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Migrating from nonfiction to fiction – a practice-led approach drawing on a literary journalist’s notional tool-box

Abstract

This paper reflects on a literary journalist’s practice-led approach to migrating from nonfiction to fiction and the decision to situate a narrative about the challenges and achievements of women in Victoria’s mid-19th century goldfields in a novel in the subgenre of historiographic metafiction. It addresses the lacuna in the traditionally masculinised history of the gold rush era, opening a window onto the ‘herstory’ of the period, describing the courage of women who overcame poverty, isolation and the limited gender-based expectations of the time in which they lived to set the pattern for the social infrastructure we take for granted today. The first author’s doctoral novel ‘A Respectable Married Woman’ embodies this migration and is informed methodologically by both journalistic and creative strategies.

The study focuses on the role of site visits in practice-led research as it applies to literary journalism to create a sense of ‘being there’. The interlocutory reader (Widdowson 1979) is drawn into a narrative construct which hangs evidence-based ‘fictionised truths’ in a factual framework in order to facilitate a greater understanding of a critical period in the growth of Victoria and, in particular, the contribution of women. Drawing on literary theorists including Hutcheon (1998) and Kundera (2000) and referencing writers Ricketson (2006), Sedgwick (2004) and Quindlen (2004) among others, this paper aims to encourage other nonfiction writers to make use of the literary journalist’s notional ‘tool-box’ to take an imaginative leap into the world of credible historiographic metafiction.

Keywords: historiographic metafiction; literary journalism; practice-led research

Introduction

This essay examines the uncovering of evidence relating to the presence of women on Victoria’s mid-19th century goldfields in the context of a grand lacuna that compelled me to write a doctoral novel, ‘A Respectable Married Woman’. An academic, subjective narrative of ‘myself as data’ (Muncey 2010: 49), this paper joins Natalie Kon-yu’s (2010) in exploring one of the increasingly popular pathways to addressing the lacuna in traditionally masculinised recorded history:

writing a *herstorical* historical novel.

Through three sections, this paper narrates how I act as an author to produce new aesthetic experiences by writing in what I call the 'porous borders' between fact and fiction. In the first section, I relate my trajectory from being a career journalist and nonfiction author on predominantly social issues to becoming a writer of fiction. This section examines how some of the methodologies of my journalistic self, particularly site visits, enhanced the experiential knowledge I brought to my recreation of fictional worlds. In the second section, I examine my migration from nonfiction to fiction more closely, opening the contents of my journalist's tool-box and examining how my journalists' principles and strategies led me to write in a rich interstitial zone between nonfiction and fiction where my pledge to the truth became enlivened by open engagement with the imagined. Throughout, I describe where this tool-box took me: to the rich liminality of Linda Hutcheon's (1998) historiographic metafiction. In the third section, I consider my contribution to the gaping lacuna. Historian Kathy E Ferguson (1993) emphasised that goldrush era histories describe many goldfields identities and their achievements but there is scant mention of the practical, let alone emotional, response to critical issues impacting on women: the isolation, anxiety, poverty, loss and powerlessness endemic to the migrant experience. As I describe here, my novel 'A Respectable Married Woman' investigated, engaged with and recreated these issues, narrating into this lacuna.

Section 1: Migration from nonfiction to fiction: A subjective academic narrative

My interest in the goldrush period was piqued by a chance visit to one of the many goldfield sites in Victoria's high country for a family picnic some 30 years ago. Beside a creek I came across a long-abandoned cabin with rotting newspapers, posters and handbills forced into the gaps in the walls. At about this time many of Melbourne's historic CBD buildings were being demolished to make way for bland office towers that told nothing of the state's story (Annear 2005). It was hardly surprising that I could find few interested in, and no provenance for, this intriguing historical snapshot.

A career journalist at the time, I drew a rough sketch of the cabin and wrote a few notes on the back of a business card. I later transferred these notes to a journal – the first of many – which became a framework for exploring the lives of women who gave us a blueprint for the social infrastructure we take for granted today, and benchmarked the characteristics that marked these women: supportive, innovative, forthright and fearless.

Over the years, I returned to the goldfields in search of the goldfields women with whom I now felt an affinity due to our shared migrant

origins. Retracing their footsteps in my adopted country, I became absorbed by the history of Victoria's goldfields and the women who raised families there in conditions so primitive as to be beyond the comprehension of women today – yet still found the will to set up schools and hospitals and challenge the prevailing social structure to become leaders of style and substance.

