

## Piecing Together—A Methodological Bricolage

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narrative, narrative  
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**Abstract:** The use of narrative, reflective, and creative processes as interpretive tools has been considered by many critics to be naïvely humanistic and even romantically impulsive. This contribution challenges those views by putting performative research methods into practice—using the method to test the methodology. The meta-text, in which embedded texts (visual, audio-visual and literary) challenge, inform and enhance each other's meaning, has at its heart a digital mapping system that acts as a guiding link that provides alternative interpretive angles and mediating possibilities. The inclusion here of many kinds of text acknowledges that there are multiple ways in which human cognitive networks process information and make creative leaps. This contribution directly presents the case for multi-layered narrative inquiry as a paradigm of ethical activity. The researcher is seen here as a bricoleur, a maker of patchwork, a weaver of stories; one who assembles a theoretical montage through which meaning is constructed and conveyed according to a narrative ethic that is neither naïvely humanistic, nor romantically impulsive—but rather one that stimulates an inclusive and dynamic dialogue between the researcher and her audience.

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## 1. Using the Method to test the Methodology

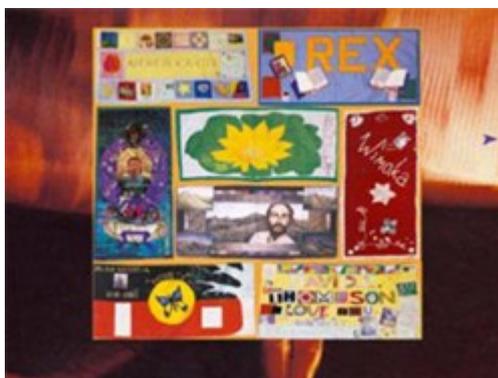


Figure 1: AIDS Quilt, montage of photographs by Ponch HAWKES, 1994.

[AIDS Quilt movies.](#)

Each quilt panel shown in the photograph can be clicked on to play individual movies about the panel and person whose life it remembers. [1]

### 1.1 Creative product as interpretive text

I have drawn the reader into this written text through a series of stories, images and short movies from the Australian and New Zealand AIDS Memorial QUILT Projects accessed through an electronic medium. Why would I include such stories, art works, and digital media in a theoretical discourse and claim that the contribution they make to the discussion is both descriptive and interpretive? [2]

The critic might say that, at best, images, real-life stories and movies have an illustrative function, at worst that they simply provide a diversion to mask a lazy avoidance of critical thinking and/or a lack of commitment to data collection—a poetic muddying of the waters. Bells and whistles perhaps. A form of narrative navel-gazing, as David SILVERMAN suggests, that sets the stage "for a dialogue of the deaf between itself and the community" (SILVERMAN, 1997, p.240). Subjective and unverifiable. SILVERMAN beds in this view by describing attempts to engage directly (and interactively) with the narratives of research participants (fictional or otherwise) as a "romantic impulse" elevating "the experiential to the level of the authentic" (SILVERMAN, 1997, p 248). Unflattering both to the hearing impaired (or the person living with AIDS) and the qualitative researcher about to embark on a narrative turn. SILVERMAN is, of course, making the case for maintaining rigour, not condemning narrative inquiry per se, but I wonder what it is about "experience" itself that could possibly lack authenticity? Is it not the method of presentation of experience that might be the culprit rather than the experience itself? Perhaps we could join forces, the deaf and I, turn the narrative corner together and discuss our chosen research topics in whatever language we found appropriate to convey our intended meaning. Why might we want to communicate with one another about our lived experience anyway?



Video 1 (audio track): Carmen's Cosmology. In this story Carmen tells Frank his favourite tale about the beginning of the universe and the dawn of human consciousness (YARDLEY, 2003). [3]

### *1.1.1 Multi-layered texts*

The inclusion of many kinds of texts in this article, including stories emerging from lived experience (the AIDS QUILT) and fiction (Carmen's Cosmology) has two purposes—to directly present the case for narrative inquiry as a valid modality and a paradigm of ethical activity (LEDBETTER, 1996; NUSSBAUM, 1990); and to acknowledge that we each make meaning in our own way, that there are multiple ways in which human cognitive networks process information and make creative leaps (GARDNER, 1985). I use the term "narrative inquiry" broadly, to include visual, verbal, musical and written narrative texts. [4]

