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Truth or Fiction: Writing Narrative in Research

Setting The Scene

We need to ask, first of all, whether we want to study a culture in a calculating, solely intellectual way, and then - when we turn to the task of bringing the culture to others - whether those whom we study would want to be represented in that way... from which every ounce of sensual and emotional content had previously been bled in the name of credibility? Do we really have to avoid lyrical description, subjectivity, and the personal voice in order to hold our place in the line-up of respected social scientists? (Altork, 1995:130)

This paper/performance piece explores the use of "narrative" as an integral tool in the presentation of experiential research. As Researchers, we are working in fields as supposedly opposed as pure academia and pure fiction. We are discovering the most accessible, appropriate expression of these extremes lies in sites between these two points. Our explorations are also attempts to structurally and linguistically display the theoretical framework of multiplicity, hybridity and interweaving, regarding the relationship between researcher and researched, issues of accessibility and political usefulness. Hence, we are weaving textual tapestries which address persistent questions: for whom are we writing? of what use is our writing? what do the people we write about gain? how do we write for the activist as well as the academic, for personal as well as political engagement?

By marrying the hybridity of our research to the styles and structures of our research writing, we may transcend these limitations. Using the rich cultural capital of our subjects, such as the Italian tradition of oral story-telling, we may deconstruct traditional research modes through the integration of "narrative" writing.

In order to illustrate this dynamic, egalitarian relationship between the "researcher" and the "researched," we will present primary research material and demonstrate the effectiveness of weaving varying degrees of narrative into its presentation.

The raw material of our research is the emotions and experiences of the "researched": mainly second generation Italian-Australians in relation to their lived expressions of ethnicity, gender and sexuality. Writing forms which emulate the complexity and diversity of such experience simultaneously reach out to a wider audience; and audience whose educational, social and economic conditions may limit their access to the traditional academic research paper or who may feel academic representations are inappropriate or irrelevant to their lives.

Text as metissage, that is the weaving of different strands of raw materials and threads of various colours into one piece of fabric...It would emancipate the writer from any internal or external coercion to use any one literary style or form, freeing her to enlarge, redefine, or explode the canons of our discursive practices. (Lionnet, 1989: 213)

Truth

An Italian-Australian straight woman met an Anglo-Australian gay man at the Mardi Gras. They fell in love and spent the first three years of their relationship battling both 'straights' and 'gays', 'Italians' and 'Australians', about the validity of their relationship.

Academic Discourse

There are at least three major potentially homogenising and coercive forces which police and regulate public representations of privately lived realities. These forces are: ethnic and gay/lesbian community censorship and disapproval; ethnic and gay/lesbian community codes and regulations for belonging and for being representative voices of that community; and the constant push and pull of Western binary constructs (either/or) coming from the wider society, European and Westernised ethnic communities, and gay/lesbian communities. In relation to and negotiating these forces are persons who see themselves as "too queer for the straight, too straight for the queer, and actually too queer for the queer". (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1996a: 98)

Narrative

Mardi Gras.

She wears a short bright dress and high heels. He wears a white t-shirt and black bike pants. She looks pretty. He has the crew-cut clean look. Standard uniforms. She is straight straight. He is gay, but...

It's their first Mardi Gras. They hadn't intended to spend it together. ...

"What's happening here?" she thinks in confusion. "He's gay and I'm heading for heartache. After years of fag hag expertise, how could this happen to me?". ...

They make some attempts to retrieve the masks. She thinks, "He is gay, isn't he? I'm not going to be his experiment with hetsex." He thinks, "Why her when I'm surrounded by these male hunks? Is this her idea of kinky sex?" They stare at each other with suspicion. They pull apart and then feel themselves melting into each other.

She shakes her head slowly. "We can't," she says. "I know," he says. Not much conviction in their voices.

She's frustrated. He's supposed to be reliable company. He's frustrated. He's finally at a Mardi Gras and all he wants to do is hold this woman.

...

Mardi Gras.

She wears a black high-cut body-suit. He wears bright purple bike pants and bare chest. Her hair is in an intricate formation. He is growing his. She is not-so-straight straight. He is bisexual. They enjoy the Mardi Gras together.

It's been a strange, painful, traumatic year. In trying to be true to their new unfixed selves, they have hurt those they love and been hurt in return.

...

Because they have discovered their two selves together do matter so much, not only in straight land but also in their Oxford Street neighbourhood amongst the so-called radical who can become conservative and oppressive. Oxford Street is not such a haven anymore. There are less smiles, more blatant stares.

...

Mardi Gras.

