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I am the amazon who dances on the backs of turtles: Becoming the subject of the story in a community writing and publishing project

Abstract:

This paper is concerned with the practicalities of writing stories of 'me' in the frame of an interest in taking up alternatives to the positions offered by dominant social narratives of identity. It draws on the work of a women's community writing and publishing group in the ACT (Homefront, 1988-1992) and in particular looks at the writing practice I developed with the group over three series of workshops and two publications. The focus of this approach is working with and against various forms of writing. It is situated in a wider theoretical interest in 'changing the storylines' which I am currently exploring through my PhD thesis topic, 'Re-writing Self and Community'.

Introduction

Homefront women's writing and publishing group was initiated through a series of writing workshops with Doris Women's Refuge in the ACT in 1988. Subsequent workshop series produced the publications *Belles' Letters: voices from homes of violence* (1990) and *Hells Belles' Letters: lines from the homefront* (1990). Over its most active period, from the beginning of 1990 until the end of 1992, Homefront established a wide distribution network and mailing list, encouraged other women to write, and participated in public readings and workshops.

*Starting next week - we were told - would be two community development workers.
They will be working with residents of the refuge and ex-residents - helping women adjust to their new lives.
Good I thought
Two new faces
I was getting bored with the now well known faces of the well meaning refuge workers.
(Paris, memories of Homefront process, 1991)*

There are numerous and various examples of community writing and publishing activity across Australia, though much of it is more concerned with writing than publishing. (For instance see Molly Travers, *Text* 1997.) Homefront was initially hosted by a community organisation and supported financially on a project basis through various sources including arts funding. There was an explicit feminist intention 'to speak out about domestic violence and sexual abuse' which shaped itself in terms of long-term goals to reach other women through independent publishing. In this Homefront was particularly inspired, as other work in Australia has been, by the British community writing and publishing movement which emphasises publishing as a vital way in which non-mainstream voices reach an audience, as well as the importance of writers having control over the way their words are presented in print (for example see Morley and Worpole, *The Republic of Letters*).

*During our exploration we made a few demands. We wanted the workshops/
process to continue and we wanted to extend the scrapbook into the form of a publication so that it could reach other women... Contact with other women was very important to the group, we wanted to finish the alienation.
(Paris, Nature of Adult Learning assignment)*

I was employed as writing workshop leader with Homefront and was involved, through my role as Community Literature Officer in the ACT, in later stages of the group's activities. Research workshops with Homefront members formed the basis of a study for my Graduate Diploma in Continuing Education and now form the core of my PhD thesis on writing self and community.

In this paper, I introduce and look briefly at main aspects of the approach to writing self that I developed with Homefront participants during the course of the writing projects. The intention of this approach is to write self as the subject of the story. In effect it is a re-writing project which encourages writers to find, explore and take up alternative subject positions. In practice it involves working with the form various kinds of writing take; changing or challenging the established lines on which they run as a way of opening up positions and avenues for the shaping of text/self. It also implicitly involves working with 'community' in the sense that it engages self as one amongst others, rather than taking up the idea of an author as one apart from others who speaks with singular and special authority. In

its place it offers the idea of the subject's authority in relation to her position in the story, her invention or telling of self.

...
here is a woman who is however she wants or needs to be
here's a woman whose behaviour can be lazy, loving,
stubborn, generous, twitchy, kind, mean, expansive, laid-back
here's a woman who's living her life, reacting to her
surroundings, initiating things
I can be right here, off my tree and out of my body hey, but I
decide
hey, and if I say that I'm built like a wharfie
you'd better believe that's the size I'm feeling today
 (Lisa, 'this is a woman who is', *Belles' Letters*)

Following my interest in the way in which 'genre forms...determine the theme' (Bakhtin/Medvedev in Morris 1994:177-178), in writing about Homefront I'm interested in working 'in and against' the traditional form of academic writing; mixing exposition with other more 'evocative' writing styles and using my own voice in different registers, as well as juxtaposing it with the voices of Homefront participants to produce what Laurel Richardson calls a 'knowing' (Richardson 1994:516) of my material. In fact I see it as more of a 'thinking'. In this article I draw on Homefront publications, writing about Homefront and conversations with Homefront participants, including a taped interview. I also use excerpts from a letter to a colleague in London, interested in doing a writing project with a domestic violence support group.