In early 2000 I presented at a social science forum. My presentation consisted of a performance of selected literary texts that I had been working on as part of my theoretical exploration of creativity, consciousness, and disruption. These recited texts were performed with an accompanying montage of film and stills, which have since been incorporated into a website and a DVD-ROM that accompanies a more "traditional" written text. I had intended to create a feast for the eye and ear that would give my fellow scholars a taste of what was to come in the next phase of this research-in-progress. The collection of stories and images reflected the processes involved and events experienced during the production of the creative work I had been engaged in. There were many images, and many kinds of text. I had made a deliberate choice to present the material in this way, as it reflected the project work I had been undertaking, my methodology and some of the multi textual forms I intended to combine in the finished work. Numbers of texts which now form part of the theoretical discussion were missing, including the one that many would argue, and indeed did argue, was the most important—the traditional written analytical "academic" text set in the context of the relevant body of "literature". Some indicated that in the context of this forum the appropriate interpretive system was not available, as it might have been in the

"performance" presentations of the previous day, to "read" my text and that therefore they couldn't (wouldn't?) share in the discourse. It would seem that the inability of the audience to read my text was a matter of definition. I was presenting in a "social science" context, not a "performative" one, which, by definition, allows performance. While I felt confident that what I was doing and where I was headed was valid—my research trajectory was not apparent to many of the people present. This was quite a shock, partly because the reactions of some were quite angry but, essentially because the multi-textual development of the argument was in fact a theoretical underpinning of the research itself. Arghh! Terrible moment. Condemned to the academic wilderness! Why were the texts that I was presenting so resoundingly challenged? Not because they inherently lacked the capacity to convey meaning, all texts communicate something, and mine were designed to convey a great deal, but because the code was missing that could transfer meaning across the texts in the context of this very particular environment. If I was asking people to travel in, for them, uncharted territory, then it was my responsibility to provide them with a confident and reliable guide who spoke their language or a very clearly means to chart their journey. To defend my position what I needed was a map.

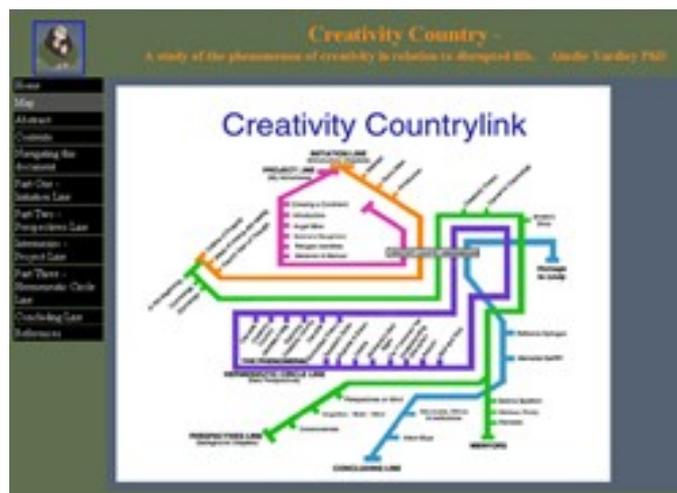


Figure 2: [Creativity Countrylink website](#) navigation map [5]

It was in the context of this forum that I hit upon the analogy of the London Underground map to explain my purpose. When that map was conceived it broke through a literal mind set that expected a map to show a miniaturised version of how things actually were—relative distances to scale etc., rather than providing, at a glance, the order of things—what was next to what and where a passenger could make connections and get on and off at the stations of their choice. I have used this principle in the design of the mapping system presented at the portal of my Creativity Country website. This map has become the home page to which the reader always returns (YARDLEY, 2004). [6]

