

The internal pathway of the self

supervisory implications of autobiographical, practice-led Ph.D. design theses

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Abstract— This paper draws on case studies undertaken in doctoral research at AUT University. It seeks to address a number of issues related to inquiries employed by graphic design students who use autobiographic approaches when developing research-based theses. When employed as a framework, autobiographic inquiries offer a rewarding yet challenging system for connecting investigation with the researcher's personal experience. This paper provides a discussion of the nature, advantages and challenges of autobiographic research in relation to three recent PhD theses in graphic design. Through this, it seeks to provide a useful reflection on cautions and opportunities inherent in the methodology.

Keywords -autobiography, graphic design, ethics, self inquiry, supervision

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL DESIGNER

This paper is concerned with research projects in which PhD students employ the medium and devices of professional graphic design to create statements that wholly, or in part, draw on navigations of the self. In these projects the graphic designer is a form of autobiographer who assumes an essential role as a character within the work. In this regard the designer is engaged in a form of research that transcends traditional service-oriented production.

Such graphic design inquiries may lead to the generation of performance texts.

The performative text describes a story that reaches beyond its traditional written narration (Jones, 2006). As Berridge (2008) suggests, graphic design texts may be seen as “performativity on the printed page, [when] techniques such as font or image manipulation enhance aspects of the essence of the piece and change the way in which the raw story is communicated” (p. 14). In this regard these texts may, as typographic expressions, engage with paralinguistic dimensions or, when combined with image, communicate meaning where traditional constructs of writing are unable to reach. In such forms of narrative inquiry, graphic designers “turn the analytic lens on themselves ... writing, interpreting, and performing their own narratives about culturally significant experiences” (Chase, 2005, p. 60).

Autobiography nominates the researcher as central to an inquiry. Burdick, (cited in Heller 1998, p. 206), proposes that designers must consider themselves authors, not facilitators.

This shift in perspective, she believes, implies responsibility and voice. This, she argues, results in a more personal connection with design and the ability to extend professionally limited paradigms. Her position has been developed by a number of theorists concerned with ideas of origination and agency in graphic design (Rock, 1996; Scrivener, 2000; Scrivener & Ings, 2009; Wood, 2004).

Rock (1996, para. 27) argues “the amplification of the personal voice legitimises design as equal to more traditional, privileged forms of authorship.” Wood suggests that “in an age of mounting ecological damage in which we often see ourselves as powerless individuals in the thrall of faceless corporations,” it is no longer appropriate for a designer “to deny his/her own views, ideologies and immediate well-being in the quest for his/her client's cause or satisfaction” (2004, p. 50).

KNOWLEDGE, THE DESIGNER AND POSITIONING THE SELF

Autobiographic inquiries presuppose knowledge as personal. Webb and O'Brien (2008, para.8) argue “knowledge and interpretation may be located in and attributed directly to the art/artist.” Exercising these elements, they suggest, relies less upon the acceptance of external authority and more upon what Keats called “Negative Capability”. This the poet describes as that condition “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, Mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Keats, 2002). This state of ‘being in’ the irrational self may be likened to Sela-Smith's (2002) exercising of the “subjective I”, Mead's (2007) indwelling, and Douglass and Moustakas' (1985) notion of immersion.

The elevation of the self to the focus of an inquiry, I suggest, does not constitute a refusal to establish meaning but rather, as Bate argues, enables “an imaginative openness of mind and heightened

receptivity to reality in its full and diverse concreteness" (1979, p. 249).

DEFINING THE AUTOBIOGRAPHIC INQUIRY

In graphic design, autobiographic PhDs may be defined as those that employ reflection upon personal experience as a means of understanding and expression. As a form of inquiry they are primarily concerned with the designer's subjective experience rather than with a reflection upon the practices and needs of others. Because of this we might argue that they are also a form of cultural accounting.

Within this definition the autobiographic may embrace self-narrative inquiry and forms of autoethnography, but its emphasis is not necessarily solely on writing. Thus, designed texts may be expressive, creating another reality where "language may present degrees of ambiguity so that social reality is not explained via a single perspective, but becomes participatory. Into this dynamic, readers bring their own perspectives to bear on the narrative and through this, add other layers of meaning to the text" (Barone, 2001; Barone & Eisner, 1997).

Ellis and Bochner (2000, p. 739) suggest that such inquiries display "multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural." They say that as such, the creator may be asking 'readers' "to feel the truth of their stories and to become co-participants, engaging the storyline morally, emotionally, aesthetically, and intellectually" (ibid., p. 745). Thus, in contrast to hypothesis-driven research, autobiographic PhDs in graphic design navigate the subjective pathways of the self. In this regard they may embrace personal feelings, narratives, imagery, and observations.

THE AUTOBIOGRAPHICAL AND RESEARCH

Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) argue that autobiography, like self-study, "represents a trend away from modernism and its assumptions about legitimate knowledge and knowledge production toward a broadening of what counts as research" (p. 13). This is interesting when one considers that the antecedents of literary autobiography (as we understand it today) emerged during the 17th century inside an environment that paralleled the rise of empirical science and inductive method.

