co-authored with Sandra Harvey, about the shooting of seven people in a hotel car park in Sydney on September 2, 1984. This was one of the first books in Australia to tackle the creative nonfiction genre in true crime. This paper serves to explicate the research process we undertook as writers and compares this with the more scholarly approach of the ethnographer. In so doing, it posits that ethnographers and CNF writers would benefit from an interdisciplinary approach in retelling stories grounded in the real.

Biographical Note:

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Keywords

Creative nonfiction — bikies — gangs — ethnographic reporting — ethnography and storytelling — qualitative research and storytelling

Both ethnographers and creative nonfiction writers mediate, through narrative, a set of events and characters to retell a factual story. The methodological approach of the Creative Nonfiction writer, in many ways, mirrors that of the social scientist. Although not constrained by scholarly concerns, the mode of research involves rigour and similar practices to that of the ethnographer: ethical engagement; an accurate recording of data including interviews; corroborating sources; note-taking and documentary analyses. Like ethnographers, CNF writers with a literary journalism focus, seek a deeper, and often long term engagement with their subjects than most of their news counterparts. However, the CNF genre lacks critical analysis. For instance, it does not attract the same systematic study, interpretation and analysis of other works of literature. Barbara Lounsberry asserts that, ‘Scholars skilled at tracing artistic and rhetorical strategies in fiction, poetry, and drama seem to halt at the border of nonfiction.’ (1990: iii). Instead, there are multiple reprints of seminal works in a plethora of anthologies on the genre that mostly shy away from critically analysing texts or their research processes. Lounsberry attempts to delimit the genre by suggesting it has four constitutive characteristics: documentable subject matter (the real as opposed to invented); exhaustive research which allows (writers) to have perspectives on their subjects and ‘the scene’ to revive the context of events; and, finally, fine writing which discloses the writer’s artistry which is displayed in the narrative form and structure of the work (1990: xiii). Lounsberry suggests, however, that this still falls short of critical analysis. She states:

If, these four features delimit an important art form of our time, a discourse grounded in fact but artful in execution that might be called literary nonfiction, what is needed is serious critical attention of all kinds to this work: formal criticism (both Russian Formalism and New Criticism), historical, biographical, cultural, structuralist and deconstructionist, reader-response criticism and feminist (criticism).” (xvi)

There has been little written about the capacity of CNF writers to deliver research outcomes. The critique of research practices of such CNF icons as Truman Capote (Ricketson 2010; Siegel 1984; Park 2006) are exceptions, but a systematic critical analysis of the genre is absent. Even the etymology of the title of the genre remains a mystery (Gutkind 2011.) The genre is defined as encompassing literary journalism, personal essay and memoir and cultural criticism which employs literary techniques to tell factual stories. Its credibility comes from the vigorous attention to facts and a research approach, although research borne from professional practice rather than the constraints faced by scholarly researchers. For example, there is no ethics review process, although ethical practice may be observed. CNF practitioners, nevertheless, contribute to contemporary discourse on factual events and characters and follow similar methodological paths.

For the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on Lounsberry’s delimiting of this art form while focusing on the first of three crime books I co-authored with Sandra Harvey entitled *Brothers in Arms* as a case study to explicate the writing and research process (1989). This paper documents how we navigated the ethnographic spaces of the research while pursuing the common disciplinary epistemological goal of the social scientist: retaining authenticity. By detailing the research process conducted in the writing practice, this paper suggests that mediating events and characters by

employing literary techniques through narrative, induces truth-telling by allowing the reader to more vicariously experience the lives and attitudes of the subjects being researched. Through a process that is both creative and analytic, writing is employed as a method of inquiry. The importance of creativity in the research process is reflected in recent attempts by the government's research arm, Australian Research Council through its ERA (Excellence in Research) to capture such activity in its research process. This paper, then, mounts the argument that CNF practitioners have the capacity to produce research outcomes through a creative process.

