

EDITORIAL: FICTION AS RESEARCH WRITING BEYOND THE BOUNDARY LINES

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EDITORIAL: FICTION AS RESEARCH – WRITING BEYOND THE BOUNDARY LINES

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The call for submissions for this special issue of *Art/Research International* opened with our agreement that the narrative, speculative, and literary can open up boundaries and bridge imaginations. We invited contributions on fiction as research or fiction within the research process, and hoped to attract authors who would consider fiction in ways that moved beyond translation, beyond instruction, and beyond utility. The articles and reviews herein, we are very pleased to say, do exactly this. With and through fiction they explore critical themes of marginalisation, racism, incarceration, colonialism, the climate emergency, and our current global pandemic. Collectively, they also cultivate a caring attentiveness to issues at the heart of how and why we tell (fictional) stories: to imagine, to communicate, to connect. As we expand upon in our introduction to the sections below, the articles in this special issue work to create space for dialogue, illuminate the complex multiplicities of social life, and envision different ways of doing things.

During the last decade, widespread interest has developed in fiction writing among researchers and particularly among social scientists. To us, the reasons for this come down to *engagement*. Fiction offers us a rich way to engage with our potential audiences with our disciplinary knowledges, and with the issues, sites and communities we study. By fictionalizing research, we have the opportunity to bring our findings to a larger audience. Researchers of all kinds uncover information that would be directly useful to the public, but we are not always great at letting the public know. Instead, valuable insights are made inaccessible to most people through university firewalls or the lofty cost of purchasing an article from a journal. Research writing can also be a jargon-filled bore to read. Fiction is one way we can bring the purpose and the value of our research to life.

Importantly, the process of writing fiction is also a rich way of engaging closely with scholarly theory and with the topics we focus our research on. Many previous scholars have highlighted this point, including Laurel Richardson (1990, 2003), who has written generously for many years on writing as a method of inquiry, and whose work shows the value of curiosity and commitment to the craft. Also, while she did not “invent” social fiction, we would be remiss not to mention Patricia Leavy’s significant development of the field. Her book *Fiction as Research Practice: Short Stories, Novellas, and Novels* (Leavy, 2003), along with her award-winning Social Fictions Series at Brill/Sense Publishers, paved the way for researchers to publish their work as fiction. The Social Fictions Series currently has an incredible forty-two volumes in print, two titles of which include our own novels (Gullion, 2014; Watson, 2020). Since then, the method has expanded into many fields and through many approaches, including researchers writing auto/ethnographic fiction (Ellis, 2004; Inckle, 2010; Gullion, 2016) and researchers and participants writing creatively in response to set prompts (Watson, 2021). Fiction as a form of inquiry has become a legitimized means for research.

There has been strong debate among ethnographers, in particular, about maintaining the balance of confidentiality and empirical evidence in ethnographic research. This debate was recently reignited by critiques of Alice Goffman’s *On the Run* (2014). Goffman was

eviscerated by a lawyer who claimed her evidence was suspect; however, this criticism did not take into account the right to confidentiality that is codified for participants' protection. One way to protect confidentiality is to fictionalize events. Starting with theoretical findings, a researcher can craft a story that explains those findings in a way that protects participants. How this is done raises an interesting tension, which sits at the heart of social fiction: researchers regularly make use of fiction techniques to evocatively render their conclusions and craft a larger social "truth." Through this, the fact versus fiction divide becomes less of a binary; narrative nonfiction and fiction overlap substantively in terms of process and product, and many scholars intentionally working with fiction are now turning their conceptual attention to intent and affect. Rather than illustrate findings or mirror a social reality, with fiction we can generate complex questions and craft alternative social possibilities (Benjamin, 2016; Barone & Eisner, 2012). Collectively, the articles in this special issue are also oriented towards these same ends. They ask important questions about social research and about the role, power and use of fiction. They also craft some much-needed alternative visions, of the present and of our possible futures.

This special issue follows in three sections. Our *Theoretical Musings* section features four articles which explore methodological and theoretical issues of writing and reading fiction in/as research. Opening our issue is a piece by **Anna Nguyen** (Leibniz Universität Hannover), titled "Narrativizing Injustice' through Fiction," which argues for fiction writing as a generative and critical practice for narrativizing injustice. Focusing on the social ends of fiction, Nguyen raises questions that we hope readers carry through the articles in this issue and into their own creative practices: why do we write the stories we do, and whose spaces and voices are we taking up and/or leaving out? Following is **Shawna Carroll's** (Okayama University) article, "Anti-Colonial Book Clubs: Creating a Different Kind of Language for a New Consciousness." This piece is about an innovative project that wrestles with and actively de-centres white settler colonial discourses, through an anti-colonial book club. Rich insights arise from Carroll's participants and from her own analysis on the relational negotiations of subjectivity that can occur through the dialogic processes of fiction reading – between characters, between author and reader, and between members of a book club. The third article in this section, "Narrative Futuring" An Experimental Writing Inquiry into the Future Imaginaries," is by **Rachel Horst** (University of British Columbia), who considers the value of speculative forms of writing for futures-oriented theory. Through stylistically varied vignettes that engage new materialism, post humanism and post-qualitative inquiry, Horst explores the liminal space between fiction and fact, self and other, human and other-than-human, and present, past and future. Finally, rounding out this section is an article by **Ellen Anthoni** (KU Leuven and BrusselAVenir), **Khushboo Balwani** (BrusselAVenir), **Jessica Schoffelen** (UC Leuven-Limburg), and **Karin Hannes** (KU Leuven), "20:30 Brussels Talks: Fiction as Method, Fiction as a Format, Fiction as a Space for Participation," which also generatively puts experimental futures thinking to work. Impressive in scope and imagination, the authors detail their recent participatory project involving over 100 participants – the crafting of a fictional radio show set in the year 2030, exploring climate change as a social issue (the radio script is presented in the following section) – and grapple

