Article

The familiar strange of sociological fiction

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Abstract

Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* makes the magical and strange feel familiar, and short stories from *Fiction @ The Sociological Review* inversely make the familiar feel strange. I consider this ability to make the familiar strange as a key part of having a sociological sense of the world: as an ability to disturb what seems fixed and settled in society, and unmake any given set of social relations as the only and natural way of life. I conceptualise the crafting of this sense in fiction as a process of distillation. When writing sociological fiction, we distil our disciplinary attunement – strip down, concentrate and refine the many concepts and findings of our work – to craft scenes which unsettle 'common sense'.

Keywords

creative writing, distillation, familiar strange, Gabriel García Márquez, literature, sociological fiction, sociological imagination

My favourite scene of Gabriel García Márquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude* (1967/2009) closes a chapter almost exactly one third of the way into the story:

> A special messenger brought a sealed envelope to the house with a sheet of paper inside bearing the colonel's delicate hand: *Take good care of Papa because he is going to die.* Úrsula became alarmed. 'If Aureliano says so it's because Aureliano knows,' she said. And she had them help her take José Arcadio Buendía to his bedroom. Not only was he as heavy as ever, but during his prolonged stay under the chestnut tree he had developed the faculty of being able to increase his weight at will, to such a degree that seven men were unable to lift him and they had to drag him to the bed. A smell of tender mushrooms, of wood-flower fungus, of old and concentrated outdoors impregnated the air of the bedroom as it was breathed by the colossal old man weather-beaten by the sun and the rain . . .
>
> When he was alone, José Arcadio Buendía consoled himself with the dream of the infinite rooms. He dreamed that he was getting out of bed, opening the door and going into an identical

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room with the same bed with a wrought-iron head, the same wicker chair, and the same small picture of the Virgin of Help on the back wall. From that room he would go into another that was just the same, the door of which would open into another that was just the same, the door of which would open into another one just the same, and then into another exactly alike, and so on to infinity. He liked to go from room to room. As in a gallery of parallel mirrors, until Prudencio Aguilar would touch him on the shoulder. Then he would go back from room to room, walking in reverse, going back over his trail, and he would find Prudencio Aguilar in the room of reality. But one night, two weeks after they took him to his bed, Prudencio Aguilar touched his shoulder in an intermediate room and he stayed there forever, thinking that it was the real room . . .

A short time later, when the carpenter was taking measurements for the coffin, through the window they saw a light rain of tiny yellow flowers falling. They fell on the town all through the night in a silent storm, and they covered the roofs and blocked the doors and smothered the animals who slept outdoors. So many flowers fell from the sky that in the morning the streets were carpeted with a compact cushion and they had to clear them away with shovels and rakes so that the funeral procession could pass by. (García Márquez, 1967/2009, pp. 142–144)

I first read *One Hundred Years of Solitude* when I was writing my own first novel[1] and a PhD thesis on fiction and sociology. This scene has stayed with me since. It seared into my mind and skin and now, when I recall it, I am there, in Macondo, standing in the street outside the house and I feel the yellow flowers under and around my feet. When the flowers started falling, I was no longer suspending my disbelief or going along with the imagination; their yellow rain was not something I had to believe in; the falling flowers simply were. The thick realness of García Márquez's writing, where the supernatural is awe-inducing and completely natural, is an incredible and widely-discussed stylistic achievement (see Aldea, 2010; Warnes, 2009; Wojda, 2009). Of course tiny yellow flowers fell from the sky as the carpenter took the measurements for José Arcadio Buendía's coffin. When I think of this scene and the sense it conjures for me, I imagine sociological fiction as achieving its inverse – as making the familiar strange.

When I refer to sociological fiction, I am talking about fiction written as sociology. This might look like a short story based on an interview study, or writing that engages with and tries to progress a body of sociological theory. This is a narrower definition than others may use, as there is a great deal of fiction which can be seen to be sociological in one way or another (Longo, 2015; Piamonte, 2016; Seeger & Davison-Vecchione, 2019; Váňa, 2020). Some, for instance, find sociological use in a story's style of description or its concern with societal structures and issues, such as Becker's (2007) work on Georges Perec and Jan Váňa's (2020) work on Jáchym Topol. My interest is in how sociologists can engage with the craft of fiction as part of their scholarly work, so this is where I focus my attention.