I came across echoes of their lives in city archives and country cemeteries; in the crumbling remains of slab huts and carefully preserved boom-time buildings; in one-room museums in once thriving towns now bypassed by high speed freeways and on bronze plaques mounted incongruously on urban high-rise monoliths. I visited goldfields towns and what remained of the diggings. The people with whom I engaged were more than willing to share unpublished family histories, diaries and journals with me. One woman approached me as I sat in St Peter's Eastern Hill, Melbourne's first Anglican church, built in 1846 and witness to the success and failure of goldfields families who had counted themselves among its mid-19th century congregation (Holden 1996).

Resettling my own children from the UK to mid-west US, from mid-west US back to London, from London to rural Australia, Australia to Asia and back to Australia, I had shared the goldfields women's sense of isolation from family and friends, particularly in times of childbirth and childhood illness (Hagger 1979). Our points of reference were vastly different, however. Schools, hospital and a reliable social infrastructure were immediately available to women of my generation. We owe this to the blueprint created by the goldfields women who had only themselves to turn to in the unfamiliar and unforgiving environment of Victoria's goldfields. Lewis observes that 'it was in the Victorian era that women experienced the greatest forward thrust toward their own liberation in the Western world's history' (Lewis 2000: xi). It is remarkable enough that they survived the journey from the Port of Melbourne to the goldfields, across the windswept hills and freezing gullies, through the sucking mud and fierce, reflective heat of the unfamiliar landscape. Their reaction to the challenges they met and how they overcame them belongs to the realm of the imagination.

Methodologically, site visits transcribed into my journalistic notebook presented empirical data while stimulating the imagination revealingly as they had done for Gaylene Perry (2007). Perry tells of absorbing the site of a key incident retold in her memoir *Midnight Water* (2004). Standing on the banks of the Lerderderg River which runs through Blackwood, I found it easy to imagine the tents and tarpaulins scattered over the rolling slopes, and the diggers – men, women and children – panning and sluicing knee deep in the freezing water. Blackwood, situated half way from Melbourne to Bendigo, had become a focus for my research. To date, this research had covered surviving goldfields towns from Walhalla to Bendigo, Ararat to Beechworth and locations large and small in between. The Blackwood Hotel, built in the mid-1800s by widow Bridget Cruise to house and provide income support for her children, razed and

restored after three successive bushfires, was to become the centrepiece of a narrative which I then began to realize was shaping itself as a historical narrative.

The challenge I faced was to keep faith with the goldfields women by creating a credible account of their stories and emotions as I had uncovered them in journals, diaries and oral histories retold through successive generations. Like Kundera, I had to treat ‘historical circumstances with the greatest economy’ and create a narrative, hoping to absorb readers to take fiction for reality (Kundera 2000: 36, 33-34). Another part of my challenge was to rely on my own creative interpretation to convince even the most ardent ‘interlocutory reader’ (Widdowson 1979: 174) of the authenticity of the research on which it was based. Harris (2009), paraphrasing Boulder (2007), describes the interlocutory reader in the latter part of this quote: ‘Readers who comment directly to writers are part of the writing process but readers anticipated, or imagined, or unconsciously assumed by writers also affect it’ (Harris 2009: 73). The concept resonates with Umberto Eco’s (1994) hypothesis of a model reader who brings her culture, past reading history and experience selfhood to the understanding of text.

My research up to this point had been practice-led in the style of literary journalism: collecting ‘documentable subject matter chosen from the real world as opposed to “invented” from the writer’s mind’ (Ricketson 2006: 156). As I worked on the novel I found a mirror for my migration in Sedgwick: ‘With each nonfiction book, I found myself creeping further down the diving board towards fiction, as my journalistic accounts relied increasingly on narrative, setting and character’ (Sedgwick 2004: 213). From my work as a literary journalist, I realised writers of nonfiction had long ‘borrowed the tools of novelists to reveal truths that could be exposed and rendered in no better way’ (Clarke 2004). Writers of fiction, such as myself, surely might also use them.

