13 *Literary Forms*

WRITING AS THEORY

In Defense of Fiction

◆ Stephen Banks

Humanity has but one product, and that is fiction.

—Dillard, 1982, p. 1

This chapter advocates using literary fiction as a mode of expression in reporting scholarly research. I will not argue that conventional social science must be transformed or that standards for research reports be jettisoned in favor of fiction, nor will I attempt to repudiate any other aspect of scientific writing, except to challenge its failure to engage writing as a theoretical activity and to question its practical utility in some instances. Rather, this chapter sets forth a defense of the position that writing literary fiction can be a productive, even revelatory, practice for communicating scholarship, and as such fiction writing should be taught, used, and appreciated as a form of research reporting. I will make a distinction between reporting as a conveyance of findings and reporting as relating a story of the research experience.

Certainly the zone between the practices of fiction writers and nonfiction writers is blurry. In an interview with National Public Radio journalist Steve Inskeep, Seattle author and librarian Nancy Pearl

(2005) said this about spy fiction writer Robert Littell's novel *The Company:* "If you want a fictional history, lightly fictionalized history of the CIA, 'The Company' is the book to read." Pearl expressed an ambiguity commonly felt about fiction, that is, it is only more or less "fictional." As Morroe Berger (1977) amply demonstrated, fiction strives for a social science–like verisimilitude as a condition of its being. British novelist A. S. Byatt (2001) calls this "fiction's preoccupation with impossible truthfulness," and she connects it "with modern scholarship's increasing use of the techniques and attitudes of art" (pp. 98–99). To achieve that verisimilitude, creative writers conduct rigorous, extensive research. Many novelists conduct in-depth interviews, historical investigations, legal searches, media content analyses, participant observation, and similar fieldwork. They often have "research assistants." In *A Writer's Reality,* Mario Vargas Llosa (1991) says, "I did a great deal of research. I went to the newspapers and magazines of that year. I read everything that had been written and tried to interview the participants. . . . The interviews helped me considerably in writing my novel" (p. 151). A lack of research invites comment:

Mark Twain (1918/1994) savagely criticized James Fenimore Cooper for his "absence of the observer's protecting gift" in *Deerslayer,* saying Cooper's "eye was splendidly inaccurate" (p. 70). Twain took Cooper to task for poor research concerning the shapes of streams, the size of an ark, the behavior of Indians, the visibility of a nail head, even the sounds of conversations.

On the other side, a small clan of social researchers has sensed there is something in the logic and practice of fiction that invites the construction of a "bridge" (Watson, 2000) between social science and literary writing. In the past two decades they have presented diverse arguments for using alternative modes of expression for reporting scholarly investigations, mainly in ethnographic research. In some cases they have made their points by creating provocative examples of experimental writing in scholarly research. Prominent among such scholars, Norman Denzin has championed publication of new forms of writing in the journals *Qualitative Inquiry, Qualitative Research,* and *Studies in Symbolic Interaction,* and more recently in *Culture & Communication,* as well as in numerous books.

These innovations in scholarly expression have established, either by explicit argument or indirectly by example, four foundational premises upon which this chapter builds its position. First, writing must itself be theorized as a generative research practice. Laurel Richardson (1990) concludes that the "crisis of representation" in post-foundationalist social science is an uncertainty about what constitutes adequate depiction of social reality. "How do we write (explain, describe, index) the social?" (p. 19) she asks. Similarly, Susan Krieger (1984) says we need to theorize writing so as to bring into our purview the "inner world" of experience that is anchored in subjective meanings. To theorize writing means not to take writing for granted but to account reflexively for its foundational principles. If, as communication scholar Steven Corman (1995) has argued, theories basically are ways people explain things, then those expressive techniques by which social scientists explain motives, rationalize methods, and communicate findings are themselves theories. If the expression reflexively accounts for itself, then writing *is* theory. And those accounts are always and only grounded in the genre, form, and content of our expression.