### *1.1.2 Mapping discursive space*

At first glance it is easy to see how the reader would use this map as a tool for moving around this (or any) web-based document, but this kind of map is more than a navigation aid. It does more than provide a way around a text. Even more importantly, the map defines the landscape of the research question and reflects its identity, just as the rail map defines the boundaries of Sydney or London, and names the stations with all their iconic resonance and layered meaning. The map tells a visual story, mapping the conceptual links visually and allowing the researcher to show how a specific research agenda is contained within a larger cross-disciplinary domain. The breakthrough of this interactive map made it possible to traverse different paradigms simultaneously without overload or confusion. It is possible to see at a glance where the theoretical connections are being made. The reader can follow the route of their choice at any given part of the journey and determine, to a certain extent, their point of arrival—thus making it possible to cover a broad, multi-disciplinary terrain and to handle the kind of complexity that tackling meta questions, such as the nature of creativity, usually makes such a daunting task. The advice that researchers are given again and again is to narrow down their research question, to be specific, to stay on the main methodological and theoretical thoroughfare and resist going down those fascinating cross-disciplinary side roads. If it's not obviously on point or in the right theoretical domain, researchers are told—Let it go! As we all know, those fascinating side roads and intuitive diversions often lead somewhere important, however obscure the route might seem in the beginning. Why let them go? Why not pinpoint them on the philosophical map, find which line on which they belong and make the connections? [7]

The notion of "creativity as country" and therefore a mappable space emerged for me initially as a metaphor to assist in conceptualising a phenomenon which seemed to be imbued with spatial and temporal characteristics, and indeed, like all countries, to have borders, laws governing conduct within those borders, and conditions of exit and entry. The methodological map made it possible to cross that theoretical threshold. I am hopeful that it is an idea that will help others to explore even the most inaccessible and unpopular regions of their chosen research domains. [8]

### *1.1.3 A dynamic dialogue*

There are many advantages to approaching a text in this way. To a certain extent the presence of a number of different kinds of texts within the meta-text provides a continual ground for self-critique not possible within a mono-text. For example, I cannot predict in advance what sub-plot will emerge when I place, side by side, written and visual texts which, while undertaken within the same methodological boundaries, have been created independent of one another over time, albeit by me (the QUILT montage and Carmen's Cosmology and the Creativity Country Underground Map). Visual images brought into a dialogue with other texts are, as I have already pointed out, more than "illustrations", they become more like the images that illuminate medieval manuscripts, providing an alternative language—

an "illumination" of the soul and spirit of the text—a way of capturing what could not be said in words common to all. The literary, visual, and audio-visual texts are intended to speak directly to one another, to provide alternative interpretive angles to inform and enhance each other's meaning. But this is, of necessity, a dynamic dialogue and the texts also challenge each other by increasing the mediating possibilities. Some forms are more "fixed" than others, as is the case with film—in that the camera records actual moments in time that can then be seen by others. I can digitally alter image, of course, but I cannot manufacture after the fact what the camera recorded—although I can, and do, make choices about what the camera is allowed to "see", or what I edit out, consciously and unconsciously. Other forms are more fluid, as is the case with all forms of writing. I reflect on and interpret what my eyes saw and my mind/body experienced through the written medium of fictional and analytical texts. The fictional texts have the advantage of being able to reveal the "inner life" of the analytical text that is usually obscured—as the illuminations were intended to do in early religious texts. The purpose of these illuminations was then, as mine is now, to bridge the gap between different ways of thinking and seeing and different bodies of knowledge, and to offer myself and my reader the opportunity of becoming textually multi-lingual. The methodology has the capacity to extend the boundaries in which I may explore my philosophical question but, inarguably, presents a complex design challenge.



Video 2: *Frank's Train of Thought*. In this story, Frank rides a train between Bondi Junction and Waterfall and muses on black holes, fat ladies knees, and the meaning of words.

This narrative was originally written for actor John BAILEY and was performed by him at the Sydney Fringe Festival (YARDLEY, 1999). [9]

## 2. The Researcher as Bricoleur

How could I, as an artist, writer, and researcher best accommodate the transdisciplinary tensions (of language and meaning) and navigate the great sea of information, opinions, ideas, and prejudices that surround the development of any new transdisciplinary methodology in (as far as the social sciences are concerned) a relatively untried medium? [10]

Frank's stream of consciousness approach (as can be seen in his story) has a degree of merit, his mind fluidly ranging over the territory accessible to him,

alighting on one image, one idea, and then another—gathering, filtering, feeling his way. The merit of this approach, for Frank, lies in its free-ranging fluidity and its lack of attachment to any thought in particular along the way—its lack of prejudice in fact, and its avoidance of premature commitment. But this approach is, as Frank's mother had realised, worryingly untethered to any substantial body of knowledge or structural system, hence her providing him with Collin, his fat friend full of words and meanings. With Collin (his dictionary) at his side, Frank has become something of a bricoleur (WEINSTEIN & WEINSTEIN, 1991), piecing together a patchwork of ideas and possible solutions to the problems that trouble him. [11]