An important assumption held by autobiographic and qualitative researchers in general, is that reality is neither fixed, nor purely external. Instead it is "created by, and moves with, the changing perceptions and beliefs of the viewer" (Duncan 2004, p. 4). Autobiographical approaches as academic contributions facilitate distinctively personal points of view that emphasise reflexivity and personal voice

(Mykhalovskiy, 1996; Tierney & Lincoln, 1997). In this approach, Duncan (2004) argues the researcher is not attempting to *become* an insider in the research setting. Instead he/she *is* the insider. The context of the research is his or her own. This highly subjective position stands in a dichotomous relationship to the tenets of positivism that has formed the substrate of much scientific, and indeed some important design research. However, the autobiographer's emergence in design research is underpinned by a significant history of thought.

In 1958, Polanyi argued for the value of subjectivity in research. He believed it was impossible to remove the subjective passion and commitment of the observer from an inquiry and argued that these passions and commitments were in fact essential to experiencing and investigating the world. In 1994, Schwandt, building upon Eisner's (1991) notion of the researcher as a connoisseur and "instrument," argued that personality and past experiences provide the sensibilities that make investigation possible.

In 1996, Rock raised issues of authorship in graphic design and profiled examples of practitioners who used "the medium of professional graphic design to create self-referential statements and compositions" (p. 243). Operating in a space between service-oriented projects and 'free expression', these designers, he argued, eschewed the parameters of a client relationship and transcended conventions of production to "imply that authored design holds some higher, purer purpose" (ibid.). Rock's statements, and those of Katherine McCoy, who asserted "We are not here at Cranbrook to prepare indentured servants for corporate America,"¹ became part of a somewhat binary debate in the 1990s that tended to pit suggestions of design as authorship against protestations that the designer should fundamentally be a service provider.²

Since these debates, writers like Lupton (2003), Mermoz (2006), Moline (2006), and Tremlow (2006), (although their positions differ), have discussed the functioning and role of authorship in graphic design. In their deliberations, the designer is no longer seen as invisible or relegated to the position of articulating a client's voice. Their writing reflects an awareness of Golden-Biddle and Locke's (1997) observation that in research "... authors never can choose to vanish from their texts; they can only pick the disguise in which they will appear" (pp. 72-73).

¹ (McCoy 1991, as cited in VanderLans, 2005, p.37).

² Much of this ideological debate was played out in the pages of *Émigré* magazine, with the likes of Howard Riley on one side of the debate and Anne Burdick and Rudy VanderLans on the other, arguing that graphic design had become "too narrowly defined as a service-oriented profession" (VanderLans, 2005 p. 55).

ADVANTAGES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIC INQUIRIES

Autobiographic inquiries have an established although contested history. Such approaches to research place the graphic designer at the centre of the problem to be solved. They elevate his/her ability to utilise informed subjectivity, self-search and intuition as tools for discovering solutions to complex and often protean problems. As such, for a student considering a PhD thesis, they suggest a number of advantages.

Commitment and transformation

First, in extended inquiries that are driven from the self, autobiographic approaches often engender high levels of relevance and personal commitment from candidates. As an extension of this, if well supervised, they can also be highly transformative.

Reflexivity

Second, autobiographic inquiries are capable of engaging the researcher in very high levels of reflexivity. This is because they locate the designer at the core of the issue being studied, and emphasise throughout the candidate's role as both a researcher and the subject of the investigation. In some graphic design theses, the permeating nature of this reflexivity can lead to profound levels of insight into both the inquiry at hand and, if the candidate is sufficiently 'self-conscious', perceptive understandings of the relationship between the designer and the designed.

Empowering the marginalised voice

Third, approaches to creative inquiry that position self experience at the core of the investigation can also result in the empowerment of marginalised voices. Russel (1999) argues that through autobiographical approaches, marginalised individuals who might traditionally have been the exotic subject of more conventional ethnographies are able to tell their own stories (p.3). Thus, in practice-led PhD theses, graphic designers sometimes employ the autobiographic when they seek through the expression or synthesis of personal experience to provide insight into issues that are positioned on the peripheries of academic or societal discourse. Such projects might include research located in the realms of identity, ethnicity, sexuality, or the ontology of the other. In this regard these texts transcend mere narration of the self because they engage in cultural analysis and interpretation (Chang, 2008, p.43).

Authentic links between the researcher and society

Fourth, self-narration is not tame (Ellis & Bochner, 2006; Tolich, 2010). As such it is capable of tracing unique trajectories through experience to achieve linkages between ideas and their emotional and societal impact. Research based on this framework enhances the signature and voice of personal interpretation. A resulting thesis "will not present a record of the world the researcher has visited or been part of; rather it will

show how the researcher made sense of that world" (Clandinin & Connelly, 1994, p. 4).

Although writers like Duncan (2004) and Parks (1997) note that autobiographic researchers can become over reliant on the potential and impact of personal narration in eliciting emotive responses from readers, creative work generated from autobiographic research can produce very rich texts that create highly distinctive relationships between the narration of personal experience and broader societal concerns.

Originality, impact and immediacy

Finally, as generators of communicative texts, graphic designers are often concerned with issues of originality and understanding. Autobiographical research may be employed to generate a range of projects including artist's books, activist design, graphic novels, typographical film poetry, short films, and multi-modal documentaries. In these projects, being able to access a rich spectrum of experience and emotion is often helpful in developing inquiries that lead to highly distinctive and broadly empathetic outcomes.