Building on the imperative for a self-reflexive practice of writing, a second premise says theorizing writing also invites a critique of the received practice. Against the growing body of critical and experimental work on new forms of scholarly expression there

stands a huge, monolithic and overwhelmingly conventionalized canon of ideas that govern research writing. That dictatorial canon rests on the foundational assumptions of science. It assumes the possibility and necessity for objectivity; it demands and simultaneously assumes writerly authority; and it prescribes textual uniformity and positions scholarly writing as a distinctive, nonliterary mode of expression.

Third, in research writing, as in any human expression, "narrative is unavoidable" (Richardson, 1990, p. 20). Mark Freeman (1998) points out that narrative is unavoidable because, "the phenomenology of human temporality requires it as a condition of the very intelligibility of experience" (p. 457). He argues further that the possibilities for constructing selves, enacting human agency, and sharing social meanings are grounded in narratives. Narratives also are used to diagnose medical conditions, to assess cognitive and social development, to convict criminals as well as to free the innocent, and other practical applications, reflecting an understanding that narrative "captures" experience as an immediate and true metric (see Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, & Zilber, 1998, pp. 3–5).

The last premise is that one of the key modes of narrative—literary fiction—can profitably be used for scholarly writing tasks. This is not an unprecedented point, since numerous scholars have begun to express themselves in literary productions,[1] and critics have for many years turned to literary resources to bolster scholarly arguments, such as Joshua Landy's (2004) use of Proust to develop a philosophy of mind and aesthetics, and Robert Hopper's (1998) use of fictional materials to examine such social rituals as flirting and teasing. The rest of this chapter explores the latter three of these premises in order, as elaborations on theorizing scholarly writing. I conclude with a discussion of what can serve as standards of acceptability for scholarly fiction writing.

◆ *The Conventional Research Report*

Open any current textbook on social research and examine the material about how research activity is to be communicated to audiences. With rare exception, research is assumed to culminate in (i.e., to produce) "findings" or "results" (e.g., Keyton, 2001, p. 343). I place these words in scare quotes to highlight them as terms of art that embody assumptions about what research is and what it does. To ground this part of my discussion, I examined 10 textbooks in research methods across the social science disciplines, all of which included sections on qualitative research. Only one allowed for any deviation from traditional ways of presenting the conclusions of research projects. Structurally, "findings" inevitably are presented as if they occur in the research protocol upstream of the creation of the research report. The positioning of research as something that "produces" likens it to a knowledge factory, a device for generating expected, planned, or epiphenomenal outputs. "Findings" entails the idea that something preexists to be found, and the planned output is the discovery and revelation of the phenomenon assumed to preexist the search to find it. Articulation of the "findings" or "results" is a closing of the episode, an ending of the activity, and the use of the term belies an underlying assumption that the goal of a quest has been achieved, a question definitively answered, or a once elusive relationship found.

Like "findings" and "results," the idea of data as naturally occurring phenomena is another assumption of the standard research report. Yet what are counted as "data" invariably are selected and named by the investigator; in most cases the phenomena under analysis are created by the investigator. Elinor Ochs (1979) has demonstrated that even in the most empirical research

involving recorded spontaneous talk, the data worked on are never the in vivo talk: Almost always analysis is performed on transcripts created when researchers reproduce those conversations through auditing and transcribing the tape recordings. Ochs argues that transcribing is always theoretical work, since the researcher decides what to include and what to exclude. If everything were to be transcribed, she says, one would be transcribing into infinity. But the conventional view is that data are either evoked by experimenters or produced by nature, and all the researcher does is observe it, harvest it, and analyze it. This process produces "findings," which, as John Reinard cautions, should be presented "without comment on their substantive importance" (Reinard, 2001, p. 136).

The canons of style include the requirement for clear, well-organized expression (Schutt, 2001), the advisability of writing drafts and revisions (Booth, Colomb, & Williams, 2003), and in qualitative research reports, the fitting of a conventional narrative form to a standard organizing scheme (Baxter & Babbie, 2004). Only in Lindlof and Taylor's (2002) book on qualitative communication research methods is found encouragement to think about and experiment with "alternative writing formats" (p. 287).

