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The curious task of fictionalizing the 'truth': a narrative inquiry for historical fiction

Abstract:

Woolloomooloo is an infamous working-class suburb spread along the docks between Kings Cross and Sydney city and has been largely overlooked as a setting for historical fiction. When you read in a 1939 edition of a major newspaper that a family member was found shot in the head on the precipitous steps from Woolloomooloo to Kings Cross, you know you have a story. When you read further and discover that not only did the injured party survive but claimed to have shot himself (with notably poor aim) and that no weapon was ever found, you know you have not only a story but also a developing problem. Will you be able to uncover further trustworthy information? How will the family feel about sharing 'dirty laundry' in public? This leads to foundational methodological questions for a writer and PhD researcher. One solution is to fictionalise 'the truth' in an historical novel (acknowledging that the truth itself is a matter for negotiation). This paper presents an account of my methodological journey of narrative inquiry as a process for creative writing. The personal experience stories of a Woolloomooloo family and archival private and public records combine as powerful resources for historical fiction that 'could almost be true.'

Biographical note:

Alison Owens is an adjunct Associate Professor of Education at Central Queensland University. She has taught University courses in English, education, communications, literacy and social research methods for over twenty years and has a special interest in internationalization of education and curriculum as well as second language learning. She has researched and published widely in academic journals on these topics and has been the

recipient of multiple research grants. Alison is the current recipient of an Australian government scholarship to undertake a PhD in creative writing at CQU. She has had short stories published in Australian magazines and is currently working on an historical fiction set in Sydney in the mid 20th century.

Figure 1: Crime Scene 1939 at Woolloomooloo's Butler's Steps: a family member found wounded by gunshot to the head. Claims to have shot himself. No weapon found. (Untitled image (nd))

"…the only way we can really touch each other's shoulders is through fiction." (Strout 2013, np)

Prologue

There is a powerful absence in my family by marriage: that belonging to my deceased father-in-law whom I never met. He died in 1992, but some would say that most of him died on a day in 1981 when he suffered a massive stroke while eating a slice of fruitcake in the steaming garden of his Singapore home where he lived with his wife and four children. Returning to Australia, he never spoke coherently again and lived as a rapidly greying figure on the periphery of his still young family's busy life, often in his dressing gown, moved like a chess piece from room to room and event to event by his determined wife. He had conquered the world, leading international explorations for a major oil company, but his body had turned on him and in the end, he had conquered himself.

There are many family stories of this man but it is also the archetypal Australian stories that encircled him that I feel should be told. Abandoned by his father in 1928 at three years of age, he grew up along with his sister in the Woolloomooloo terrace home of his paternal grandparents. His mother is another 'loud silence' in the family, working as a David Jones' shop girl and eating and boozing her way to happy, raucous obesity, she remains a beloved memory for the remaining family. The extended family of uncles, aunts and cousins were a colourful mob with regular encounters with the law, as was not atypical for members of the Woolloomooloo community. Indeed, in one example selected from various court records and newspaper reports of family crimes and misdemeanors, a major Sydney newspaper reported in 1939 that a family member was found shot in the head on the precipitous steps from Woolloomooloo to Kings Cross. Not only did this injured 26 year-old survive, but claimed to have shot himself (with notably poor aim) although no weapon was ever found. His last words before slipping into unconsciousness were: "I shot myself: let Madge, my wife, know." The colourful characters comprising this working-class family and their life events in the context of local and global social

struggles of the era in the infamous location of dockside Woolloomooloo provide rich ingredients for an historical fiction about Sydney that is not yet told.

Introduction

This paper discusses PhD research currently underway as part of a creative arts, practice-led investigation into the Sydney, Woolloomooloo community in the 1920s and 1930s for the purpose of creating historical fiction. A central question addressed in this paper is: how can a narrative inquiry approach drawing on personal stories as well as public and private documents and artifacts generate a fictional account of lived historical experience? In answering this question a series of significant and related issues must also be addressed, such as: how is a story like this best told in fictional prose and why fictionalize a family story rather than write a biography, family history or local history? As this story is in part based on the life of a deceased family member by marriage to me, a further consideration for this research is: how can family members be included and protected in the development and presentation of this story? This paper seeks to explain the methodological approach constructed in answer to these questions.

