"Merging Theory and Practice Through Artefact and Exegesis"

**Introduction**

For the last three and a half years I have been completing a PhD by artefact and exegesis. Whilst writing a young adult novel (the artefact), I have been scrutinising my writing practice in the light of current research on creative practice, eco psychology and narrative theory: the results of this scrutiny are documented in the exegesis component of the PhD. This paper, which is derived from the preface to my exegesis, discusses the conclusions I reached when I considered how the artefact and the exegesis interact with each other. It begins with a brief overview of both, then offers a short discussion of how practice and theory co-exist, before moving on to a closer examination of the elements of form, process, methodology and theory. The paper considers how these elements merge, and what grows from this. It concludes that in the collision of ideas and creativity, new meanings can emerge.

**The Artefact and the Exegesis**

‘Shifted’ (The First Book of Gaia) is a young adult novel written for early teens. It is intended as the first of three books. Five young people are drawn together by the death of their friend, Zoe, from Cystic Fibrosis. One of the five, Kalia, has been fostered with Brigid, Zoe’s best friend, due to an abusive past. When her step-father, Mr Darvel, turns up at Zoe’s funeral, the five friends are sent on a journey by a mysterious woman, Morrigan, who charges them with taking Kalia to safety. Gin is the oldest of the five, and Zoe’s brother. Taz, also a Cystic Fibrosis sufferer, was Zoe’s boyfriend. The final member of the party is Vivi, a teenager with Williams Syndrome, who met Zoe when they were hospitalised at the same time.

The story occurs during and after the shifting of the earth’s magnetic poles. As a result of this shift, numerous people, now known as ‘fizzers’, have become unable to use technology without causing it to break down. A schism has developed in society, and policies have been developed to keep the fizzers away from technology wherever possible. Whilst well intentioned, these policies have created a kind of apartheid which some use to excuse discriminatory or abusive behaviour.

Of the five protagonists, only Gin is now able to be near technology. As the five journey along an underground railroad established by Morrigan to help fizzers find safety, as in the American Civil war, they are pursued by Darvel and find help in unexpected places. Much of their journey is spent travelling through the Australian bush that lies between the Blue Mountains in New South Wales and the Dandenong Ranges in Victoria. Gradually they become aware that the time spent in this natural setting, which they come to call Sanctuary, is having unexpected impacts on all of them, and that time itself seems to pass differently in these places.

When the five are close to their final destination, Kalia is snatched by Darvel’s men, and taken to his company headquarters, a place where, her companions know, he previously conducted medical experiments on her. With the help of a community of friends, most of whom are fizzers and have a disability of some sort, they break the security of Darvel’s company and rush to rescue Kalia, only to discover that she has certain powers at her disposal and is able to free herself. Darvel flees, and Taz retreats with Kalia into Sanctuary. The others are left to wonder what lies ahead, for in their time in Sanctuary they have discovered that the threat to Kalia, and to Sanctuary, is greater and more far-reaching than they could have imagined.
The artefact began as a work of fantasy with elements of science fiction, but over time I shifted towards a more ambiguous, magic realist approach, for reasons I discuss in a paper published in the proceedings of the 2011 AAWP conference *Speaking and silences* (Le Rossignol, 2011).

The exegesis is shaped by the Narrative Therapy intervention process as created by Michael White and David Epston. It begins by naming and mapping the problem that is the focus of the research question, namely the psychological factors which contribute to environmental destruction. It explores how this problem impacts on our psychological well-being and, importantly, on our agency, which, to borrow from White, relates to whether we are a passenger in life or have the power to shape it (White, 1992, p. 139). In Narrative Therapy, the problem is externalised; that is, separated from the person in order to see it more clearly, and the exegesis argues that placing the problem in a story serves the same function. It then goes on to examine how cultural meta-narratives about the earth underpin the problem, how they make us, as a society, believe this is the only way things can be, and how such meta-narratives inculcate new generations into this perception of the world through stories.

The exegesis then explores exceptions to the problem; storytelling that shows another way of thinking about the earth. This stage is crucial in that it shows change is possible and gives form to other possibilities. Later chapters examine the re-storying process I undertook as a fiction writer in order to create a new narrative removed from the meta-narratives which drive the problem. This examination considers the themes and principles that underpin this re-storying, the role of character and voice and how I used earth as character. All three show how the idea of Ecos, which Kaye (2013) defines as an earth-as-home centred ethos aligned with biocentrism rather than anthropocentrism, has shaped my world, plot and characters. The exegesis concludes by drawing together findings from both the creative and the research process to argue that allowing space in the creative process aids re-storying.

