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Mixing memory with the desire to forget

Abstract:

Fiction can be used to narrate the lives and experiences of those who have marginalised within, or by, historical discourse. As such, many mainstream texts engaged with the past ‘fill in’ or imagine the details of their characters’ lives. However, is revealing or recuperating the past the most authentic way to write narratives about those people whom history has forgotten? As writers, how can we use fiction to tell the lives of those people whose stories have effectively been lost, silenced or omitted?

This paper will explore the different ways in which memory may be written in the novel. Rather than simply being used as a method for recuperating the past, I will argue that characters’ memories can be written as incomplete, contradictory and full of omissions. Drawing on the creative component of my PhD, as well as from the work of novelist Carol Shields and theorist Nicola King, I will suggest that rather than using memories or the act of remembering to recuperate the past, a writer can use the situated narrative voice to encourage the reader to reflect upon why certain narratives cannot be told with the familiar trajectory of revelation and reconciliation. Within my own creative text, ‘The other side of silence,’ my protagonists’ refusal to remember the past in any complete sense suggests that their histories remain in the margins of the text. Writing from the margins in this way, I will suggest, highlights how revelation and closure within the realist text can preclude the probing of subtle and significant questions about who we remember, and how.

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. 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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Current literary trends seem to indicate a growing interest in historical fiction. This year's Man/Booker Prize was awarded to Hilary Mantel for her fictionalised account of Henry VIII and Thomas Cromwell. Both winners of this year's *The Australian/Vogel* award wrote about recognisable figures from the past. In the last few years there has been much critical and popular interest in historical fiction; Kate Grenville's novel *The secret river* (2005) in particular, has raised questions regarding the respective rights of novelists and historians when it comes to writing history. Whatever might be said about the genre's ability to portray an accurate account of an historical figure, it is clear that historical fiction is enjoying a resurgence in mainstream literature.

My interest in historical fiction is not predicated on the genre's ability to capture the truth but, rather, on the kinds of narratives which the genre necessarily marginalises. Historical novels by definition usually provide the reader with fictionalised accounts of recognisable historical figures, and my concern is that the subjects written about in these fictions are precisely those figures who already enjoy some measure of fame or notoriety in mainstream culture. What then of those people which history has forgotten? What kinds of texts can be written about ordinary people from the past? And what kinds of narrative structures can authentically represent a life which has already been marginalised both within history, and increasingly, within fiction?

My project was motivated, at first, by a desire to tell the story of a particular woman in my family's history, a woman I had only heard about in hushed tones, whispered conversations. A woman whose past, it seemed, was so terrible that her story had become marginalised within my own family history. As a student of feminism and literature I couldn't understand why I shouldn't know about this woman's life, and I wanted to take her out of the shroud of silence which surrounded her, and write her story. I felt that by doing this I would be validating her life as one worth writing about. A life worth knowing.

However, my first problem was finding the details of this woman's life. Those who knew the story seemed fearful of telling it. Of course this made her more intriguing. What could this woman possibly have done to deserve this shame which worked its way down through successive generations? Unable to garner much information about her anecdotally, I searched for her in archives. But here again, I was met with silence. There seemed to be no records of her anywhere, no way in which I could trace the facts of her life. The silencing of these kinds of lives due to shame has been articulated by feminist scholars, biographers and memoirists. Carol Shields (2003, 26), a writer of fiction, suggests that:

Enormous quantities of stories—perhaps the finest stories of our culture—have been lost to illiteracy or lack of permission . . . a prohibition placed on the story teller—most often: ‘Woman hold thy tongue!’

The epistemological problems I faced were clearly not new. In their article 'Hystorical fictions,' Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellyn (2004, 137) state that:

The closing decades of the twentieth century and first years of the new millennium have seen a growing trend towards historical fiction in women's writing.

