Beyond epistolarity: The warp, the weft and the loom

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Abstract:
Contemporary autoethnographic epistolary creative writing grounded in both feminist and post modernist paradigms gives women a voice. By challenging metanarratives their stories can instigate social, cultural and political action. The PhD by artefact and exegesis explores the formation of a writing subject and argues that the epistolary form and the fictional techniques of novel writing provide a safe space for women to tell their stories. The exegesis analyses the importance of creative epistolarity as a way of knowing the self. It highlights the need to find ways of producing knowledge by rejecting the concept of the detached observer. Personal choices of omissions and additions both academic and creative have had a profound impact on the research, the writing of the exegesis, and the creation of a novel.

Biographical note:
Glenice Whitting’s epistolary novel, *Pickle to Pie*, was published by Ilura Press in 2007. Glenice is currently a PhD candidate in Creative Writing at Swinburne University of Technology. The creative component of her PhD is an epistolary, autoethnographic novel, *Hens Lay, People Lie*.

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What a woman does in writing, in telling, is to search, sifting through the many versions and possibilities to find the shape and truth of her life, the story she doesn't yet know, the image and narrative she struggles to bring, like herself, into being. (Modjeska 1994:31).

Human beings are natural storytellers, weaving narratives of self into epistolary texts such as letters, diaries, emails, blogs and electronic social networking such as Twitter and Facebook. This practice-led PhD consists of two elements: an exegesis Beyond Epistolarity: The Warp, the Weft and the Loom, which reveals theories accepted and abandoned, choice of methodologies, fictional techniques and creative pathways employed when creating an epistolary novel. ‘Hens Lay, People Lie’ is about two women, two cultures and a shared dream. My aim is to encourage women to write innovative self-reflexive narratives which will inspire and empower other women to weave the colours of their lives via their stories into the fabric of society, thereby adding their voices to an emerging women’s discourse.

To embark on a PhD is an emotional and enlightening experience. To grow as a writer and move on in my life I stepped out of my comfort zone of imaginative creative writing and embraced the world of academia. However, I now see scholarly work is more than an individual quest for knowledge and understanding. It is a collaborative process in both its creation and its dissemination (Stimpson 1984). To hold all the strands of the artefact and exegesis together and to engage in an analyses of my work and clarify my thinking I use a weaving metaphor. Auto/biography is the warp: the taut foundational threads attached to the loom, epistolary fiction is the weft weaving through the warp to create the colourful design, and a multi disciplinary autoethnographic qualitative research is the loom, the firm framework that cradles the weaving of words,

I set out to write one woman’s story through epistolarity. Hens Lay, People Lie germinated from my chance meeting in 1975 in Outback Australia with an American poet. It is the story of my pen friend, Mickey Bogert’s fascinating life and explores our thirty-five year friendship via the epistolary medium of letters, journal entries, limericks, and poetry in an Australian/American context from 1975-2010. I've found that the interplay between the research process, including the reflective journal and the creative writing has had a profound effect on my writing practice.

I began writing ‘Hens Lay People Lie’ as a non-fiction auto/biography in the style of 84 Charring Cross Road (Hanff 1970). It is both biography and autobiography, not only because it weaves my words with those of my penfriend, but also because the lives of penfriends are inextricably intertwined (Binhammer 1993). Further, as Kendall once suggested any biography uneasily shelters an autobiography within it (Kendall 1965).
The difficulties of writing non-fiction soon became evident when I realized my collection of letters needed to be heavily edited, amalgamated and journal entries truncated, because, as Patricia and Frederick McKissack point out, no one wants to 'read a bunch of dull facts' (McKissack 2010: 1). Many letters were missing. How was I going to fill the gaps within the narrative?

My writing journal became my place to explore and work through many research and writing issues before making the inevitable move from non-fiction into a hybrid genre, delicately balanced between auto/biography and epistolary fiction. The techniques of fiction allow me to get to the truth of the characters personal experience via imaginative reconstruction (Angrosino 1989). Writing fiction also addresses the problem of producing a publishable novel. It means I can employ literary writing techniques crucial in delivering emotional details that engage readers. According to Stephen King, the primary function of dialogue in narratives is to reveal character (King 2007).

