

Swinburne University of Technology

Rachel Le Rossignol

Emergent eco-narrative in the third space

Abstract:

As creative practitioners we bring to our writing not just our storytelling skills and imagination, but a polyphony of identities that derive from our multiple places and experiences in the real world. Whatever we create arises from the collision of our creative, aesthetic impulses and our epistemological standpoints. Homi Bhabha's notion of the third space of enunciation, which results from the coming together of two different cultural traditions, has particular relevance in this context. As Ika and Wagner (2009, 2) note, the negotiation of two cultures leads to a displacement of the old and the emergence of a new, hybrid identity.

This theoretical concept was transposed into the creative arena to inform the understanding of the outcomes resulting from writing an issues-based young adult novel. The project's aim was to create a fiction that re-storied meta-narratives around the relationship of those in Western, consumeristic culture to the earth. An eco-critical epistemological perspective thus fed in to the creative writing journey. The risk I faced as a white female located in an affluent, Western culture was that any emergent narrative would simply re-frame known meta-narratives around the dominant social paradigm, as defined by Koger and Winter (2010); a paradigm which sees the earth as a dead resource to be utilised. However, the process was guided by a narrative therapy methodology, which offers a specific structure not only for breaking apart the known through the post-structuralist process of deconstruction, but for then identifying alternative stories and finding among these the threads of new, previously unknown (or at least unrecognised) stories that can emerge.

The writer's discovery was that this methodology also provided a meeting ground where principles and issues could join with aesthetics in a constant process of negotiation. This process veered from conflictual to complementary at different times. The writer's practice likewise veered from analytical to instinctual, from being guided by theory to being guided by the creative impulse. Allowing this merging of the known with the unknown resulted in an emergent narrative that achieved some of the project's aims in unexpected, unlooked-for ways. Not only did the writer discover a hybrid practice where principles and storytelling could merge, but the resulting story brought forth tropes, characters and ideas that offered new choices for eco-critical storytelling. This presentation therefore investigates which key aspects of the writer's practice led to the creation of a third space from which an eco-critical narrative which challenges and moves forward from the dominant social paradigm.

Biographical note:

Rachel Le Rossignol holds a Masters of Creative Media from RMIT University (Melbourne) and is in the final stages of completing her PhD at Swinburne University of Technology. Her research involves the use of a narrative therapy methodology to re-story cultural meta-narratives about the earth through eco-critical young adult fiction.

Keywords:

Third space – Bhabha – Narrative therapy – Eco-critical – Creative writing

Introduction

This paper asks how third-space thinking, as enunciated by Homi Bhabha, can inform creative writing as research, in relation to issues-based writing. I use as an example my eco-critical young adult novel *Shifted*, and discuss how concepts of spatiality informed my writing and research practice. My key challenge as a researcher was to create an eco-critical novel that conveyed ecological issues without being overly didactic, and the use of third-space thinking impacted significantly on my ability to meet this challenge. I argue that ‘extraordinary openness’ (Soja, 2009, 50) and a willingness to allow for the intersection of the known and the unknown in both writing and research practice can offer an entry into the third space, and hence to unexpected discoveries in terms of story and meaning, allowing me to convey challenging ideas in an engaging manner. Reflecting Soja’s argument that third space is ‘a purposefully tentative and flexible term that attempts to capture what is actually a constantly shifting and changing milieu of ideas, events, appearances and meanings’ (2009, 50), I note that concepts of spatiality can be applied in different ways at different stages of arts-based research.

I begin by examining the hybridity that grows out of the interplay of conceptual Spaces, firstly for an arts-based researcher, and secondly for a creative writer. I then consider what happens when writers as researchers engage in reflexive practice side by side with their creative practice. Such practice, which involves both critical and creative thinking, requires a constant process of negotiation between research issues and story aesthetics; the result can be a difficult meeting of different epistemological and ontological stances. I show that by adopting Lefebvre’s concept of trialectics, these differences can be brought together in research and creative practice to render new understandings. Finally I consider fiction as third space, and the ways in which writers invite readers to enter into this space.

Choosing to work in the third space

My exploration of third-space thinking began with the challenge Murphy’s (1995) argument about dialogics proposed for a narrative therapy approach, which emphasises deconstructing meta-narratives. Murphy argues that deconstruction alone creates a binary and a victim position because there is always a centre (the privileged meta-narrative) and a margin, the dissenting minority voice, both of which are fixed. He proposes instead recognising the complexity of each perspective and that the relationship between the two positions is a dynamic, ‘constant dance of revisioning’ which, being always in motion and development, leads understanding forward and creates paradigm shifts (1995, 29). Similarly, Bamberg notes that meta-narratives and counter-narratives (the components of this dance) are never fully formed in themselves, emerging through interaction, and as such have the potential to shift, and even shift rapidly, sitting as they do in a disputable space (2004, 365). He defines such a shift as ‘microgenesis’, when better understandings and new identities, including a shared cultural sense, emerge from interactive narrative space (2004, 368).