Writers such as Margaret Atwood, A. S. Byatt, Margaret Forster, Maxine Hong Kingston, Drusilla Modjeska, Carol Shields, Toni Morrison, Amy Tan, and Jeanette Winterson, to name a few, have all written fiction about women's lives set in the past. These novels

encompass the infamous, such as Margaret Atwood's *Alias grace* (1996) and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), as well as the 'ordinary,' such as Poppy in Drusilla Modjeska's fictional memoir (*Poppy* 1990), or Winnie in Amy Tan's novel, *The kitchen god's wife* (1991). Many of these writers adopt a 'recuperative' strategy for writing about women's lives from the past: that is, they use fiction to tell stories about women whose narratives have previously been misrepresented or marginalised within our culture. Writers like Tan, whose novels have consistently enjoyed mainstream success, write about women, like my own ancestor, whose lives have been silenced for many years. Tan's novels also utilise recuperation, and inherent in Tan's work is the assertion that these kinds of stories about women *can* be told, as well as an adherence to the generic conventions of realism which enable the telling of them. Inspired as I was by these stories of ordinary women, as a writer, I was concerned that a fiction which followed a trajectory of confession and revelation might perpetuate the myth that women's lives can simply be re-traced and revealed. Given the real constraints in finding out, and being able to speak about, my lost ancestor, I felt that if I wrote an historical fiction which 'filled in' the secret or shameful aspects of her story, I would be glossing over the problems I had encountered in researching her life. My determination to write the story, or a version of it, was borne from a fear in colluding in the silencing of certain women's narratives. In an attempt not 'to hold my tongue' I began to think about other ways in which I might write about a woman, like my relative, whose story could not be told.

Writing at the same time as Tan, Morrison and Atwood, Carol Shields explores the lives of ordinary women in her fiction, though her project is emphatically not a recuperative one. In particular, her novels *The stone diaries* (1994) and *Unless* (2002) pay specific attention to the kinds of gaps, silences, contradictions and omissions in women's stories which have traditionally rendered them unknowable, and, in many cases, unwriteable. Shields exhibits a dissatisfaction with traditional realism, and her texts exemplify scepticism about the capacity of realist conventions to articulate the lives of women. Shields creates situated narrators, further problematising the idea of objective or impartial narrative voices. In addition, both *The stone diaries* and *Unless* refute traditional closure, which is at odds with the trajectory of recovery and reconciliation in much popular historical fiction.

Inspired by Shields' example, I decided to write my fiction, 'The other side of silence,' as a text that would write from the margins of a woman's life. A text which might illuminate a woman's history, *without* revealing those details which often render such lives as unknowable, or untellable. My first inclination was to have the main character, Serafina, the woman whose life I would have liked to know about, silenced throughout the text. My intention was to focalise the narrative through her daughter Alba's perspective. Since I wanted to suggest that lives like Serafina's were not traceable in any archival, historical sense—or even reachable through the back alleys of history (those ways in which we traditionally find out about women's lives)—I made sure to eradicate all diaries, letters and family stories, the kind typically passed down from one generation to the next. It was easy to suggest that Serafina was illiterate, given the time in which she was born, her gender and her lower-class status. I obscured details about Serafina's past, especially those events one wouldn't be able to find out when researching the life of such a woman.

Yet, by not including Serafina's voice in the text, I realised I was still suggesting that the details about her past could be found, if only one had the right tools. Nicola King (2000, 4) suggests that there are two main approaches to remembering the past. She posits that one approach is modelled on Freud's concept of 'archaeological excavation' which 'assumes the past still exists 'somewhere' waiting to be rediscovered'. Minh-ha Trinh (1989, 104) argues that this model is problematic, as it implies that 'the Past, unrelated to the Present and the Future, is lying there in its entirety, waiting to be revealed and related' as certainly happens in many popular historical fictions.

I decided to include Serafina's narrative within the text, and the first half of the novel is told from both Alba and Serafina's perspectives. Yet, as Alba moves from Italy to Australia, the narrative follows her, and Serafina's voice is lost. I used third-person subjective narrative voices for both Alba and Serafina, which allowed me to write each character's recollection of events differently. The creative text starts at a point of friction: Alba is moving to Australia; she is leaving her mother, and embarking on a ship bound for another country. At this moment in history, Alba's trip is fairly standard; many Italians migrated to Australia between the 1930s and the 1970s. Yet, Serafina, with the full weight of her past pressing on her every day, a past which she and Alba share, senses that Alba's journey to Australia is not only about leaving a village ravaged by the effects of war. The difference with Alba's journey, Serafina suspects, is that Alba is not going *to* Australia; rather, she is running *from* Salerno.