In certain practice-led research this distinctiveness is partly achieved by the way in which the researcher positions him/herself within the thesis. Because of the designer's use of direct address, his/her work often has comparatively high levels of impact and immediacy. Chang (2008) suggests that autobiographic inquiries, because of the manner in which they make transparent the nature of the author, are by their nature 'friendly'. We receive ideas through direct and emotionally redolent discourse, rather than through a form of objective reflection. Of course this assertion of 'friendliness' is arguable. Not all autobiographical theses produce comfortable accessibility. Indeed in certain inquiries, especially those that deal with marginalised states, autobiographic theses can make decidedly uncomfortable (if distinctive) 'reading'.

DISADVANTAGES OF AUTOBIOGRAPHIC INQUIRIES

Narcissism, solipsism and confusion of purpose

Historically, autobiographic inquiries have engendered a wide range of criticism. Atkinson (1997), Bruner (1993), Charmaz and Mitchell (1997), Coffey (1999), Hargreaves, Earl, and Schmidt (2002), Holt (2003), Krizek (2003), and Sparkes (2000) all suggest that without careful monitoring, such approaches are capable of becoming non-productive, introspective, deliberations on the self. Accusations of narcissism and solipsism are often leveled at researchers who employ this approach in the design of their PhD theses. Without astute monitoring, an autobiographical thesis can dislocate from the consequences and expectations of its position as a scholarly work. By extension, without a rigorous critiquing of emerging outcomes, the candidate can end up defending themselves instead of the work and producing a design thesis that confuses its role as a communicative text with tangential benefits

that may involve levels of self-actualisation, personal growth and healing.

The limitations of self-reference

Because autobiographical inquiries affirm the personal they can sometimes offer a deceptively sheltered environment in which critical thinking is required to function. This can lead to some designers failing to address the limitations of a self-referential approach. If candidates continuously fall back on their own terms of reference there is no guarantee that emerging designs are not being evaluated against limitations they don't know they possess.

In graphic design, when one is generally seeking to produce communicative texts, there are specific issues that need to be balanced between the integrity and exclusivity of the self (as an environment for generating and reflecting on work), and the need to engage with outside critique. Without some form of external feedback, purely self-referenced processes can result in designs that fail to explore a wealth of available options or fall short of their communicative potential.

This said, a designer employing external feedback in an autobiographic inquiry needs to be vigilant. Sela-Smith, in her critique of Moustakas's method, notes that a "confusion of ... different perspectives and different meanings, can fully disorient the researcher doing self-inquiry" (2002 p. 71). Unless feedback is drawn back into the self (as opposed to simply being applied to the emerging design) the integrity of an autobiographic inquiry can become disconnected. The power of the subjective search can shift to an objective analysis of the created phenomena. This can result in a work in the final stages of its realisation, losing much of its integrity and idiosyncratic 'voice'. This is because, if one applies critique to the emerging artifact instead of the question, the outcome can become disconnected from the wealth of tacit knowing that brought it into being.

This is a challenging issue for supervisors. In many cases, when working with a candidate employing an autobiographic inquiry, it is useful to remind oneself that such an inquiry is an orchestration of questions. If feedback is framed as questions (rather than advice), and a response is not asked for as an instant response, there is a higher chance that reflection may be taken back into, and reprocessed inside the self.

Social obligation

Finally, a criticism sometimes lodged at autobiographic research is that it is self-aggrandising. Delamont (2007) suggests that for academics these inquiries shirk a certain form of social obligation because they focus "on the powerful and not the powerless to whom we should be directing our sociological gaze" (para. 6). However, her criticism is contestable. For example, the PhD candidates discussed in this paper, while developing research inside universities, all adopted autobiographic

approaches to their theses because they felt the need to work with knowledge and experience that traditionally sat outside of dominant paradigms of academic consideration. All three candidates were mature students who had rich and diverse life experiences gained outside of university culture. Their theses dealt with personal narratives of criminality, social ostracism, immigration, and cultural marginalisation. Their PhDs were not the self-indulgent musings of a privileged elite, but undertakings in equity where lived experiences of marginalisation and misunderstanding were deliberately (and politically) positioned, through design practice, in the realm of academia.

CHALLENGES OF SUPERVISING AUTOBIOGRAPHIC INQUIRIES

When encountering the concept of the autobiographic, candidates often respond positively to the potential for high levels of personal connection with the subject and processing of their thesis. However, for many the allure of the autobiographic brings with it a number of soon-discovered difficulties. These in turn pose distinctive challenges for their supervisors.

While some of these problems, like discomfort with the generally unstable and protean research process, may relate to a range of methodologies, (especially those that employ significant levels of heuristic inquiry), others are more specifically aligned with the autobiographic.

Emotional cost

Often students engaged in self-search inquiries underestimate the emotional cost of the research. Practice-led PhDs in graphic design, like any complex undertaking, tax both intellectual and emotional tenacity. They can be unstable and at times disappointing. When issues of identity are intimately and inextricably tangled in this dynamic, such inquiries can become comparatively fraught and at worst immobilising.