I am, as researcher, a bricoleur, a maker of patchwork, a weaver of stories, an assembler of montage (LINCOLN & DENZIN, 2003, p.5) by which means I construct and convey meaning according to a narrative ethic, an approach to research that is neither naïvely humanistic nor romantically impulsive—nor, by any means, easy to achieve. To do this kind of work effectively I need at my disposal a range of techniques and media capable of containing my multiple texts and making them accessible and coherent to the reader. [12]

WEINSTEIN and WEINSTEIN (1991, p.161) describe the results of the bricoleur's method as an "emergent construction" that reconfigures itself, adding new methodological tools, new forms of representation and interpretation, in response to the unpredictable and unforeseeable needs of an ever changing research environment. This extended methodological framework provides the researcher with the opportunity to explore a more open, expansive terrain, to interpret and reinterpret data across the different textual and visual forms. Research work undertaken in this way inevitably tests the capacity of the methodology itself to move successfully beyond the boundaries of more formally documented and disseminated research practices. This paper, due to the constraints of space and time, is limited in its scope to "describe and show" anything close to a comprehensive range of possibilities, but it nevertheless provides examples of the added value more creative approaches to research might bring to the human sciences. [13]

## **2.1 Will to method: Mediating the territorial clash**

A multi-media, multi-textual, narrative approach to research provides a "literary" form that can be fully integrated with its philosophical content, across disciplines; a form that has the capacity to mediate territorial clashes of discourse within the academy (D'CRUZ, 1995) and open the conceptual ground for genuine transdisciplinary conversations. It can do this precisely because the methodology does not require that a line of inquiry subsidiary to, or divergent from, the main argument, be set aside. It can remain conceptually, and materially, visible on the philosophical map. [14]

This kind of work is intended to be, in EISNER and PESHKIN's terms (EISNER & PESHKIN, 1990), a form of "radical democratic process" that recognises and moves across (forwards and backwards) the tenuous demarcation line between

disciplines and between the researcher and the researched, and recognises the possibility of residing simultaneously in more than one domain and being both the researcher and the researched at one and the same time. It is possible to include myself as both researcher and participant in my research through the inclusion of my own creative products. [15]

The way questions are framed and the processes used in inquiry are crucial here in any research undertaking. Roland BARTHES describes obsessional attitudes towards method as "greedy" and "demanding", and work which constantly proclaims its "will-to-method" as "ultimately sterile" if all the effort has been put into the method and nothing remains for the writing. "The researcher" he says, "insists that his text will be methodological, but this text never comes" (BARTHES, 1986, p.318). [16]

Equally important, BARTHES asserts, are the choices made concerning the structure and form in which a text is developed, fleshed out, and communicated. All language is symbolic, creating the "like enoughts" and the "as if it weres" (Carmen's Cosmology) that allow the products of one mind to be shared with another mind. In constructing whatever material text we may wish to share, however "scientific" in nature, we are weaving a fabric of fiction—aiming to tell a coherent story about the products emerging from the workings of our minds. In so doing we allow the contents of our minds to be, in some degree, perceived by others. In this the "perception", one's own or another's, is viewed as a text which can be constructed and interpreted in much the same way that a work of fiction can be (DENNETT, 1991, 1996). [17]

The structure of the text and the form and style of the writing contribute considerably to textual richness. For example, the structure MERLEAU-PONTY gave his texts mimics his phenomenological argument—ideas growing and developing, coiling back on themselves; a structural writing of the spiral in *The Phenomenology of Perception* (MERLEAU-PONTY, 1962). The experience of reading his works, the phenomenon of the reading, becomes structurally part of the discourse. Martha NUSSBAUM asks us how one should write, claiming that, "(l)iterary form is not separable from philosophical content, but it is, itself, a part of content—an integral part, then, of the search for and the statement of truth (NUSSBAUM, 1990, p.3). [18]

### 3. Conclusion

We return to our starting point and to David SILVERMAN's concerns about how we might use creative processes and narrative inquiry in social science research. James JOYCE wrote of his protagonist in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*.