Through embracing authenticity, the CNF writer must observe fact to build a story and engage in thorough first-person research, as observed by Lounsberry as the delimiter 'documentable data'. Ethnographers use multiple methods of data collection that allows a more personal and in-depth portrait of a particular community or set of events. This can include participant observation (including informal interviews, direct observation, participation in the life of the group over an extended period of time) field notes, interviews and surveys. Like the early work of ethnographers in the Chicago School (Friedland & Campbell 2004: 22), we collected empirical data and analysed that data in a systematic way. We wrote up what people told us in both formal and informal interviews; visited places of interest including the sprawling amorphous housing estates of Sydney's western suburbs and bkie clubhouses. We were connecting with a culture that was largely taboo and out of reach. Like social scientists we went into the field seeking to gather facts and build the story from the "ground up" employing an inductive rather than deductive approach. Social scientists seek to verify accurate information from their research by the method known as "triangulation". Haas maintains (2004: 59) that journalists/writers find it difficult to use methodological triangulation which 'requires the investigator to use different research methods to confirm those findings' suggesting that corroboration might include document analysis or participant observation (2004: 64). Researching for this book entailed multiple approaches such as Haas describes. Richardson challenges the notion of triangulation stating that the assumption is that a "fixed point" or an "object" can be triangulated (Richardson 2005: 963). She states there are 'far more than "three sides"' by which to approach the world. This was certainly our experience when seeking to verify fact. Richardson uses the analogy of crystals saying that they: '...are prisms that reflect externalities and refract within themselves, creating different patterns, and arrays casting off in different directions' (2005: 963). We sought to reveal multiple refraction of the crystal's rays, and our goal was always to improve perspective. We conducted more than a hundred interviews with interviewees leading up to the massacre, the event itself and the aftermath, including incidental players such as the retired kindergarten teacher who lived next door to the Bandido clubhouse in Birchgrove; the nurse at the hospital where the 14-year old girl killed in the crossfire had been a patient and the publican at the bar in the Viking Tavern that day. We sought, like social scientists, a holistic approach to situate the story in a context defined as broad as possible. We conducted documentary analysis through court transcripts; records of interview (particularly useful for scene setting to revive the context of events) as well as compiling our own database. We used annotation including page references across documents. This could be compared with data analysis which is an iterative process documenting the first data collected and

continuing with emergent insights and a tentative hypotheses as we continued with data collection (Haas 2004: 65). Unlike the lawyers who collected and built on witness accounts in order to determine the guilt or innocence of the accused, we sought to build a more layered perspective on the events, to cast a wider net than the legal preoccupation. As Christians outlines:

Comprehension of actual context only accumulates gradually, so the search is always an ongoing one until we finally reveal the exact contours of the details unearthed (49).

Writers and ethnographers confront similar ethical dilemmas such as: presenting a false sympathy to encourage participants to be interviewed; avoiding prejudice when selecting who will tell the story; editing the text for dramatic content at the expense of the truth; the effect of the presence of a writer/ethnographer on events or people involved in the participatory research as well as continuing long term involvement with subjects which might compromise what is being studied or written about. We observed the professional practice of journalists under the MEAA (Media, Entertainment & Arts Alliance) Code of Ethics. We always identified the purpose of our interview and recorded interviews (other than the visits to the jail where we were not permitted to do so). We also engaged in self-analysis, a form of auto-ethnography, in the form of a detailed diary, known as our 'Red Book,' where we reflected upon the writing and research process (Simpson & Harvey personal diary 1984-1994).