I have practised this interest with *The Sociological Review*, serving as Fiction Editor of their short story series since it launched in 2018. We publish short stories of approximately 3000 words with accompanying exegesis of 500 words. The rolling call for submissions welcomes fiction that is 'sociological in style, scope and sensibility', and exegeses that illuminate the scholarly and creative process. At the time of writing, 30 stories are part of the series and all freely available to read online.[2] Below, I share and

discuss key scenes from some of these to consider how the writers make the familiar strange in their work, enlivening sociology in their fiction by unsettling common sense and unmaking what seems to be the natural way of things.

In doing this, and in drawing on the work of García Márquez, I am purposely skirting an important discussion of the relationship between sociological fiction and other forms or genres. The sociological possibilities of realism, post/modernism, magical realism and metafiction, to name but a few, are each distinct and collectively abundant. I wish to speak more broadly and simply here, to narrative fiction beyond or encompassing generic distinctions, and to the value of practising the craft as/in sociology. Still, something people routinely query – anecdotally speaking – is the difference between sociological and literary fiction. This is a big question I have turned over in my head for close to a decade. For me, the former brings that biography–history and self–society connection (Mills, 1959), compared with the often individualistic narrative structures of the latter where, in the Western tradition (Erwin, 1993; Spivak, 1985), protagonists journey towards self-recognition (Lukács, 1974) and 'overcome' the conditions of their existence (Armstrong, 2005). This is by no means a systematic claim, and the difference between a sociological and non-sociological text may seem a relatively straightforward stylistic and substantive distinction for those familiar with C Wright Mills. It is more difficult, however, to pin down what this sense *is* when trying to communicate how it may become present in a story.

The familiar strange

The maxim of 'making the familiar strange' seems so central to contemporary sociology it is commonly misattributed to Mills.[3] Its earliest penning can be found in the unpublished notebooks of the German Romantic poet Novalis from the late 1700s (Beiser, 1998; Gunderson, 2020), and traced through much art and philosophy, including T. S. Eliot and the Russian formalists, before the notion was taken up within ethnographic and qualitative research (Myers, 2011). Mills' most overt contribution to this tradition is his claim that, upon acquiring a sociological imagination, people may 'come to feel as if suddenly awakened in a house with which they had only supposed themselves to be familiar' (1959, p. 4). More recently, scholars like Dawn Mannay (2010) have focused on this idea while considering how to tackle the blind spots of familiarity. Victoria Foster (2019) charts methodological ways of 'making the ordinary strange' by drawing together sociology and surrealism. Ryan Gunderson (2020) has also given this attention, exploring the depths and complexities of making the familiar strange as a sociological process of 'social defamiliarisation'. Doing this, Gunderson (2020, p. 10) draws on Bauman's (1990, p. 15) view that sociology involves asking questions which 'defamiliarise the familiar' so to show a social world 'to be just one of the possible ways, not the one and only, not the "natural", way of life'.

Writing fiction which defamiliarises the familiar in a sociological way is a complex task. Shining a light forward are the many scholars who have worked to understand and reimagine the chasms which can (or are used to) separate fact from fiction, knowledge from nous, and rigorous research from art (e.g. Barone & Eisner, 2011; Inckle, 2010; Leavy, 2020; Vickers, 2010). I have charted some of these arguments in previous work,

on why fiction and the form of the novel in particular is valuable for sociology (Watson, 2016), how we can combine fiction with other methods (Watson, 2020b), and how we begin to write (Watson, 2022). This includes our disciplinary imperative to 'go public' (Burawoy, 2005; Collins, 2007; Gans, 1989), and how we can build from documenting the social world to anticipating and making possible different futures (Benjamin, 2016; Camargo-Borges, 2017).