She is wearing black velvet short shorts, a bustier, and suspenders with fish-nets. He wears a leather and chain harness and leather short shorts. ... She is queer-straight. He is bisexual.

...

The gossip has died down in their Oxford Street neighbourhood. They're like pieces of furniture which you can't axe for firewood, you can't feel comfortable with, and you feel funny having them around, but somehow they're there and actually would be missed if they were thrown out. And you know, they're quite nice pieces of furniture anyway. Indeed, many younger immigrants to these blocks don't really care. Everyone's queer and you can't tell who's who anymore. And identity politics can become too confining.

"A mixed cultural, mixed gender marriage". They compare notes on split ends and hair dyes. He wears her mascara on special nights out and flutters the eyelashes at all the good-looking boys who hear him say how much he loves her. She wears his leather shorts, experiments with his leather and chain harness, and dreams about fulfilling her big fantasy, being behind one of those tough sexy-looking dykes on bikes in a future Mardi Gras. He has the same fantasy. (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995a: 26-32)

Truth

Nancy was born in 1956. Her sister Franca in 1964. Nancy was chaperoned on dates. Franca went out with her friends. Nancy didn't have sex before marriage. Her sister did. Nancy was betrothed to a Italian who turned bad. Franca slipped out the bedroom window and dated whoever she liked. Nancy was disinherited from her family when she eloped with a nice Italian but divorced chappie who her father didn't approve of. The parents paid for Franca's marriage to a non-Italian with a drinking problem. Franca visits her family once a week. Nancy's phone calls to her parents are terminated with screams of abuse. Her children have never met their grandparents because they think their daughter is a slut.

Academic Discourse

The identity of the second generation child was defined as the repression of living within two worlds. Labels such as "double disadvantage" emerged: the Italian-Australian girl suffering the plight of being not only

ethnic but also a woman. Against the concurrent political push for assimilation, it presumed ethnic parents were inferior and forecast the children would deny their cultural background. By the 1980s, new liberal thinking supported by the era of cultural diversity, pluralism and multiculturalism surfaced. "Cultural Synthesis" evolved as the new discourse of negotiation and resolution. The Anglo-Australian and Ethnic Australian cultures gained acceptability as two ways of life, language and tradition interacting rather than opposing each other. Tonina Gucciardo explored this binary in the "Best of Both Worlds" (1987). Here, NESB youth weren't marginalised or conflict ridden but synthesised. In the 1990s, Pallotta-Chiarolli concluded second generation Italian-Australian girls were experiencing less cultural coercion and undertaking more cultural choice with both Italian parents and Anglo-Australian society (1989:49-63). It is the dawning of the "Heartbreak High TV Promo" Generation. I'm a wog and I'm proud.

Narrative

Anastasia "Stassy" Sumich is 17 when she enters the graduating year of Hartley High.

Stassy is classically beautiful but she hides this under an almost feral image: nose ring, cropped hair and grungy clothing.

Stassy's a rebel. Her liberated Australian upbringing clashes with her parents' homeland Yugoslav values. Stassy is sandwiched in the middle. She learns how to protect herself, often resorting to lying.

At her old school, Stassy lacked concentration. She had bad record with the male teachers who she would challenge and confront, often causing class disruption. When she was counselled, she was secretive and unwilling to participate in discussion.

Stassy is a wild one and her home secrets constantly fuel her rage.

(Heartbreak High, 1996)

The Creative Process: accuracy vs. accessibility

You are always working in this precarious space where you constantly run the risk of falling on one side or the other. You are walking right on the edge and challenging both sides so that they cannot simply be collapsed into one.

(Trinh, 1992: 173-174)

The experiential research based on the "real" subjects of Nancy and Franca is presented in genres as supposedly opposed as pure academia and pure fiction. Neither is an accurate representation of the truth, but the truth in each is recognisable in that it sources the initial research material. The question we pose as researchers working in narrative genres is: can we represent research within more accessible generic sites without sacrificing the accuracy of the raw material?

It can be argued any genre or form of expression which utilises the research incorporates the experiential capital within its essence. What we are exploring here is a question of degrees: how can we successfully qualify the relationship between the researcher and the researched, issues of accessibility and its political usefulness?

When presented as "raw" research, Nancy and Franca's story is directly related to the "researched." It is folklore, one generation removed from the truth. In the storytelling process, the research has been condensed in time, spiced up with words and expressed in rather broad generalities. But its truth is recognisable. Its audience is limited to the immediate family and friends of the researched, local gossip or urban mythology. Its political utility fulfils the same functions as a morality tale or as neighbourly entertainment.