Both ideas offer a way of framing ecological issues that offers hope for change, but both fall short of a full solution, not being quite far enough away from binary thinking

to resist the possibility that existing meta-narratives are too strong, or too invisible, for dissension and resistance. In fact, Bamberg points out that new meanings are not necessarily ones that did not exist previously, but simply ones that now emerge as relevant (2004, 368) – and hence are always at risk of being dismissed or absorbed by more powerful meta-narratives.

While Bhabha's idea of 'cultural hybridity' begins with the idea that new representations and meanings grow from such a dance, by introducing the idea that such negotiation happens in between and on the edges, he opens up a realm where anything becomes possible (Soja, 2009, 58, 59). It is only through third space's true commitment to complexity, to creating a space entirely separate from centre and margin, no matter how fluid and interactive, and a space 'open to the recombinations and simultaneities of the real-and-imagined' (Soja, 2009, 53) that possibility is truly opened up. Lefebvre describes this as a space that is truly open, where all things can be seen from every angle without privileging any (Soja, 2009, 53).

There is a strong parallel between third-space thinking and what theorists call for as a new mode of thinking about ecological issues. Both are about moving away from control and reduction to allowing for many meanings and ways of being. Watkins argues that eco-therapeutic practice needs to open space to explore contradictions, question established modes of thinking and being, voice concerns and especially to wonder aloud if other stories are possible, to allow for new insights and practices to address ecological issues (2009, 221). This would suggest that the very process of adopting a third-space approach is a contribution to a new ecological ontology¹, because, Watkins suggests, consciously exploring cultural ideas embedded within our personal narratives will contribute to cultural activism (2009, 222). This resonates with Soja's idea that third space is a place:

where old connections can be disturbed and new ones emerge. A Thirdspace consciousness is the precondition to building a community of resistance to all forms of hegemonic power. (2009, 56).

Soja concludes that radical openness is a critical precondition for this to succeed (2009, 57), an idea I found in my own work repeatedly. While it could be suggested that moving third-space thinking away from its original post-colonial focus depoliticises it, I would argue that creating space for new stories that offer an alternative vision of living and being in the world is a radically political stance, a point White continually returns to in his many writings on narrative therapy (e.g. 1988). The challenge is to do this while retaining the power of engagement inherent in good storytelling.

So my preliminary explorations revealed that third-space thinking was not only an effective way of conceptualising my writing practice, but potentially in guiding me in my challenge of re-storying ecological meta-narratives.

Third space in research: intentional writing and allowing space for the unexpected

Arts-based research is an interplay of conceptual spaces. The researcher brings their personal epistemology, derived from life experience, to meet with the epistemology of other researchers and arts practitioners, a meeting which is framed by the chosen methodology. This combination feeds into, and is fed by, the arts practice. For my eco-critical young adult novel *Shifted*, my methodological starting point was narrative inquiry, which considers how meaning is constructed through the stories we tell. Recognising that knowledge is negotiated within a community and that dominant cultural narratives direct us to decide what is true or meaningful (Freedman & Combs 1996, 20, 32), I chose in my research to move away from the centre, the dominant cultural narrative of the Earth as a machine, and to uncover the ‘mass of intertextuality’ (Parry & Doan 1994, 29) of other voices.

Taking Kroll’s (2010) words to heart about moving into unknown areas, I utilised a fluid, free ranging approach, consciously crossing discipline boundaries to use the structured approach of Narrative Therapy as my ‘travel guide’. Narrative Therapy specifically aims to open space for the creation of new stories. As McKenzie notes, bringing together different frames of reference and exploring the collision of ideologies through critical reflection is a precursor to imagining other possibilities because it creates a ‘consciousness of the Borderlands’ (2009, 215 & 216). In the third space created by this hybrid methodology I found a definite shape which moved my research forward, although the extensive range of ideas and theories I was reading did not always lend itself to a clear path ahead. I was reassured by the words of Springgay et al that ‘difficult spaces of unknowing’ are part of arts-based research (2008, 336). In fact, their findings reinforce the idea of radical openness as a path to discovery, noting that meaning comes through dissolving dichotomies between disciplines, through disruption and pulling things apart, and by asking the right questions and being open to what’s discovered rather than through a more linear process (ibid. 2008, 336, 342). I found it particularly reassuring to note their conclusion that ‘only time gives the understandings, threads and connections necessary for the coalescing of new ideas.’ (ibid. 2008, 344)