Background

In the period of the 1920s and 1930s being 'poor', meant suffering grinding poverty. Major social and political unrest, agitation and labour restructuring occurred over this period impacting on workers, particularly on the local wharves, and reflecting global as well as local pressures. Thus, the driving thematic questions for the fictional text are: What qualifies as 'criminal' in the concurrent and overlaid contexts of local, petty crime, systemic social inequality and unrest and the global atrocity of war? The novel seeks to explore how a young man comes to understand, differentiate and engage with criminality and notions of evil in these contexts and what impact this has on his ethical decisions and character. The exegesis accompanying this novel and co-comprising the PhD, explores and describes the relationship between the private and public, published and unpublished data collected through research and the creative process of writing historical fiction.

Creative writing is selected in favour of possible alternative approaches to writing an account of this experience - such as, family history, local history, biography or creative non-fiction - for a number of reasons, not least the capacity for fiction to avoid compromising or embattling stakeholder interests in a story for which they feel some degree of ownership (Hocking 2011). As the novel has potential for wider popularity than a family history or local history and as Woolloomooloo is not yet represented in Australian historical fiction writing, an historical novel is selected as the creative outcome for this investigation. The research 'problem' is how to provide a rich, fictional account of a specific community and a period in time that is not yet represented in Australian fiction, basing this on family stories, in a way that does not offend remaining family.

The Woolloomooloo Locale

The etymology of the term Woolloomooloo is disputed but often explained by reference to indigenous languages. Accordingly, it may mean 'place of plenty', 'field of blood', a 'male kangaroo' or a 'windmill' (Department of School Education 2007; Farwell 1971; McCarthy 1959; Wikipedia 2014). In the early twentieth century, Woolloomooloo was home to an equally ambiguous community of maritime workers, fishermen, musicians and show folk, sailors, petty criminals, prostitutes and drunken revelers (Farwell 1971; Fitzgerald 2008). Its proximity to the often truly immoral Kings Cross made it something of a passageway between the then busy Docks and the entertainment quarter of the Cross. The families who lived amongst this shifting human colour in the small, impoverished terraces and cottages of Woolloomooloo have interesting stories to tell that are characterized by hardship, hard work and petty crime. Irreverent humour is also as evident, for example, in the local reference to the only church of Woolloomooloo, St Columbkilles, as 'St Comicals' (Spindler 2011).

The Docks at Woolloomooloo were a major industry, providing a port facility for extensive export loads. Indeed, the Finger Wharf was the modern engineering marvel of Australia at the time being the longest in the world.

Figure 2: Finger Wharf at Woolloomooloo' (Source: *Sydney Morning Herald* 12/11/2009)

Ships carried Australian wool, soldiers and munitions from this wharf and the 'connected' Garden Island was torpedoed by Japanese submarines in WWII. Hence, the Docks of Woolloomooloo play an important role in our local and national history. Although poor with modest educational opportunities, the local Woolloomooloo community interacted with the rest of the world on the ships, the docks and in the pubs, tenements, streets and lanes in which they lived on a daily basis, achieving a gritty cosmopolitanism by virtue of first-hand experiences of the sailors, ships' crews and travellers docking at their doorstep. Despite the important national events and the continuing flow and colour of foreign visitors and influences, this is an era and locale in Australian history that is not specifically depicted in a sustained portrait in Australian fictional prose.

Meditations on methodological decisions
The primary objective of the research undertaken in this thesis is to tell a story. As stories seek to develop rich descriptions rather than broad generalisations, this study adopts a qualitative rather than quantitative approach to discovery. Fram (2013) differentiates between a '…methodology [which] is "a way of thinking about and studying social reality" […] whereas, method is "a set of procedures and techniques for gathering and analysing data."' (Fram 2013, 1). Based on a researcher's ontological belief, epistemological assumptions and theoretical perspective, a

methodology is chosen as a strategy to lead the research investigation (Crotty 1998). The methodology selected for this study is a practice-led qualitative, ethnographic approach designed to recover/discover and relate human stories from personal accounts as well as the private and public materials of the time and location. Randall (2007) argues that:

> "…when we create stories of us, stories of our lives, we shape what has been uninterpreted, and strive for coherence through narrative. The stories we then know ourselves by, or identify ourselves with, give a kind of structure 'to the stream of activities, the flood of emotions, and the swirl of relationships that constitute our existence.'" (in Merritt & Turner 2013, 372).