Like Laurel Richardson, “I welcome, ...the blurring of genre, the complexity of writing, the shaggy boundaries between ‘fact’ and ‘fiction,’ ‘subjective’ and ‘objective,’ ‘true’ and ‘imagined’” (Richardson 2000:253). A ‘mediated text’ by which I mean texts that are often halfway between fact and fiction, gives me authorial freedom and license to craft the narrative, to move beyond rigid classification and literary restrictions, giving creative freedom over the material.

Many other authors make the same decision. Kate Grenville intended to write a non-fiction account of her ancestors when she began her book Secret River, but when some of the work needed to be fictionalised, her book became a novel (Grenville 2005). She comments that “readers often ask novelists “is your work autobiographical?” and most novelists hate the question because the answer can be both yes and no”(Grenville 2006). Carolyn Ellis agrees and insists that no text is free of its author or completely neutral or objective. Elizabeth Jolley’s character in Miss Peabody’s Inheritance comments, ‘There is too thin a line between truth and fiction and there are moments in the writing of fantasy and imagination where truth is suddenly revealed’ (Jolley 1984).

When attempting to understand and produce epistolary fiction, which I call ‘creative epistolarity’, it is useful to consider the genre’s conventions. I began researching how contemporary women in postcolonial cultures were writing epistolary novels and questioned whether my novel, consisting mainly of prose with letter and journal fragments, would be considered to be within the parameters of the epistolary genre. As Elizabeth Campbell points out, novels that are not composed exclusively of letters can be classified as epistolary (Campbell 1995). Australian author, Elizabeth Jolley’s novel, Miss Peabody’s Inheritance, for example, is continuous prose and the only whole letter we see is Miss Peabody’s first letter to the novelist (Jolley 1984: 1-3). Yet, this book is epistolary, in that the fragments of letters reveal the story of pen friends. More recently, extracts from blogs and emails are often included in novels.
An example of the modern epistolary genre is the controversial *The PowerBook* by Jeanette Winterson (Winterson 2001).

One of my reasons for choosing to write creative epistolarity is the versatility of the genre — one that allows writers opportunities to examine physical characteristics, style, content and the principles of craft. (Sadlack 2005). Since the 1980s there have been a significant number of novels that make use of epistolary conventions in an unconventional manner (Campbell 1995:334). These contemporary novels, unlike eighteenth century sentimental examples are experiments in style and form. They emphasise postmodern fragmentation, shun essentialism, debunk universal truths, replace grand narratives with local accounts of reality, and support a plurality of viewpoints (Jary 2000:475). These novels blur the boundary between letter writing and novel. In *Miss Peabody’s Inheritance*, (Jolley 1984) Jolley uses letter fragments to weave parallel stories. In effect, reader, writer, and text are fused. Characters are readers and writers; readers and writers are characters, the text is both fiction and reality at the same time. *The Household Guide to Dying*, (Adelaide 2008) has a journalistic ‘Dear Abby’ style.

Other novels such as *The Star Garden*, (Turner 2007) *We Need to Talk About Kevin*, (Shrimer 2003) *Grace Notes* (Patrick 2008) and *A Mercy* (Morrison 2008) also enriched my artefact, by expanding stylistic and structural possibilities within the creative epistolary form. These texts are written by women, tell women’s stories and examine women’s lived experience (Campbell 1995). Inspired by these writers I believe creative epistolarity is uniquely placed to challenge metanarratives and give women a voice.

I came to the research with a passion to explore, discover and understand. However, establishing my relationship with theory has been a difficult process and I did not realize the influence my research would have, not only on my thinking, but on my writing. It is intellectually challenging to engage with theories such as postmodern feminisms, and convey what I have learnt via a theoretically based exegesis. However, Kay Vandergrift maintains that “Those who become lost in what Geoffrey Hartman and others have called the wilderness of contemporary literary theory will find it useful to keep in mind that all theories are themselves products of the imagination” (Vandergrift 1997). Nevertheless, insights gained from my foray into the theoretical standpoint of third wave postmodern feminisms, especially the works of feminist thinker Hélène Cixous now inform a new understanding of my writing practice. My first novel *Pickle to Pie* was a male story written from a male perspective. *Hen’s Lay People Lie* represents a significant move forward. I’m writing a story about women from a woman’s perspective. I see that many of my personally held beliefs and practices align with those of a wider female existence and a new sensitivity now informs my writing of marginalised women. (Leavy 2009)