This required radical openness not just to the process, but also to a ‘multiplicity of perspectives’ (Soja, 2009, 50), a stepping into the third space where I could examine my research question by looking not only at eco-theorists, but also the creative exploration of ecological issues by fiction writers. My research began with an examination of the epistemological frames of eco-feminism and eco-psychology. Accepting the basic premise that underpins both – the need to re-story our relationship with the Earth – as the focus of my exegetical research, I explored the many arguments put forward for how this should be done. My specific research question was how I might, through a work of fiction, undertake such a re-storying. At the same time I examined what meta-narratives currently exist in fiction about our relationship with the Earth, and what stories stand outside this centre. Specifically, I wanted to know how other writers might have successfully undertaken a re-storying process.

As I moved between the conceptual spaces of psychologists, eco-feminists and writers, recognising the importance, in arts practice, of the words of Knudson and Suzuki that knowledge can derive equally from the intellect or the soaring imagination (1992) and therefore privileging neither, I caught glimpses of commonalities and possibilities. This openness to different ideas and understandings about ecological issues opened the door to flashes of insight, whereby I would suddenly see connections between concepts. This seemed akin to juggling balls of light which, when they crossed in the air, revealed new colours. A recurrent finding, which concurred with my practice epistemology as a researcher in the field of social work, was the importance of ontology. The values and beliefs that form your sense of how the world is ordered are important in directing your actions. If there is to be a change in how people act towards the Earth, it needs to begin with a psychological shift in how they see their place within it.

Gare, in a paper that calls for ‘a new polyphonic grand narrative’ to respond to the ecological crisis, says that stories can provide this shift and that therefore ‘it is of immense importance to uphold the ontological assumptions of stories’ (2001, n.p.). I identified a difference between fiction that holds a message (which may be more or less explicit), and fiction from which meaning emerged because of the ontological stance underpinning the story. Ontology is embedded through an underlying value system that infuses all aspects of the storytelling. Specific values that emerged relating to the re-storying that was my aim were community and connection, stewardship and sacredness, and simply the recognition that there is another way of being. My next challenge was to build these into the story.

Third space in creative writing: the writing process and allowing space for creativity

... if there is one gift more essential to a novelist than another it is the power of combination – the single vision. (Virginia Woolf, quoted Allott, 1960, 236)

Writing fiction is a process whereby everything we know, think and have experienced, coalesces and is transformed through the creative process. This creative coalescence fits well with Bhabha’s concept of third space, as fiction can cope with complexity and contradiction, doing away with binaries to look instead at blendings; not the ‘either/or’ duality which frequently underpins Western epistemologies, but the ‘both/and’ outlined by Soja (2009 50). However, it is not always an easy blending.

It was impossible to encapsulate the complexity of ideas, theories and beliefs I uncovered through my research and reflexive practice in an entirely conscious process. I went through dark periods where I felt that my skill as a writer was not up to the scope of the task. To progress the novel I decided to approach the developing story with the same ‘extraordinary openness’ (Soja 2009 50) I had brought to my research, trusting to what Coleridge described as ‘the esemplastic power of the imagination’, the process by which everything we have experienced is brought together into a coherent whole (Hyde 2007, 195), in that third space where combinations and connections bring to life something that is greater than the parts. The conflict between political effectiveness and artistic excellence in arts-based

research is acknowledged by Finley, who notes that it takes shape ‘in the tension between truthfulness and artistic integrity’ (Meyer & Moran 2004, quoted Finley, 2008, 72). For me this tension was between deliberate eco-critical conceptualising and the demands of my imagination. I chose to privilege the aesthetic demands of creating a story, trusting that my research would feed into my practice, but ensuring that the creative practice followed its own impulses. This process proved fruitful.

While I used specific devices in the story to consciously portray or suggest certain ideas or values, others emerged of their own accord, so that I only became aware of them while reading the first draft. Coming into the writing process I had specific ideas relating to the plot and world of my novel and a basic sketch of the central characters, and I held the broad aim of re-storying humanity’s relationship with the Earth, through the ontological values I had identified during my research. I incorporated a character, Kalia, who personified the Earth, and created a place, Sanctuary, that effectively served as a living character in the story. The final denouement of the plot required the coming together of a diverse community, and the central characters embodied a growing connectedness to the natural world.