Becoming the subject of the story

Theoretically the Homefront approach to writing self, and my representation of it in academic discourse, draws on feminist and poststructural understandings of gender and language.

Feminism takes both a resistant and transformative approach to women's subordinate social identity. In working strenuously against violent abuse of women it claims their equal rights as individuals and the validity of their experience of abuse, and demands change in a social order that produces and condones such abuse. In working towards change it encourages abused women to see themselves as self-determining subjects, rather than the objects of their abusers, and on this basis to change their lives. Feminism, in effect, offers women an alternative story to live by, in which they neither deserve or ask for violent abusive treatment and in which the plot concerning their life course is not fixed to such abuse.

Postructuralism opens up both the complexity and the possibility of the feminist project through identifying language, and its discursive organisation, as shaping individual subjectivity (Weedon 1987:74).

Language does not 'reflect' social reality, but produces meaning, creates social reality. Different languages and different discourses within a given language divide up the world and give it meaning in ways that are not reducible to one another. Language is how social organisation and power are defined and contested and the place where our sense of selves, our **subjectivity** is constructed. (Richardson 1994:518, emphasis in original)

Writing self as the subject of the story connects the liberatory discourse of Homefront feminism with the poststructuralist view that the subject is constituted by language. 'Speaking out about...' becomes 'finding a voice' in the constitutive and self-transformative sense that Bell Hooks names as 'coming to voice' (Hooks 1988:45-49):

Only as subjects can we speak, as objects we remain voiceless - our being defined and interpreted by others. (46)

Finding such a subject voice in writing involves resisting the powerful and most accessible discourses that speak of us as objects and reaching for a language through which 'I' can speak.

Language can serve either as a prison house, or as the material of liberation. (Haug et al 1987:63)

Jo Spence writing about photography calls it 'putting myself in the picture' (Spence 1989), Fiona Place, discussing a writer in residency project with people with psychiatric illness, calls it 'saying what is me' (Place 1990:45). Frigga Haug and her comrades talk of resisting the cliché, those 'ready-made assemblages of words' that 'condemn the writer anew to subordination', and propose working creatively with language, as a means of opening up options for the experience of 'me' (Haug et al 1987:63).

The Homefront workshops opened up spaces for writing self as subject by working with form rather than content, by working together rather than in isolation and by taking charge of the publishing process. The following discussion provides some examples of these activities and suggests something of the atmosphere of enthusiasm and discovery that was part of the Homefront workshops.

You know how they talk about electrical experiments - the first person who put things together so they went spark - a bit like that
(Homefront participant, taped conversation 13/5/95)

Working with form

Dear M

It was fabulous to hear your enthusiasm for Hells Belles' the other night, and connecting about the plasticity of language - how to make it immediately something malleable and fun, rather than overwhelming, how to make it open possibilities rather than close and fix them...

Here are some suggestions, with your interest and situation in mind.

Focus on familiar forms - writing I already do - lists, notes, letters, scrapbooks, recipe books, photo albums - make a list of them! Focus on forms that connect - letters, scrapbooks.

Ease people into writing by drawing on these forms and working on them together - eg group shopping lists (wish lists, hit lists). Encourage extravagance...
(Letter to colleague 17/10/97)

Letters and scrapbooks

To start the workshops we read women's letters from the nineteenth and early twentieth century; letters that described domestic life at the time, hinted at its pains and darker tragedies, as well as hopes, hard work and interest; letters that showed the constraints of women's social position, but spoke in their varied voices.

The letter is a familiar and defined but flexible form. It is multi-purposed, and multi-voiced. You can write an assertive letter to Housing, or an intimate letter to a friend. The letter has an immediate and direct audience, named at the top. This provides a firm frame of reference for decisions about tone, style and content.

