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Article

Directions for Public Sociology: Novel Writing as a Creative Approach

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Abstract

This article presents a creative direction for public sociology: novel writing. Narrativity is embedded within much contemporary sociological work, and sociologists and novelists share a number of complementary approaches for understanding and interpreting the social world. This article argues that novel writing presents sociologists with a process and medium through which they can expand their work for a more public, engaging, affective, and panoramic sociology. Here, the historical development of sociological thought is considered as well as the recent progress of public sociology. Three key strengths of sociological novels are presented: promoting public sociology and interlocutor engagement; transforming knowledge exchange from mimetic to sympractic communication; and addressing issues of scope. Two recent sociological novels are discussed: *Blue* by Patricia Leavy and *On The Cusp* by David Buckingham, both published in 2015. Finally, two linked aspects for (thinking about) writing sociological fiction are explored: the concept of glocality and the methodology of ethnography. Employing creative mediums such as novels as public sociology may cultivate a wider, affective public engagement with significant academic ideas such as the sociological imagination. Sociological novels work to bring the local and global into dialogue, and may help achieve the scope and panoramic depth that sociology requires.

Keywords

arts-based research, ethnography, fiction, glocality, novels, public sociology, sociological imagination, sociological novels, sympraxis, writing, literary, literature, sociological fiction

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Introduction

Sociology has an 'untidy face' (Willis, 2011: 145). The multiplicities of sociological research mean there is no standardised welcome bag of disciplinary essentials, and this presents a challenge for newcomers and non-sociologists. Explored here is a tool for the sociologist's toolkit that may assist with this challenge: novel writing. Novels are a medium with potential for sociology. The labour and analytical processes of novel writing are complementary to the narrativity embedded within much sociological work (Agger, 2000: 1–4, 249; Berger and Quinney, 2005: 3–6, 8–11), such as ethnography (Ellis et al., 2011: 282). Likewise, literary novels have been recognised for their unique depth of insight into social realities (Becker, 2007: 8; Szakolczai, 2015: 225), both at macro and micro social levels. Novels provide added accessibility: they bridge public readers and academic writers (Leavy, 2013b: 252) as well as academics and students (see Coser, 1972; Hegtvedt, 1991), and popular books commonly act as vehicles for public discussion (Burawoy, 2005: 7). Ben Agger considers 'sociology as a social act that is above all literary – as writing' (2000: 2). Game and Metcalfe argue 'all sociologists write stories' (1996: 66). As such, this article advocates for sociological novel writing. A unique extension of traditional research writing and work, writing sociological novels can help develop, through both practice and outcome, panoramic social worlds that bring to life the sociological imagination. These novels may frame sociology's untidy face in a way that is less of a framework and more like a picture frame, broadening both the practice of sociology and the spaces of sociological consumption.

There are numerous works discussing the significance of, and actually writing, lyrical and metaphor-employing sociology (see Jacobsen and Marshman, 2008; Metcalfe and Game, 2015; Mills, 1959), as there are many instances of novels being used to teach and illustrate sociological theory. Fiction, written by non-sociologists, is effectively paired with more traditional texts in sociology classrooms, giving students the opportunity to 'clothe the dry bones of social theory' (Weber, 2010: 353) with and through literature. As examples, Cheryl Laz teaches introductory concepts including institutions and social control with Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (Laz, 1996), and Caroline Weber recurrently pairs Kurt Vonnegut with Karl Marx (Weber, 2010: 354–355). Lewis Coser's *Sociology Through Literature* brings this outside the classroom, aiming to help 'teach modern sociology through illustrative material from literature', and 'contribute to the refinement and clarification of the concepts of sociology' (Coser, 1972: 4–5). In this text, culture comes through excerpts of Melville and Fitzgerald, status through Chekhov and Orwell, and anomie through Dickens and Yeats.

Discussing Coser's text, as well as the wider use of fiction in teaching sociology, Andrew Carlin (2010) raises pertinent points of corpus status and sociological re/presentations or reconstructions. He highlights that the labour of recognition - the work required to determine sociological relevance within novels - is 'glossed' (2010: 224) or underplayed. In doing this, Carlin makes a similar point to Howard Becker: critical reading of fiction still requires doing 'a lot of work' (Becker, 2007: 249). Further, Coser himself notes that 'fiction is not a substitute for systematically accumulated, certified knowledge', and 'literary insight cannot replace scientific and analytical knowledge' (1972: xvi–xvii). However, fiction and sociology can do more than reciprocally illuminate

understandings. Fictional texts can be more than supplementary material for sociological literature within university classrooms. Fiction does not just provide a 'wealth of sociologically relevant material, with manifold clues and points of departure for sociological theory and research' (Coser, 1972: xvi). Sociologists can bring sociology not just to fiction, but into fiction. Fiction offers sociologists a medium for doing sociological work.

