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Independent Scholar

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Hearing home: Exploring place and identity through voice

Abstract:

Creating or recreating voices through the writing of fictional letters can be a way of reconnecting with places that may have been taken from us. For the person denied an authentic connection with their birthplace, the writing of voice through fictional stories, novels and creative nonfiction may have the power to bridge time and distance, to take a person back to the place where they were born and to help rebuild an origin story that was refused them. By recreating the voices of people associated with one's original home, especially when writing for an audience who may take the theoretical place of an absent respondent, a person may come to develop a better understanding of their relationship with that region. This paper is informed by Elspeth Probyn's theory that childhood is a repeatable point of beginning, Anne-Marie Fortier's extended definition of home, and an examination of the results a return to the past may bring. It references studies on dialect as it relates to character the epistolary form. It provides examples that informed the author's thinking in using voice to reflect place and follows with samples of the author's attempts to connect with their birthplace by drawing imaginary portraits using dialect reflected in the epistolary form. It ends with a reflection on this process.

Biographical note:

Australian/American Laura Fulton is a novelist, memoirist, essayist and researcher whose commercial, creative and critical work has appeared in publications in the US, the UAE and Australia. Laura's 2020 creative practice dissertation explored how the adopted person may address issues of identity, origin and belonging through creative writing experimentation. A former high school English teacher and current casual relief teacher, Laura's career as an educator has spanned over thirty years and every age level, from preschool, primary and high school substitute to full-time middle and high school teacher to university guest lecturer. Laura writes from the outskirts of Naarm/Melbourne.

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Is it not wonderful how I remember the voices better than anything else? I think they must go deeper into us than other things. I have often fancied heaven might be made of voices.
– George Eliot

Introduction

In George Eliot's 1876 novel *Daniel Deronda*, the title character's eventual wife, Mirah, reaches back in her memory, seeking family members with whom she has lost contact. Having been taken from her mother and brother at the age of six, Mirah feels a connection to her relatives, just for a moment, by recalling the way each of them spoke. Imitating each voice, Mirah recreates a memory from her past and, in so doing, finds comfort in her present.

Mirah's desire to know her mother may seem equally evident and naïve. How many of us, in the same situation, would not cling to such a voice had we only known our mother as a memory? Would we not, like Mirah, want this imaginary mother to know that we had always loved her? Would we not also have grown up wishing for just a glimpse of her, wishing that we could comfort her, if we could only know our mother was alive or dead?

Or perhaps we would know better than to trust the tatters of a single memory, a phantom voice remembered from childhood. Psychologists Helen Williams, Martin Conway and Gillian Cohen (2008) observe that memories can be deceiving, in many cases nothing more than "interpretations" made with the benefit of hindsight. Memories of our past can be more (or less) specific, often reconstructed, and a single memory is sometimes "representative of a series of similar events", many times less accurate than we think (p. 23). Perhaps we would also know that, despite our longing, parents are only human and not every parent is the paragon of acceptance, belonging or virtue for which we might hope. As Gender and Culture Studies scholar Elspeth Probyn (1996) notes, "[y]ou can never go home. Or rather, once returned, you realize the cliché that home is never what it was" (p. 114).

Still, there is little wonder Mirah fantasises about the mother and brother she seeks. Mirah is an orphan, long separated from her origins, and we orphans cannot seem to help ourselves. It is irresistible, this desire to know our roots (Bowers, 2015). Those of us who have been denied our past sometimes find ways to fill the gaps in our histories, supplementing scant memories like Mirah's with narrative, fantasy and imagination. While many take the concept of "home" for granted, others struggle to make sense of their origins. Those who have been removed, displaced or otherwise disconnected from their birthplace often look for ways to recover ties to those places. One way, like Mirah finds, is with voices.

For as long as I can remember, voices have fascinated me. Some places are defined by the distinctive sound of its people: the soft lilt of those from "Sath Care'line-ah", the sneaky "r" that somehow ends up in the middle of "however" when spoken by the Northern Irish, the way certain Queenslanders say "pew-well" instead of "pool". I still remember being eight years old, listening to a man in small-town West Texas ask my grandfather, "How much ye give for it?", meaning, "How much did it cost?". Everything – from the twang of the man's

voice to his interesting turn of phrase to the way he hooked his thumbs in his belt loops – placed my grandfather’s farmer friend in that dusty speck on the West Texas map. I would grow up with an affinity for voices, the unique way people talk, their cadences and accents and what those sounds revealed about the speaker, eventually using the ability to recreate certain voices to lead me, in a sense, home.