I discovered that if I fully allowed the creative writing process, I could enter the delimited space Oberg & Cranmer define as *temenos*, a space where if you are willing to explore without a pre-determined destination you can witness ‘extraordinary events’ (2008). I had moments of clarity where I suddenly saw how the story should progress, or how a character would behave. Trying to forcibly define my characters at the start of the process was unsuccessful, but allowing my imagination to enter a creative space, their voices and motives began to become clear to me. Likewise, when I wrote with a conscious intention to portray specific ecological or ontological messages, the work read later as overly message-laden, while if I trusted that these would emerge in the open space of my creativity, they would emerge in unexpected ways.

My writing practice thus involved a similar process of bringing together and emergence as did my research, in this case blending creative writing techniques with ontology to create an eco-themed story. Creating a coherent story I needed to trust my own ‘single vision’ and my skill as a writer. This vision had grown out of a significant amount of research, but the words of Barthes resonated strongly when I recognised my ‘personal and secret mythology’ and philosophy, the themes of my existence in terms of biography, biology, metaphor and memory, all of which notably impacted on my choice of imagery and delivery (1953, 10, 12).

The revision process further allowed me to build on motifs that emerged from ontology, and also to tone down moments that felt too much like ‘message’. It gave me an opportunity to use conscious critical reflection to identify areas in my novel where I might be, as Bamberg puts it, complicit with dominant meta-narratives (2004, 363). Imagination might release story in the third space, but the chances are that meta-narratives, implicit in all aspects of our daily interactions and thinking, will re-emerge in this space as well. Surprisingly, the main area where I had fallen prey to dominant meta-narratives was in relation not to ecological issues but gender issues. Entering the third space of imagination will not, therefore, preclude the need for critical thinking and revision later in the writing process.

Fiction as third space: revealing new possibilities

So far I have noted that bringing openness to the research process allowed understanding to emerge in terms of the discovery of the importance of ontology, while trust in the writing process allowed story to emerge, replete with ontological underpinnings. In this paper it appears to be a linear process, with research feeding into practice, but the interplay of both was more like an emerging fractal, with each feeding into the other. Unexpected meanings emerged in the recombinant moments when creativity and criticality met, a process that again resonated with my understanding of third space. Finley expresses this beautifully, stating that arts-based inquiry:

...takes form in the hyphen between art and social science research. It creates a place where epistemological standpoints of artists and social science workers collide, coalesce, and restructure to originate something new and unique among research practices. (2008, 72)

She sees arts-based research as opening space for new cultural interpretations, meanings and transformations, and says the researcher's responsibility is to create entrances to emotional, spiritual and ephemeral spaces (2008, 73). Writer-researchers do this through story, and Oatley describes fiction as an invitation to a dream, a simulation of multiple realities (2011, 19) that are found in 'the space-in-between' the world and the mind. It is in this space, he suggests, that creativity occurs, and where culture grows, so that:

the reader's imagination can expand without coercion. It is in this space that the reader can take up and turn over the words of the writer. The experience of the book can become the reader's own. (2011, 55)

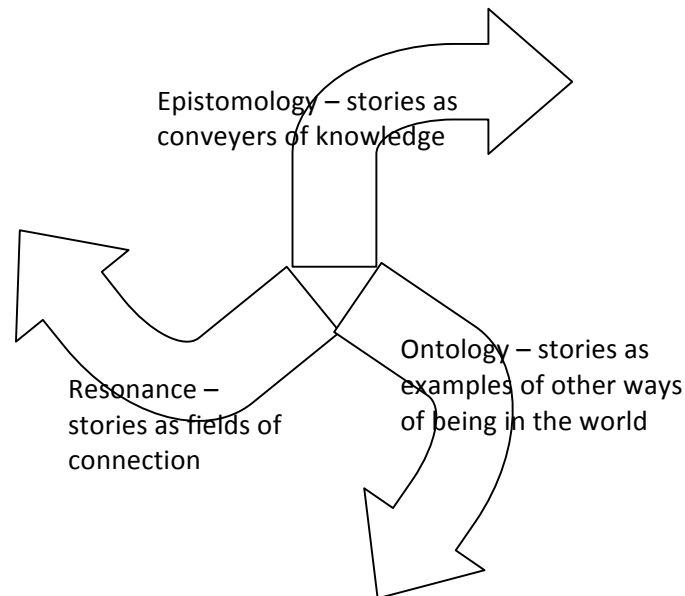
Stories take what we know and show it to us through different eyes. In a discussion of magical realism Faris quotes HP Duerr's work *Dreamtime*:

perhaps you are aware that seeing takes place only if you smuggle yourself in between worlds, the worlds of ordinary people and that of the witches. (1995, quoted 172)

This idea elegantly highlights the thought that in the space that forms when two worlds intersect, which, in fiction are the real world and the world of the writer, we can really see something new, even if all that we see is that it is possible to see things differently. Fiction, then, functions as a third space. But a consideration of spatiality does not need to end there.