This article first of all considers the long-running ties between sociology and fiction, and contextualises the significance of sociological novels within contemporary public sociology. It then explores three key strengths of sociological novels: as mediums for facilitating public engagement; as affective and sympractic sociological work; and their potential to creatively address issues of theoretical presentism through panoramic narrative scope. Following this is a discussion of two sociological novels that were published in 2015: *Blue*, by sociologist-cum-novelist Patricia Leavy, and *On The Cusp* by Professor David Buckingham. Finally, this article unpacks two linked approaches for (thinking about) writing sociological fiction: conceptually, via 'glocality', and methodologically, via ethnography.

A Background: Sociology and Fiction

Historically, sociology grew in the divisional space between science and literature that developed in the Scientific Revolution and Enlightenment period, and deepened during the Industrial Revolution and Romantic Age (Berger and Quinney, 2005: 1–2; Lepenies, 1988; Nisbet, 1962). As 'method' developed, ways and fields of knowing were bracketed apart. Literature and sociology, both concerned with the social, had (and indeed have) discernible commonalities. Wolf Lepenies argues that rather than any fundamental difference between novelists and sociologists, it was this very overlap in focus that saw early sociologists purposefully diverge away from 'art' and into 'science', as the latter was gaining significant intellectual and social traction (1988: 7). As such, both strategically and hegemonically, sociologists since Auguste Comte have often aligned themselves with empiricists and positivists, differentiating 'science' as the content of intellectual work from 'literature' as no more than a form of written work that exists in the realm of public understanding.

However, like the affinities long observed between scientists and artists (Nisbet, 1962: 70), and more specifically the early sociologists and novelists in Chicago (Capetti, 1993: 20–24), today sociologists and novelists have much in common. Parallel threads run between contemporary sociological and literary methods, subject matter, and their critical approach. Arguably, these aspects have been especially congruent in the English tradition since H.G. Wells' sociologically informed novels influenced London's Sociological Society in the early 20th century (Lepenies, 1988: 146–154; Renwick, 2012: 164).

As Ashley Barnwell argues, for productive critical progress with regards to contemporary disciplinary identity issues, sociology should 'reparatively return' to this common, if dichotomised, history between art and science that the discipline has 'never settled on one side of' (2015: 561–562). Sociology may have emerged in this intellectual fault-line, but it does more than operate as a bridge between art and science. Writing sociological novels does not mark a collapse of qualitative sociology into, or further into, non-scientific art; sociological novel writing is a distinct approach for doing and writing

academic research that acknowledges the history of sociological thought and drives forward knowledge production by considering future-oriented questions, such as Burawoy's (2005) and others' questions of 'sociology for what?' and 'sociology for whom?'.

Important to note at this point is the small but significant handful of novels written by sociologists since this time. French sociologist and criminologist Gabriel Tarde published a science-fiction novel, *Fragment d'Histoire Future*, in 1904, which was translated into English as *Underground Man* in 1905. Well-known British sociologist Frank Parkin published two novels during the 1980s, *Krippendorf's Tribe* (1986) and *The Mind and Body Shop* (1988). More recently, Patricia Leavy left an Associate Professor in Sociology role to pursue fiction, finding success with her first two novels, *Low-Fat Love* (2011) and *American Circumstance* (2013a). In 2015 Leavy published her third novel *Blue* (2015), and Emeritus Professor David Buckingham (formerly of the University of London's Institute of Education) also published *On The Cusp* (2015). These two recent novels by Buckingham and Leavy, both grounded in extensive sociological research, are exemplars of contemporary sociological fiction.

Contemporary Contexts: Novel Writing and Public Sociology

The rise of public sociology shows that sociologists are aware of the need to communicate research to outside the academy. This is particularly vital in the current climate where the value of sociology is being questioned and quantified, and sociological research in universities faces an uncertain future. Charting a way forward for sociology in the public realm, methodologically or otherwise, is significant as the discipline has much to offer the subjects and societies it is concerned with. As highlighted by David Inglis, in the current climate we risk losing the view that sociology is 'an integral part of social criticism' (2014: 103).

Substantial attention has in recent years been directed towards addressing this through public research and communication (see Agger, 2000; Burawoy, 2005; Clawson, 2007; Hanemaayer and Schneider, 2014; Jeffries, 2009). Across all perspectives, having an 'untidy face' is a significant problem. This is not to say that sociology needs a tidy face to succeed in the public realm. Sociology may just need the opposite: multiple, polyvocal mediums for expressing the multiplicitous nature of sociological research. Michael Burawoy, a major figure in developing sociology's contemporary public face, noted this in his now-seminal 2004 ASA presidential address. The address generated much discussion and critique of sociology's structure as a professional academic discipline (see Christensen, 2013; Deflem, 2013; Keith, 2008), as well as sociology's moral attachments (see Mooney Nickel, 2009; Tittle, 2004). In focus here are two other significant considerations Burawoy raised: the need to address sociology's 'multiple publics' in 'multiple ways' (2005: 7), and that fact that while there is 'no shortage of publics', 'we do have a lot to learn about engaging them' (2005: 8).