Creating or recreating voices through the writing of fictional letters can be a way of reconnecting with places that may have been taken from us. For the person denied an authentic connection with their birthplace, the writing of voice through fictional stories, novels and creative nonfiction may have the power to bridge time and distance, to take a person back to the place where they were born and to help rebuild an origin story that was refused them. By recreating the voices of people associated with one’s original home, especially when writing for an audience who may take the theoretical place of an absent respondent, a person may come to develop a better understanding of their relationship with that region through creative writing.

There’s no place like “home”: A risky proposition

While much has been written on the use of voice as it relates to writing place, less attention has been given to the ways in which employing the regional sound of a particular voice can assist with the exploration of identity. The use of the epistolary form may allow the writer to create imaginary portraits of individuals associated with one’s origin, while the reader of these fictional letters may, in some ways, stand in for the absent respondent with whom the writer may never be able to correspond.

Theoretically (re)writing the past

Underpinning the theory that fictional letters may be used to rewrite the past is Probyn’s recasting of childhood as something more than a moment in linear time. Sociologist Anne-Marie Fortier’s (2001) extended definition of home contributes to the structural framework that supports this proposition. The contradictory stances of adoption theorist Margaret Homans (2007) and memoirist and adopted person Jenny Heijun Wills (2016) challenge the benefits and potential risks of attempting to revisit one’s past.

For the person who was removed from their original home by forces beyond their control, one refreshing perspective to consider is that we are not required to remain encumbered by the childhood of our lived experience. Probyn posits that we each have the power to “laugh at childhood as the origin of whatever is”, to take control of how we feel about the past and turn “birth and childhood into a question of ‘so-what’ and ‘whatever’” (p. 97). While Probyn clarifies that childhood is “a space that cannot be revisited” (p. 103) in a literal way, she suggests that what we can do is reconsider our identity by re-examining that period of our lives (p. 99) and looking at childhood as “an event” (p. 116) rather than a “sustained mode” (p. 95). She notes that if we are not happy with the childhood we were assigned, we are each free to return to those years and “begin again” (p. 121) through writing.

Building on Probyn's theory that childhood is a rewritable point of beginning, Fortier extends the concept that "home" is perhaps more than just the place we come from. Fortier contends that "home" can be as abstract as a "destination" (p. 405), or as concrete as a place we return to over and over after "multiple migrations" (p. 414). While Probyn warns against the unreliable nature of a home that exists in the past, Fortier observes that perhaps home can be a place where identities are developed in "an ongoing process of becoming" (p. 414) or even a theoretical safe space. Fortier notes that several queer theorists "dissociate 'origins' from the idea of a single, unitary cultural-geographical space" (p. 408). In other words, what we think of as "home" and what we know to be our "origin" are not the same place – or they do not have to be, if we do not want them to be. Home may be, as Fortier suggests, "familiarity, where strangeness is cancelled out" (p. 410), a place that changes once it loses its mythical status (p. 412). Home, then, can be whatever we want it to be.

While the concepts of childhood and home may leave room for interpretation, Homans and Wills agree (and disagree) on the benefits of revisiting one's past, attempting to reconstruct or reconnect with that time and place. Homans, an adoption theorist, suggests that our origins are not really that important, that we are more than the sum of our ancestry (p. 64). This view contradicts the opposing, arguably racist and sexist point of view, sometimes referred to as essentialism, which contends that certain essential and immutable qualities should be assigned to people based on race or gender (Kobayashi, 1994, p. 77). Like Homans, Wills agrees with the reasonable perspective that we should "turn away from singular, fixed biological understandings of ourselves" (p. 203) and construct our own identity from what we know of ourselves in the here and now. If we are more than our blood, if we construct our identity in the present, there is little point in looking backwards.

More than pointless, there are those who contend that dwelling on the past may do more harm than good. Adoption theorist Barbara Yngvesson (2003) argues that attempting to return to the past, literally or metaphorically, may show the adopted person removed from their original home just how much they live in the margins, how much they may never truly belong (p. 17). Making contact can even be dangerous because, as adoption advocate John Simmonds (2000) notes, sometimes the people and place of a person's origin embody "rejection, abandonment and failure" (p. 30–31).