As encoded in the language used to discuss methods, then, research is understood as an autonomous procedure in quest of a conclusive discovery about self-presenting natural data that is subsequently related in an omniscient, transparent text. Ben Agger (2000) points out, however, that "what is distinctive about much positivist sociological writing is that it suppresses the fact that it is writing at all" (p. 2). The text calls no attention to itself, even while it struggles to appear as an automatic and faithful reproduction of an a priori reality. The *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* specifically discourages literary writing, as it "might confuse or disturb readers of scientific prose" (American Psychological Association [APA], p. 32). Agger (2000) argues to the contrary that any method is argument, a rhetorical positioning of the research act that "polemicizes quietly for a certain view of the world" (p. 2), so that the *Publication Manual*'s striving for "writing that aims for clear and logical communication" (APA, p. 31) itself argues for a particular worldview in scholarship.

For many years authorship has been problematized among qualitative researchers and particularly among ethnographers. What is the role and responsibility of the author, if reading constructs the meaning of a text? If there is an implied reader in a text, is the author a textual prognosticator? A puppeteer? A lagniappe? In whose voice does and should the report speak? From Barthes to Eco, the question of authorial reality, power, and legitimacy has depended on whether a text is thought to be able to mirror another, different reality or is a creation of a partially or entirely new one. It has become almost a cliché to say that the text as an object is meaningless without a reader yet inevitably has an author. Indeed, texts don't write themselves (films don't imprint themselves; dances don't choreograph themselves): Authors exercise consequential agency and intentionality in creating texts.

♦ *The Narrative Alternative*

Reflecting on the social science research report, Donald Polkinghorne (1988) says researchers should change their voices from logicians to that of storytellers, so that they can reveal more profitably the narrativity in the research experience. The format of the research report, Polkinghorne argues, is an artifact of the social sciences disciplines and

(quoting Calvin O. Schrag) as such it needs to take into account the "web of delivered discourses, social practices, professional requirements, and daily decisions" within which the research practice takes place (Polkinghorne, 1997, p. 22; see also Harré, 1990). Polkinghorne points to the practical uses of research reports beyond the stated purpose of making knowledge claims, uses such as establishing the prestige or reputation of scholars and departments, the establishment and perpetuation of scholarly publications, the promotion and tenuring of writers, and the improvement of lives of participants and their communities. These uses also are parts of the larger narrative of the research act.

Narrative theorists, like Polkinghorne, Laurel Richardson, William Tierney and Yvonna Lincoln, and Arthur Bochner and Carolyn Ellis, theorize all writing as having essential narrative qualities. This move goes beyond the usual perspective of narrative analysis, by which texts can be analyzed as sorts of conventional stories, with plot, setting, character development, action, and a beginning–middle–denouement–ending structure, for example. Narrative theory in the poststructuralist view, says Denzin (1997), asserts that all texts encode stories with a "narrative logic concerning discursive authority, sexual difference, power, and knowledge" (p. 232). Such elements are embedded but not always obvious in texts.

The Italian philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2000) says the very idea of sentience, of selfhood and personal identity, is grounded in narrative. The self is not fabricated within a project of opportunistically matching one's identity to situational or mass-mediated circumstances, but is instead an aspect of our unavoidable exhibiting of ourselves to others. We present ourselves to others from birth on, and others cumulatively tell us who we are. Only when others tell our stories do we know our identities, she says. Cavarero counterposes the ancient question *What am I?* as against the pragmatic *Who am I?* The first question is a categorical inquiry: What class of objects do I belong to? This is the sort of question found in science writing. To say *what* a person is is to place persons into nomothetic categories. But even philosophical inquiry cannot say *Who* a person is, in all his or her singularity, according to Cavarero. Fortunately, philosophical discourse is only one of many forms of expression we humans are capable of using, she points out. Narrative gives life its figuration and each individual's life its figure, not only its uniqueness but also its unity, its coherence over time. So scientific and philosophical discourses unitize humanity, while narratives unify an individual autobiography.