Many other contemporary sociologists have raised similar points. Gary Wickham (2012) looks towards economics as a discipline that discusses 'the economy' to parallel how sociology could and should similarly publically discuss 'society', and Laurence Cox (2014) importantly emphasises understanding an audience as 'interlocutors' and thus focuses on creating engaging dialogues. Aspects of accessibility, accountability and

relevance have also been widely discussed (see Gans, 1989; Maryl and Westbrook, 2009). Largely overlooked in the debate thus far are creative avenues and - most notably, considering the extent to which Burawoy's address has been dissected over the past decade - new methods of engagement. Creative forms of public sociology may navigate the diversity of both sociology and its publics, encapsulating our vast 'study of society' in new and affecting ways. These avenues may also work to be more than a platform for delivering sociological knowledge (see Coser, 1972). Creative mediums act as vehicles for public discussion, involvement, and interaction which crucially necessitate engagement.

Sociological novel writing can promote public sociology. While a widespread, nuanced public sociology will involve multiple popular public mediums (Vannini and Milne, 2014: 226–227), novel writing is a viable and valuable direction which specifically allows sociologists the space to re/create issues and worlds that affect and can reach their publics. Sociological novel writing can also work to reconceptualise the traditional academic–audience relationship which has existed between, for example, the ethnographer and their subjects. Positioning sociologists as writers, publics as readers, and both parties as interlocutors (cf. Cox, 2014; Puwar and Sharma, 2012), fiction can help facilitate public dialogues and engage a 'double conversation' (Burawoy, 2005: 7) through the fictional text.

Sociology, Fiction, and Writing for Engagement

Issues of engagement have been raised many times with regards to public sociology (Agger, 2000; Berger, 1977; Burawoy, 2005, 2014a, 2014b; Furedi, 2009; Maryl and Westbrook, 2009). Determining how to engage readers on 'the outside', considering the diverse publics that different sociologies involve, may seem a very challenging task. As Furedi states, 'it is not a question of simply taking sociology to the public' (2009: 182). Agger contends that 'sociological writers must write publicly, accessibly, openly', and must 'address major public issues' (2000: 258). Addressing these issues does not mean only focusing on events 'of the moment' or only advocating for political action; cultivating public engagement includes developing an awareness in people of various public issues and, as Mills argues (1959: 8), connecting these to the private troubles that publics themselves see as significant in their own lives. This involves noting the main concerns, issues, values, rhythms, and ways of living of a particular public. These aspects are already the focus of sociological work, and in combatting 'anti-populist prejudices' (Furedi, 2009: 182) the content and style of engaging sociology comes into play.

Creating engaging sociological work requires more than crafting a narrative from a personal and/or research perspective. Retaining an academic, outsider voice can create a detachment and aloofness in the narration that risks both flattering publics and talking down to them (Burawoy, 2005: 17). For the purposes of engaging public sociology, sociologists can draw from their positions as part of the field to craft narratives as an insider. The concept of being an 'insider' here is less of a methodological position, as commonly discussed with regard to subcultural research (see Adler and Adler, 1987), but a conceptual, stylistic and narrative position. To write as an insider in this sense is to write of gained knowledges and experience without an overstated scholarly distance. This is writing for a public readership, rather than the author necessarily existing within or undertaking research as a member of a specific public. Furedi affirms this narrative positioning,

arguing that 'unless we see ourselves as part of a public we will lack the language with which to conduct a wider conversation' (2009: 183).

This 'insider' positioning also lends itself to the development of interiority, a characteristic aspect of fiction where readers are 'invited into the mind, or inner life' of characters (Leavy, 2013b: 44). Interiority is arguably the most intimate, micro-level aspect of narrative. This literary technique helps readers engage with characters and, when used in conjunction with macro-level literary techniques, may also aid in propagating Mills' sociological imagination. Developing a micro–macro framing matrix ensures that different layers of meaning can be expressed. This allows readers to 'enter into' the lives of the characters in a way that helps to challenge stereotypes, promote deeper understandings, create intellectual engagements, and cultivate empathy (Leavy, 2013b: 20, 43, 47). The minds of the characters are 'inside sites' where interlocutors can connect the private troubles and social issues of the novel's world, and through which they can frame sociological thought from different perspectives than their own.