By setting the creative text in Italy in 1952, I was creating three distinct historical 'moments': the present perspective from which the contemporary reader might read, as well as the 'present' of the text (1952), and a more distant past (which the characters recall in the narrative). By including Serafina in the 'present' of the text (1952) I was better able to call her past into question. The memories of individual characters became the means by which I could challenge the notion of a history laying in wait to be exhumed, and written in full. Both characters remember specific episodes from the past, but given the trauma associated with them, their memories are incomplete, fragmentary and contradictory. Alba's inability to recall the past, as the text progresses, strikes me as reminiscent of the way in which writers (notably Virginia Woolf) articulate the past in their novels. As Gabrielle McIntire (2008, 7) suggests, such writers: 'Write out a past that can never be mastered, that is always ajar, and open to both re-inscription and re-experience—open to the supplement of perpetual (re)turn'.

By including Serafina as a narrator in the early part of the text, I was able to show the discrepancies between the different characters' memories, and to suggest that both characters revise or modify their memories. This is congruent with King's (2000, 4) second definition of the past as one of 'continuous revision or 'retranslation,' reworking memory-traces in the light of later knowledge'. Although 'The other side of silence' (2009) moves in a linear trajectory, the frequent analepses (or flashbacks) serve to destabilise the notion of narrative chronology, further emphasising the role that their history plays in the lives of these two characters.

By writing part of the text from the perspective of two different characters, I was providing the reader with more than one version of the past. I did not want to reveal the details of the characters' lives which would have been silenced due to shame, but, instead, wrote

memories surrounding these events. For example, in Chapter Three, the narrative is focalised from Serafina's perspective and the character remembers one of the last evenings before they are expelled from Alba's father's house. She recalls:

There had been no sounds out of the ordinary. Serafina had been poised for a shriek, a sudden scraping of a chair from the table. Raised voices. But there was nothing. He hadn't told Alba then, she'd thought, scrubbing the pot with vicious intensity. One more thing he had left for her to do. (2009, 21)

Serafina later approaches Alba's bedroom. She reaches forward to knock on the door, but cannot do it, nor does she ever explain to Alba the reasons why they have to move.

Later in the text, I return to the memory of this night, but this time, the event is focalised through Alba's perspective. In her memory of this night, the character focuses on seemingly insignificant things: the conversation at the dinner table, the French lesson she'd had that day, her desire to brush her hair one hundred times in an attempt to make it straight. Alba also recalls being in her room and hearing footsteps coming towards her door, and she assumes that these belong to her father. All these years later, Alba does not question to *whom* those footsteps might have belonged, but she does question whether or not she actually heard them, 'Looking back, she cannot be certain that she didn't plant those footsteps there herself, that she hasn't imagined them because the alternative is still too painful to bear' (2009, 146-7). Alba wants to believe that her father wanted to say good-bye, and so the footsteps loom largely in Alba's memory. However, earlier in the text, it is suggested that it was Serafina, rather than Alba's father, who approached Alba's door that night. Yet, Alba does not consider that it might have been her mother outside her room. King (2000, 2) puts this process of modifying the past poignantly: 'We long for a time when we didn't know what was going to happen next—or, conversely, to relive the past with the foreknowledge we then lacked'.

King suggests that trauma may inhibit characters from experiencing their memories fully.¹ In 'The other side of silence,' Alba is unable to recall the last night she spent with her father without wondering: 'Where were they then? The hints of things to come?' (2009, 46). Conversely, she expresses grief over her ignorance on that evening:

There is something about the certainty of those brush strokes, the way she kept on going, which Alba cannot bear to recall. There had been, in the flex and stretch of Alba's arm, no apprehension that things were about to change. (2009, 145)

In writing accounts of this night from both characters' perspectives, I wanted to emphasise that the meaning which might be created from past events is necessarily fragmentary, contradictory and partial.