**An Introduction to the Link Between Theory and Practice**

*The process of making art can nurture the intellectual flame that pushes the inquiring mind into a quest for new knowledge.* (Higgs, 2008, p. 553)

In considering how the artefact and the exegesis interact, it is possible to offer two basic statements. In the introduction to this section I will outline each of these, then I will explore both in more depth, considering how they relate to various theoretical approaches to arts-based research, using the diagram below to further elucidate my main points. I will then discuss why the relationship between artefact and exegesis is an uneasy one, before concluding with a brief discussion of what emerges from the interaction of the two, thus foreshadowing discussions found later in this document, and particularly in the final chapter. On a basic level one can state that any field of study has its underpinning theoretical underpinnings, or first principles, which are usually one of the first things you learn as you venture into that field. As a writer this might include the basics of language, plot, characterisation and so on. A practitioner acquires greater understanding of these through their application in a practical situation. Learning the theoretical aspects gives the practitioner structure to guide their work, whilst learning to apply them leads to some certainty that a particular approach will work, and how. Theory is thus fundamental for guiding practice so you understand what outcomes you might achieve. So the exegesis could be seen, on this level, as an explanation of the underpinnings of the text, and how they were applied. Unlike literary analysis, where such underpinnings are considered from an outsider’s point of view, whereby the writer’s motivations can only be surmised, arts-based research allows for an insider’s explanation not only of what they have done, but of why. This document certainly
contains commentary on the use of particular writerly techniques and the reasons for their implementation.

On a second level, however, each document plays a role in responding to the overall research question, which in this case is how to re-story the relationship of humans to the earth through fiction. The exegesis offers the logical argument for why such a re-storying is necessary, and how, as a practitioner, I went about attempting this: an explication of the research. The artefact is a tangible creative piece that offers a re-storying: the outcome of the research. In Action Research terms the artefact could be seen, on the surface, as the ‘plan’ and ‘act’ phases of a research cycle, whilst the exegesis could be stated as the ‘observe’ and ‘reflect’ phases. For example, I planned to use my reflections on ontology, which emerged as I wrote the exegesis, within the novel, as I came to understand that presenting a different view of the world is important. Writing the novel allowed me to act upon or explore what other ontological positioning was possible and to observe, as a researcher, what emerged within the story. But this is an over-simplification, because both processes of text production could be seen as Action Research spirals that interlock with each other. Outcomes of the novel research are identified and discussed in the exegesis also, while the research is explicated in the artefact in that it is an exploration of what a re-storied relationship might look like. A closer examination unpacks this complexity even further.

Form, Process, Methodology and Theory

*Fig.A: The artefact and exegesis together.*

This diagram is derived from comments in the introductory chapter of Creating Scholartistry (Cole & Knowles, 2008) and from further readings on arts-based research. I use the term arts-based research as a blanket term for the totality of the research in the following discussion, and argue that other terms come into play depending on the focal quadrant. These terms relate to the different theoretical frames that can guide arts-based research, but it is important to note each is not considered to relate only to a specific quadrant; the implication is only that the frame starts from that quadrant and expands outwards to integrate the other elements. As a practitioner I would argue that I move not only between quadrants, and therefore between theoretical frames, but also work at the points of intersection.

The elements of form, process, methodology and theory are defined as critical by Cole & Knowles. They argue that it is the bringing together of artistry (in terms of form and process), methodological integrity and reflexive and responsive inquiry (which incorporates theory) that results in research that has the intention to transform an audience (Cole & Knowles, 2008, p. 62). My research began with form, in terms of a story idea and decisions around genre, audience etc.: yet such decisions were guided by theory as much as by my experience as a writer. The words of Knowles, Promislow & Cole resonated strongly with this decision making:

*Knowing how artists of a specific genre engage with and represent subject matter is crucial for success.* (2008, p. 5)

Whatever my research findings, it was important that the resultant story be engaging and resonant, which guided many of my writerly choices. This focus returned during the project as I considered also Barone’s argument that success, in terms of giving the audience “insights previously unimagined about their world” only comes when they have something to identify with, that coaxes them to participate in constructing its meaning (2008, p. 489). This argument informed my choice of first person, shifting voice. The project also began with theory, particularly in terms of eco-feminist readings and a consideration of the power of storytelling, both of which I had explored during my Masters degree, and to that extent it could be defined as research-led practice. My background reading gave me the desire to address certain issues. These beginnings gave me a somewhat vague research question,
relating to using storytelling to address issues raised by eco-feminists. This was research-led practice, whereby my scholarly work was conceptually driving my creative work (Smith & Dean, 2009).