Working with letters provided the basis for Homefront participants to see writing in terms of audience and purpose.

You weren't writing in isolation any more. You discovered a language. You discovered a connection... Like everything I put down on paper wasn't so much to heal myself. It was like...this is how I see it and I'm sure you could see it some similar way.
(Homefront participant, taped conversation 13/5/95)

At the end of the first workshops the participants decided to make a book for other women. The scrapbook of writing and artwork and personal bits and pieces that was kept during the first workshops offered a model. In a naming ceremony which involved pulling one of many possible titles from a hat, that first book became 'The power of paste and women's voice'.

Voices - from talk to text

...imaginative literature has more in common with spontaneous conversation than with the typical written genre, expository prose... The features thought of as quintessentially literary are, moreover, basic to spontaneous conversation... A few such features are repetition of sounds (alliteration and assonance), repetition of words, recurrent metaphors and other figures of speech, parallel syntactic constructions and compelling rhythm (Tannen 1985:137-138)

A feature of writing as the subject of the story is writing with a live voice - the sort of voice that speaks in uninhibited conversation; creating images, manipulating language confidently and recognisable for its distinctive turn of phrase or signature. Deborah Tannen identifies 'interpersonal involvement' as a feature common to 'casual conversation' and forms of writing such as personal letters (129) and imaginative writing (137-8). As readers we experience such live writing as telling, touching, moving, gripping...

Something that was also very important in early stages with Homefront workshops and others I've done, is what Homefront called the 'voices' exercise. This encourages people to value not so much what they have to say (though this too) but the way they say things - the skill they have in putting words together and connecting with others through talk. This draws on what you might do as workshop leader in making a list of what people say, but in this case, people work with each other in pairs...

(Letter to colleague 17/10/97)

Turning the language inside out

*Today I want to say
Gurgle Gurgle
Splat Splat
Take that
Stuff it in your hat
Wear it flat
And remember what it was
That I said
Gurgle Gurgle
Splat Splat*

(Paris, Hells Belles' Letters)

Bill Green writes about the power relations of English teaching in schools in terms of social regulation (1988:50) which in effect supports what Haug et al call the 'division of labour in writing' between 'literature as creative writing and everyday language as communication' (1987:38). Both writers suggest 'disrespect' for this order. Green calls on 'playfulness' as a democratic antidote to the 'silence and seriousness' of literature (1988:58), the exclusivity of belles lettres.

The Homefront workshops emphasised fun and play with language. We cut up and collaged words and phrases from magazines, played with the shape and sound of words. The group was delighted when Janine wrote a piece shaped like a toilet.

Working as a group

...The warm feelings when voices small and uncertain at first start to add to the fabric of the web that is the group - the workshop... We see our own words on the wall belonging with everyone else's - we belong together now - they are the beginning.

(feral, Hells Belles' Letters)

The Homefront workshops were based on group writing activities, often starting with a list of some sort, made on butcher's paper and visible to all. Contributions were made by calling out a line. The authority of each speaker was honoured but there was the opportunity to change lines, and rearrange their order through discussion. The group pieces were vital in generating and sustaining individual work.

A particular example of working with writing as a group which also reflects on working with form, was what became known as the 'labelling' exercise. Workshop members were keen to put down/write up all the ways they'd been 'labelled' or how they'd featured as objects in the discourses of others (Ania Walwicz's wonderful piece, 'men said to me', is particularly to the point here). In the first place everyone had a great time making a huge list of things that started 'you're...'. Just putting them together in a highly visible way changed the position of 'you'. Then we looked at arranging and ordering them, taking further control over them by juxtapositions that made particular meanings with them, and inserting lines in the first person. In the book we made the list into a pyramid shape, and individual pieces which worked with it in all sorts of transformative ways followed.