Although it has been argued that vulnerability gives authority to autobiographic inquiries (Ryang, 2000; Behar, 1997; Erikson, 2010), the same vulnerability requires careful and attentive supervision. Because autobiographic theses contain personal elements candidates must be prepared and able to separate critique of the manner and quality of discourse from criticism of the self. This is because heightened levels of self-revelation when submitted as part of a PhD are being positioned in the academic arena. Therefore the positions they serve to articulate must be open to scrutiny. Self-revelation cannot operate as an alternative or escape from rigorous and reasoned critique. Of course this poses challenges to the supervisor-candidate relationship. On one level autobiographic theses reach their highest levels of resolve when risk is supported by

high levels of trust. This trust is important because both the supervisor and candidate must be prepared for sometimes rocky journeys where self-interrogation, fear and declaration are supported. That said, this support, if the thesis is to produce high quality outcomes, also requires insightful and rigorous questioning.

Representation

Delamont (2007) argues that placing outcomes of autobiographic research in the public domain can be highly problematic. She suggests that readers will automatically read such research “as an authentic, and therefore ‘true’ account of the writer’s life, and therefore the other actors will be, whatever disclaimers, or statements about fictions... identifiable and identified” (para. 4).

Autobiographical narratives are not simply an author’s story. If they were, ethical considerations would be comparatively straightforward. However, they are considerably more complex. Autobiographical material is subjective and the power of its narration reminds us of King’s observation that “once a story is told ... it is loose in the world” (2003, p. 10). If this is the case, one is left to consider the implications for two groups of people. The first are those who populate the world of the researcher’s self-narrative; the second is the researcher him/herself.

Ethics and the protection of others

Conventional ethics may be understood as emanating from two fundamentally different stances; the deontological and the teleological. The deontological position argues that the ends never justify the use of research that is unethical. Conversely, the teleological position argues that the ends may in some cases, justify the means.

Traditionally, university ethics committees are concerned with ethics protecting participants other than the researcher. This is normally a relatively straightforward demarcation. However, where people appear as components in a personal narrative, it becomes a little more complex. As characters they are often ‘unknowing’ participants and appear as subjectively framed in non-neutrally edited representations. This issue becomes even more complex when the created work is semi-fictional. In these situations I have found it helpful to encourage candidates to follow two broad guidelines:

- 1 Treat all participants (including themselves) as vulnerable. In this regard, researchers need to acknowledge that they don’t own their story and make certain where practical, that they have shown what they have written to parties who are directly represented.

- 2 Talk about their research with others. This means that candidates not only consider the purpose and communicative clarity of their work but also remain open to reflection and debate regarding their ethical practices and linkages between the self, society, and the implications of what they are presenting.

These guidelines stated; it is of course not always that easy. Although writers like Tolich (2010), Ellis (2007), and Doloriert and Sambrook (2009) propose guidelines that emphasise consultation with represented parties, sometimes candidates narrate situations where they were victimised. It is not appropriate to ask a researcher to approach a past assailant and show them how they have narrated the impact of the assault. For example, one would not expect a narrator of rape or torture to show their work to the people who harmed them. Yet, the auto-narration of these experiences would probably be accepted, even by the most deontologically positioned of academics, as a potentially important contribution to knowledge and understanding. Beyond implementing existing university ethics guidelines, I have found that if each autobiographic thesis is approached on its own terms, one may also usefully employ what Ellis (2007) describes as relational ethics. Her essentially teleological approach suggests that the researcher must “recognize and value mutual respect, dignity and the connectedness between researcher and researched, and between researchers and the communities in which they live” (p.4).³

In adopting this position both the supervisor and the candidate must be responsive and attentive. There are very few black and white solutions. They must think through implications for all parties in relation to the integrity of the thesis.

In situations like these, ethics becomes a far deeper consideration than consent and information. The very substance of research and its relationship to, and responsibility for society becomes deeply embedded into the content and process of the journey.

Ethics and the protection of the self

Even when issues relating to others mentioned in an autobiographical thesis are resolved, we are left with another question. What of the safety of the researcher who *is* the researched? In this case I am referring to theses where the focus of the inquiry is entirely centred on the revealed self.

Clandinin and Connelly in describing autobiographical inquiries say, “The researcher is always speaking partially naked and is genuinely open to legitimate

³ The issue of communities is broached by Tolich (2010) and Kaiser (2009). Using the term *deductive disclosure*, Kaiser refers to the possibility that confidences revealed in the thesis may be exposed among participants themselves. Thus the concern is not with the researcher exposing confidences to outsiders, but with confidences being exposed amongst those who are mentioned in the study.

criticism from participants and from the audience” (1994, p. 423).

This ‘nakedness’ can become a complex ethical and emotional issue. Because autobiographical theses disclose the personal, many students, especially those approaching the end of their PhD, wrestle with anxieties regarding post-doctoral employment. In contemporary scholarly communities personal disclosure normally becomes part of an online and highly accessible environment. Candidates often fear that the availability of what is essentially a personal and declarative document might potentially render them vulnerable in a struggle to secure tenure. In addition those who intend to pursue a career in teaching become aware that what they reveal in their thesis will, in an easily downloadable environment, possibly become the reading material of their students.