As I read more and listened more I became entranced by the image of women weaving words and producing colourful individual narrative designs. Feminist thinkers such as Hélène Cixous (Cixous 1980), Luce Irigaray and Julia Kristeva
(Zajko 2006) refer to this style of writing as *écriture feminine*. Cixous defines it as unrepressed women’s writing that is more fractured, more unstable, more colourful than the writing of men (Cixous 2008). Deborah Silverman Bowen argues that letters, emails and blogs written by women are a form of *écriture feminine* and part of an emerging women’s discourse that portrays the struggle women engage in with their social milieus and with themselves (Bowen 2004). Women are writing, and telling their stories, in their own voice. However, do my experiments with voice and epistolary conventions constitute ‘unrepressed feminine writing’? Has the analysis of women’s writing, changed the way I write? I’m now writing in my own style and voice, hoping to add my colours to this new and vibrant tapestry.

The more I research and explore multiple and partial truths, challenge the dominant discourses and work in the margins and learn to honestly embrace complexity, the more I evolve into a woman who wants to own, and own up to her own story. I have found the courage to investigate and use myself as research; to acknowledge the importance this project has for me. My dream is to find the shape and truth of my life, the story I don’t yet know, through writing.

Like Judith Gill I discovered,

> *I am my data; I’m in it and it’s me. I cannot stand back from myself. I have become a subject of my own exegetical research as much as I am an authorial presence and character within my novel.* (Gill 2008)

This led me to Laurel Richardson’s writing as a method of inquiry (Richardson L & St. Pierre E A 2005) and to an investigation of contemporary narrative inquiry, which Susan Chase describes as, “An amalgam of interdisciplinary analytic lenses, diverse disciplinary approaches and both traditional and innovative methods… as narrated by the one who lives them” (Chase 2005:651). Using narrative inquiry, researchers turn an analytic lens on themselves and their interactions with others around culturally significant experiences. The decision to focus on my own writing journey led to Carolyn Ellis’ autoethnographic ideas and methods (1995; 1997; 2004). Like Bochner & Ellis I believe that creative writing is embodied enquiry: that ‘imagination is as important as rigour, meanings as important as facts and that the heart is as important as the mind’ (cited in Berridge 2000: 2)

The writings of Ellis (2002), Bochner (1994) and Reed Donahay (2002) reveal that autoethnography is a qualitative research method, extending beyond autobiography because it tests social and historical boundaries and by empowering self and others, it opens the possibility of cultural transformation. Autoethnography focuses on the writer’s subjective experience rather than the beliefs and practices of others; to produce knowledge by rejecting the concept of the detached observer. Bochner claims that

> *The investigator is always implicated in the product. So why not observe the observer, focus on turning our observation back on ourselves? And why not*

My own story is an integral part of this research praxis. As the author, I have a dual role of autoethnographer and of storyteller (Reed-Danahay 2002). This approach is imperative for me as a fiction writer because personal experience is an essential part of my writing, especially weaving through the novel what I call my LED moments of enlightenment.

There is a perception that autoethnographers willingly tell their stories and highly personalised autoethnographic narratives have been criticized for slipping into what Sara Delamont terms ‘emotionally explicit, self-indulgent trauma therapy’ (Delamont 2007:4). I have found it incredibly difficult to honestly access and examine my life and to share that understanding with others. Feminist thinkers such as Virginia Woolf and Clarice Lispector constantly tried to break through barriers of shame, cowardice and fear to their vulnerable writing selves. I am attempting to do the same, but find there is a fine line between writing honestly without reservation and the accusation of navel gazing.

If I am to follow Caroline Ellis and write texts that are emotional, personal and complex (Ellis 1997) then I need a safe space to write. Using a weaving metaphor to engage in an analysis of my work and clarify my thinking, it follows that if auto/biography is the warp threads of my writing design, creative epistololarity the woven weft, then the shed, the space between the warp and the weft is my safe space. Like my writer’s journal, which I consider as ‘letters to myself’, this creative epistolary space allows me a safe space to capture and write what is emotionally challenging and to write myself into understanding. It was a natural progression to write in the gap between, and drawing on, Caroline Ellis’s ‘evocative or heartfelt autoethnography’ (Ellis 1999) and Leon Anderson’s ‘analytic autoethnography’. His five key features of analytic autoethnography that differentiate it from evocative autoethnography are, complete member researcher status, analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, dialogue with informants beyond the self and commitment to theoretical analysis (Anderson 2006).