This positioning and framing encompasses both the content and stylistic considerations of academic novel writing. Writing as part of the public firstly means to focus the core content of the novel on the troubles a particular public sees as important, not only the issues the scholarly analysis highlights. Integrating the issues that scholarly analysis highlights is what makes a text sociological, but arguably these should be included in such a way that sociologically-understood social processes are implicated or embodied in the lives and local events of the characters and setting. It is the role of the sociologist to make the connections between the local troubles and the wider social issues, and the sociologist-novelist can illustrate these connections in an affective narrative style and effective public written medium.

This focus is not to controvert Furedi's arguments about the dangers of privileging public 'connection' over sociological 'content'. Furedi notes that some sociologists approach public work believing that readers will not connect with it unless the work is immediately relevant and speaks to their personal experience (2009: 172). Rather, he argues that a sociological imagination is developed through 'conflicting experiences' that distance people from the 'immediate and everyday' and 'stimulate the mind to imagine other possibilities' (2009: 172).

This stimulative discord may be achieved by sociological fiction. Sociologist-novelists have the ability to take the immediate and everyday experience of a public and hold it under a microscope: question values, challenge social processes, and create a dissonance within the public's image of itself by employing a range of stylistic literary techniques in conjunction with sociological analysis. This mirrors Ossewaarde's 'cosmopolitan opening of the patriotic mind' (2007: 380), simultaneously grounding and transcending local contexts in order to stimulate a reimagining of cultural patterns. Fiction and research together can cause this friction, specifically the kind of friction sociology aims to create by disrupting narrow or limited everyday understandings of the social world.

Mimesis to Sympraxis: Writing for Affect

Vannini and Milne cogently call for a multimodal public ethnography that counters 'unimodal products such as writings' (2014: 227). However, developing sociological research

such as ethnography into fiction is a distinct direction for public cultural sociology. Rather than adapting traditional scholarly work for 'more convenient' mediums (Vannini and Milne, 2014: 226), novel writing shifts the emphasis from the representation of sociological work to its intimate and intellectual dynamism. Novels transform the message exchange. Importance shifts from effective to affective communication; from mimesis to sympraxis (see Kloepfer, 1987).

Sympraxis is a semiotic concept that, as per Rolf Kloepfer's (1987: 125, 131) perspective, complements the mimetic side of signs and communication; mimetic communication is logical, representational and informative, whereas sympractic communication is energetic, emotive, involving, and creatively engaged. Kloepfer explores communication as a three-fold relationship between mimesis, discourse, and sympraxis, understanding signs as facilitators of co-action in the process of communication and thus positioning sympraxis as causing affective or emotive 'modifications of consciousness' (1987: 125, 132–136). Sympraxis as an affect (and effect) is achieved through the 'increasing sophistication' of mimesis and discourse, whereby 'lasting changes in attitude' and 'actions in the real world' are elicited (Kloepfer, 1987: 136). As such, mimesis and sympraxis are not discrete kinds of communication but rather are elements of successful active communication. Like advertising, the case Kloepfer uses, novels are also an especially sympractic form of communication. Novels too are aesthetic narratives, incorporate a complex discourse structure, and explore and operate within cultural patterns (Kloepfer, 1987: 145).

This is not to suggest that traditional sociological work does not, or cannot, affect its publics. However, novels arguably have an edge that non-fictive scholarly work does not. One significant difference between the aforementioned 'typical scholarly media' and novels, with regards to cultivating sympraxis, is their 'position' as cultural texts. These texts are approached differently by publics and often engaged with for different purposes. Without creating a false binary, scholarly texts can be understood as primarily mimetic and novels as purposefully sympractic. Novels are read as a form of entertainment and leisure practice, whereas scholarly texts are consumed for information and often only for professional or academic purposes. As noted, when exploring *Pride and Prejudice* as a social analysis, Howard Becker points out that novel readers still 'have to do a lot of work' (2010: 249–251). However, publics approach academic and creative public texts aware of these differences. Indeed, most publics rarely independently approach traditional scholarly media at all because they cannot access them, physically and intellectually. When they do engage, publics can be seen to engage with these texts differently because they, as readers, hold different levels of power in each space. Power relations are not removed, especially when novels are assigned in classroom settings (Carlin, 2010: 219). However, publics can arguably act as interlocutors more easily when engaged in novel reading, as fiction is more open to reader interpretation. Novels and fiction are culturally positioned this way. Novels can be seen to broaden both the practice of sociology as well as the spaces of sociological consumption.