with questions of social goals, participatory aesthetics and the power of the imaginative leap. Together these theoretical and methodological articles raise important considerations for how fiction may be engaged in research, especially including the tensions between narratives and counternarratives, and the roots and trajectories of imagination.

Our *In Action* section features six articles that use significant short works of fiction to analyse social phenomena, and consider the affordances and limitations of fiction for doing this work. These pieces approach this task in various ways and forms, primarily including short stories and scripts. Importantly, they each engage with the essential concept of *voice*. Voice is a sensitising issue in the generation and representation of data across qualitative and arts-based research. It is especially critical in the medium of fiction, which substantively and stylistically rests on the creation of believable, animated, active voices – characters who speak and move through the story-world with such vitality and authenticity that we, the reader, continue to journey with them page after page. It is this quality of being-with the characters that propels the thematic journey through these six pieces. The section begins with **Gregory Barraza's** (Chapman University) “Short Fictive Reflections on the Perception of a Postsecondary Experience of Long-Term Incarcerated Juveniles.” In this, Barraza shares two short stories co-constructed with research participants as part of a juvenile justice education project; as he explains, “these stories are not fictional, per se” but are a “distorted mirror” through which he considers, working *with* his participants, the affordances of fiction as expression in a context where one’s voice is suppressed. This is followed by **Karen McGarry's** (University of Cincinnati) “A White Palette Gathering: A Literature Synthesis in One Act,” which engages with the place of storytelling in Critical Race Theory. Bringing arts-based inquiry to pedagogical practice, McGarry also troubles the delineation of fact and fiction by blending scholarly literature with a fictional script and the production of a multi color-coded artifact woven from the resulting data. These creative practices make material the affective theoretical concepts that comprise the context and inform the narrative structure of the play script, in a way that (physically) shapes and creatively extends the role of fiction in the project. The third article in this section is **Sandra Filippelli's** (University of British Columbia) “An Urban Walkabout with Cindy Sherman’s Photograph, ‘Untitled #466, 2008’,” which features a short story based on a visit to an art gallery in our contemporary COVID moment. The text spirals into the alternative worlds of Cindy Sherman’s artistic work, thematically touching on of healing, responsibility, race and place, while stylistically exploring the depth of insight which interiority can bring to social fiction. Following this is a second piece from **BrusselAVenir and BNA-BBOT** with **Ellen Anthoni** (KU Leuven and BrusselAVenir), **Khushboo Balwani** (BrusselAVenir), **Jessica Schoffelen** (UC Leuven-Limburg), and **Karin Hannes** (KU Leuven), “20:30 Brussels Talks: A Future Fiction Radio Show for Change,” in which they present the fictional script discussed in their methodological piece in opening section of the issue. Translated into English from its original multilingual version (English, Dutch, French and Spanish), the Brussels-based radio show reflects upon the multiple crises of the present from a decade into the future. Primarily charting the climate crisis, it also shows, through curated live dialogue, how multiple crises of environment, economy, and democracy are socially experienced and unequally lived.

The fifth article in this section is **Heather Duff's** (University of British Columbia) "Poet(h)ic Inquiry and the Fictive Imagination: Silence, Voice and Story," which presents a creative method for ethical reflection. Through cyclic storytelling, she writes and rewrites across place in a way that shows the workings of writing as inquiry. Through intertextuality and an engagement with meta-fiction, Duff takes a multi-dimensional approach to themes of silence, language, motherhood, ecofeminism, and urbanism in a way that reflects the complex entanglements social scientists grapple with. The final article in our *In Action* section is by **Phil Crockett Thomas** (University of Glasgow), titled "Writing Sociological Crime Fiction: *You Will Have Your Day in Court.*" Through an innovative narrative and visual format which combines script with poetry, Crockett Thomas crafts a dual sense of stream-of-consciousness and fragmentation. Doing this, the piece creatively moves beyond the prioritising of multiple perspectives and works to reveal the social entanglements of crime-as-multiplicity.

Finally, our *Reviews* section contains three reviews of recently published social fiction novels: **U. Melissa Anyiwo** (Curry College) reviews *The Candy Floss Collection* by Patricia Leavy; **Chloe Cannell** (University of South Australia) reviews *Palmetto Rose* by J. E. Sumereau; and **Jessica Smartt Gullion** (Texas Woman's University) reviews *Into the Sea*, by Ash Watson. By reflecting on and critically engaging with longer works of scholarly fiction, these reviewers consider the scope, depth and impact that can be achieved with fiction-based research.

by Ash Watson and Jessica Gullion

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