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Stitching the world together again: finding creative possibilities through theoretical constraints

Abstract:

In my PhD ‘The other side of silence’ I wanted to examine how a writer could write the kinds of women’s lives which have been omitted, silenced or marginalised in discourses such as history, biography, auto-biography and fiction. For me, fiction seemed a logical way to tell such a story, since fiction had the ability to highlight those lives and experiences which have been largely left untold within popular culture, or deemed historically insignificant. Yet, in reading fiction which focused on the lives of women, I noticed that such narratives seemed to suggest that ordinary women’s lives could be told, *only* if they were narrated in a certain way. I found that fiction which simply filled in the gaps about historically ‘unknowable’ lives carried with them the suggestion that stories about women from the past could be retrieved and narrated. In writing a fiction about a woman from the past, I began to understand that the problem lay in a deeper place: a place that was difficult to address within the generic boundaries imposed by realism, which continues to maintain a tight grip on popular and literary fiction. To write about the silencing of women’s lives, I began to look at the epistemological reasons for this silencing, and I realised that fiction imposed conditions of its own. Imagination was only going to take me so far, and my creative manuscript began to falter under the weight and the limitations of conventional realism.

Writing my fictional manuscript would have been impossible without engaging with post-structuralist theory. Literary theory became the spine that supported the shaping of my creative text. It enabled me to rethink specific creative writing approaches and techniques; to question the boundaries imposed by realism’s dependence on resolution, revelation and closure; and to challenge generic conventions, which enable the telling of some stories, while inhibiting the telling of others. In this paper, I will describe how literary theory informed my own creative writing practice, and enabled the writing of my fiction. It is my contention that literary theory not only unpicks the seams of fiction, but, in doing so, presents writers with new ways to stitch those worlds together again, subsequently enlarging our ideas about what is permissible and possible in fiction.

Biographical note:

Natalie Kon-yu was recently awarded her PhD in English and the Creative Arts from Murdoch University, Western Australia. She is living in Melbourne, and is currently teaching creative writing at the University of Melbourne, and Literature at Victoria

University. She is a member of the Centre for Everyday Life at Murdoch University, and is part of a team which authors the weekly 'Slow Living' column for *The Canberra Times*. Natalie was the recipient of the Emerging-Writer-in-Residence at Katherine Susannah Prichard Writing Foundation for 2009, and her manuscript 'The other side of silence' was long-listed for *The Australian/Vogel* award.

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‘[W]here history says little,’ Anna Laetitia Barbauld wrote in 1810, ‘fiction might say much’ (Tuite, 2005: 248). It is only after writing both a creative piece and theoretical exegesis that I have come to understand how important the word ‘might’ is in Barbauld’s statement. When I began my PhD I imagined fiction as a space in which I could write a story freed, to a certain extent, from the limits of more ‘factual’ genres such as history or biography. The impetus for my PhD was a desire to write a biographical fiction of sorts, based on my great-grandmother’s life. The scant archival information about my great-grandmother meant that there were many gaps in her life story, and these silences were reinforced by my family’s reticence to speak about this woman, who seemed to have shown more than a little contempt for the social morés of her time. At this point, I had a vague idea about what this woman might have done to cause such embarrassed silences and this gave me enough of a story to begin. The details of the shameful events could, I thought, be re-imagined later, and would therefore be the stuff of fiction, rather than fact.

As I started writing my creative piece, I began to wonder why it was so difficult to find archival or historical records about my ancestor. My initial research into the field of women’s history made me realise the lack of information about my ancestor was a problem which has been articulated by historians, social scientists, biographers and even memoirists. This inability to locate specific details about women’s lives, and the subsequent problems this poses for writers of fiction (as well as biography and memoir) is not new. In the 1970s and 1980s, the issue of women’s absence in historical discourse was being significantly redressed within the social sciences, especially in history and biography. This rise in social history turned a spotlight on those women’s lives that had been largely omitted from, or left unrecorded in favour of what historian Joan Wallach Scott cites as the ‘maps and chaps’ version of history (1988: 9). She argues:

the ‘her-story’ approach has had important effects on historical scholarship. By piling up the evidence about women in the past it refutes the claims of those who insist women had no history, no significant place in stories of the past. (1988: 20)

With the advent of social history and her-story came the re-evaluation of certain documents, such as journals and letters, which were once deemed too subjective to be included in historical discourse. Much of the recuperation of women’s lives within history and the social sciences in this period was written as biography, as well as ‘chronicles of feminist movements, and the collected letters of female authors’ (1988: 15). For Liz Stanley and Ann Morley:

‘Knowledge,’ feminist social scientists, historians, scientists and philosophers have demonstrated convincingly, is . . . a socio-political product, in a context which most knowledge-producers are white middle-class ‘first world’ men. (1988: 66)

As a result, Stanley and Morley contend that lives and experiences of women have often been misrepresented and misunderstood in ‘extraordinarily gross ways’ (1988: 66). Wallach Scott suggests that ‘(w)omen’s history does not have a long-standing and definable historiographic tradition within which interpretations can be debated and revised’ (1988: 16).