More to the point of research writing is the theoretical observation that narrative, in moving from the *what* to the *who* of characters, shifts from representing persons as units in categories to unique existents (Cavarero's term) in a constitutive relationship with others, a move from radical individualism to a more relational, socially communitarian view of subjectivity (and the characters can be any phenomenon, from Melville's whale to a soup can in Tom Robbins's *Skinny Legs and All*). From this perspective, then, narrative is fundamental to human understanding, selfhood, and sociality.

But recall my opening quotation from Annie Dillard's *Living by Fiction:* "Life has but one product, and that is fiction." What can she possibly mean by that? The pragmaticist philosopher and semiotician Charles Saunders Peirce (1958) argued that what is taken as factual is actually an agreement of beliefs. Peirce held that truth is decided within interpretive communities and that disagreements over truth represent diverse interpretations of narratives, which have their own logics, evidence, and styles. This means that truth, as Denzin (1997) has

argued, is a social construct and is judged not as a correspondence to external events but is judged according to its internal cohesiveness and correspondence to a world we recognize in other narratives.

♦ *From Narrative to Fiction*

Fiction per se, however, still struggles for legitimacy in the academy as scholarly writing. In their introduction to *Composing Ethnography,* Carolyn Ellis and Arthur Bochner (1997) write:

> Gregory Bateson knew there was no way to guarantee objective truth, but he didn't think that meant the end result had to be make-believe. . . . That's the danger of going too far with the notion of ethnographic fiction. We ought to treat our ethnographies as partial, situated, and selective productions, but this should not be seen as license to exclude details that don't fit the story we want to tell. [It's not the same as] saying the impossibility of telling the whole truth means you can lie. (p. 21)

This view shortchanges the uses and purposes of fiction, as I discuss below. Moreover, lying isn't the point of fiction. Fiction is the selective ordering of experience rendered in a unique story. Paraphrasing Denzin (1997), a fiction is a narrative that deals with real and imagined facts and how they might be experienced, made up stories fashioned out of real and imagined happenings, and that tells a truth. Indeed, psychiatrist and story advocate Robert Coles (1989) argued that researchers shouldn't be concerned about whether we present our subjects as real or fictional characters, but whether we can capture and well express the interiority of those persons.

Even when fictions are deemed as lying, or are seen as purely works of the writer's imagination, they nonetheless have several strong utilities for reporting scholarly research. If two of the main purposes of social science research include instructing others about social life and sharing understandings, then part of the teaching and sharing might (some would argue *must*) include the expressive–emotional dimensions of the researcher's relationship with participants. An example of how this dimension can be conveyed is found in Phil Smith's part story, part poem called "Food Truck's Party Hat" (Smith, 1999). He could have written a report that explored the lives of developmentally disabled, middle-aged men, and layered those lives under various social theories, perhaps correlated their degree of disability with various aspects of social functioning or dysfunction, and reported his "findings." Instead, Smith was interested in the persons themselves, as defined by the particularities of their lived experience. He chose to privilege the voices and lives of his participants and "let the story write itself." He accounted for himself this way:

> As I sat down a month or so after my morning with Food Truck in the donut shop, I did not have a clear picture in my mind of what the resulting text about him would end up being. I wanted it to be what Neal Stephenson calls a *nam-shub,* a Sumerian word that he says is "a speech with magical force" . . . capable of infecting those who hear it with a virus that will affect how they think and act and understand the world. I wanted to write a nam-shub that would begin to change how people think and act and understand what they call developmental disability. (Smith, 1999, p. 248)

This is a positive use of fiction, instructing readers by evoking an awareness of the subjective aspects of participants' experience. In addition, the uses of fiction might

include attempts to share with audiences the researcher's own subjective response to participants' experiences and other research materials, as I have advocated in my fictional renditions of holiday letters (S. P. Banks, 2000).

Several of the strongest arguments for using fiction in scholarly writing are offered by former sex worker and ethnographer Katherine Frank (2000). She says fiction can reach audiences that are broader and larger than those within the academic tribe of readers. In addition, fiction provides immediacy—an artfully strategic evocation of sights, smells, sounds, and other contextual factors—far beyond what conventional writing conveys. Moreover, fiction writing is a form of practice that often is pre-theoretical in the sense that the writer can write into and out of problems of representation without the more cumbersome and constraining language of academic discourse. Frank (2000) also cites a related utility: Fiction, she says, helps "work out problems for which I am unable to find the appropriate theoretical language or framework" (p. 484). Accordingly, she writes about characters as a way of interrogating the social scene she is studying and to learn about her own relation to it and how to locate her research experience in the existing literature. Inevitably, fiction allows writers and readers the freedom to remain open to new interpretations and to avoid closure on any research project.