Both Tolich (2010) and Doloriet and Sambrook (2009) address this issue. Tolich says “my advice for a novice researcher planning to write about bulimia or attempted suicide, or any other stigmatized experience, is that they should imagine dressing up in sandwich boards and walking around the university proclaiming their stigma ... Like an inked tattoo, posting an autoethnography to a Web site or making it part of a curriculum vitae, the marking is permanent” (p.1605).

In seeking a means of addressing this vulnerability, both he and Morse (2002) recommend that the autobiographer consider adopting a *nom de plume*. However, in a PhD thesis this is generally not a feasible option, because of the *viva voce* or oral format of the examination. In addition, the scholarship made evident through the research is not directly (or professionally) attributable to the writer.

Deliberate positioning

Although the nature and consequences of intimate exposure require careful deliberation, some students decide to approach their thesis autobiographically because they can position and empower the personal. Sometimes this is because they conceive themselves as marginalized voices and believe the association of their ‘otherness’ with scholarship is both authentic and political. These students are not seeking anonymity. Instead they have made conscious decisions to draw these aspects of their private and scholarly lives together. Consequently, their theses operate on three levels. First they are a contribution to the academy through a demonstration of scholarship. Second, they are artistic works that seek to advance human understanding by linking the self with a social context and third, they are a politically positioned form of intellectual activism.

In dealing with issues of self-exposure, or to borrow a vernacular term ‘outing’ oneself, I find it helpful to have candidates think about three issues:

1 Although your thesis is a narration at a moment in time, it will be preserved and unalterable. You cannot go back and change this text. It will represent you for the rest of your life. How do you want yourself perceived?

2 What are the implications of your thesis being read by people who love you, feel neutral to you, or may intend you harm?

3 What support strategies do you have around you post-lodgment/publication?

These are discussion points. They are used as a means of talking through the implications of self-declaration, and they need to be carefully handled. The last thing one seeks as a supervisor is to frighten candidates away from appropriate methods for analysing and creatively interpreting cultural issues. This said, it is naïve to pretend that autobiographical theses do not pose distinct issues for all parties concerned.

Accordingly, I will now discuss, in relation to three current graphic design⁴ PhD candidates, the manner in which autobiography became integral to their theses. In doing so, we may consider the distinctive approaches adopted in drawing these research projects into ‘designed’ form. We will also consider the impact of the methodology on the researcher.

AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND THE GRAPHIC DESIGNER

TATIANA TAVARES

I think that instinct, that storytelling instinct, rescued me most of my life. (Armistead Maupin)

The thesis

Autobiography can be used to reach rich but often vulnerable parts of both the researcher and the researched. Although this can be problematic for some students, for others the creative fusion of the self and external phenomena can lead to very profound and highly expressive results.

‘Carnival Land: A performance of metaphors’, was presented as an allegorical graphic novel, realised through bilingual narration, photomontage, and renegotiations of picture book design. The work orchestrated a performance of metaphors as a means of drawing correlations between Carnival and the

⁴ I define graphic design as a conscious and critical orchestration of graphic elements/thinking into coherent, communicative texts. By adopting this definition, I suggest that graphic design can transcend binary conflicts regarding authorial or service-oriented purpose. In doing so, PhD research is freed up to usefully negotiate broader conceptual and professional parameters (and their resulting synergies).

candidate's personal experience of immigration to New Zealand.

The novel was conceived as a pilgrimage unto the unknown where bricolaged identity played out in theatricised and eclectically ornamented environments. In the thesis, theories relating to Carnival, bricolage, liminality, rites of passage, and theatricisation were used to escort the researcher's central concerns through the process of designing and writing a richly illustrated text.

Locating the question

At the heart of Tatiana's thesis was another story. As a child, she grew up in the poor part of Sao Paulo. To afford an education at design school she had to work full-time and study in the evenings. At twenty-four, in an attempt to escape from a world where many of her friends had become involved in crime and drugs, she left for another country on the other side of the world. However, upon arrival, the pictures of New Zealand she had seen in travel brochures didn't match the experiences she encountered as a new immigrant. In this new country Tatiana experienced exploitation and deception on very visceral levels. For several years she was forced to work in a variety of occupations that paid below the minimum wage. In the evenings, she would steal out to attend night classes in an effort to learn English.

When Tatiana enrolled in the programme, she spent some time focusing her question. She was interested in identity and could frame with relative lucidity a range of possible research inquiries. However, deep down nothing really seemed to resonate. Uncertain of the true direction and focus of her thesis, she returned home to Sao Paulo briefly. It was while she was there that the city was swept up in the extravagance of Carnival. This festival had marked the years of her childhood and, in its rituals of masking, costuming and assumed identities, she found a unique series of metaphors for framing her experiences as an immigrant. She also became aware while she traversed the spaces between these two 'homes', of feelings that she belonged in neither. Liminality had become a state of being.

Tatiana's resulting thesis included created works and an exegesis. The novel's typographical treatments oscillated between languages, its images depicted foreign worlds constructed from known but culturally disconnected fragments, and its allegorical narrative built to a moving climax.