In this sense, art in the form of creative writing is envisaged for this study to be as Dewey (1934) proposed: a 'synthetic tool of knowledge'. Dewey agreed with the poet John Keats, that any reasoning (the traditional domain of 'science') that excludes imagination and the embodiment of ideas in an emotionally charged sense (the domain of 'art') cannot reach truth (Leddy 2013). In this sense for Dewey, "Life is made more intelligible by art not through conceptualization but through clarification and intensification in experience" (Leddy 2013, np). This research is arts-based, and arts-informed, narrative inquiry. Arts-based Narrative Inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly 2000) involves field text gathering whilst arts-informed Narrative Inquiry refers to research text presentation. This research has begun with an arts-based process of identifying, reviewing and analysing relevant texts and will develop into arts-informed text construction in the form of a novel and exegesis. These outputs will develop existing knowledge and understanding of the era, locale and community of Woolloomooloo, Sydney as well as provide thematic accounts of a life lived in the context.

Qualitative research is "…multimethod in focus, involving an interpretive, naturalistic approach to its subject matter… involving the studied use and collection of a variety of empirical materials … that describe routine and problematic moments and meanings in individual's lives." (Denzin & Lincoln 1994, 2). Within the traditions of qualitative research, ethnography is an approach that seeks the "…description,

classification and interpretation of a particular group's way of life." (Denzin 1989, 157). Ethnography emphasises fieldwork which involves the researcher's immersion in the everyday lives of the subjects under study or "… an attitude toward 'being there' sufficient to experience the mundane and sacred, brash and nuanced aspects of socio-cultural life and, through observations, encounters and conversations, to come to an understanding of it." (Lewis & Russell 2011, 401). Such immersion of the researcher in the subject of study frequently positions the researcher as a participant observer. Participant observation combines analysis of documents, interviewing of respondents and informants, direct participation, observation and self-introspection. These methods in combination provide for internal validity (Denzin & Lincoln 1994).

A criticism of the Participant Observer approach is that such studies cannot achieve external validity in that: "…analysis of one case, or a series of cases is not sufficient for scientific generalization because of biases inherent in the selected cases," (Denzin 1989, 171). However, Denzin and Lincoln (1994) have pointed out that participant observers (who write personal narratives about how they studied what they studied) and ethnographers *write culture* (157). Whilst it is argued that science is culture (Commission for the Advancement of Science and Culture nd), culture is not 'science' in the traditional, positivist sense wherein dependent and independent variables can be identified and measured to generate universal truths; it is messier, less certain and more complex (providing fine foundations for fiction). The ethnographic approach assumes a commitment to symbolic interactionism and to the naturalistic method recognizing that objectivity is both unattainable and inappropriate within the ethnographic paradigm but that the careful construction of an authentic, verifiable and resonant 'subjectivity' reflecting life in the era and locale can be achieved.

The Narrative Inquiry approach is selected as the method for this ethnographic research as it is deemed "…best for capturing the detailed stories or life experiences of a single life or the lives of a small number of individuals." (Creswell 2007, 55). As the individual family member on whom the main character of this novel is based, is deceased, his own first hand accounts are only accessible through texts, such as his letters, paintings, artifacts and photographs. Purposeful sampling of research participants was conducted for this study in order to include accounts of the

protagonist's life that are drawn from those individuals who shared most closely in it, that is, his family. Snowball or chain sampling (Biernacki & Waldforf 1981) may be employed in the situation where an interviewee identifies further individuals or texts that may provide details relevant to the protagonist's early life and immediate social context. Such an approach aligns with the description by Webb and Brien (2011) of the creative arts researcher as 'bricoleur-as-bowerbird' (199) which emphasises that "…the creative practice directs selection of method rather than method driving creative practice." (Webb & Brien 2011, 199).