Fiction, de Freitas tells us, creates a space for speculation (2008, 188). By its very nature this is a space where narratives can be re-visited, a critical step, Parry and Doan argue, for creating new frames of reference (1994). Once such a space is made, it can show us new ways of conceiving of and perceiving reality, showing that other ways of thinking and being are possible; this is particularly effective when writers create characters that readers can resonate with. This can be phrased as story holding different cognitive frames within its borders: epistemological, ontological and resonant, while at the same time shaping something new. The idea of conceiving and

perceiving reality in different ways brought to mind Lefebvre's concept of trialectics of spatiality (Soja 2008, 53), and I articulate this thinking in the figure below.



The significance of spatiality for ecological re-storying

Having become aware that the constant dialogue between research practice and creative practice can lead to new understandings, I applied this trialectic of conceptual spaces in fiction, to the range of research I had undertaken into ways in which environmental issues can be conceived and re-conceived. Theorists identify an apparent binary between traditional environmentalism, with its emphasis on unpeopled landscapes and distant species that need saving, and eco-feminism, which points out the social injustice that environmental collapse creates for the vulnerable. The former takes an epistemological stance, primarily focusing on creating awareness of problems, while the latter calls for an ontological shift. Yet my research into eco-psychology and depth ecology identified a third approach to ecological issues, as well as the issue that even broad understanding and deeply held values can fail to lead to action because of the paralysing effect of emotional reactions such as grief and fear.

This would suggest the need to approach environmental issues from the same three cognitive spaces I identified as being found in fiction – epistemological, ontological and resonant – or the fields of knowledge, values and emotions. My research suggests it is important not only to conceive of a different way of ordering our knowledge of the natural world (a shift away from Cartesian thinking) and of relating to it (a shift towards a degree of reverence), but also of overcoming emotional resistances to these shifts. Re-storying therefore needs to encompass this trialectic. Stories that encourage reflection and compassion can awaken and inspire readers to reflect on their values, to relate to others in new ways, to gain new understandings and, by offering shared visions, build community and bring about shifts (Driscoll & McKee 2007, 211). This is because:

People reflect on well told, meaningful stories that are told from the heart and soul. They resonate and stick with us. This, in turn, helps us with discernment, in making better decisions, more ethical decisions. (Driscoll & McKee 2007, 211)

Conceiving of fiction as an invitation to the third space – and noting that it can offer the trialectical thinking environmental issues need – offers hope that stories can lead not only to a shift in thinking about ecological issues, but also to shifts in behaviour. If the arts are taken as an expression of what it is to be human, then it could be argued that by sharing art an alchemical communication can occur in the third space, when expression and receptivity meet. Hyde argues that art embodies the spirit of any group (race, culture etc.), thereby linking one (the artist) to many, but also creating connections across communities and generations, going beyond the life of its maker to articulate and renew the spirit of the group (2007, 199). According to McKenzie et al., this is because art encourages daydreaming, and, by offering ‘new imaginaries’, expresses hope that change is possible (2009, 9).

Art can certainly be an invitation to discover new possibilities, as long as the reader approaches it with a willingness to enter into a different reality; a state of radical openness. By laying themselves open to imagination, Oatley (2011) says readers can abstract themselves from immediate reality, gaining the:

ability to conceive alternatives and hence to evaluate. We gain the ability to think of futures and outcomes, skills of planning. (2011, 30)

McKenzie notes that when stories create a sense of dissonance between the real and the imaginal world, which we have connected to through its characters, it can lead to critique of, resistance and even acting with intention in the real world (2009, 220).

Conclusion

Creative writers work in the third space, creating hybrid new realities from the collision of their ‘singular vision’ (derived from knowledge and values) and their imagination. Out of this collision ideas and meaning can emerge, offering readers new knowledge and understandings, but also showing them that other ways of being-in-the-world are possible. When writing is well crafted, creating emotional resonance, it invites others to enter this space of new possibilities. Narrative shapes culture: who we are and what we believe impacts on how we act upon the world. One way to bring about the profound cultural shifts required of our time may be to create stories that offer an alternative to the dominant social paradigm. The trialectic of epistemology, ontology and resonance offers signposts to guide the creation of issues-based writing that engages, educates and shows new ways of being.

Endnote

i. I use ontology in this paper in terms of a way of being in the world, which in relation to ecological issues involves a move towards recognition of the inherent nature of living things and a move away from the economic growth imperative that underpins consumer culture.

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