But take this same "truth" into the new site of academic analysis and the political readings of the cultural capital are numerous: ethno-graphic, multicultural, generational, feminist, post-colonial, etc. But while its political utility is maximised, the relationship to the researched is sacrificed, relegated to the role of a quotation mark or footnote. It's accessibility is institutionalised. Niche marketed.

Its television evolution as the character, Stassy Sumich, is a useful comparative site. It's catchment audience is the largest of the mass medias, its political engagement, exponentially referential. But if we were to draw isobars around a central core representing the "accuracy" of the experiential research, the distance from the core representing the various narrative genres relationship to the truth, television "narrative" fiction would be nervously teetering on the periphery. What separates this genre from the "raw material" is the processes involved in creating the generic form.

When the cultural capital within the research is invested into the creative narrative process there is a withdrawal of cultural funds. "Cultural capital" becomes a unit of measurement through which we may trace the experiential research through the various production processes. Or what I call, "Stassy Sumich and the Ever Shrinking Ethnicity", the debiting of the experiential research:

1. The volatile political background with the Australian network dropping the program "Heartbreak High" after market research showed the youth audience didn't want a "multicultural" cast, immediately endangered "cultural capital", invested in the character, Stassy Sumich.
2. The racial background of the character was determined by the actress who was cast prior to the creation of the character: an exotically beautiful blond teenager. The character's country of origin was subsequently narrowed down to Eastern European, Yugoslavian.
3. The episode introducing the character was to reveal domestic violence and incest as reasons for Stassy's bad record at school. This was quickly dropped when the time slot changed to "G" classification.
4. The episode coincided with the Helen Demindenko saga. Network Executives condemned the portrayal of "bad" ethnic characters for fear of racial reprisals.
5. In Europe, the market for which the program was produced, Yugoslavia is an explosive issue. Is Stassy Croatian? Bosnian? or Serbian? What is her religion? This would affect future sales to the European market. Stassy's racial origin began to be described under the general term of the "Former Yugoslavia."
6. The Production Budget didn't stretch to see Stassy at home. As a result, other ways were required to illustrate her ethnicity. Subtitles were too expensive. An actor known for his roles in movies as the quintessential Aussie was cast as Stassy's father.
7. The assigned director, the product of Cultural Conflict of the 1960s, rejected most of the remaining authentic cultural representations in the script. When the fine cut of the episode is screened for the Producer and Network Censors, the scene with Stassy smashing the bottle of dill pickles she has mysteriously pulled out of her rucksack, is the only vaguely cultural remnant of Stassy Sumich's character. Only now it makes absolutely no sense to the story and the episode is running 3 minutes over. Decision: edit the scene out.

Whether this debiting of experiential research is undesirable is a matter of debate. The mere presentation of second generation ethno-Australians in television drama is broking goodwill, a realisation of its cultural assets. The accuracy of this cultural signification is the trade-off, an issue for future speculation.

The Research-Narrative Network: the hybridisation process

write from within, between and about the gaps, the borders, the mid-points of interwoven identities which occupy multiple spaces beyond binaries.

I'm working with constructions of multi-culturalism (hybrid ethnicity) like not-Italian AND not-Australian; multi-sexuality (hybrid sexuality) like not-gay AND not-straight.

So my work is not-academic AND not-fiction. It appears in multiforms, for multipurposes, to explore multiplicity. The same "truths" in different forms. Three issues frame and interrogate my writing/research:

1. *Accessibility.* My research and writing is based on relationships in my life which already exist, or which are initiated by the research and evolve into a life-span of their own. Sometimes strangers will meet me and tell me their stories and hope that I use them. How do I reconstruct people's intimate details in ways which do not exploit nor appropriate? How do I write so that the "written-about" can access the work, identify themselves, and collaborate with me in the portrayals of their realities? If I write about my mother migrating to Australia, or a Lebanese friend's bisexual Muslim realities, will they be able to see the journeys they make through my words even if they haven't stepped into a university, apart from cleaning its toilets?

2. *Activism.* I want to shift attitudes, stir the emotions, politicise. How do I write so that the academic and the bureaucrat, the secondary school student and the amusing/confusing entity "the general public", will also see why they need to know about the journeys of people like my mother and my Lebanese friend? How do I get issues of multi-sexuality onto multi-cultural agendas? How do I get multi-culturalism onto multi-sexuality agendas? How do I get multiculturalism and multisexuality onto feminist agendas?