Despite discouraging the backwards glance, Wills – a transnational adoptee – observes that there is, in fact, some benefit to be had in going back, one way or another. Wills notes she was quite touched by her own roots journey and found herself deeply moved by seeing the place where she was born and meeting her biological siblings (p. 203). Adopted person and theorist Marianne Novy (2005) also says that, while finding out she was Jewish on her birth father's side did not give her a "simple message of how or whether" she should alter her definition of herself, she felt it was important that she "finally found out the truth" (p. 14). In other words, when attempting to return to the place of one's birth, either literally or through creative means, rewrite one's childhood or redefine with one's home, results may vary.

A "sound" methodology

Whatever the exercise may accomplish, a person like George Eliot's character Mirah – one who yearns to reconnect with an origin that has been denied to them – may return to the event of their childhood and recreate their original home, whatever or however they imagine “home” to be. While countless options exist, one methodology for returning to the past relies on sound, specifically creating the sounds of the voices of people from one's region of origin. Linguists Susan Tamasi (2001), Carly Overfelt (2017) and Faulkner scholar Stephen M Ross (1989) define and discuss dialect and what these voices may say about the characters the writer creates. Epistolary scholars Liz Stanley (2004) and Rachel Bower (2014) outline the aspects of the epistolary form, especially effective for conveying those voices, while literary critic Max Saunders (2010) defines the imaginary portrait, a literary technique useful for recreating figures from our past we may not be able to know in any way other than through creative means.

While the concept of “voice” in literature often refers to authorial tone and perspective, the aspect of “sound” one hopes to achieve when attempting to hear their original home relies largely on the writing of dialect, including word choice, syntax or sentence structure, grammar and morphology, which refers to particular pronunciations specific to a region (Crystal & Ivić 2024) [1]. As Tamasi notes, dialect is achieved when the author forgoes standard spelling and grammar so that a character's personality may come alive in a more genuine way through their speech and use of language (p. 129). By making these linguistic choices, one may recreate the sound of speech patterns specific to a region.

The language patterns created using these techniques of dialect can provide insight into characters we create, including personality, background, level of education, socioeconomic standing and age. Overfelt observes that the use of realistic regional dialect can also illuminate “the complex linguistic intersections of race, gender, class and region” (p. 7) among the characters we draw. Overfelt's deft examination of the different specific types of dialect, especially as it relates to race and African American English was critical to my understanding of dialect, as was Overfelt's critique of its overuse.

Within the voice of a fictional character, argues Tamasi, also lies links to the character's personality and role in the story (p. 129). American Southern writer William Faulkner perfects this technique in his characters by imitating the speech patterns of people he knew (Ross, 1989, p. 4). Faulkner recalls being a child in the South, where his large extended family would “swap stories” while he “sat in a corner and listened” (Ross, 1989, p. 2). Faulkner is so capable of creating characters with distinctive regional voices that a reader might find their own internal voice overshadowed with the powerful voices of Faulkner's imaginary cast (Ross, 1989).

Faulkner's attention to the sound of speech became one of his most effective literary techniques, one that allows his characters to embody the places they occupy (Ross, 1989). Characters such as Sarty and Ab Snopes of “Barn Burning” and Joe Christmas of *Light in August*, among several others, epitomise the time and region of the American Deep South in which their stories are set, the characters' specific place within that region, their

socioeconomic standing and their struggle against forces larger than themselves. Using dialect, Faulkner allowed voice and place to become synonymous [2].

The intersection of voice and place is seen perhaps most clearly in the epistolary form. By allowing the character to speak using not only the spoken but the written language available to them, the letter is an excellent means for drawing character through voice. Stanley observes that the epistolary form is defined by time: the “I/you” exchange written in the present tense with a future audience in mind, only to become past tense information once read. Not only may the structure and content of a letter change depending on the recipient of the letter and the passage of time, the voice and tone of the letter writer may fluctuate depending on the writer’s audience and purpose (p. 203). While Rachel Bower points out the distinct difference between the “syntax of oral and written language” (p. 324), Bower also points to the “immediacy” (p. 323) of the epistolary form, referencing Tony Jackson’s suggestion that the “personal letter exemplifies the writing that is most like speech” (p. 324). The fictional letter, then, is an excellent method for emphasising the voice of a character.