The move from the literary traditions of auto/biographical writing, to the academic enterprise of autoethnography meant crossing sociological and literary disciplines. However, like Karen Upton-Davis I have found that,

The ascendancy of postmodernism into the humanities has allowed me the possibility of representing stories of myself and others through the use of creative writing.

My aim is to write with both heartfelt meaning and what Laurel Richardson terms ‘creative analytic practices’ to extend ethnography to include the heart, the autobiographical, and the artistic text.

At this stage of candidature, my writing is grounded in autoethnography but my practice is transforming and developing into what I construct as creative epistololarity.
By mobilizing through creative epistolarity I can address issues of ownership, ethics, morality, construction of self and of subject.

I acknowledge that writing fiction is often considered one way of avoiding awkward ethical issues, yet I wrestle daily with the ethical implications associated with this story, constantly evaluating my responsibility as a writer. In contrast to an ethic of justice, which hopes to treat everyone the same through a principle of human equality, I embrace Margaretta Jolly’s ethics of care premised on the idea that no one shall be hurt (Jolly 2008:87). Like Ron Hansen, I believe that the Hippocratic oath, first do no harm, also applies to writing and research. Yet, whose story is it? When I first put pen to paper Mickey and I had conflicting views of what was, or was not ‘truth’. We had trouble collaborating—who owned the story, omissions and additions, form and style—as a writer, my obvious choice was to have a hybridity of auto/biographically based fiction.

Researching autoethnographic writers such as Caroline Ellis, Art Bochner, Laurel Richardson, Thomas Wyatt and the qualitative research guru, Norman Denzin resulted in a brief research trip to the Qualitative Inquiry Conference 2009 in Illinois USA. I was fortunate to have a three-day visit with Mickey in Arizona and planned to share my research and writing, but she was not interested. I put this down to her age and my laptop remained unopened. Later, I realized that mediated texts gave me a safe space to write, but had the opposite affect on her. She had given permission to fictionalise the story of our pen friendship, but she no longer felt part of the story. In March this year Mickey died. I had come full circle, once again writing a novel from loss and reparation (Whitting 2007). In fact, I could not write. My fingers refused to type and the novel and exegesis froze. How to write the unspeakable through silence into a safe space? How to move to a different level of understanding? Rainer Rilke in Letters to a Young Poet, says, Things aren’t all so tangible and sayable as people would usually have us believe; most experiences are unsayable, they happen in a space that no word has ever entered (Rilke 1984)

I was fortunate to have compassionate supervisors, Dominique Hecq and Christine Sinclair, to support me during this time. I found comfort in reading how other women manage to write from mourning and explored the concept that the writing of narratives is consistently written from a position of mourning and stem from the writers’ desire to cope with loss. This can be loss of a person, country, youth or language (Atkinson 1999; Hecq 2007; Sellers 1994). Eventually, to reach closure and write my way out of silence, wrapped in the maternal fabric of words I wrote without pause in my journal. With unfettered, unedited words I moved beyond words to a silent space and image of felt knowing (Iggulden 2007). Writing in the ‘shed’, the gap between the warp and the weft, I found the capacity to write the character Martha’s story based upon my lived experience with Mickey.

The fictional constructional techniques of different tenses, blanks, cuts in the text, metaphor, different points of view and voices through which the characters speak,
create a safe space for me to write a herstory. I can write Martha’s story in first person, however, I need the further emotional distancing of third person narration to enable me to write mystory (Ulmer 1989:106). Moving further into ‘fictive space’ gives meaningful ethnography to the ‘real’. I am still finding this difficult, but realize the grieving process can be the disjunct before creation (Hecq 2009). The blackness of grief woven through the text now underpins the colours already woven through the story.

Cixous says, “To me my texts are elements of the whole which interweaves my own story, are the seasons, days in the Great Year of my life” (Sellers 1994). Hens Lay, People Lie is more than a story of two women and a thirty-five year pen friendship, more than the exploration of their literary journey and their struggle to find their place in society. Creative epistolarity is uniquely placed to challenge metanarratives by providing women with a safe space to find their voice and write their stories. Texts that cause readers and audiences to think and feel have the capacity to instigate social, cultural and political action. Women writing innovative, self-reflexive creative narratives in their own individual style and voice will inspire and empower other women to weave the colours of their lives and the warp and weft of their stories into the fabric of society, thereby adding to the tapestry that is écriture feminine.
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