At the same time that historians, social scientists, and biographers were addressing women's absence from formalised historical discourse, there was a surge in the number of fictional texts written about women from the past. In *The Woman's Historical Novel* Diane Wallace suggests that 'The 1980s saw the beginning of a renaissance in the 'serious' or 'literary' woman's historical novel, a stream of novels which broadened into a veritable flood in the 1990s' (2005: 176). Historical fiction, written by both women and men, enjoyed a surge in popularity at this point. However, as Wallace points out,

While the male-authored historical novel frequently elided the female, either erasing women altogether or presenting them as the enigmatic 'Other', women's historical novels were politically driven, refashioning history through fiction as part of the urgent need to tell 'her story'. Women's history needed to be recovered and reconstructed before it could be deconstructed.' (2005: 176)

Indeed, Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn assert that, 'For women, historical fiction offers them and their female characters a means of reclamation, a narrative empowerment to write women back into the historical record' (2004: 144).

Not all historical fiction written at this time was written in the same way. Writers such as Margaret Atwood and Toni Morrison wrote about infamous women such as Grace Marks in *Alias Grace* (1996) and Margaret Garner in *Beloved* (1987). Other writers such as Maxine Hong Kingston, Drusilla Modjeska and Amy Tan wrote stories about 'ordinary' women from the past, and did so in radically different ways. Modjeska's *Poppy* (1990) is a fictional memoir of her mother and Tan's novels *The Joy Luck Club* (1989) and *The Kitchen God's Wife* (1991) are matri-lineal narratives about the lives of seemingly 'ordinary' women. Despite the differences in the kinds of women being written about, what remains clear is the emphasis placed on women's history in fiction between the 1970s and the 1990s.

Both *The Joy Luck Club*, *The Kitchen God's Wife* as well as Tan's subsequent historical fictions enjoyed huge mainstream success and the popularity of Tan's work, particularly amongst women, suggests that there is something powerful in the way she represents women and articulates their stories. Amanda Laugsen argues that although Tan is producing fiction and not history, her works 'address major historical issues in important ways and have reached a wide audience in doing so' (2005: 570). What drew me to Tan's work was her emphasis on so-called 'ordinary' women and the re-framing of socio-historical events within a domestic setting. Inherent in her work is an emphasis on revealing aspects of the past which have been hidden so that the truth can be known and shame can finally be overcome. This revelation/closure nexus is not only satisfying from a reader's perspective, but also offers a glimpse into precisely those histories which have been silenced, obscured or withheld by traditional historical discourse. This pattern of revelation and closure was highly attractive to me, and I wanted to, for obvious reasons, write a book in which the shame of the past was transcended and all the secrets revealed. However my own frustrated research into the life of my lost relative prompted me to question some of the underlying premises inherent in this model of recuperative historical fiction. This approach suggests that

well-kept secrets are only ever temporary, and that information about such ordinary women's lives can be retrieved.

I noticed that many historical fictions about women, famous, infamous and 'ordinary,' relied upon this idea of recovering or revealing the past. Even texts which write from the margins (as Morrison's brilliant novel *Beloved* does) end up revealing those incidents in the past that were previously deemed too shameful to articulate. Of course, in many ways this is precisely the point of historical fiction: to give voice to those who have previously been silenced, or to show historical events from a different (and often unheard) perspective. But I began to realise that, especially in popular historical fiction, such as Tan's novels, the adherence to the revelation/closure nexus fitted firmly within the boundaries of classic realism. This is problematic, as Wallace writes that 'The nineteenth century produced both the realist novel and narrative history. Both of these, as feminists were pointing out, have either excluded women's lives or experiences or shaped them in particular ways' (2005: 182). Pam Morris suggests that the realist text 'coincided with and aligned itself to the modern secular materialist understanding of reality' (2003: 3). Catherine Belsey affirms this position, 'Classic realism, still the dominant popular mode in literature, film and television drama, roughly coincides with the epoch of industrial capitalism' (1980: 67).

The difficulty in finding information about women's lives is linked both to historical discourse's focus on the 'maps and chaps' (to borrow Wallach Scott's phrase) version of events, but also to the ways in which history has been written. As a factual discipline, history cannot admit fragmentary, partial or incomplete information and what cannot be known traditionally went unmentioned. What is interesting is that even within fiction, and especially within realist texts, there exists the same adherence to the trajectory of revelation and closure; a trajectory which has already (in historical discourse) omitted so many women's lives.