Narrative Inquiry requires open-ended and semi structured interviews that allow stories to unfold. The research should involve:

> …mutual and sincere collaboration, a caring relationship akin to friendship that is established over time for full participation in the story-telling, retelling and reliving of personal experiences. It demands intense and active listening and giving the narrator full voice. Because it is a collaboration, however, it permits both voices to be heard. (Marshall & Rossman 2011, 153)

Like any method that relies on participants' accounts, "…narrative may suffer from recalling selectively, focusing on the subsets of experience, filling memory gaps through inference and reinterpreting the past," (Ross & Conway 1986 in Marshall & Rossman 2011, 153). To establish the "trustworthiness" of a (qualitative) study, Lincoln and Guba (1985) have used alternative terms that, they contended, adhered more to naturalistic research: "…terms such as 'credibility', 'authenticity', 'transferability', 'dependability' and 'confirmability' as 'the naturalist's' equivalents for 'internal validation', 'external validation', 'reliability' and 'objectivity'," (p.300 in Creswell 2007, 205). To operationalise these new terms, it is recommended that qualitative researchers deploy techniques such as prolonged engagement in the field and the triangulation of data, sources, methods and investigators to establish credibility through thick description (Creswell 2007).

Analysis of data collected in ethnographic research is frequently conducted through a process of analytic induction (Smelser & Baltes 2001). A study such as this may be described as idiographic and emic as it is conducted "…in order to formulate lawful

statements that pertain to the single case… a particularizing study – not searching for cross-cultural universals but studying cultural meanings from the inside." (Denzin 1989, 200). In the fictional work that emerges, 'truth' is built up from a rich and broad iteration of the experiences, values, behaviours, life-events and artifacts of the family and community in their socio-historical context. The inevitably subjective accounts provided by research informants may not be in agreement and may, in fact, be contradictory yet, as Sarah Pollard demonstrates in her recent film *The Stories We Tell,* "…truth may come from editing the facts, whereby an unedited talking head may yield little." (Lambert 2014, 19). Leys argues that philosophers, scientists, writers of history and writers of historical fiction are essentially establishing truth via 'imaginative leaps':

> History (contrary to the common view) does not record events. It merely
> records echoes of events – which is a very different thing – and, in doing
> this, it must rely on imagination as much as on memory… the historian
> and the novelist both must invent the truth. (Leys 2007, 43).

Narrative Inquiry itself incorporates choices in how stories are sourced and structured for research including life stories, self stories and personal narratives or stories. Personal narrative is the selected format for research of family members because these narratives do not necessarily position the self of the teller in the centre of the story, as self stories do and are not told to or culturally mandated by a group (Denzin, 1989). Personal experience narratives may "…involve only one or two listeners… and are more likely to be based on anecdotal, everyday experiences, while self stories involve pivotal often critical self experiences." (Denzin 1989, 187). In the context of researching the early life of a deceased protagonist in order to develop a portrait of a real-world Woolloomooloo community, personal narratives allow a range of informants to contribute their memories and views of the protagonist but also identify and describe aspects of the locale and community that they recall as typical, definitive or important.

An interpretive data analysis approach has been proposed for this study based on the Dolby-Stahl literary folkloristic methodology for establishing meaning of personal narrative stories and is useful to the research proposed in this study (Denzin 1989, 198). This process, developed from Denzin (1989) involves a series of steps

beginning with the location of subject within a generic social category (male, working class urban youth) and the identification of salient themes and experiences in the subject's life (abandoned by father, growing up in Depression, surrounded by petty criminals and wharf workers, 'escaping' to War). The subject's life history and life story should then be connected to larger social meanings, including communal and private folklore (communism, working class exploitation, collectivism, depression, criminal subcultures, war). This folkloristic method of data analysis recognizes that the subject's life story reflects a set of meaningful experiences which, when told, create an emotional bond between the teller and the listener (building family ties) and also that the private, inner meanings of these experiences to the subject can never be fully revealed or illuminated (adapting and filling through fictional strategies and devices). Essentially, the researcher/writer is interpreting the materials by sharing in the world of the subject which involves bringing the interpretive approaches of literary theory (reader-response theory, deconstructionism, semiotics, psychoanalysis, feminism) to bear upon the life story materials (analysis of data within exegesis). Thus, the interpreter creates the document (novel) that is interpreted (exegesis). (Denzin 1989, 198)

Such an analytical framework assists structure and makes transparent the often messy and invisible process of historical fiction writing.