However, these features might be those used to assess a piece of professional graphic design. What made Tatiana's thesis effective, as a body of academic work was the manner in which she was able to draw on personal experience and synthesise this through modes of graphic design into a provoking and insightful social analysis. She achieved what Chang (2008) says is the need for such research to "transcend mere narration of

the self to engage in cultural analysis and interpretation" (p.43).

The work demonstrated how an authored voice might reach experience beyond objective analysis and beyond the limitations of the written word.

Ethics of representation

Because the thesis dealt with issues of criminal exploitation and marginalisation the candidate created her narrative as an allegory. The incidents relating to loss, coercion, exploitation and acceptance were true, but the characters were Emerald Jewellers, Reptile Men and wandering harlequins.

Tatiana was always conscious of the ethical implications of her story. Her mother appeared as a character in her novel (and was sent iterations during its development). However, other people who had exploited or supported her in her early years in New Zealand also appeared. By adopting allegory as a literary/illustrative form she was able to include real incidents but discuss them in visually rich, yet relatively anonymous ways.

Tatiana's distinctive approach to autobiographical research may be likened to Watson's (2000) "fictionalization" that employs disguise in order to preserve content. Humphreys and Watson (2009) argue that no research account can be "totally true", but that some accounts "may be truer than others" (p.4). They suggest that so long as "how things happen" and "how things work" are retained, the vitality and importance of the research is preserved.

Of course, on a creative level the use of allegorical metaphor is also a very rich vehicle. Its potential to expose character and event and to provide undercurrents of visual and narrative cohesion in a graphic novel can be developed at very sophisticated and complex levels.

The fictionalization of Carnival Land became a vehicle for linking the self with a social context, but it also became a vehicle for very sophisticated narrative design. Its rich orchestration of typography as the voice of transformative experience (figure 1), its subtle, illustrative references to cultural ambiguity (figure 2), and its distinctive theatrical metaphors (figure 3), all combined to produce a designed text that demonstrated a highly individualised signature and elegant integration of visual and written storytelling.

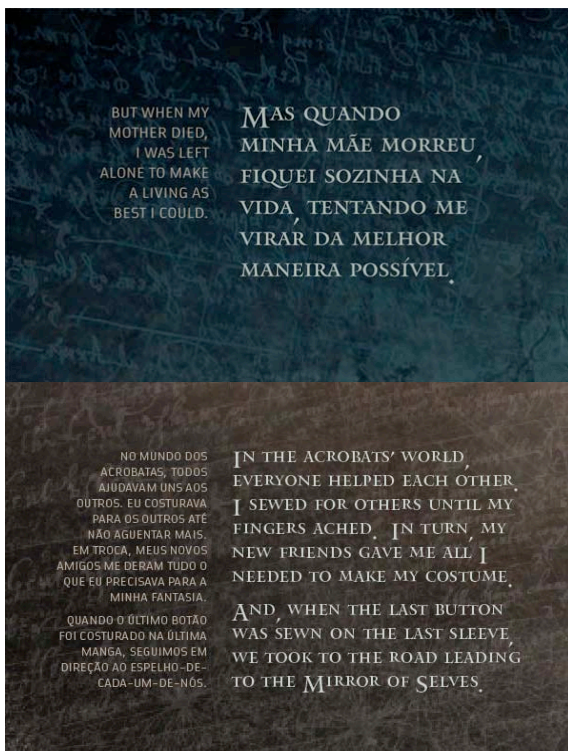


Figure 1: Spreads and details showing how the visual volume of two languages changed throughout the novel. At the outset the dominant copy is in Portuguese (and the translation is in English). In Carnival land the dominant text is in English (and the translation appears in Portuguese). At the end of the book both languages

hold equal position. However, it is useful to note that the two languages are not direct translations of each other. Certain emphases and ‘turns’ of phrase are preserved as cultural idiosyncrasies.



Figure 2: The journey to the Mirror of Selves. The cities of Carnival land are amalgams of dislocated elements. The image draws on Turner's (1979) ideas of liminality as “being-on-a-threshold”, a “betwixt-and-between” (p. 465). Thus both Carnival and immigration may represent periods where an individual exists between societies. Both Carnival and immigration may therefore be seen as ambiguous, liminal pilgrimages. In this illustration the pilgrimage is an eclectic journey through a liminal space made up of cultural ambiguities. At this point in the novel, the characters are on their way to the Mirror of Selves in the hope of finding their true identities.



Figure 3: Peri and the outsiders discover the thief's brand. At an early point in the novel the central character is set up to steal. When she is discovered she is turned out of the city. Eventually she encounters a group of vagabonds whose world is a theatricised expression of collective strength and jocularly in the face of ostracism. When they discover her brand the girl turns to flee, but they stop her and show her that they too have such marks. In Carnival land many immigrants are manipulated into falling from grace with the law so they can be kept pliable and grateful for work in unreasonable conditions.

"We must write about what we really prefer not to write about. It is not about presenting ourselves in a good light - in charge, competent, controlled, organized and so on, or how we might like to be seen. Rather, it is about writing rich, full accounts that include the messy stuff - the self-doubts, the mistakes, the embarrassments, the inconsistencies, the projections, and that which may be distasteful" (Tenni, Smyth, & Boucher, 2003, p.3).