Because it relies on voice, the epistolary also lends itself to the drawing of the imaginary portrait, a form which combines the writing of others with invention. A blend of history and fiction, the imaginary portrait is useful for telling stories based on real people when little accurate information is known or when the writer hopes to conceal certain details. The imaginary portrait is also a method for telling stories of the self through the vehicle of the lives of others.

The concept of the imaginary portrait has existed for quite some time. Early examples include Walter Pater’s 1893 *The Renaissance*, James Joyce’s 1916 *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Ezra Pound’s collection of poems *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920) and Richard Aldington’s *Death of a Hero* (1929), all of which create imaginary representations based on fragments of authentic knowledge about real people. As Max Saunders notes, the writer of the imaginary portrait may include their own “‘inner’ experiences, which are true for the subject [or the writer] but are invisible to the public sphere” or certain biographical or autobiographical details and exclude others, or they may include “selected details” from real life as a starting point only for those details to be “transformed in the telling” (p. 302) of the tale. While there is some basis of truth in an imaginary portrait, this form makes no claim to represent a wholly truthful telling of another life.

But what happens to the “I/you” exchange when the writer lacks that link, when there is no recipient who may respond? For the person who knows little of their origin, the epistolary form may allow the writer to embrace the unknown and write into the void. In the absence of any actual respondent, the audience of a fictional letter – whether story, novel or creative nonfiction – may in some sense stand in place of a lost community. In this case, an epistolary work may take the perspective of testimonial, the writer exploring agency and self-knowledge as they position themselves in relation to the experience as something other than what has been done to them (Gilmore, 2002, p. 710). This testimonial is what anthropologist

Michael Taussig (2011) calls bearing witness, a “mysterious, complicated act” (p. 2) that encompasses more than what was seen. In this sense, the writer may feel heard.

For the person removed from their original home, who may have little or no information connecting them to the people and place of their past, the drawing of the imaginary portrait offers one option for creating lost loved ones through creative means. Using aspects of dialect to create the sounds of distinct voices, one may employ the epistolary form to develop imaginary portraits of people – real or invented – associated with the place of their origin, a creative exercise that may resonate for those who were removed from their birthplace and who, for whatever reason, have no means beyond the creative to develop that crucial bond and give voice to their experience.

Voice and place: A literary tradition

In September 1972, I was disconnected from my original home. For nearly eight months between the ages of two and three, I was an orphan, a legal ward of the state. I still do not know where I lived or how this situation came to be, only that my birth mother was no longer part of my life and there was no one else to care for me. I found a new home with a lovely family, and though my life going forward was a good one, I would spend the next forty years looking back to a place I barely remembered on the banks of the Mississippi River. Through a process of research and reflection, I discovered I could reconnect with that place through the writing of voice, drawing imaginary portraits using the epistolary form.

This process was informed by several illustrations I found within the literary tradition. Some voices are inextricably linked to particular places. An adept author can capture those voices in such a way that readers can “hear” that place just by sounding out the words on the page. Consider, for example, this excerpt from Thomas Wolfe’s 1935 short story “Only the Dead Know Brooklyn”:

“G’wan!” some wise guy dat I neveh seen befoeh pipes up. “Whatcha talkin’ about?” he says – oh, he was wise, y’know. “Duh guy is crazy! I tell yuh what yuh do,” he says to duh big guy. “Yuh change to duh West End line at Toity-sixt’,” he tells him. “Get off at Noo Utrecht an’ Sixteent’ Avenoo,” he says. “Walk two blocks oveh, foe blocks up,” he says, “an’ you’ll be right deh.” Oh, a wise guy, y’know. (Wolfe)

This distinctive voice takes the reader directly to the iconic borough of New York City, famous as much for the sound of its spoken language as it is for its characteristic bridge and Coney Island theme park. This story, told as a continuous monologue, captures the sound of an unnamed narrator recounting an incident that happens to a New York City commuter on a subway platform. In terms of sound, the speaker’s dialect is so specific, the reader can hear this place just by decoding the phonetic indicators.