The idea for the book came after Sandra and I were sent, in November 1984, by our respective media outlets: the *Australian Associated Press* and *The Sydney Morning Herald* to cover a three-year court case at the Penrith courthouse, in Sydney's outer west. Forty-three men were charged with seven counts of murder following a shootout at the Viking Tavern in September 2, 1984 at Milperra. Critical to our goals to 'scratch below the surface' of events and characters, was to develop rapport with our key interviewees, the bikies. The media section in the courthouse adjoined the area that housed the bikies. Around six weeks after the shootout, and, after the court proceedings began, we began interviewing detectives from the Viking Taskforce and the Sergeant-in-charge of the security. These initial interviews proved to be less confronting than establishing rapport with the key protagonists behind the court partitions who were escorted from the court by armed guard. Our first encounter, however, was a week or so later. We passed 'Minties' to the outlaw gangs across the slim partition that separated them from the media. The first individual contact with one of the gang members came shortly afterwards when Knuckles, a Bandido who was a former Commonwealth gold boxing medallist 'dropped' a note on Sandra's chair during a lunch break requesting her to write to him. On February 9, 1985, we made the first of two visits to Parklea jail, dressed up as bokie molls, to interview members of the Bandidos after being invited to discuss the prospect of writing a book. Following the release of 11 bikies from jail the following year, we conducted interviews at the Royal Oak in Parramatta and were invited back to the gang's clubhouse. Our research had truly begun.

Like ethnographic stories, the spirit invoked by the CNF writer is humanistic (Talese & Lounsberry 1996). CNF practitioners, like anthropologists, have to cultivate the

habits of ‘being in the world, of being able to talk and listen to people’ (Perl et al 2004: 306). From the outset, our in-depth interviews focused on collecting multi-faceted information on interviewees. For example, in an interview with a young constable who was called out to a shooting at the Bandido clubhouse in the months leading up to the massacre, we asked what kind of McDonalds hamburger he was eating when the emergency call came through. Recreating a scene means questioning what clothing interviewees were wearing; or what food might have been eaten; or the weather or the kinds of vegetation growing nearby. As observed by Lounsberry, scene setting is an essential characteristic of the CNF practitioner and this builds context. But, apart from physical appraisals, CNF writers also need to map the emotional landscape of their interviewees so as to better understand that person (Vickers 2010: 562). By re-invoking emotions experienced by interviewees, through the act of writing creatively, the writer can evoke at once deep, subtle and powerful emotional reactions in both writer and reader (Clarke et al., 2005, Furman, 2006a; Rolfe, 2002; Rowland et al., 1990, cited in Vickers 2010). That process of ‘fictive imagining’, for CNF writers, however, *must* be informed by interviewees words so as to align closely with fact. As Rolfe observes, ‘the writer of fiction (and similarly nonfiction) is a researcher who processes her observations about the world and its inhabitants into a literary form rather than into a standard research paper (Rolfe 2002: 95). In that way, Rolfe argues that the writing of fiction, and in this case I would argue CNF, is itself a form of social research that provides access to a particular kind of truth often to a wider audience than that expected by the ethnographer (2002: 101). It also extends that representation to a wider audience. When creating fiction as part of qualitative research, we are extending the usual choices concerning analyses and representation beyond the normalised boundaries traditionally set by our profession (cited in Vickers 2010: 561).

In describing the interview process for ethnographers, Vickers cautions that other people’s experiences should be considered a mystery to be explored, rather than a problem to be solved, especially if those people are somehow different to us (Clarke et al., 2005 cited in Vickers 2010: 563). As two young, career-minded women in the Superwoman category of the 80s, we found ourselves regularly portrayed as ‘the other’. We needed coaching on the social etiquette of the world we inhabited. For example, a Comanchero ‘old lady’, who observed a traditional gendered role, advised us to follow a male into a bokie party lest we were seen as ‘available’. We were often in the company of what our friends would have described as misogynists, either within the police force or among the bikies. At the Louisa Road clubhouse in Birchgrove, Sydney, the Bandidos had a Virgin Converting Room with a bleeding heart painted on the wall and an arrow through it and would delight in inviting women from nearby Balmain, accustomed to gender equality, back ‘to party’. However, as participant observers, it was critical to have acceptance within these groups so we did not contest values. This declared position – to record what we saw and heard - also resulted in our decision to reject any authorial role in the ensuing text.