The thesis

Gabriella worked for some years as a designer for film and theatre before she entered university. Between 2005 and 2011, I supervised her MA and then her PhD. In the course of her doctoral research her topic of inquiry journeyed through a number of iterations that centred on an exploration and reclaiming of the feminine abject. In this regard, her thesis engaged with signs of the leaky corporeal self, through a series of designs for textiles of liminal domestic spaces (such as sheets and drapes).

In adopting an autobiographical approach Gabriella sought to interrogate the privileging of the exterior over the interior. Her decision to adopt a relatively self-exposing approach to her project was both personal and political. The research was positioned in the tradition of certain feminist approaches to art from the 1970s and 80s, such as Hannah Wilke's self-portrait performance pieces. Gabriella believes "if women are to extend ways of knowing to incorporate their subjecthood then they must be prepared to place the reality of those lived lives under scrutiny" (personal communication, April 11, 2011). She notes that Robyn Longhurst (2001) has argued that embodiment has become a frequently deployed word in the academy, but in an abstracted sense, referring to bodies that are in fact incorporeal and "strangely tidy" (p.4).

In discussing ethical issues impacting on her thesis Gabriella says, "I have an issue with interrogating the bodies of others, and appropriating their stories for my research. The only body, the only abjection, I have the right to examine is my own. Anything else merely reinforces the kind of privileging which feminism works to subvert" (personal communication, April 11, 2011).

Autobiography and authenticity

Being able to effectively engage with highly revealing personal data is reliant upon understanding one's own defenses and reactions to difficult, confronting or unstable material. If the researcher does not understand his/her limitations and responses, the temptation may be to edit, discard or ignore potential opportunities.

Remaining true to an autobiographic inquiry can sometimes be very difficult. As Tenni, Smyth and Boucher (2003 p.6) note, "Underpinning all of this is both the need for awareness of the self and paradoxically, the search for greater awareness.... The willingness to see, confront and discover oneself in one's practice and to learn from this is at the core of this work and central to the creation of good data." But creating 'good data' can be a challenging undertaking when one is dealing with a critical area like the abject. Socially we are conditioned to negate those narratives that make others feel uncomfortable. Alternatively, in the realm of scholarship we can theorise them into comparative neutrality. However, when a graphic designer deals with the abject, the outcomes can be significantly more confrontational than when she writes (in a scholarly manner) about it, even though the ideas may be the same.

Eriksson (2010), discussing his autoethnographic practice-led PhD, worries that "Exposing my deepest flaws might damage my own career, either as an academic, as a designer, or both." He suggests, "It is inevitable to adopt a layer of censorship or rather different layers of censorship" (p.95).

The question is raised however, if one chooses to employ autobiographic approaches to research, at what point in the censorship process does one's research lose its authenticity? Certainly in examining autobiographic PhDs I have come across more than once, candidates who have initially engaged with the surface of the methodology, but have then backed away from its rigorous demands on authenticity. This often leaves their research ill-resolved on deeper levels. As a consequence, the PhD sometimes fails to deliver on a robust and aspirational abstract, or its explication and practice fall back on re-framings and tepid renegotiations.

Gabriella thinks carefully about her work and its consequences as a PhD thesis. She is aware of the potentials of lodging her research in the public domain and the reaction others might have to it. In the face of this she has maintained a rigorous (and often unforgiving) interrogation of the self. Her written reflections weave through many of her designs (as graphic elements). She creatively investigates the potentials of *paragone* (competition between words and images to best describe reality) and *ekphrasis* (the description of one work of art in another).⁵ The images appearing in her prints are her own. Her ownership is thoughtful and comprehensive. Accordingly, her written exegesis is an intelligent contextualizing of the work, partly because it does not attempt to censor or reframe

⁵ For example, writing that is about an image, or an image that attempts to communicate the contents of a piece of writing.

it, and partly because it understands on very deep levels the purpose and parameters of the inquiry.



Figure 4: An early design based on a fusion of Victorian ornamentalism and female genitalia. The work was preliminary and led to more corporeal designs that moved from abstracted notions of female abjection to a specific and personal portrayal.

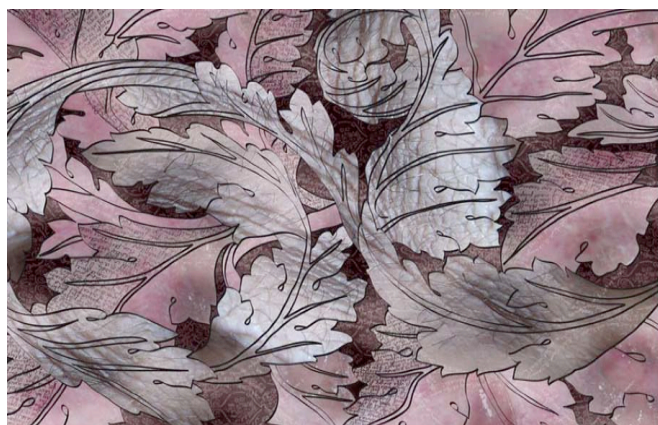


Figure 5: Based on a William Morris wallpaper pattern, the design is constructed from images of the candidate's skin, textured with autobiographical text (as a handwritten narrative). An iteration of the previous design has become a background element.