Wolfe’s use of “yuh” for the standard pronunciation “you”, the slang expression “g’wan” pronounced as one word in place of the standard “go on” and nonstandard spellings such as “befoeh” (before), “toity” (thirty), “oveh” (over) and “foeh” (four) all capture the

nonstandard pronunciations one would typically associate as being spoken by a person native to Brooklyn. (What and who determines “standard” pronunciation is beyond the scope of this investigation, albeit a question that warrants further investigation.) I chose this example for the distinctiveness of the American accent, so different to my own.

But what about other accents derived from the English language? In the same way Wolfe uses the voice of the unnamed narrator to transport the reader to Brooklyn, Irvine Welsh recreates the equally distinctive sound of Edinburgh, Scotland in the 1993 novel *Trainspotting*, as we see in the following excerpt:

Ma room is bare and uncarpeted. There’s a mattress in the middle ay the flair with a sleeping-bag oan it, an electric-bar fire, and a black and white telly oan a small wooden chair. Ah’ve goat three brown plastic buckets, half-filled wi a mixture ay disinfectant and water for ma shite, puke and pish. Ah line up ma tins ay soup, juice and ma medicines within easy reach ay ma makeshift bed.

Ay took ma last shot in order tae git us through the horrors ay the shopping trip. Ma final score will be used tae help us sleep, and case us oaf the skag. (p. 15)

Throughout the novel, Welsh recreates distinctive regional accents of Scots, Scots English and British English through the various characters. Readers around the world can hear these unique voices and, by extension, each unique place, through the sounds of these voices. This sample, also a monologue by main character Mark Renton – who, at this stage of the chapter, is determined to kick his heroin habit – demonstrates the sound of another dialect most often associated with this specific place. I chose this passage to demonstrate that, though the speaker of this sample and the previous sample are both speaking the same language, their dialects are wholly unique and distinctive.

While Wolfe’s story and Welsh’s novel both provide compelling samples of dialect as a means to embody place, my objective was something more specific. I extended my study of voice and place by focusing on women writers of the American South who had the same goal as mine: to create fictional versions of people they knew (but not well), allowing the voices of their mostly imaginary characters to embody specific places through fictional letters.

Appalachian author Lee Smith (1988) uses the twin devices of voice and the epistolary form to create imaginary portraits in her novel *Fair and Tender Ladies*, a series of fictional letters chronicling the life of Appalachian mountain woman Ivy Rowe from the late 1800s to the late 1970s. As the story opens, young Ivy writes to her pen pal, far away:

Dear Hanneke,

Your name is not much common here ... I know all how you live too, we have seed the pictures, I cannot feature it all so flat ther with flat water so brightly blue and never a mountain nor nary a cloud in the sky. You are lower than the sea so that oncet a boy has had to stick his finger in the wall to hold back the water, this is scary to me ...

Momma makes all of our clothes we have storeboghten shoes thogh they are black, they have copper on the toes so as not to wear out very fast. I disgust them and wish for wooden shoes and a lace cap like yourn ... (p. 3)

Using the device of the letter, we not only hear Ivy's regional dialect – her use of “oncet” for “once”, “yourn” for “yours”, “nor nary a cloud” to mean “not one cloud” – we also get a sense of her level of education (“we have seed”) and her age (“we have storeboghten shoes”, “I disgust them”). These elements place Ivy as a little girl in the distinctive region of small-town Appalachia. Voice was such an important element to the story, Smith reflected that writing protagonist Ivy Rowe was “like taking dictation” (McCorkle, 2016). And while the novel was not written as a memoir, Smith wrote the story with real people in mind, as a way of memorialising the personal history of not only her protagonist's culture, but her own (Robbins, 1997, p. 136). In this way, *Fair and Tender Ladies* achieves many of the goals I hoped to accomplish.

Even more aligned with my objective of using voice to reconnect with the people and place of my original home is Alice Walker's (1982) Pulitzer Prize winning novel *The Color Purple*, in which fourteen-year-old Celie writes a series of letters to God, recounting the events of her life in early 1900s rural Georgia:

DEAR GOD,

He beat me today cause he say I winked at a boy in church. I may have got somethin in my eye but I didn't wink. I don't even look at mens. That's the truth. I look at women, tho, cause I'm not scared of them. Maybe cause my mama cuss me you think I kept mad at her. But I ain't. I felt sorry for mama. Trying to believe his story kilt her.