A large part of this complexity has to do with the evocation of meaning. That fiction and art evoke meaning is a point Patricia Leavy makes when discussing authority, dialogue and meaning-making (2020, pp. 20–27). In other more traditional scholarly mediums, we draw on explanation, exposition and argument to apply and communicate the value of sociological analysis. With fiction, the question is how to invent and accumulate enough of the right narrative detail to generate and convey sociological insight. Beyond effectively representing the people, spaces, events and issues of our work, focus shifts to crafting a present and lively connection between personal troubles of characters and the public issues of the worlds they live within. Learning from the above scholars, I have thought about the smaller things we might build up – the poetic and aesthetic details we can imagine and bring together so to craft a sociological story, such as a narrator and a focal setting (Watson, 2022, pp. 343–348). One of the bigger things we bring to the blank page is a sociological sense of the world: this ability to make the familiar strange, to disturb what seems fixed and settled in society, and unmake any given set of social relations as the only and natural way of life.

How to do it?

In an interview for *The Paris Review* (Stone, 1981), Gabriel García Márquez recalls how his grandmother told him stories when he was a child. The how is emphasised here; reflecting on the roots of his distinctive tone, Márquez shares:

> She told things that sounded supernatural and fantastic, but she told them with complete naturalness . . . In previous attempts to write *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, I tried to tell the story without believing in it. I discovered that what I had to do was believe in them myself and write them with the same expression with which my grandmother told them: with a brick face.

The interviewer, asking a question about tone and journalistic detail, notes that García Márquez describes 'seemingly fantastic events in such minute detail that it gives them their own reality'. He answers in response:

> . . . if you say that there are elephants flying in the sky, people are not going to believe you. But if you say that there are four hundred and twenty-five elephants in the sky, people will probably believe you. *One Hundred Years of Solitude* is full of that sort of thing. That's exactly the technique my grandmother used . . . When I was writing this, I discovered that if I didn't say the butterflies were yellow, people would not believe it.

He goes on to talk about another oft-discussed scene of the novel, involving a character visibly ascending to heaven:

One day I went out to the garden and saw a woman who used to come to the house to do the wash and she was putting out the sheets to dry and there was a lot of wind. She was arguing with the wind not to blow the sheets away. I discovered that if I used the sheets for Remedios the Beauty, she would ascend.

There are very interesting hooks in both these scenes – the flowers and the ascension. What stands out to me in the first is that, before we reach 'a light rain of tiny yellow flowers falling', there is a snowballing of earthy, corporeal and tactile details: the brief letter in recognisable handwriting, the chestnut tree, a changeably heavy man, the smell of mushrooms, pacing from bedroom to identical bedroom, and a coffin (which, based on the presence of a carpenter, is presumably made from wood). In the second, García Márquez uses domestic imagery, of a woman with a bed sheet in the wind. These aesthetic details prefigure and work to naturalise the magical event which crowns each scene.

The authors published in *Fiction @ The Sociological Review* similarly prefigure their scenes of sociological insight. Fabian Broeker's (2021) 'Propinquity' follows Chris, an English postdoc newly living in Germany, as she navigates her surroundings and relationships through digital technologies. The story opens to Chris looking in the mirror, trying to get used to a disassociating haircut:

She'd told him to take an inch off. Or that's what she thought she was saying. She'd been in Berlin 3 months now, yet her attempts at German were mostly met with bemused smiles. Like the look she had given to her cat, Karl, that time he placed a bloodied bird at her feet. (Broeker, 2021)

A phone notification moves Chris to imagine the green owl icon of a language app she is using as a real bird, 'bloodied, in the mouth of her Karl'. And then, while the image of the red-green owl still hovers in the imagination, messages from a friend and a possible romantic date push through. This sharp imagery does some important connective and conceptual work in the first paragraphs of the story. Broeker plays with a number of classic binaries: self and other, through the mirrored Chris; home and foreign, through the alien words coming out of Chris's own mouth; life and death, through the cat and bird; and real and virtual, by connecting the first bird with the cartoon second. Doing so, Broeker sets the scene by unsettling the binaric foundations of the world. His world is built with a sense of multiplicity. Later, when digital technologies are central within the romantic plot, we are prepared to experience these encounters in this multiplicitous way. The digital is not distinct from the in-person; there is no 'online world' that is a different place to the neighbourhood Chris walks. They blend, and each augments each.