Finally, in any advocacy of fiction writing as scholarly production, the problems, threats, and inhibiting factors must be confronted. Frank points to the threshold problem of audience expectations. Academic readers, editors, and university review committees overwhelmingly expect research to be communicated in the traditional mode of reporting and to address standards of validity and reliability. The politics of publication are a significant concern to those who would use fiction: What editor will accept a short story in lieu of a scientific report or a conventional realist ethnography? More to the point, how would editorial reviewers judge the quality of a research report written as fiction?

A special issue of *Qualitative Inquiry* (June, 2000) was devoted to this question about criteria for judging in "alternative representations," which is about as close to a confrontation with fiction as academe moves, and the responses of the contributors were varied and mostly cautious. Emphasizing verisimilitude, Richardson (2000) seeks ethnographies that correspond to a lived truth. Focusing on thematic content, Denzin (2000) looks for work that advances social movements and offers a blueprint for cultural criticism. Ellis (2000) would review an experimental text by using the same criteria she applies to any scholarly report. And Clough (2000) seeks theoretical rigor and fidelity in any experimental text. Only Bochner (2000) takes an expansive enough perspective on alternative modes to be responsive to fiction: He seeks persuasive details of fact and emotion, structural and emotional complexity, a plot that shows transformation of character, ethical self-consciousness and commitment, and finally, "a story that moves me, my heart and belly as well as my head" (p. 271). In my own work, I have held that the standards of quality for scholarly fiction should be the same as any other literary fiction, because it seeks to evoke the same responses within its audiences: aesthetic pleasure, understandings derived from narrative coherence and verisimilitude, and an enhancement of emotional resources.

Fiction as research reports, however, needs something more: Because fiction until recently has been rooted entirely in the spaces of literary art or popular entertainment, it is necessary for scholarly fiction to declare itself to have a specialized purpose for its own creation. Likewise, when fictions are created so as to share with readers a

research experience, it is necessary for them to declare their fictional nature. In this limited sense I agree with Tony Watson (2000), who advocates setting fictional reporting within a larger text that explicates the writer's research methods, including an explicit identification of the fiction, and relates the fiction to established theory and research literature. Watson's "ethnographic fiction science" formulation, however, drifts away from the principle earmarks of fiction as he strives to retain the aims and standards of science in the fictional report. Those qualities are the centrality of story, the use of figurative language, and imagination. Vargas Llosa (2002) identified thematically driven story as fiction's core and emphasized coherence and persuasiveness as story's defining properties. Eugène Ionesco insisted on a distinction between invention and imagination, arguing that imagination is the foundational resource of the "honest" writer (see Weiss, 1991). Watson (2000), on the contrary, says ethnographic fiction writers should "draw on the language of the social sciences, reflexively and tentatively, when appropriate [and] make some formalized generalizations about social life in the ways we expect of sociologists or psychologists" (p. 503). This view brings to mind novelist John Banville (1993), who quipped, "the word *psychology* when it is applied to art makes me want to reach for my revolver" (p. 107). Using the language and explicit conceptual frameworks of the social sciences repudiates the very reasons moving a scholar to turn to fiction for expression in the first place.

The practical reality of writing scholarly fiction is that the leap must be total and transparent. The natural history of conventional social science is that of a real world being articulated in imagined details; the natural history of fiction is that of an imaginary world being articulated in real details. The former helps us understand what people are, while the latter helps us understand who people can be.

◆ Note

1. A partial list of representative work includes Anzaldua, 1987; Angrosino, 1998; S. P. Banks, 2000; Diversi, 1998; Ellis, 2004; Lingis, 1994; Lyotard, 1997; Schaviro, 1997; and Stoller, 1999.

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