Writing to Show and See: Sociology's Panoramic Vistas

Sociology explores and analyses the intricate connections between local scenes and global social processes. This is sociology as promoted by the British Sociological

Association's *Discover Sociology* booklet, a vivid resource to attract would-be sociologists, which illustrates that a focus on the 'social dynamics of small groups of people, large organisations, communities, institutions and even entire societies' can reveal 'the underlying meanings of emerging patterns of social behaviour', and thus makes sociologists particularly 'able to see the bigger picture' (BSA, 2013: 1–3). C. Wright Mills' hallmark conception of the sociological imagination is the precise ability to see this big picture; to 'grasp the interplay between man [sic] and society, of biography and history, of self and world' (1959: 4). More than access to information and having skills of reason, sociology requires a 'quality of mind' (Mills, 1959: 5). This is needed to see the international, the intimate, the present, the past, and possible futures of society. Indeed, sociology always requires an exercise of the imagination.

David Inglis mirrors this sense of scope when referencing Marx and Weber's sociologies as 'panoramic vistas', albeit in opposition to the 'impoverished descendant' that contemporary sociology may be today (2014: 103). Inglis highlights a weakness in present research that, due to being absorbed by contemporary social orders, leaves sociology 'without a profound sense of the complexities of human history underpinning it' (2014: 102, 100). This is likely due to historical ignorance (Inglis, 2014: 114), but perhaps only partly. Traditional scholarly sociology can be restrictive, in terms of style, form, and accessibility. Scholarly writing in its typical forms such as journal articles and books allow for 'great depth and terminological sophistication' but these are ineffective as primary strategies for reaching a wider audience (Vannini and Milne, 2014: 226). These typical media are also restrictive in terms of their intellectual scope; a panoramic vista may be difficult to achieve when employing conventional scholarly styles.

Novels do not inherently encompass complex social phenomena or exhibit panoramic visions. If novelists shared these aims, much (if not most) contemporary popular fiction would warrant the same critique Inglis gives contemporary sociology. However, fiction writing does offer sociologists a process through which to expand their academic work into a more panoramic sociology, as well as a form and style with which to express this.

Leavy and Buckingham: Two Recent Examples of Sociological Novels

Patricia Leavy's *Blue* follows a 20-something college graduate, Tash Daniels, who lives in New York with two friends. Tash, in Leavy's own words, is at first a 'difficult character to like' (2015a: xv); she is brash, impulsive, and quick-tempered. Her friendships are fierce and the intimate relationship propelling her story is tumultuous. She does not recognise the privileges in her life – money, family support, education – until they are pointed out to her. For these reasons Tash Daniels is an excellent protagonist for a work of feminist, sociological fiction, especially as a novel written with classroom use in mind. Supported by three other central characters – Aidan, her love interest, and Jason and Penelope, her housemates – *Blue* works to show and explore with sociological insight how friendship, love, popular culture, and identity can intertwine. Intersecting aspects of race, sexuality, and class are privileged in the narrative, as well as the power or potential of individual agentic practices.

David Buckingham's novel *On The Cusp* (2015) is set in East London. Centring on controversial urban development plans, the narrative ties together a substantial web of characters through a complex story about the overlap of property and politics. The troubles and actions of teenage boys, a single mother, a journalist, the Mayor, hipsters, and local protesters weave together in a way that makes reading simultaneously feel like a process of uncovering how their lives are linked, similar to the experience of reading crime fiction, while also building up these ties yourself as a reader, filling in gaps as you bring your own life experiences to the book. Overall, *On The Cusp* is a textured analysis of contemporary life in a specific milieu with themes that reach outside the boundaries of the storyline; it is not just a story about East London, but about work, family, media technology, class, and social change. Importantly, each character does not 'represent' a single sociological theme. The real strength of the narrative is in its intersectional approach. Sociological insight and analysis run throughout the storyline just as the characters' lives further intertwine.

There are significant identifiable and unique qualities of both Leavy's and Buckingham's work that distinguish them from other sociology and other fiction. These novels each achieve the three previously discussed attributes: they are engaging, affective, and reasonably panoramic reads. They have also both 'written in' the sociological labour Carlin (2010) discusses. The books achieve these features in different ways. *Blue* focuses intimately on key characters that, importantly, are also characters in Leavy's first novel, *Low-Fat Love* (2011). This allows Leavy to develop an ongoing and longitudinal set of interior insights within them, where the characters individually and cooperatively question their own socialisation and fluctuating agency. *On The Cusp* shows the complex layers of a society, with specific attention paid to institutions and how these operate during periods of significant social change. Buckingham draws out how agency–structure struggles work and are worked out within changing institutions. Both writers are clearly exercising their sociological imaginations in their texts, tying personal troubles to social issues in distinct but analogous sociological ways. A substantial aspect of both texts, but particularly Buckingham's, considering the plot and complication of the story, is their loose and untidy ends. This is a significant attribute of sociological fiction: neither author attempts neatly to resolve the troubles in their texts. Neither narrative feels 'finished' in a closed way, no significant resolution is purposefully reached, no individual 'overcomes' their troubles or circumstance in the ways that much popular fiction that skirts social issues arguably seems to want to achieve. The ending of Leavy's novel feels like the end of a chapter in the characters' lives rather than the end of their story. Buckingham's book convincingly finishes, after series of quick-paced climaxes, not with a happy resolution but with a continuing, rolling-on of everyday life. This sociological narrative technique, if it can be called that, is part of the depth of insight afforded by sociology.