3. *Language.* I come from a Southern Italian peasant oral storytelling tradition as a way of teaching and discussing political and sensitive issues. The anecdote is the explanation. When I was five in 1965, I was thrown into a monocultural Australian working class school and drowned/cleansed in English. Much later, I was told in order to have some measure of credibility in academia, (my so-called "exotic look", and the uniforms I chose to wear from the many available, were already problematic) I would have to learn academic language. I now bridge the three, sometimes comfortably, but they each only convey a part of the multiple. How do I interweave the words and their worlds?

I'll give you three examples of journeys my work has undertaken from their "original truths":

* A close friend is gay and teaches with me in a Catholic boys' school. He finds out he has AIDS. I write the narrative of that journey, communicating about each step with all the "real" people in it, and donating royalties to the Bobby Goldsmith Foundation for People Living With AIDS. It is published as a "semi-autobiography" and does well particularly in schools, including Catholic ones(Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1991). I am then asked to write academic pieces explaining/interpreting my "semi-autobiography" and "how to" pieces explaining how teachers can use the book with students. I am also asked to write political pieces for schools, ethnic communities, health groups on issues of AIDS, homophobia, ethnicity, gender and sexuality. This journey continues: currently working with a film producer/director to consider turning it into a feature film.

* As part of postgraduate work in Women's Studies, I undertake oral history interviews with the women in my family: straight-forward interviewer/interviewee dialogue. Sections are published as academic papers for multicultural, feminist and educational publications, becomes part of a Migration Museum exhibition in Adelaide of particular interest to the ethnic communities, and is excerpted for anthologies(Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1996b). For my mother and second mother, my auntie, and many in the Adelaide Italian community, seeing themselves as part of the audio-visual Museum exhibition is the most powerful occasion. I usually get a proud hug and kiss for the other publications. They get placed on a shelf in the lounge room but are read only once. I now have developed the interviews into a full manuscript and will be seeking its publication. So the journey continues.

* As part of my Masters in Women's Studies, my thesis on lesbians of Italian background based on interviews is published in its original form. Since then, sections have been written in diverse forms for diverse multicultural, feminist, educational and mainstream texts, including a short story now used in secondary schooling. The relationships begun with and resulting from my research have taken different roads, from occasional letters to close friendships. My current Ph.D research is one of the new journeys which began with my Masters journey.

searching for different ways of describing the complexity, multi-dimensionality, the organisation and disorder, the uncertainty and incongruities of the social worlds that we and others inhabit (Evans, 1992: 245).

Narrative

They stifle me with ridiculous rules and regulations they have brought with them from Europe, but they haven't changed with the times like the Europeans have. There is always something which shouldn't be said or done. There are always jobs I have to learn because all good Italian girls know how to do them and one day I'll need them to look after my chauvinistic husband. There's always someone I have to respect. I hate the word respect. It makes me sick to my stomach.

I'll run one day. Run for my life. To be free and think for myself. Not as an Australian and not as an Italian and not as an in-between. I'll run to be emancipated (Marchetta, 1993: 41).

If someone comes up and asks me what nationality I am, I'll look at them and say that I'm an Australian with Italian blood flowing rapidly through my veins. I'll say that with pride, because it's pride that I feel (Marchetta, 1993: 258-259).

Academic Discourse

One of the strongest exponents of the transition to the "Good Second Generation Italian Girl" is the novelist, Melina Marchetta. A teenager of the late 1970s-early 80s rather than the fifties, her novel, and subsequent play, *Looking for Alibrandi*, parallels the journey from coercion to choice. The main character, Josephine Alibrandi, in searching for her personal identity amongst three generations of Italian women living in Australia, personifies the internal voice of "Good Italian Girl" in Australia today. Josephine negotiates her way through the traditional cultural stereotyping which her Nonna is trying hard to impose upon her, and after a journey of pain and conflict, she emerges discovering she is the product of synthesised Italian and Australian culture. Indeed, Josephine travels from a position of "coercion" at the beginning of the novel to the empowered status of "choice" by the final chapter of the novel.

Truth or Fiction?

"I mean all that crap about the boats unloading illegal shipments of heroin into the cafe?"

"You think we would of seen something if it was true. I mean we got a pretty good noses for drugs." Uproarish laughter. We touch noses. "Hey, Sofie get our profile shot." Zoom in. Roman noses. Camera trauma. Sudden fade to black. "Fuck you, Bruno. Give the camera back."

In retrospect, I guess we should of cut that bit out. I don't reckon the violent siege of the camera by Jo-Jo's little brother actually helped us explain that we weren't Daughters of the Mob.