Section 2: ‘No better way’: Inside a journalist’s toolbox

To paraphrase Tom Wolfe, in his ground-breaking manifesto on the difference between news-gathering journalism and literary journalism (1972), I had gathered all the material the conventional journalist was after, and kept going. It had also seemed important to me to get the dialogue and the details of the environment into the goldfields women’s story. In doing this, I was writing with Wolfe:

The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: namely the subjective or emotional life of the characters. (Wolfe 1972: 21)

I was also mindful of Kramer at the 2003 Conference on Narrative Journalism who clarified journalism’s critical writer-reader contract

thus: 'If you take any liberties (with the facts), tell the reader' (Kramer 2003). In other words, if I wanted to keep faith with the goldfields women by drawing on my own creative interpretation to convey a sense of being there for the reader, I had to posit the developing narrative in a genre other than nonfiction.

Considering Kramer's insistence on communicating any cross-generic liberties to an illocutionary reader, Clark's borrowing 'truths' from novelists and Wolfe's use of the subjective and emotional, I returned to the raw materials of my journalistic training to examine more closely where I had come from. Elements of the literary journalists' toolbox underpinned my career in literary journalism over three decades in four global regions and seven nonfiction books on critical social issues. The notional term 'the journalist's toolbox' describes a set of guidelines, generally accepted by practicing literary journalists that set them apart from writers of fiction. Clearly there are commonalities: literary journalists and fiction writers stand or fall on the quality and depth of their research and intellectual rigour as well as their polished prose. However, I needed to revisit the elements of literary journalism to understand how they might open a window to historiographic metafiction, a theme I return to in section 3.

The 'rules' outlined by Tapsall and Varley (2006: 156-157) capture the essence of a literary journalist's notional tool-box, and are paraphrased as follows:

1. Documentable subject matter is chosen from the real world as opposed to 'invented' from the writer's mind.
2. Exhaustive research through conventional sources such as documents or interviews or by 'saturation reporting' leads to a higher standard of accuracy.
3. While literary journalists are restricted largely to techniques drawn from socially realistic fiction, novelistic techniques may be permitted if exhaustive research is conducted. It is possible legitimately to use techniques borrowed from fiction, such as creating whole scenes, quoting passages of dialogue, describing the social milieu in detail, and writing interior monologues for subjects (based on interviews with the subject).
4. Literary journalism gives the writer the freedom to move away from the tyranny of an institutionalised voice. Writers may be ironic, self-conscious, informal, hectoring, self-aware and so on. It is mainly through the authorial voice that literary journalists can move beyond the socially realistic portrayal of events and people.
5. Literary prose style, both in the attention paid to structuring the narrative and choosing the words themselves, can be used.
6. A key purpose of literary journalism is to go beyond the constraints of daily journalism, and find underlying meanings in issues and events. This implies greater intellectual rigour in mounting an argument about the subject, even if that argument is embedded in an artfully constructed narrative.

Examination of these principles reveals why literary journalists and novelists are permitted to borrow from each other when it comes to research. While “truth” would appear to be the inviolable tenet underwriting the most eloquent, elegant and descriptive elements of literary journalism, novelists ask readers to suspend disbelief. To return to Wolfe (1975):

[Literary journalists] had to gather all the material the conventional journalist was after, and keep going. It seemed all-important to *be there*, to get the dialogue, the gestures, the facial expressions, the details of the environment. The idea was to give the full objective description, plus something that readers had always had to go to novels and short stories for: names, the subjective and emotional life of the characters. (Wolfe & Johnson 1975: 41)

Being complete is crucial to truth in literary journalism, a maxim Milan Kundera (2000) would subscribe to in fiction: ‘A writer must give the maximum amount of information about his character: about his physical appearance, his way of speaking and behaving’ (33). Increasingly, I saw a mirror of my practice in the descriptions journalist-turned-novelist, Anna Quindlen wrote of her practice:

I learned from decades of writing down their words verbatim in notebooks, how real people talk. I learned that syntax and rhythm were almost as individual as a fingerprint, and that one quotation, precisely transcribed and intentionally untidied, delineated a character in a way that pages of exposition never could. (Quindlen 2004: 196)

Literary journalism offered the artful, stylistic space and the professional permission to explore the narrative, the subjective, the emotional and the individual and to enter the exciting spaces of the underlying as well as the actual.

Reviewing and analysing data collected while researching what I now recognised from Miller and Swift (1976) as a ‘herstory’ of the goldfields led me to a liminal space between nonfiction and fiction. I soon realised this was the space of Hutcheon’s historiographic metafiction (1998). I was writing between the porous borders of both traditional genres. As my paraphrases of the tenets of literary journalism demonstrate, my research into development of a creative narrative hung in a factual framework revealed more similarities than differences between the broadly journalistic and the fictional. At this point, Porter Abbot alerted me to the possibility that a reader’s own ‘experiential reality’ influences her perception of the value of a narrative coded as fiction (Porter Abbot 2008: 156). Porter Abbot argued the past is open to interpretation and notes a writer embarking on a historical novel should watch for lacunae historians might have left out. This identification of the lacuna leads me to a more explicit description of the gap into which I wrote ‘A Respectable Married

Woman’.