The framework of creative practice
The creative writing thesis that has developed over the past 20 years (Webb & Brien 2011) is conventionally made up of a creative piece of work, often writing but also performance and visual art, accompanied by an exegesis. In these decades a considerable literature has developed in relation to the creative writing thesis and the exegesis (see, for example, *Text Special Issue Illuminating the Exegesis* 2004). There is debate on the benefits and necessity for an exegesis along with significant variation on the purpose, content, format and length. Dunlop (1999) completed a novel as a PhD researching the teaching of literature and argued for the novel or literary narrative itself "…as a viable mode of representation for research is envisioned in light of the perception that ideas can be reflectively addressed through the arts in order to enlarge human understandings" (np). However, it is conventionally accepted that "It is the exegesis that 'proves' the work is not just art-as-usual, but art-as-

knowledge – a part of the doctoral tradition" (Webb & Melrose 2013). In a groundbreaking article on the subject, Brien (2006) argues that "…it is as researchers that creative writers can provide valuable insights into the creative process and how creativity can be enhanced both in other academic disciplines and the wider community" (53).

Boyd (2010) reviews an extensive range of creative writing research higher degrees and claims that the exegesis should be more than just an explanation or reflection and could be "…a site of experimentation; an opportunity to theorise about creative writing as a discipline," (22). Such creative theorizing has been conducted by a range of PhD creative writers including for example, Milfull (2012) who explores 'working with risky relatives' a PhD adopting the parodic framework of historiographical metafiction highlighting history itself as 'narrativised' rather than a 'truth-status' account (Hutcheon 1989, 8). Banagan (2010) provides a useful model of a creative writing thesis incorporating a novel set in mid-twentieth century America and Ireland and also an exegesis that structures a real-time and reflective analysis of the creative writing process through a quantum model of the left and right hemispheres of the brain. Leading researchers in the discipline, Kroll and Harper (2013) describe a range of productive methods to *draw together* critical and creative practice in writing and emphasise that it is particularly important to explain the convergence between the practice of research and the practice of creative writing. It will be made methodologically evident in the exegesis of this study how the research data informed the creative writing and was transformed in this process from 'data' to 'story'. Fictional strategies will be deployed to fill gaps, disguise and protect identities and develop an engaging plot and these movements will be tracked and explained in order to explicate the normally 'hidden' or 'unarticulated' (Carter in Webb & Brien 2011, 186) creative process. Murphy (2004 in de Mello 2007) explains the reflexive and integrative creative process:

> I became intrigued by the ways the fictionalised pieces made me aware of elements in the field texts and research experience I do not think I would have recognised if I had not engaged in this writing process. I also became interested, as I created the fictionalised pieces, in the process of creating

fiction in a research framework and what that meant in the process… it became an exploration of moving in and out of worlds, the worlds of the children in the inquiry, the fictionalised world, and the world I inhabited as narrative inquirer. (21).

In this symbiotic pattern of moving between related but distinct texts as they are constructed, as well as once they are completed, the exegesis of this study will identify connections and deviations which emerge between 'data' and 'fiction' and seek to explain these moves and these relationships in terms of 'representing' and (re-) creating history. In this way, this project seeks to develop both a fictional account and an account of 'the fiction' as it is drawn from a study of historical data.

Conclusion

It has been argued in this paper that creative practice-led research in the form of narrative inquiry drawing on the methods, traditions and objectives of ethnographic research can allow writers of historical fiction and/or family historians seeking to write beyond the facts, to develop a structured and productive methodology for creative writing. Such a method responds to concerns for sensitivities associated with publishing non-fictional accounts of family stories, whilst supporting a 'bricoleur' approach to 'fossicking' for ranging data sources that contribute to a story that could 'almost be true'.

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