Furthermore, in writing the scenes described above, I was suggesting that shame about the past suppresses certain stories from ever being narrated, or results in the emergence of other stories, differently positioned. King (2000, 24) suggests that narratives such as Morrison's *Beloved*: 'Recognise that some events cannot be fully reconstructed or integrated into a coherent story, that something in them will always resist recovery or 'passing on'.

Morrison's novel offers a different version of Margaret Garner's life, one which places Garner's almost inexcusable act within the larger context of slavery and rape. However,

Morrison's novel provides a sub-text to the story which already exists; it cannot erase the versions of Garner's story which have come before *Beloved*, or the ones which follow it. The word 'disremember' is used by Morrison in *Beloved*, and has interesting connotations for the ways in which characters remember, are remembered, or actively forgotten, (as the case may be). As 'The other side of silence' progresses, Alba's memories become more uncertain. Thus, the character not only is questioning her past as the story moves forward, and by extension, Serafina's past, but Alba's constant speculation means that she is unreliable in providing the kind of truth which conventional realist texts depend upon. Alba begins revising her history by making her memories more palatable. Serafina history is thus doubly marginalised within the narrative: not only by her daughter's migration to Australia, but by the ways Alba chooses to remember her and, by implication, forget her. As Shields (1994, 148) reminds us in *The stone diaries*, 'a childhood is what anyone wants to remember of it. It leaves behind no fossils'.

Perhaps the most poignant example of Alba's desire to remember her mother in a particular way is seen in the last chapter of the text. After learning of Serafina's death, Alba builds a shrine for her mother wondering, 'Who will remember her now that she is gone, and how?' (2009, 183). Alba hopes that, with Serafina's passing, 'all the dark days can finally be put to rest' (2009, 184). Thus, Alba as a character is an unreliable witness to the past, yet she is the only witness left at the text's end. The creative text, set as it is in 1952, intimates that certain stories about Serafina might not be passed on, especially by Alba, implicated as she is in Serafina's past.

Thus, even though the particulars of Serafina's life, events so significant to provoke the expulsion from Alba's father's house, are not written in 'The other side of silence,' they haunt the narrative nonetheless. The text leaves space for the various interpretations of what may have happened in Serafina's life, and it is for the reader to decide what these events could have been, or if they need to be speculated about. Inevitably a sense of loss permeates the novel—most obviously, the loss of Serafina's history. Yet, the marginalisation of Serafina's history within the text reflects both the epistemological problems encountered when researching certain women's lives, as well as the constraints placed on women's stories by the realist form. The reader expecting confession or disclosure will be frustrated by the loss of Serafina's history in 'The other side of silence'. In a sense, the reader's frustration at this loss neatly mirrors my own frustration at the loss or deliberate silencing of stories about women. In acknowledging that some stories about women cannot be 'fully' articulated, I was compelled to write from the edges of Serafina's story. Yet, I hope what Serafina has done, or has not done in her past, is less significant to the text. Rather, one of the manuscript's preoccupations is showing the effects or repercussions of the unmentionable events on both the characters. Serafina is consequently sidelined within the text, not only because she is absent, but also through the ways in which her daughter remembers her (or chooses not to).

Wendy Roy (2003, 124-5) writes that *The stone diaries* 'emphasizes the inadequacy, and yet the necessity, of portraying a woman through gaps in her life story'. I have come to realise, that even within fiction, a writer needs to think differently when trying to articulate women's lives. If I had left Serafina's character in the past, I would have been suggesting that the past is a place that can be reached, if only one has the right equipment. I would be

adhering to the promises offered by excavation, which, paradoxically, leaves so many women's lives buried. In using memory to help structure the narrative, however, I have illustrated that the past can be articulated in fragments, and that its inconsistencies arise from each character's version of events. By giving up on the notion of presenting a complete, fictional history for my female protagonists, I have been able to critique how problematic that notion is. As a writer I have learned the value of writing from the margins to try and work with the silences, omissions and distortions about women in the past, and to do so in creative ways.

Endnotes

¹ See Kearney, Richard 1998 'Remembering the past: the question of narrative identity' *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 24, 49-60 and Mitchell, Angelyn 2002 *The freedom to remember: narrative, slavery, and gender in contemporary black women's fiction*, Brunswick NJ: Rutgers University Press

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