Thinking-Writing via Concept: Glocality

As a sociological imagination connects micro-and macro-level social scenes (Mills, 1959: 6), sociological narratives combine global social processes with local situations and stories. That is, approaching fiction writing with the concept of the glocal helps capture the scope of the sociological imagination in the fiction. The concept of glocal as applied here is

drawn from Robertson's (1995) ideas about the 'compression' of global time-space and the 'creation and the incorporation of locality' within global processes (1995: 40), developed in light of recent work on cosmopolitanism (see Ossewaarde, 2007), yielding malleable perspective on the lived in-between-ness of everyday existence as a glocalised experience. The glocal, as a conceptual framework for analyzing reality, positions culture as forms of locality that are experienced by individuals who are 'world citizens' (Ossewaarde, 2007: 382), aware of 'the global' (Szerszynski and Urry, 2002: 472–474).

Sociological fiction involves glocal narratives, and works to draw both the global and the local into this in-between space. In much research where glocality is employed as a concept, the two zones of local and global act as distinct but integrated frames of reference for approaching social structures (see Fasenfest 2010; Hemer and Tufte 2005). However, in fiction that strives to refabricate the ongoing day-to-day experience of 'being in' the social world, the two zones collapse and are brought together as one. This works to re/create some verisimilitude, reflecting a realistic experience of being in the social world through which interlocutors begin to see the themes and issues sociology is concerned with emerge from the story. A glocal narrative illustrates the private–public connections of sociological themes and explores the space inside of them; the narrative fleshes out how personal troubles and social issues connect in a creative and affective way. Local contexts ground global social processes, and the global nature of these processes lifts the issues of the local context out onto the plane of a wider, sociocultural and structural awareness. Further more, these structures and contexts are not only external social factors, but factors internal to us as individuals; social structures 'have an inside' in that 'they are meaningful' (Alexander, 2003: 4). Fictional narratives can connect the conceptual spaces of local and global, of external and internal sociocultural meanings, and can display different sociological themes for intersectional analysis.

Novels zoom in to the distinct and personal as much as they pan out to rhythms and patterns of the all-encompassing social vistas through the purposeful use and manipulation of narrative and literary devices. Capturing an in-between-ness, then, means not drawing a line between a private trouble and a public issue while the reader observes, but rather inviting the reader/interlocutor to exist *between* these troubles and issues, seeing themselves as connected to them intersectionally and multiply, and as living *inside* the glocality.

Paired with Mills' emphasis on the writing of sociology as a craft and labour (1959: 195–199), creating the glocalised narrative of the novel necessitates an active and reflexive sociological imagination. 'Painting the big picture' is a process of building up the layers of a society, or creating 'an adequate view of a total society and of its components' (Mills, 1959: 211). This is not to say that a novel must address all aspects of a society, or even highlight all areas of sociological research that may appear relevant to the narrative. It would be impossible to do so. What the work must do is strive to encapsulate a social world, by illustrating it in enough detail and with enough perspective that it *feels* like a 'total society'. A sociologically-imagined text is effective and affective if it creates a rich and resonating realism (Leavy, 2013b: 21); if the narrative brings to life sociological analysis that does not just bridge the personal–social division within the novel but also strives to bridge the text and the reader. That the work will resonate with the reader cannot be assured, but this condition of affect/effect may be cultivated by employing

sympractic techniques. A key to creating a sense of authenticity and relatability in the work is creating glocal narratives that make readers engage with sociological concerns and themes.

Thinking-Writing via Method: Ethnography

There is no singular method for 'doing' public sociology, nor is there one technique for cultivating intellectual engagement. Similarly, multiple existing qualitative approaches complement the labour of novel writing. Patricia Leavy argues fiction is a 'natural extension' of what many qualitative social researchers already do (2013: 20). Many research methods used by sociologists are also commonly employed by novelists, including covert observation and interviewing (Given, 2008: 133, 470), though these are often distinguished conceptually as scholarly or non-scholarly practices (Leavy, 2013b: 253-254).