"Direct links to crime boss, Robert Trimbole? Connections to the police force? It's all rubbish."

"Bruno keep the camera straight. This is serious." Sudden lens burn. "My Papa worked hard for what he had."

I rush into shot. "Yeah, it's not about the Mafia. It's about ownership. Protecting your assets."

"Your family, your house and your business, they're the things you work all your life for. If some bastard's going to take that from you. You fight for it."

"Onore della Famiglia. That's what we live for. Your daughter brings shame upon your house, you kick her out. Your best friend not going to honour your promise, you stab him in the heart."

"Our Papa's loved us. They wanted the best for us."

"My Papa wasn't going to give away his pride and joy over some pissy card game. Lucchese was a shifty. Furbo. It was well known."

"What do you mean?"

"Come on, everyone knows that he forced that young Maria to have a backyard abortion."

"She was allergic to the...."

"What about that night we were hanging out near the Re Store and he came out of that gambling joint with those two bimbos?"

Jo's sticking her thumb into my breastbone: "He did it with the gypsy and you know it."

I spit in her face: "Yeah well why did my mama go back to him if he did it?"

Jo's smug: "It's the way she's culturally programmed."

It got to be an all-out brawl and we recorded it all on tape. When you're a wog you've got a different way of sorting things out. You pissed off with someone, you get it out of your system straight away. No thinking about it. No negotiation.

We thought we were giving a selfless expose but Mrs Riley told us the reason we failed the assignment was that the filmmaker's argument in the documentary was "intrinsically flawed." I think that was unfair. We were arguing really well. But in those days we didn't know arguing meant having a clear line of thought.

Truth

Sam and Gloria are a bisexual married couple living in the suburbs of Adelaide. Their parents are of Southern Italian background. They have children, good jobs, and realities rendered unreal by the very groups they belong to.

Academic Discourse

Representations of sexualities are still often splitting, fragmenting, silencing, negating or invisibilising individuals located within, between and beyond hierarchical binary representations such as those of straight/gay, Anglo/non-Anglo, centre/margin, monogamy/multipartnering. Persons who inhabit the borderland, or slip into the cracks of these insider/outsider zones, often find themselves negotiating with the control/conformity and deviance-designating systems of both the so-called mainstream with its heterosexist, phallocentric and Anglocentric categorisations, and the control/conformity and deviance-designating systems of the so-called marginal or power-challenging minorities such as ethnic communities, gay communities, lesbian-feminist communities. (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1996a: 97)

Narrative

Gloria and I are sitting on her back veranda eating her home-made tiramisu. Her husband, Sam, is swinging their kids on the clothesline inbetween cooking the meat on the barbecue. Both sets of grandparents are in the garden discussing tomatoes, wine-making and basking in the satisfaction of sitting in the backyard of married children, knowing they have fulfilled their parental duties in getting their children to this stage of sistemazione.

Gloria shrugs. "Sam and I are bisexual, we occasionally have other lovers in ongoing relationships, we are very happily married, and we love being Italian and hope our children cherish their cultural heritage the way we do. But all these contradictions are not meant to exist".

She looks at the various members of her family enjoying the sunshine and peace. "From when Sam and I were teenagers, we knew we were different. Not only different but supposedly non-existent. It's as if we were the only kids on the whole planet who were not gay and not straight, who wanted to have the good old-fashioned Italian wedding and raise an Italian family but not accept what would've been traps for us like needing to be monogamous and heterosexual. Well, we still feel like we're the only Italian-Australians that have ever been through this and it's so isolating sometimes. There's no one else to talk to, no one else to tell you your lives and mixed identities are realities, your sort of marriage exists. But every now and again, we wonder who else is living similar realities but also in absolute silence? We're real. We're flesh and blood. He's there cooking the barbie and playing with the kids and I'm here scoffing my face with tiramisu and our parents are there seeing what they want to see and not needing to know the rest. We're resigned to the fact that in our lifetime there won't be any public acknowledgment of our particular situations. These days it's all about multicultural identity and gay identity and every now and again there's stuff about a multicultural gay identity, but neither the multiculturalists nor the gay activists are prepared to publicly discuss our complexities. But more of us will come out of the woodwork."

Gloria sighs and stretches out her arms to her world. "I love being married, I love being bisexual, I love being Italian-Australian. They can co-exist and they do right here in this suburban backyard." (Pallotta-Chiarolli, 1995b: 140-141)

When boundaries begin to break down between the poetical and the personal, the popular and the obscure, truth and fiction, some interesting elements begin to slip through the cracks.
(Trinh, 1992: 248)

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APRIL 1997