Broeker stylistically furthers this through the visual layout of speech; throughout, text messages and oral conversation are identically formatted. Interestingly, so is Chris's inner monologue and the narration of the story. Apart from line breaks, no quotation marks or other punctuation visibly delineate who is speaking. He reflects on this strategy in his exegesis, noting that 'In matters of intimacy, and particularly dating culture, narrativization plays a prominent role in experience' and 'the short story provides the perfect medium to portray practice and narrativization as interlinking, not only in content, but

also in form' (Broeker, 2021). The story's title, propinquity, means both proximity and kinship. It speaks to a relational closeness that is dually affective and material. Broeker's opening scene crafts a sociological sense of this duality, shaping Chris's world as post- or more-than-digital.

Carissa Gordon's (2019) 'The Desert' is the story of a child making his way to school on a bus. With this simple premise, Gordon crafts an unnerving expedition. The child, who we only know as Boy, walks through the wet and cold to the overcrowded bus station. Boy's bus is late, and he is hungry, and once finally on board he sates himself with a pop-tart during the journey. The bus moves through a bleak but familiar-enough landscape:

> A six mile bus ride takes sixty-three minutes, and in those sixty-three minutes the city takes a picture of Boy sixty-seven times. He passes eighteen homeless people with cups of change on the ground in front of them, and five liquor stores. He passes twenty-one restaurants and zero supermarkets. (Gordon, 2019)

Gordon achieves a sense of anomie and alienation with these details: calling the character Boy, recontextualising the often-joyous breakfast treat of a pop-tart as a usual and therefore dispiriting meal, and tightly quantifying the passing landscape rather than painting the scene with richly detailed description. She reflects on this last technique in her exegesis, explaining 'There are a lot of numbers in this story . . . as sociologists, we utilise numbers as a way of solidifying our theories. In this story, the numbers help solidify the subjective reality that Boy is experiencing' (Gordon, 2019). Her use of short sentences and paragraphs throughout also evoke the spareness of the story world. As a reader, we feel how Boy is removed from the natural world, and feel how our world is removed from his. Through these affective narrative and stylistic choices, Gordon crafts the desert.

The desert Gordon is referring to is a 'food desert', and, as she explains in her exegesis, the story addresses the growing social issue of access to fresh produce and impoverished urban environments. Boy is so alienated from nature he does not recognise fresh food:

> Something buried within the garbage catches his eye.

> It's yellow, and appears bland compared to the mountain of shiny plastic strewn beneath his feet. He touches it, and pulls his hand away instinctively, a jolt of adrenaline and disgust washing through him. It feels human. (Gordon, 2019)

This moment of touch, where Boy's fingertips meet the strange yellow skin, surfaces the generative distance which saturates the story. Where Broeker folds voice and seemingly natural binaries to enliven a sociological reading, Gordon crafts a jolting disassociation.

Craig Potter's (2019) story 'The Nightclub' uses a comparable technique. The protagonist, who we know only as 'the student', spins from house party to sidewalk to nightclub. Potter pairs an abstracted narratorial voice with the hyper-sensory and near carnal experience of partying with a group of fellow students:

> The door is closed and he will never taste vodka jelly. He is inescapably himself . . . the mind loses focus on the particularity of objects and finds now only friends . . . The floor becomes increasingly sticky with spilled drinks as human links begin to stretch and merge with one another . . . By blind chance, people who wear woolly hats indoors make friends with everyone, and those in cool and careless shirts befriend nobody. (Potter, 2019)

With this poetic technique, Potter crafts sociological imagination into a window – something that allows perspective, and serves as both a divider and a bridge.

A choice setting serves as a similar window in Jay Emery's (2019) 'A Bench at the Side of the Road'. The bench, placed 'where Pit Lane meets the end of the High Street', displays a plaque commemorating a (real) man who was killed decades ago during the miners' strike on a picket line by the Ollerton colliery. Jamie, the man at the middle of this story, takes refuge on the bench; he is putting off returning his 'noxious purple' uniform to the supermarket he was let go from (we assume) the week before. From the bench, Jamie smokes cigarettes, scrolls through social media and abandons an online dole application. He also meets his father, Brian, and a girl he once went to school with, Claire, who moved away; each stop to speak with Jamie as they pass by. The minor details of these interactions carry with them a rich sense of place and community. Emery shows us the village through these three characters, juxtaposing their life experiences:

> Not too long ago, perhaps five years, Brian could routinely be found wandering the Pit Woods, a coniferous forest carpeting a mound of slag that generations of men piled up for close to a century. Ascending the hill, Brian, along with other arched, limping, wheezing ghosts of the village, would plot out the undulating landscape as if it were a graveyard, pointing to other slagheap burial mounds in the near-distance, arguing over which coalmine they belonged . . .