One methodology comparable to the processes and techniques of writing fiction is ethnography; in particular, Geertz's renowned ethnographic 'thick description' (1973). Ethnography is a well-established approach in sociological research and an ideal methodology to support novel writing as public sociology. Ethnography is reflexive, dialogic, and places specific emphasis on the aesthetic of the written work. That is, ethnographic work is both scientific and literary (Richardson, 2000: 253), concerning process and product equally. Burawoy (2009) argues ethnography has largely transcended binary oppositions such as 'participant and observer, micro and macro' and, by joining the 'participants in the rhythm of their life' and 'continually [engaging] theory with data, and theory with other theories', is a method that can 'propagate the sociological imagination' (2009: 8–9, 15, 278). Furedi argues this is one of the 'main purposes' of public sociology (2009: 172). Similarly, Paul Willis (2000) states that successful ethnographic work requires an ethnographic imagination, paralleling C. Wright Mills' sociological imagination (1959). This ethnographic imagination allows ethnographers to connect cultural practices with the structural conditions of existence and ground these in 'everyday' social activities (Willis, 2000: xvi, 34).

The content of a sociological novel in terms of its plot, narrative arc, characters, setting, and circumstances may be derived from the observations that such qualitative research methods yield. Qualitative research methods can inform the writing process in a way that retains the 'quality of lived experience' (Game and Metcalfe, 1996: 94) and ensures the 'realistic, authentic, and life-like portrayal' of subjects and worlds (Leavy, 2013b: 21). Howard Becker explores this process as 'making representations' (2007: 20–26), where selection, translation, arrangement, and interpretation are all important factors.

The various methods involved with novel writing and sociological writing, and indeed sociological novel writing, may be understood as work styles or 'crafts', so the labour of writing narratives and writing research can be more closely explored (Agger, 2000: 249–251; Mills, 1959: 195–226). As a craft, writing academic fiction involves the balance and manipulation of certain key factors. This is more than a blurring of sociology's subjectivity–objectivity line that has also long been debated as fiction versus nonfiction in creative writing and journalism (Ricketson, 2010). Arguably all sociological writing

incorporates and negotiates narratives in ways that are never wholly 'objective' (Game and Metcalfe, 1996: 64–65). Narratives are selected, paced, arranged; momentum is built throughout arguments; sentences are sharpened; and superfluous information that detracts from the overall story is tightly edited out. Writing academic work involves exercising literary techniques.

Stylistically, many sociological narratives remain restrained and disciplined non-fictive recounts. Indeed, sociologists 'tell stories as if they weren't storytellers' (Game and Metcalfe, 1996: 65). This is despite Paul Willis' compelling claim that 'writing *needs* – as the only possible form of putting the subject of study "on the table" – metaphors, figures, literary turns, connotations, allusions, theatre and drama' (2000: 117–119, original emphasis). Ben Agger's recommendation is resounding: 'try to write so that you would want to read your own writing!' (2000: 266). This means to write as a reader; not an academic reader but a public reader, concerned primarily with reading stories that provide entertainment, insight, and enjoyment.

Literary techniques such as narrative structure, characterisation, themes, metaphors, dialogue, and descriptive details come into play. Leavy details many of the fundamental components of fiction writing specifically for non-creative-writing academics (2013: 37–76), and many texts have been written on the 'how to' of fiction writing (see Steele, 2003; Stein and Stein, 2012). One succinct mantra, associated with the approach of novelists, for crafting engaging writing is the ever-popular 'show, don't tell'. Metaphors and similes are also significant stylistic techniques in fiction writing, and are a particularly effective tool for bridging micro - and macro-level scenes and processes in the narrative. These allow writers both to interpret and construct meanings. They can ground the abstract processes that inform sociology in the experiential world of the characters, tethering concepts and theories to concrete memories and feelings. While the sociological significance can be further teased out with supporting research and scholarly insight, using metaphors and similes in this way can 'challenge, disrupt, or subvert taken-for-granted assumptions' and 'create subtext' (Leavy, 2013b: 73). These techniques may work to create the 'distancing insight' that Frank Furedi argues a sociological imagination requires (2009: 172).

While the ethnographic method emphasises the writing process and is a central sociological methodology for developing public sociology, the transformation of academic ethnographic writing into more public, popular media like the novel can also involve employing arts-based research methods. Arts-based research (ABR) is a methodology that involves the creation of 'art' in genres such as music, poetry, creative writing, theatre, and film, in order to achieve goals that traditional academic genres and practices often inhibit (see Liamputtong and Rumbold, 2008). Novel writing is one such genre which is gaining momentum. Leavy argues 'fiction is engaged' and a 'natural extension' of what many qualitative social researchers already do (2013: 20). As she defines it, arts-based researchers are not so much 'discovering' new methodologies, but rather 'carving' out new research and communication tools (2015b: 3).