The application of a narrative therapy methodology gave me a direction to take in order to address this research question; by applying specific therapeutic processes (deconstruction and re-storying) to a cultural problem I was, in the words of Chambers et al, offering a way to step away from accepted narratives that held “the illusion of truth” in order to see them anew (2008, p. 145). The Narrative Therapy methodology itself is deeply grounded in theory yet is a highly practical, real world process. Taking McLeod’s argument that Narrative Therapy teaches us to analyse social problems within a therapeutic space because it links individual stories to dominant discourses (2007), the texts could be framed in these terms, with the exegesis as the therapeutic process undertaken, and the artefact as the final result of the re-storying. To include the final quadrant, my process as a writer gave form to the artefact, and it is at this point in the diagram that practice-led research must sit most comfortably, because it is through process that certain understandings are uncovered.

It is apparent already then that whilst I agree with Cole & Knowles that all four elements are important, arts-based research constantly works at the points of intersection. In fact it was through the merging of all four elements that I came to pin down the specific question, and to find answers.

The Interaction of Elements: Where Knowledge and Knowing Emerge

Practice is a set of relays from one theoretical point to another, and theory is a relay from one practice to another. No theory can develop without eventually encountering a wall, and practice is necessary for piercing this wall. (Kroll, 2010, from Foucault & Deleuze, 1972, online article, 'Intellectuals and power', quoted p3)

In terms of text production, form and process were key in the artefact creation, whilst methodology and theory guided the development of the exegesis. The former could be seen as lyric inquiry (as defined by Neilsen, 2008), as it involves engagement in the inquiry (process) and the outcome of the engagement (artwork in a certain form) (Neilsen, 2008, p. 94) whilst the latter could be framed, in my project, with its explicit focus on stories, as narrative inquiry, with specific reference to the work of Polkinghorne (1988) and Clandinin and Connelly (2000). Recognising that my process involved a constant overlapping of story with research, artefact with exegesis, it would seem appropriate to adopt the term lyric narrative inquiry for the overall process. As the figure indicates, to an extent the two forms of inquiry sit opposite each other: Neilsen puts forward the argument that the creative act and its outcome can create as much impact as rational persuasion through logical argument (2008, pp. 94 & 100), or story that can be read as research, whilst narrative inquiry emphasises the use of critical reflection in conjunction with story writing, that is, research framed in story terms (Clandinin & Conelly, 2000, p. 107). Yet it soon becomes apparent that what they have in common leads us towards the centre of the diagram, to the point where artefact and exegesis meet. And whilst the final outcome of each might be different, as will be elucidated below, it is at the point where they meet, at the merging of exegesis and artefact, that both outcomes can be achieved.

The commonalities relate to their ontological underpinnings. Both emphasise openness and fluidity; as Neilsen notes, ‘lyric inquiry is marked by the willingness to let go’ (2008, p. 94), whilst Polkinghorne argues that narrative inquirers need a multiplicity of skills and systems relating to the construction of meaning itself (1988, p. 175). Both focus on lived experience: not only the lived experience of those who encounter the artwork, or whose stories are researched, but also the lived experience of the artist or researcher as they undertake the research process- and how this impacts on the research (Neilsen, 2008; Clandinin and
Connelly, 2000). Neilsen points out that since lyric inquiry aims to ‘create an aesthetic experience’ that audiences can resonate with, it leads to more relational, personal, experiential and located knowledge (Neilsen, 2008, pp. 96 & 100). Both frames are also able to respond to complexity; lyric inquiry, it seems, can be particularly responsive to those things which can’t be expressed in words, whilst narrative inquiry, with its emphasis on the whole rather than decontextualised parts, is suited to capturing the multiplicity of humanity (Polkinghorne, 1988). Bringing these underpinnings back to the artefact and exegesis, their practical application was evident in the attitude of ‘radical openness’ (Soja, 2009) which I adopted to both texts.