This concern with the generic limitations of the conventional realist form has been articulated within feminist literary theory. As Morris argues:

There is one distinction between realist writing and actual everyday reality beyond the text that must be quite categorically insisted upon: realist novels *never* give us life or a slice of life, nor do they reflect reality ... realism is a representational form and a representation can never be identical with that which it represents. ([emphasis in original] 2003: 4)

Belsey writes that 'Classic realism is characterized by *illusionism*, narrative which leads to *closure*, and a *hierarchy of discourses* which establishes the 'truth' of the story' ([emphasis in original] 1980: 70).

Much historical fiction is predicated on the revelation/closure nexus imposed by the realist genre, and this seemed to be reaffirming the epistemological conditions which had already omitted so many experiences from conventional historical discourse. My specific problem was that there had been no revelation about the details of my ancestor's life, and I was becoming increasingly wary of filling in those shameful or dramatic aspects, since, paradoxically they were responsible for the story being silenced in the first place.

For me then, the available historical fiction about ordinary women's lives did not reflect the complexities of researching such lives, and embedded within these narratives is the problematic notion that Trinh T Minh-Ha articulates in *Woman, native, other*. Trinh argues that a common misconception of history is that 'the Past, unrelated to the Present and the Future, is lying there in its entirety, waiting to be revealed and related' (1989: 104). As Wallach Scott argues, due to post-structuralist discourse, and in particular, Derrida's theory of deconstruction, the historian is unable 'to claim neutral mastery or to present any particular story as if it were complete, universal and objectively determined' (1988: 7). I am fairly certain, now, that my ancestor's past is not waiting somewhere to be revealed and recorded. As she lived in a culture where all civil records were processed and kept by the church, I'm sure that any 'evidence' I might have been able to unearth would not give me the credible information I was initially looking for. The archival searches I have undertaken have led me nowhere: my ancestor has either falsified her name, her birth date or her marriage details and my personal belief is that all three have been falsified, either by her close relatives or the church. Trinh's statement rings true because even if the truth about a woman like my ancestor exists 'somewhere', I very much doubt that it would be either accurate or complete.

Moreover further research into historical (and therefore more factually-based) disciplines such as biography and memoir, have relayed the same difficulties I faced. Margaret Forster's memoir *Hidden lives* (1996) details many of the problems in researching and documenting ordinary women's lives, and comments on the lack of archival information about her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. Forster's experience suggests that stories about women cannot always be recovered and, in fact, are actively being silenced. *Hidden lives* lacks the trajectory of revelation or reconciliation prevalent in Tan's texts (or even in Forster's own fictions). Forster sets out to uncover the life of her grandmother, and specifically to find out whether or not her grandmother had an illegitimate and unacknowledged child. Unable to garner sufficient information from archival searches or family members, the mystery remains largely unsolved, and unresolved within the text. Instead, Forster's memoir turns a critical eye on the cultural conditions that fostered such secrecy within her family. What is interesting is that by writing a memoir, Forster is able to point out the limitations of her own archival research. Using the first-person narrative, Forster can speculate about the silencing of her grandmother's story and vilify the kinds of cultural propriety and discourses which keep these stories silenced.

The gaps that I had been initially confronted with, those pertaining to the loss of details about my ancestor's life, were in a sense replaced by the new, more daunting challenge of how these gaps could be written in fiction. As a discourse, post-structuralism has allowed social scientists to question the boundaries of historical discourse and offers a re-definition of what might be classed as historically significant. Within literature and literary theory, Mary Eagleton suggests that post-structuralist feminism is still engaged with critiquing notions of historical truth and can 'construct other histories' and examine 'the processes of institutional change' (2007: 6). As Belsey and Jane Moore suggest:

One of the most potentially liberating effects of poststructuralism for feminism is that it enables the feminist reader to uncover the discursive production of all meanings, to pinpoint whose interests they support and to locate the contradictions which render them fundamentally unstable and open to change. (1989: 18)

Post-structuralist discourse, in particular the examination of the logocentric nature of language, the binary structures on which meaning is predicated, and the importance of difference in constituting meaning—is particularly useful for writers interrogating the realist form. It has provided novelists with a language to describe the variations and departures from realism. Many writers, from James Joyce to Virginia Woolf, Samuel Beckett to Maxine Hong Kingston, Carol Shields to Yann Martel (for example) have challenged, and subsequently enlarged, the concept of the realist text. The particular limitations I encountered with realism were the genre's dependence on the revelation/closure nexus, and the way in which this positioned the particular story I wanted to tell as 'untellable'. If I didn't want to fill in the narrative blanks, then how was I to proceed with this particular story?