Section 3: Writing into the lacuna and finding historiographic metafiction

The popular commercial genre of historical fiction creates awareness of history through writing in ‘the haunting space between fictionalised history and historical note’ (Westerman 2006: 369-393). In my introduction I mentioned Ferguson’s (1993) point that the decade from 1851 to 1861 was one of selective reporting by historians recording the doings of men and ignoring the contribution of women, who, apart from developing the beginnings of rural social welfare, raised a generation of new Australians in an unfamiliar, challenging environment, isolated from extended family and social support. Geoffrey Serle, noting ‘Australian historians have singularly neglected the Victorian gold rushes, despite the colour and richness of the subject matter and its importance’ (Serle 1968: *i*), writes the history of Victoria’s goldrush era is ‘untapped’. It remains fertile ground for exploring such lacunae as the under-reported challenges and achievements of women or the *herstory* of the goldfields. As my story thus far demonstrates, the frustration of finding comparatively few references to the presence of women on Victoria’s goldfields had been the deciding factor in migrating from nonfiction to fiction to tell their story.

To write in the ‘haunting space’ Westerman locates allowed me also to write into the lacunae Ferguson and Serle identified. I was, however, unwilling to let go of the handrail of history and I was interested in using fiction as a way to explore what Camilla Nelson (2007) saw as the gap between the narratives of history and the actualities of the past. But defining my narrative as fiction, the genre generally understood to encompass creative works stimulated by imagination rather than credible research would, in my view, risked trivialising the herstory of the goldrush era.

This led me to seek support for positing the goldfields women’s story in the relatively new postmodern sub-genre of historiographic metafiction. Hutcheon’s polemics on the parody and intertextuality of history (1984, 1988, 1998) argue for embedding both literary and historical texts into fiction. Historiographic metafiction uses historical record without assimilating it; it demands the recreation of historical identities not literary types; it parodies historic records’ pretence to truth with their heavy reliance on other ideology-ridden texts. Such texts may contain lacunae. Detractors view historiographic metafiction as licence to create ‘novelists parading as historic authorities’ (McKenna 2005). On the other hand lay the possibility of fictional accounts offering natural truth. As Catherine Elcik argues, ‘this third genre, this blending of the truth and fiction, may be closer to the natural truth than many are willing to admit’ (Elcik 2006: 6-7).

Given my background in literary journalism, my working understanding of historiographic metafiction is evidence-based research supported by credible ‘fictionalised truths’. Josie Arnold describes these in a study of women’s history by women writers as providing:

a background to the lives of ordinary women: they are a herstory told through narratives to which the readers relate. In this way, they provide a pace in which readers can identify ‘fictional truths’ within a narrative that enables them to both stand aside and to engage.
(Arnold 2008: 10)

Like Kon-yu (2010), I wanted to write within a realistic framework but to draw attention to the ‘omissions, silences and contradictions’ in a masculinised history of Victoria’s mid-19th century goldfields era without ‘glossing over’ what history had left out.

As a historical writer, I am not alone. In 2009, five of the six narratives on the Booker shortlist were historical novels (Johnston 2009). In a review of Pulitzer Prize-winning historical novelist and former journalist, Geraldine Brooks’ novel, *Caleb’s Crossing* (2011), Keenan describes Brooks’ focus as ‘poking into the dark corners of history’ (Keenan 2011: 24), where the author says that to get at them, things must be imagined. Philippa Gregory, whose historical novels also focus on the intriguing gaps in recorded history, argues such an approach gives readers a fuller appreciation of history, going so far as writing in the present tense to give the reader a better sense of being there (an echo of Wolfe’s *to be there*). ‘The fiction’, she writes on her webpage, ‘serves to fill in the gaps in historical records’ (Gregory 2009).