An Uneasy Fit: Finding a Place

Story writing and critical analysis are indeed separate gifts, like spelling and playing the flute, and the same writer proficient in both is doubly endowed. But even he can’t rise and do both at the same time. (Welty, 1979, p. 107, quoted Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 82)

Whilst narrative and lyric inquiry could almost be two sides of the one coin, the reality of the artefact and exegesis process is that it felt like there was an expectation (real or otherwise) that research findings would fit the mould of traditional university research. Recognising the overlap between narrative and lyric inquiry, and considering my process to be a merging of both did not do away with inherent tensions. The world of academia is a world of logic and argument, whilst the world of creative writing is a world of imagination and flow. As human beings, at times we operate from our logical, rational aspect, and at times from our emotional, intuitive one. Writing academic papers engages a different part of the brain than writing stories. As a practitioner and researcher I found that when my critical brain was dominant it was difficult to write creatively, and when my emotions were dominant writing on academic work went very slowly. Neilsen encapsulates this in her comment: Lyric inquiry has an uneasy relationship with knowledge as product, commodity or ‘trump card’. Knowing, instead, is an experience of immersion and expression rather than one of gathering data only to advance an argument. (2008, p. 96)

She goes on to argue that traditional research’s focus on categorizing and judging is a form of appropriation or control, whilst lyric inquiry is more about honouring and recording to achieve resonance rather than to make any claim to knowledge (2008, p. 100).

Methodologically, this is strongly in line with Narrative Therapy, which aims always to deconstruct stories of power over. My conflict centres around the fact that whilst my artefact is a piece that aims at resonance, my exegesis is a logical and ordered argument for the re-storying of earth meta-narratives, although at the same time its findings relate to the fluid field of spatiality. This clash between a formalist approach and a lyric approach was worth pursuing because as Banks points out, fiction can reach a much broader audience than academic writing, it can give immediacy (and therefore immersion) and it can explore problems without difficult academic discourse getting in the way (2008, p. 161).

Ultimately the diagram above suggests how I resolved these tensions and brought the two together: by placing myself within the merging points of the diagram, allowing for and reflecting on the interactions that occurred, and allowing for the flexibility of narrative inquiry. Recognising that narrative inquiry allows the inquirer to both be critical and to tell stories (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 182) I follow their advice and take a position of awareness or wakefulness, noticing the moments when something arises out of the tension. Yet the skill of the arts researcher arises from their ability to translate the understandings they have gained through their practice for a wider audience (Higgs, 2008): the exegesis becomes the expression of these understandings.
On a meta-level I observe that the tension between these processes reflects the subject matter of my inquiry. The environmental debate is similarly polarised. At its worst it is reduced to a question of economics, or to over-emotional hype. Much of the debate doesn't engage our emotions unless it engages fear. Environmental debate requires a balance between understanding the issues, and engaging peoples' emotions as well. That is why stories are needed. We're all pretty aware of the facts, thanks to Al Gore and much recent information. But we are suffering from eco-ennui. Our hearts are not engaged. We value money more than humanity. Yet the same merging might be the solution here too: blending 'argument' with 'openness', calling for balance and living between two worlds to find balance. Using two different processes, and seeing the world in two different ways, is only possible through a willingness to sit in a silent place between them to observe what emerges.

WhatEmergesfromtheMerging?AConclusion

The narrative inquirer does not prescribe general applications and uses but rather creates texts that, when well done, offer readers a place to imagine their own uses and applications. (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 42)

Taking into account Eisner’s definition of art as that which crafts a form to express something (2008, p. 8), my exegesis is the explanation of what I am trying to express and why, whilst the artefact is the expression. Or, in lyric inquiry terms, the artefact is the aesthetic experience, whilst the exegesis is the argument for that aesthetic experience. In my conclusion I offer a theoretical frame for ecological re-storying, my contribution to the body of literature relating to eco-criticism: Clandinin and Connelly would define this as a formalistic outcome (2000, p. 42). Simultaneously, my artefact aims to enhance the connection of readers to the world around them: encouraging readers to ‘vicariously extend their thinking’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 42).

Taken together, however, the artefact and the exegesis are the point where ideas and creativity collide, and the outcome is understanding and meaning. The ontological commonalities of Narrative Inquiry and Lyric Inquiry come back to avoiding creating rigid frames as outcomes; that is, honouring what Eisner defines as knowing rather than knowledge (2008). Eisner suggests that knowing is the more appropriate term when any inquiry yields uncertainty rather that solid, unshifting outcomes. Polkinghorne defines the outcome of narrative inquiry as 'descriptions of meaning' rather than 'conclusions of certainty' (1988, pp. 175 & 183). Neilsen is even more fluid, suggestions outcomes of 'illumination and connection' rather than proof (2008, p. 96). Perhaps the words of Higgs best sum up what I found through moving beyond tensions to the merging of artefact and exegesis though: he tells us that the ambiguity of the arts, which evokes cognitive dissonance and shows there is no fixed truth, can lead to growth and learning (2008, p. 554).

Bibliography


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