Arts-based research offers sociologists a creative approach that, at the least, produces an object or experience that audience members as interlocutors can immerse themselves in outside the strictures of traditional 'lesson learning'. At its best, arts-based research creates new spaces where academics and publics can be immersed in research, think

through sociological analysis, and engage in reciprocal dialogues. Novels offer both the spaces of creation and consumption, and the world of the novel for these external and internal dialogues to develop. That is, publics and researchers are often together in the field during the research period, a situation which traditional qualitative methods of course allow for. Conversely, the two are (generally) physically separate during the act of writing, throughout the process of publication, and in the act of reading. However, these spaces fold together spatially and temporally in the world of the novel through the acts of reflexive writing and reading engaged in by interlocutors (Szakolczai, 2015: 226).

The sociologist-novelist creates the subjects and worlds, and the reader-interlocutor uncovers the research knowledge within it through the active process of reading and sense-making. The reader becomes more than just a consumer as they sift through the story and, if they see themselves inside it, tie their own personal issues and troubles to the character's troubles as well as the wider social issues of the novel world – and in so doing, are effectively cultivating a sociological imagination. This is made possible because the sociologist-novelist's reflexive understanding of this process can be incorporated into the narratives of novels, and 'even become their driving force' (Szakolczai, 2015: 226).

Conclusion

Public sociology encompasses an array of academic and public labours, motivated by a number of wide-ranging aims. This article has centred on the aim of engaging publics with sociology through a creative medium, namely sociological novels, in order to cultivate a public sociological imagination. This takes written public sociology beyond accessibility (Gans, 1989: 6–7), accountability (Maryl and Westbrook, 2009: 152–154), and beyond immediate relevance or convenience (Vannini and Milne, 2014: 237). On this view, engagement requires affective sociological narratives. Sociology's publics must be affected by sociological work in order for the aims of public sociology to be realised and for an ongoing public dialogue to develop. This does not mean the work must be *about* a specific public readership, but rather means that it must achieve verisimilitude so that individuals can see themselves inside the world of the novel – come to understand, as interlocutors, that the world of the work and the social world they inhabit are linked. The public must be affected by the narrative and engage with the story.

Novels are a medium where the sociological imagination can be developed and explored. Narratives can illustrate the links between personal troubles and public issues (Mills, 1959) in styles, forms, and spaces that more traditional scholarly work may not. Working with concepts such as glocality, and methodologies like ethnography and arts-based research, sociologists can extend their own research practice into the field of fiction and pursue new sites of engagement. The world of the novel is a between-space where academics and publics can both come together as interlocutors and where reciprocal dialogues can occur through co-reading and interpreting processes. While the scholarly status of the work may retain some of its academic authority, putting ethnography into fiction can help to 'even the playing field' between writers and readers. Fiction gives publics the opportunity to act as interlocutors, and to retain some of the power they often

otherwise lose in playing the role of 'the public' in traditional scholarly engagements with non-academic audiences.

As summarised by Leavy, adopting and innovating arts-based research methodologies in sociology is 'not simply about adding new methods to our arsenal for the sake of "more", but rather opening up new ways to think about knowledge-building: *new ways to see*' (2015b: 291, original emphasis). In this way, sociological novels may mirror the strengths of fictocriticism: they are not necessarily a new form of knowledge, but do offer new ways of accessing, exploring, interlacing, and progressing 'familiar fields' of scholarly knowledge (Nettelbeck, 1998: 7).

Sociology at its best drives society's 'reflexive consciousness of itself' (Inglis, 2014: 103). This reflexivity can be cultivated through public sociology, and stimulated through sociological fiction narratives. A truly reflexive consciousness may only work with an ongoing, reciprocal 'double conversation' between academics and publics (Burawoy, 2005: 7). This the sort of a conversation that many sociologists are already in a prime position to enable. Ethnography and arts-based research are methods that complement the novel as product and process, as well as facilitating opportunities for these 'double conversations'. Novels offer new possibilities. Sociological narratives help us craft intellectual and panoramic 'big pictures', thanks to the scope and nuance that fiction writing allows. The glocal narratives that novel writing lends itself to both illustrate the personal–public linkages highlighted by the sociological imagination (Mills, 1959), and open up what I have called the space in-between, through the deployment of narrative depth, character interiority, and metaphor.

Brooks (2005) asks the crucial question at the end of his book *Realist Vision*: 'how do you find the perspectives necessary to give a sense of a world viewed and understood?' (2005: 229). Finding and exploring this perspective is what sociologists already do. Novels can complement and further the work of sociologists, and can foster wider public engagement with sociology. Novels can illustrate contemporary history and view contemporary societies in the same sorts of critical ways that good social research does, but adding an extra dimension of public communication to sociology's insights. Novels can help frame sociology's 'untidy face'. They may also make the importance of panoramic and innovative sociological thinking more clear, not just also for those outside of universities, but perhaps also for those on the inside of them too.

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