Sometime he still be looking at Nettie, but I always git in his light. Now I tell her to marry Mr. _____. I don't tell her why.

I say Marry him, Nettie, an try to have one good year out your life. After that, I know she be big.

But me, never again. A girl at church say you git big if you bleed every month. I don't bleed no more. (p. 7)

Through the subtle use of spelling, grammar and syntax, Walker brings to life not only Celie's voice but the tiny rural town of Eatonton, Georgia, where Walker grew up, the backdrop for the story's opening. Throughout Walker's epistolary novel, the author draws a number of imaginary portraits that helped the author bond with her own past. Walker describes the novel as a way to reconnect with family she had never really known:

I was longing, really, to know my ancestors better – [m]y parents, my grandparents, my great-grandparents, and I just started thinking ... that I could write a story about them that I would enjoy, because it would mean spending time with them ... with people I hadn't had a chance to spend time with, growing up. (Edemariam, 2007)

In creating these imaginary portraits, Walker uses epistolary fiction to draw “characters inspired by her own family, especially her violent young grandfathers, ‘batterers, womanisers, alcoholics’” (Edemariam, 2007). These portraits afforded Walker the opportunity not only to give voice to these ancestors but also to explore her connection to them and her past. In employing the epistolary form, Walker showcases the distinctive regional voices of her birthplace. By allowing main character Celie to address her letters to an all-knowing but otherwise disengaged “God”, Walker navigates the absence of the respondent from the typical “I/you” exchange.

The road home: An imaginary family portrait

Like Alice Walker, I wanted to get to know the people associated with my place of origin, but my hope in part was to connect with the region itself. I recognised that one benefit of the epistolary form was the link I would be able to create through the sounds of those voices. By allowing certain characters to speak for themselves in letters written by their own hands, I would be able to recall my pre-adoption home, bring that once-home to life – at least for myself – and restore some sense of connection to that place. Consider the following sample:

May 18th, 1997 Greenville, Mississippi

Dear Kathy,

How are you? Im good. been sick latly and deling with that ‘troble’ Matthew got into at scool. I think we bout got it sortd out. t other boy aint gone press charges, he said, if Matt an Billy dont smash his winshil no more so I rekon we off the hook. Im jus glad wasnt nobdy kilt in the ‘acident’. that’s how my cosin end up in the state farm. anyways Matt tole the police he was soree ...

Well I got a leter from carol and I had to tell you something there was a wuman snifin a round lookin fer ‘peggy biship’. you member her? thot she was so hot in high scool jus cos all the boys ust to folow her a roun with ther touns hangn out like a bunch a dogs you end up getn in yourself in troble. well her baby has CAME BAK lookn fer her aint that some kinda shit? aperntly that baby growd up to be a hor jus like her momma but GET THIS she thot we mita new whar she was. I sad no way sistr!

I dont even know why carol wouda even been ‘writng’ to me becas I dont no nothin bout no peggy biship an I don’t no nothn bout bein any kin a hor. I jus had numonia in 10th grade my aunty Betts livd in ‘florda’ were it is warm my daddy took me ther it was a long driv it was fer my lungs my doctor sayd numonia has a inkyubashon perod a nine or ten monts thats jus a cowhensedenc an it make you gain wayt. My dcotr said but he dont live her no mor or you culd ast him. I was jus sick not nevr no hor I dont now nothng evn bout that I dint evn now nothin bout sex nor boys nor evn kising. well thats the trut anybdy dont belef me I dont car.

And Ill tell you anoter thing. I shor dont know whar in the HELL no peggy biship mit a end up. THAT girl is lik to be anywar on this her EARTH maybe rusha or ‘egp’ or somesuch as that. God only nows and He the only one cars. Maybe not evn Him.

Anyway, I dont car if I NEVR heer the nam ‘peggy biship’ and her baby evr agin. becas I nevr had no baby and I woldnt care if I did. I woldnt nevr be sad bout some lost baby I wasnt ‘nevr’ gona see agin becas lost babys DONT NEVER COME BAK my aunty Betts and my momma both saed. so ther aint no use bein sad nor cryin nor nothin. so peggy biship can GO TO HELL!!!

Anyways, hope your all good over there. Mississippi is good but I shor miss you girls. somtim I wish things woul a turn out difernt and I migt a ben able to stay but you now what my daddy is lik. an anyway buster a good man I guess. no he is. maybe we can make it fer crismas this yer. I now I alays say that and I nevr do but I hope.