As a writer, post-structuralist theory has allowed me to think about the ways in which I could write a text which problematises both the epistemological foundations of historical discourse and realism, which functions as its representational form within literature. It has allowed me to envision other ways to write about the kinds of women's lives which remain silenced, and part of my project has been to reject the revelation/closure nexus upon which much historical fiction about women depends. Fortunately, writers such as Carol Shields provided practical examples of how these ideas might be written in fiction. Writing at the same time as Tan, Morrison and Atwood, Shields explores the lives of ordinary women (and men, as in *Larry's party* [1997]), and her novels use post-structuralist strategies to disrupt the conventions of the traditional realist text. Throughout *The stone diaries* (1994) and *Unless* (2002) Shields pays specific attention to the kinds of gaps, silences, contradictions and omissions in women's stories, which have traditionally rendered them unknowable, and therefore, unwritable. Shields exhibits a dissatisfaction with traditional realism, and her texts exemplify scepticism about the capacity of realist conventions to articulate the lives of women. Her situated narrators further problematise the idea of objective or impartial narrative voices. In addition, both *The stone diaries* and *Unless* refute traditional closure, which was particularly interesting to me. Although Shields is not writing historical fiction, she does write texts about characters whose stories are typically not told, and I wondered if the deconstructive strategies she adheres to could also be used for my own fiction.

Shields' work was interesting to me, not only because it engages so strongly with literary theory, but because it focuses on the kinds of ordinary lives that are commonly overshadowed in literature. Indeed, Shields has often been classified as a miniaturist of fiction. 'Early on in my career,' she says . . . 'the critics called me 'a miniaturist,' said that I wrote 'women's books,' 'domestic novels,' as if that were a lesser thing. But I knew then as I know now that the lives of women are serious and interesting' (2003:373). As Chiara Briganti writes that 'Shields has thought long and hard and has succeeded in making the epistemological implications of life writing a solid and

serious concern of her fiction (2003: 176).’ The kinds of women that Shields writes about have much in common with the women Tan highlights in her novels. Moreover, the way in which Shields writes her narratives means that, despite their critical leanings, they are highly accessible books. It was this particular example which guided me in the writing of my own creative manuscript.

In the case of my own narrative, I felt that I couldn’t reveal the particulars about my fictional character’s past, especially if they were the reasons her story would have been silenced in the first place. Shields’ work has prompted me to think about the ways I might tell such a story without falling into the realist trajectory of confession and closure. My manuscript ‘The Other Side of Silence’ has been motivated by a desire to illustrate, within fiction, how certain narratives about women become suppressed, while all the while illuminating the indefinable complexities of these marginalised women’s stories. In my own text I have used several post-structuralist narrative strategies: an attention to silence, foregrounding an insecure, speculative narrative voice and the refusal of closure. The ways in which these strategies have been used within my creative fiction was the subject of my paper at last year’s AAWP conference, and I would direct those interested to the relevant published proceedings. For me, what remains important is that the influence of post-structural literary criticism has allowed me to write a novel which foregrounds the problems in researching and recording women’s lives. Freed from the tyranny of closure, and the assumption this carries about being able to recover women’s lives, I have written a story which illustrates the ways by which women’s histories can become silenced. Trinh emphasises the necessity of highlighting the silences and omissions in women’s narratives. She states

Silence as a refusal to partake in the story does sometimes provide us with a means to gain a hearing. It is a voice, a mode of uttering, and a response in its own right. Without other silences, however, my silence goes unheard, unnoticed; it is simply one voice less, or one more point given to the silencers. (1989: 83)

I realised that just because I couldn’t narrate my story in a conventional way didn’t mean that the story could not be told. What has been most striking for me as a writer is that literary theory enabled me to approach my text in a different, and I believe, more credible manner.

One of the charges frequently levelled at literary theory is that it unpicks at the seams of fiction to the point that the magic of story-telling becomes lost. In my own case, literary theory enabled me to question some of the underlying premises in much historical fiction about women. Shields argues that critical discourse, especially postmodernism ‘has given writers a breath of that precious oxygen of permission, and more important, time to see in what ways the old realism—the mirror of the world—has failed us’ (2003: 34). Writing a narrative dependent on the revelation/closure nexus seemed inauthentic given the very real difficulties I had in ascertaining the truth about my ancestor’s life. One of the most salient discoveries of this project has been that researching and writing about women in the past is fraught with difficulties which have arisen both from a lack of information about women, as well as from the textual demands of conventional realist narratives. For me, it was critical to write a text which

foregrounded some of the ways in which these silences have persisted in the women's history. Even if information about such women is incomplete, stark or fragmentary, I believe these lives should be told and told imaginatively. Using literary theory to unpick at the seams of historical fiction about women has enabled me to write my story in a way which acknowledges and works within the silences of women's stories, rather than simply patching over them. As such, literary theory has allowed me to stitch my story together in a different way.

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