In her design of *Belles' Letters*, graphic artist eX de Medici, used drafting paper for the group pieces which meant that the text of individual pieces which followed could be seen through the group work. With *Hells Belles' Letters* detailed discussion about design and layout workshops were part of the process and each writer designed and organised the layout of her own pages; another graphic representation of individual/group. In addition, in between each set of pages, drawing on the scrapbook idea, was a set of blank pages which extended the idea of writing, to readers.

As we are talking about the workshop process... Paris opens Hells Belles and points to individual writing, saying 'this is personal'. She closes the book and holds it, 'this is group process'

(Homefront journal 10/10/97)

One day a copy of *Hells Belles* came back to Homefront with every blank page filled in. Paris remembers how Margaret picked it up and caught the scent of nicotine from the pages.

Taking charge of the publishing process

American women of colour like Sherene Razack and Bell Hooks have identified the commodifying of marginalised voices. Razack suggests a kind of cultural tourism. 'I have seen students literally feeding off the tears of stories from the Third World...' (Razack 1993:97).

Bell Hooks comments, 'Black women writers are **in** right now' (1988:46). In these conditions 'other' voices are condemned to otherness, to spectacle (46), as 'extraordinary' objects of interest to the mainstream publishing market.

Oh those poor creatures/oh those poor poor/broken women
(Homefront participants taped conversation 13/5/95)

Learning the skills of publication and distribution, and working on this together, is one way of resisting 'existing images and ways of knowing constructed within social frameworks that reinforce domination' (Hooks 1988:48). In the *Belles' Letters* workshops, participants decided to use a photograph of cracked lino as the cover image. *Hells Belles' Letters* used it as the entire cover. This image was deeply embedded in shared understandings and particular memories and aptly held the book together. More than that, it was the way Homefront members wanted to collectively and publicly write themselves as subjects of the story.

...Margaret says... 'That was my idea, from the lino on the floor of the house that I lived in, in New Zealand. It had those images that you're supposed to find on a carpet but it was all cracked and worn.' Together then Paris and Margaret gather up the meaning of cracked lino and the fading pretty-rose pattern. It's domesticity, the homefront, home as the crime scene, the battle zone. Paris says for her it's the lino you were always looking down on as a kid, head down, looking at your feet, and later, it's what you're always trying to keep clean, keep the cracks and spills from showing. Then you get to kiss it, she says, either cleaning, or when you land there.
(Development of conversation with Homefront participants)

Violence is an ordinary story.

I am the amazon who dances on the backs of turtles

Writing...is malleable. It is a plastic art. In writing we not only can create worlds, we can change them at will... A child writes 'the dog died' and is astounded at what has been accomplished. The child has put a dog into the world that did not exist before - created a world that would not otherwise have existed - and then has killed the dog... And if the child is contrite, a stroke of the pen is all that is required...
(Frank Smith 1985:207)

Frank Smith's article led to 'the crossing out exercise'. This was also informed by the work of Fiona Place, author of the novel, *Cardboard*, which she describes as a way of writing herself out of anorexia. Fiona is interested in how the subject represents herself, how she will shape her story and the choices of direction she will make in the process.

Writing is not only about being a voiced subject but also about having a choice of ends.
(Place 1990:5)

The crossing out exercise was a group writing process which at first changed the actions of the subject in each successive line and then changed the character of the subject. The first section started 'the girl smiled', the second 'I am the girl':

The girl smiled/said fuck this I'm not going to smile for no bastard/screamed/refused to come back/stepped out/purred/spread her wings and flew away/swung shut/ I am the girl/amazon that dances on the backs of turtles...
(Research workshops, 1991)

Re-writing self and community

An important thread through the Homefront workshops was change - changing mainstream stories of abuse, changing how I write such stories of 'me', and finding that I have other stories to write as well. Changing perceptions of writing, including who writes what and for whom, was another important aspect of the workshops. Since then I've worked on a number of community writing projects with various emphases on writing, publishing and story, and increasingly focused around place. None of these have had quite the community-driven, political focus of Homefront, but they all offer the opportunity for refiguring ourselves as individuals and communities; in Drusilla Modjeska's words 'chang[ing] the stories we are willing to hear, and claim, and live by' (1998:21).

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