Think of you alays,

Sue

(Fulton, 2020, p. 62-63)

This sample demonstrates techniques of dialect I used to create the harsh, grating Southern accent that is often (but not always) found in the Mississippi delta region of Southern Arkansas. The written aspects inherent to the epistolary form – including the character’s phonetic spelling, grammar and nonstandard punctuation – also demonstrate the character’s level of education, indicative of the region.

Through this character’s harsh voice, I explored the parochial attitudes that informed the region at the time of my birth. This sample was my attempt to confront the very real way some people believed, into the late 1980s and beyond, that a child could “inherit bad blood” from their inferior birth parents (Miall, 1989, p. 37). Giving life to this imaginary portrait with the distinctive voice of the region helped me to better understand the pervasive attitudes that defined my experience. Like Alice Walker’s Celie, who writes to her silent, watchful God, I had no one from my birth town to whom I could address my letters. In this case, the eventual reader became the witness to my experience.

Continuing to follow Alice Walker’s example, I attempted to use the epistolary form to draw imaginary portraits of people to whom I had once been related, connected or associated with in the place of my origin. I knew my imaginary portraits would only ever be just that: fictional – informed by secondary research, assumption, fantasy and my own world view. Having been removed from my original home at such a young age, I had few legal documents on which to reconstruct any reliable origin story, and even fewer reliable memories. For this reason, if I wanted, like Walker, to get to know the relatives from my past, creative means were my best – in some cases, my only – option, as I attempted in the following sample:

mama i mis yu, how ar yu, how is sadie an june, i mis them al rel bad, i mis Lucas, i hop war tha sint him the new foks ar tretn him gud, he was alays a gud boy, rebeka wil mak her new foks tret her gud or she wil wup them gud, she was alays rel strong for a grl, evn if she is litlr thn me, I hop the othrs ar ok to, mabee thay wont cry to muc, i no trais he alays hates it whn thay cry, i membr

[section unintelligible/unable to transcribe (scribbled out), transcription continued below]

mabee ther new foks wont get to mad cas yu ant ther to mak them stop an it cud git rel hard fer them litl ons if they dont lern to stop cryn

i wil go to skol son, thay ar putn me in 4th grad agin, thay sed im not to big an wont nobdee no im 12, i tol thm i don 4th grad bfor 2 tims but thay sed i dint lern anuf an i haf to do it agin, mama i promus this tim il do it gud an nevr belt nobdy an nevr lev aftr lunc an do wat them tetcers tel me, if them kids say them things abt yu i wil akt lik i dont hear, if i dont belt them it dont men i dont car i do but i cant do 4th grad agin

i no this is al mi falt, I dint men to tel the man at skol, i was jus thinkn abot somthin an he ast me alot of kweschuns – abot Daddy an did i lov him an do i member him at al frm wen i was a babee wen he lef an do i mis him, pekular kewschuns lik that – an i wasnt evn rely payn that man no mind wen i sed Daddy nevr tok a beetin fer me lik yu dun al them tims, evr tim trais wud get mad an tak of his belt an start at us an yu jus say ‘trais, dont’ al kwiyt, evn whn yu was feln sik, an yu new he wud tern on yu an go al nit, mama yu ar mor brav than eny man i no of, not suprmn or genrl mcartr nor John F Kennedy nor not on man I no fer rel in lif is brav as yu, I no yu proolly hat me now cus i tol that man at skol an he cald the sheref an thay tok us al awy but whn i gro up i hop i kin be haf as brav as yu, lov tuck

In this sample, the speaker reveals his age, origin, education, social and socioeconomic standing and much of his personality through his word choice, diction, syntax, dialect and punctuation. Writing this character allowed me to feel closer to my original family and develop a much deeper appreciation for the pervasive poverty and lack of opportunity characteristic of the Mississippi delta region at the time I was born. I have always known how little the United States supports those on the edges of its society. In the early 1970s, young parents in the best situations could expect little in the way of help from the US government, and the social structure in southern Arkansas provided even fewer options. This creative exercise helped me to develop a greater appreciation for the situation my original family faced when I was young. It also gave the character a voice. You, the reader, do not need to know the identity of the person on whom this character is based. That you know they once existed, that you understand how they lived and why – that you have heard their voice from the past is sufficient.