> Claire was proud of where she lived . . . So, when Jamie asked Claire what she's been up to, Claire replied, 'just, ya know, working an' going out an' that,' which belies her whole life and whose suppression causes her to edge impatiently out of roundabouts with sweaty palms clasped to steering wheel whenever she is back in this place that never changes.

> For Jamie, Claire will never change, no one that leaves do really. You can't exfoliate this place out as if it were dirt in your pores with a bit of university, a newbuild house and mojitos with your new mates. (Emery, 2019)

While place ties these characters to each other, always, offering roots and something to resist, time has an elasticity in Emery's story. It stretches and is material, it can be felt. Despite the paths of the past being so tangibly worn in to the spaces and bodies of the village, the characters' trajectories into the future – particularly the two young ones – seem opaque and incalculable. The characters haunt each other. Because of this haunting, as Emery (2019) explains in his exegesis, there is also hope.

By way of distillation

As García Márquez brings his grandmother's brick face and a materialisation of belief to the blank page, above I reflected that something big we bring to the blank page is

a sociological sense of the world: an imagination, furnished through an empirical and theoretical curiosity about and commitment to social life, which attunes us to the patterns, powers and make up of society. The *Fiction @ The Sociological Review* authors discussed have worked with this sense in various ways – through a pattern of imagery, a style of description, by crafting tension between voice and plot, and by using narrative conduits (e.g. telling the story of a place through characterisation, and of people through setting). As García Márquez's multisensory earthen imagery (the chestnut tree, fragrant mushrooms, the assembly of a wooden coffin, tiny yellow flowers falling and cotton bed sheets in the wind) naturalises magical events, these authors achieve the inverse and each make something that is familiar and everyday feel unusual and strange.

Rather than breaking these techniques down into discrete puzzle pieces which we could think of as cumulatively producing fiction that becomes sociological, I want to instead posit they are analogous resolutions of the same process: distillation. Through writing sociological fiction, we distil our disciplinary attunement – we strip down and refine the many concepts and findings of our work – to craft scenes which unsettle 'common sense' (Bauman, 1990, p. 15; Gunderson, 2020, p. 10) and the notion that there is a natural way of things. Scenes, such as those explored above, where expansive disciplinary concepts are concentrated into an unexpected thought, an unanticipated touch, a fleeting feeling or chance encounter distil *and affect* a sociological perspective of the world. By making the familiar strange, these authors unsettle common sense and can disintegrate boundaries between common feeling.

In the stories above, I have mostly focused on their opening or middle scenes rather than how they make their way towards a conclusion. This is partly to not give the game away – I do not want to spoil the experience of reading these authors' works for the sake of my own arguments. However, conclusions are important, especially in fiction. So, something final I want to return to, which relates wholly to this conceptualisation of sociological fiction writing as a process of distillation, is my sense that this style of fiction diverges from other genres through its lack of individualistic narrative resolutions. Most of this work feels different by the time the end of a story comes. This is another way that sociological fiction makes the familiar strange. The traditional narrative structure does not hold – there are no common resolutions, no overcoming of some societal irritation, personal struggle does not lead to transcendence. The stories roll on. The writing ends because the characters have taken a step away from us, the reader, rather than coming to a stopping place where we are happy to leave them. Their strange realities continue.

Funding

Notes

1. *Into the Sea* (2020a) was published by Brill Sense in the Social Fictions Series. The story is set mostly in Sydney, Australia, and follows a group of young adults through 12 months of everyday life – work, visiting parents, dinner parties, New Year's Eve, shopping in IKEA. The tedium and frustrations of their day-to-day lives are set against a backdrop of tumultuous international events. The project was a practice-based exploration of the promise and limits of Mills' sociological imagination.

2. View the full series via https://thesociologicalreview.org/fiction/
3. I owe my leads on this to 'Academic Twitter'. Mark Carrigan, via @PostPandemicUni, tweeted 'Does anyone know who first said "making the familiar strange"?', and many replied with pieces of the puzzle. You can find the exchange at https://twitter.com/PostPandemicUni/status/1358913241066389506

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