In order to do the goldfields women justice, I had to invest in the creation of fictionalised truths in the style of Brooks, as well as Patricia Stavelly Baird (2004) and Fiona Capp (2008); but my approach was infused with the techniques of a literary journalist. Baird introduces *An Unlettered Girl – her life on the goldfields* as a meld of fact and imagination, inspired by the discovery of a chest of Stavelly letters, diaries and artefacts, without claiming specific genre territory for her story. She draws inspiration from diaries, letters, images, a leather-bound family bible, a christening robe and a pistol and ‘imagines a history for each piece’ (Baird 2004: 7). Capp credits merging fact and family myth as the starting point of her novel, *Musk & Byrne* (2008), about the life and times of a woman painter in the Victorian town of Wombat Hill a decade on from the goldrush (Capp 2008: 339).

Kon-yu (2010) reminds us ‘the difficulty in unearthing the details about women’s lives is not a new problem’. ‘Women have no history’, Woolf had declared in *A room of one’s own* (1929a). Kon-yu draws on Woolf’s essay *Women and Fiction* (1929). Along with Kon-yu, Brooks and Baird, I, too, had found that women’s history lies:

In old diaries, stuffed in old drawers, half obliterated in the memories of the aged. It is to be found in the lives of the obscure – in those almost unlit corridors of history where the figures of generations of women are so dimly, so fitfully perceived. For very little is known about women. (Woolf 1929b: 141)

Kon-yu makes a case for ethically imagining the ‘hidden lives’ of women, absent from the discourse of history and silenced from historical writings, particularly where stories were unwritten because prohibited. Her creative text needed explicitly to acknowledge and embody the existence of gaps and silences or remain epistemologically false.

My response to these visible lacunae led me to unpack the literary journalist’s ‘tool box’ as practice-led research, as we saw in section 2. This tool-box provides stepping stones to collecting, collating and reviewing the evidence of the challenges and achievements of the goldfields women validated by literary journalism. Like Brooks, quoted in Keenan (2011), I found there was ‘no way to leave their story alone once I had begun to uncover it’ (24). However, if I wanted to bring them to life, the narrative I had set out to write as a nonfiction account of the life and times of the goldfields women was clearly destined to break free from the traditional boundaries of nonfiction to be posited in historiographic metafiction.

Concluding comments

In reaching this point of my trajectory, I realised, with Irish author, former journalist, and Booker Prize winner, John Banville, that ‘journalism is the best lab a writer can have; managing language, marshalling facts’ (*Being John Banville*, ABC, 2010). In the same ABC radio interview, he also said, ‘Researching, you can get lost in fact. Imagination is more truthful than fact’. His view on migrating from nonfiction to fiction is supported by Quindlen (2004) in ‘The eye of the reporter, the heart of the novelist’ (197). This was a defining point for me, also a career journalist and nonfiction author. Having marshalled a framework of available facts through years of painstaking research into Victoria’s mid-nineteenth century goldfield era it had become apparent the challenges and achievements of women were seen as being of little consequence in comparison with the doings of men during that life changing decade. Like Quindlen, like Brooks in writing *Caleb’s Crossing* and like the literary journalists described by Tapsall and Varley (2006) and Clark (2004), I had taken enough notes from diaries and journals written in the syntax and rhythm of the period by women of disparate backgrounds to speak to their sense of self. I felt I was empowered, at last, to do them justice.

Apart from the satisfaction of giving the women of Victoria’s mid-19th century goldfields a collective voice in the story of that state’s

greatest demographic and economic growth spurt to that point (Serle 1968: 216), the decision to migrate from nonfiction to fiction to build a narrative construct in the middle ground of historiographic metafiction was not the impossible writerly leap I had anticipated. My practice-led methodology, drawn from a background in literary journalism and as a nonfiction author of works on contemporary social issues, provided me with the 'toolbox' required to research the goldfields women's story and the influence of the mid-19th century social issues and expectations impacting upon it. It also determined my writerly approach to the interlocutory reader in my target audience.

The body of knowledge in which the characters in my historical novel, 'A Respectable Married Woman', are embedded was therefore drawn from text references, journal notes, published and unpublished family histories and data downloads, as well as interviews with local historians and descendants of goldfields families still living in goldfields towns and cities throughout Victoria, thereby recreating history 'through the writer's cerebral perception – techniques also employed by writers in more rigorously prescribed disciplines such as historiography and science' (De Certeau 1986: 201) and, most of all, literary journalism. As a direct result, the narrative, 'A Respectable Married Woman' together with the exegesis, 'Migrating from non-fiction to fiction: writing between porous borders', on which this paper is based, were accepted for a PhD by artefact and exegesis in 2011.

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