Even though they were almost entirely fictional, the samples I wrote attempting to recreate figures from my original home succeeded in achieving the goal I had hoped to accomplish. Giving those imaginary portraits realistic voices in the epistolary form allowed me to feel a

greater connection with those people and that region than I did before. Even more, the exercise in writing for an audience allowed me to bear witness to my experience and feel heard.

Reflection

Despite the warnings of adoption theorists like Homans, Wills and Yngvesson, I have found my attempts at revisiting my past to be rewarding. That said, writing dialect – for whatever purpose – bears close consideration around issues of representation. While voice can be a tool to re-create place, it has the potential to result in the othering of those whose voices are appropriated, whether intentionally or unintentionally. Take, for example, Mark Twain's *Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*, a work of Southern literature often considered an example of adroit manipulation of dialect. Overfelt provides a close examination of the ways in which Twain captures the voice of enslaved person Jim and the numerous detailed characteristics of African American English reflected in Jim's spoken language (p. 28).

While noting Twain's accuracy in developing Jim's dialect, Overfelt also agrees with Toni Morrison's assessment that "Jim's portrait seems unaccountably excessive and glaring", especially by comparison to the amount of dialect assigned to most white characters in the novel, even though Twain himself was notably "absolutely critical of slavery and American racism" (p. 34). Overfelt argues that by overemphasising Jim's accent, dramatically more so than the dialects of the other characters, Twain (perhaps unintentionally) objectifies and belittles Jim. This complex issue warrants further study and justifies the attention of writers who attempt the writing of place with voice.

I also continue to be intrigued by Fortier's notion of home as "a destination rather than an origin" (p. 405). This perspective renders the *there* and *then* of our origin, our childhood home, as relevant or irrelevant as we choose, as Probyn suggests, a rewriteable event. If "home" is an idea that we may travel towards (rather than a physical place), perhaps we create home over and over again by assigning meaning to those places where we feel we most belong. In this way, home can be both here *and* there, if we so desire. The definition of home, where and when it may be, is open for further discussion. Future research may continue to consider this question, other ways we may define home and our origins in relation to identity and self.

For myself, though, as an exercise in exploring my identity and writing my past, the writing of dialect has been fruitful. The imaginary portraits I created of key figures from my past, using dialect to hear the sounds of my original home, helped me to rewrite my childhood and re-imagine my origin story. Others who have been disconnected from their birthplace through forces beyond their control may also find the writing of fictional letters, whether for an audience or not, to be a useful way to reconnect by hearing home.

In George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda*, Mirah remembers the voices of her mother and brother "better than anything else". To be honest, I do not remember anyone's voice specifically. I

remember sunlight on my face, the smell of the river, the leaves on the trees, the presence of cousins nearby, dirt in my hands. I remember sensations, impressions, the noise of kids playing. But the voices I have had to conjure from songs, movies, music, books. Sitting, like Faulkner, in a corner and listening to people from that place, rolling those sounds around in my mouth until they felt right.

As Homans and Wills warned, the exercise of writing imaginary portraits has yet to provide me with any sense of absolute closure – which is OK. By engaging with my past through creative writing, I was able to regain some feeling of connection with the life and family I once knew, the place I once lived, the person I once was before I was disconnected and rehomed. Even regaining this *sense* of connection with the past has allowed me to make space in my current life for the person I was before. I have written into the loss, given voice to the absence. I have addressed my fictional letters, if not to the people of my past, at least to someone – to you, the reader. In this instance, I feel heard. For me, this has been enough.

Notes

[1] The distinction between dialect and idiom, vernacular, patois and idiolect, while relevant and fascinating, falls beyond the scope of this investigation.

[2] It would be irresponsible to ignore that, while Faulkner was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1949, he was also an unapologetic racist: he used racial slurs, supported lynch mobs and opposed racial integration (Cep, 2020). And while Faulkner himself attempted to separate his personal outlook from his professional output, telling *The Paris Review*, “The artist is of no importance. Only what he creates is important” (Cep, 2020), there is no denying Faulkner was party to the perpetuation of the racial tension that continues to plague the United States today. As a lauded, influential voice of the American South, this aspect of Faulkner’s personality should be noted if his masterful use of literary technique is also to be referenced.

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