Storytelling is employed by ethnographers as a compelling and valid way to reveal data (Perl et al 2007: 306). While social scientists attempt to generate understandings

of social norms or mores, or, of social understandings or practices, CNF employs a multi-layered approach to explicate an event or characters to a wider audience. As Lounsberry asserts, the writer's 'artistry' is a defining characteristic of the genre. Plot, structure, scene setting and narrative style are essential tools for the CNF practitioner.

Ethnographers, too, shape stories from the raw material of fieldwork seeking to engage readers even though, as scholars they seek to mount an argument and present findings. Clifford Geertz observes in *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author*, 'It is not clear just what 'faction,' imaginative writing about real people in real places, exactly comes to beyond a clever coinage; but anthropology is going to have to find out if it is to continue as an intellectual force in contemporary culture' (cited in Narayan 2007: 130). Narayan, who specialises in fieldwork in South Asia, writes that, 'the writing of ethnography and of fiction may both be enriched by insights carried across the shifting borders between these genres established by institutional histories and expectations (2007). She points to the documented imaginative writing carried out by American anthropologists that is as old as the discipline itself. Ruth Behar, also a cultural anthropologist, states that there is not enough reflection on the ethnographers' writing skills, 'how ethnographers write sentences, paragraphs, narration, character and dialogue' (146). Ethnographers, too, extract, curtail, and rearrange materials from their fieldwork situations to make texts, 'snipping' and 'editing' at oral stories (Narayan 2007: 133) seeking to transform their research into a compelling story. Narayan discussing the advice she received when seeking 'an interesting form' to write an ethnography on women's songs, was advised to find 'a hero', a 'heroine' and a 'villain' (133). Behar, writes that in making their stories more compelling, there is 'hope that ethnography might potentially still develop into a genre that has a distinguishable art to it' (148) pointing to the Society for Humanistic Anthropologists that encourages the writing of poetry, fiction and creative non-fiction by anthropologists (146). In his critique of Truman Capote's 'faction nonfiction novel', *In Cold Blood*, Ricketson resoundingly criticises Capote for aspiring to be an artist as though this desire is somehow unable to sit alongside pursuit of the facts and even canvasses Capote's ethical position in not acting to save the two murderers (2010). Capote, when we wrote *Brothers in Arms*, was a revered leader in the field of true crime in particular, and book length creative nonfiction especially. Since then, as outlined, there has been justifiable criticism of his research practices. However, it is difficult to take away from his pioneering role in a new genre of work by narrating a story of real events using literary techniques. It was from Capote that we learned how to create suspense through the juxtaposition of the multiple characters in our story, refocusing the temporal sequencing of events so as to have a continuing present creating a dramatic sense of an impending climax. We spliced the various narratives from the two bkie gangs, the Comancheros and Bandidos with the narrative of the 14-year old girl inexorably riding towards her death. Like all works of literature, CNF must have a credible and engaging voice. Mimicking Capote, we adopted shifting points of view to reflect the multiple layering of voices throughout the story.

Behar states that ethnography should be read 'in terms of what it does artistically, seeing how it transports the imagination – instead of exclusively reading for the

information it offers or the theory it tackles' (153). Without wider engagement, she argues, ethnography 'will remain marginal.' Conversely, CNF might benefit by being exposed to the academic rigour expected from more scholarly practices and be subject to the kind of critical scrutiny applied to Capote's work *In Cold Blood*. To argue, however, that CNF can make no original contribution to social research and that it simply plays a secondary role in that domain fails to recognise the importance of the genre in contemporary cultural discourse. Its commitment to veracity is proven in many cases. My work in this genre has been recognised for its truth-telling in legal circles in the Andrew Kalajzich case by the trial judge commending our second book as 'factually accurate' in a personal letter. In a more recent case involving Gabe Watson, accused of murdering his bride while scuba diving, the book I co-authored is prescribed reading for the prosecution team in the upcoming trial. Banishing CNF writers as unreliable scribes in social research plays out the same territorial disputes recently witnessed in the history wars where writers were categorised as unable to inhabit an historical discourse. This paper proves that for some ethnographers, some of the merits from the CNF genre are seen as improving their own practice.

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