"His thinking was a dusk of doubt and selfmistrust lit up at moments by the lightnings of intuition, but lightnings of so clear a splendour that in those moments the world perished about his feet as if it had been fireconsumed: and thereafter his tongue grew heavy and he met the eyes of others with unanswering eyes for he felt that the spirit of beauty had folded round like a mantle and that in reverie at least he had been

acquainted with nobility. But, when this brief pride of silence upheld him no longer, he was glad to find himself still in the midst of common lives, passing his way amid the squalor and noise and sloth of the city fearlessly with a light heart." (JOYCE & ANDERSON, 1977, p.148) [19]

The narrative, multi-textual turn does bring with it the potential for a "dusk of doubt" to enter the academy's thinking at the precise moment when a researcher has been lit up "by the lightnings of intuition" as they build new pathways in research. It would seem that SILVERMAN's problem with, and his mistrust of this use of narrative (in which he is not alone), lies with the undifferentiated "narrative" emerging from the in-depth interview, in which a research participant's recorded "story" is presented as an interpretive text in its own right. This kind of text goes only part of the way to achieving its goal, if the goal is to reveal more than the "off the cuff" story of a life. For both SILVERMAN and BARTHES, the methodology must have a point of arrival. [20]

If we are not to have the discursive world "perish" about our professional feet when we are testing challenging methodologies, it is important that the rigour applied to narrative methodologies provides a "literary" form that is not divorced from its philosophical content. In the context of this article, for example, the AIDS QUILT, Carmen's Cosmology, Frank's Train of Thought, and all other texts included need to genuinely enhance the capacity of the meta-text to communicate more broadly and with greater depth about multi-textual narrative research. The form must remain an integral part of the search for, and the statement of, narrative truth. If we attend to the aesthetic and structural detail of that task, there is no reason why we shouldn't emerge from our scholarly reveries to find ourselves still in the midst of common academic and creative life, approaching each new philosophical question "fearlessly" and "with a light heart". [21]

Two "characters" appear in this exploration of piecing together a methodological bricolage, two fictional friends in fact, Carmen de Terremond, a Kings Cross private detective, and Frank Erne, her indomitable sidekick. It is fitting to finish with some biographical information for the reader, to flesh out to a degree their role in this story. [22]

### **Biographical notes**

*Frank Erne* was born on a particularly cold morning on the 29th of May. The year he was born is unclear, Frank can't remember ever having known it. He is around 30 years old. Frank spends each and every birthday taking a ferryboat ride from Circular Quay to Watson's Bay, sometimes with his friend Shirley, and on one occasion with his Aunt Beryl. He eats fish and chips on the retaining wall by the yacht club, then walks up to The Gap and back again, down through the village lanes. This birthday tradition was instituted (by Frank's mother) when he was three years old. The first, and only, time he ever encountered his father. It has always been the happiest day of his year. Frank was a placid, cheerful child, spending his early years with his mother in a flat in the inner city Sydney suburb of Kings Cross (notorious then, as now, as the city's premier red light district). Frank's

mother had a stimulating intellectual life, an appalling sense of judgement with relationships, and many interesting friends. An artist of some talent, she gave up her painting to focus on educating Frank about anything and everything that ignited his interest. He was home schooled. Frank made many friends in The Cross, including Serge, the pavement artist, and a local private detective by the name of Carmen. [23]

When Frank's mother died his Auntie Beryl became his guardian and he moved into a boarding house near his old home. His intense grief for his mother subsided somewhat when Carmen took him on as her assistant and his days (and nights) became packed with problem solving. He eventually developed a close friendship with Shirley, another boarding house resident. He is dedicated to Shirley, Carmen, and his work and continues to pursue his intellectual interests when and wherever the opportunity arises. [24]

*Carmen de Terremonde* operates her detective business in the heart of Sydney's King's Cross. While she is a close friend of mine, she has never revealed to me how she came to own the agency she runs with the help of Frank Erne. Neither do I know anything about her life before she took up detecting. Her life currently, however, is an open book. She takes on the cases that others would consider too awkward, obscure, or unprofitable and does her best to discover the "essence of truth" beneath the layers of obfuscation, denial, and spin which she regularly encounters in her unusual caseload. She is of indeterminate age and looks like many one might encounter on an inner city Sydney street. [25]

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## Videos

Video\_1: <http://www.youtube.com/v/ad288CYG6FI> (425 x 350)

Video\_2: <http://www.youtube.com/v/Mpyq9Fr03ic> (425 x 350)

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