LISA WILLIAMS

If he had wanted to advance a thesis, he would have written an essay (like so many others that he has written). If he has written a novel, it is because he has discovered, upon reaching maturity, that those things about which we

cannot theorize, we must narrate (Avieson, 2008).⁶

The thesis

Lisa is an author and a designer. Her PhD brings these two realms together in a thesis that explores the potential of the materiality of 'old' media as expressed through a polysemous novel.⁷ This novel comprises seven artifacts that include newspaper clippings, an old audio tape, a VHS recording of a news broadcast, photographs, and a popular novella written by the story's protagonist. Between these texts a story can be garnered that contradicts itself, yet eventually reveals the truth about an incident that occurred in the 1970s in a racially discordant Florida community.

What Lisa seeks to do with this work is call into play the power of physical 'reading'. When we listen to an old audiocassette we hear the sounds of decay in an interview that was conducted twenty years ago. A chronology of old newspaper clippings tells us the escalating story of crime reported in the thinly veiled racist narrations of the period. But more than this, the newspapers carry vernacular, cultural signifiers of the time. The ads for shampoos and bedding sales tell us something rich and disturbing about the commercially pampered environment into which the incident irrupted.

The design in this thesis is concerned with the graphic/cultural voice of the vernacular. The novel speaks to us in mundane fragments that have been carefully recreated with astute attention not only to the aesthetics and technologies of the period, but also to the chemical and material decay that time has visited upon them.

In describing her research journey, Lisa says "I have become a designer of fiction, rather than a writer of fiction. The difference speaks to the importance of considering broader issues than just narrative content. The materiality of the media I incorporate and the dialogue between materials and text are now significant considerations in my practice" (personal communication, April 10, 2011).

Autobiography as a component

Data collected by autobiographical researchers can be used in two ways. Some studies engage with purely self-generated material and are intensely personal. Others involve the generation of a range of data that includes some material about the researcher. It is in the second of these categories that Lisa's thesis resides. Her polysemous novel is a fictional work. However the

⁶ From the book jacket of the Italian version of Umberto Eco's novel *The Name of the Rose*.

⁷ A polysemous narrative is one that uses signs to express multiple meanings. In this thesis, it refers both to the ways in which interpretation of the novel is influenced by the text's non-linearity (it was designed to be 'read' in any order), and by the ways in which the artifacts, as material objects, contribute to meaning.

diegesis of both the novel and the exegesis are enriched by autobiographical experience.

This occurs in two ways. First, the world in which the story unfolds is the world where Lisa grew up. She says, “it was necessary to set the work in a fictionalised version of my hometown, because I was writing about what I knew. Later, when the project evolved away from its original autobiographical focus, the setting remained” (ibid.).

Second, the design of the work is developed through autobiographical reflection on experiences with materiality. In this regard, we witness the intimate, corporeal engagement of a designer with certain media. Thus in the exegesis and the novel, we encounter lyrical descriptions of the physicality of texts that are personal and intimate in their accounting. For example, in a current draft of her exegesis where Lisa is introducing the reader to wear and tear as an aesthetic of pleasure, she says:

I cradle in my hands a well-read library copy of *The Dialectics of Seeing*. The spine is held together with cello-tape, the paper cover is torn and creased, and the pages inside do not cohere. Like troops obeying conflicting orders, they march off in different directions. A water stain blemishes the last third of the text...

If this were my book to keep it would live beside my bed, satisfying just to regard and hold, to flip through and smell. Like Barnhurst's (1991) child's early encounter with the newspaper, perhaps the sensual pleasure I derive from this book springs from the time before I could read. Did running my fingers across cool, soft pages, admiring square shiny covers and feeling the thrill of possession, teach me to love the book as an object?

The power of this self-narration resides not so much in its poetic framing of personal experience, but in the manner in which the candidate draws her corporeal self into broader discourse surrounding materiality. At the beginning of each section of her discussion of critical ideas that impact on her work, Lisa positions herself emotionally and physically. She then makes bridges between the authoring self and theories relating to her texts. It is within this dynamic that her novel develops, not as an illustration of theory, but as a reciprocal and creatively active relationship with it.

External dialogue

One might imagine that the creation of a fictional work fed by an autobiographic experience is a relatively solitary undertaking. However, in the context of a practice-led PhD the created work must be understood and shaped in relation to wider discourses. As Tenni, Smyth and Boucher (2003) note, when working with autobiographical data “there is a need to engage in external dialogue with others, collaborators, subjects,

supervisors (professional and/or research) ... The criticality of research supervision cannot be over-emphasised, but traditional supervision from an allegedly objective and distanced position is not appropriate” (p.4).

Lisa often found it challenging presenting her work in the public domain. However in her journey through her project, she has taken sections of her thesis (and emerging theoretical ideas) and begun delivering them as papers at conferences.⁸ In addition, even though she is an accomplished author, she has engaged a story editor to offer objective external feedback on emerging iterations of her work. At the point when all of the components of her polysemous novel were completed as a refined draft, she circulated it to critical readers who were unaware of either the storyline or the intent of the project. Their feedback resulted in her re-approaching certain aspects of the text in an effort to generate a clearer and more condensed narrative.

The non-neutral supervisor

Processes for accessing external review were encouraged in this project because I believe, as a supervisor of autobiographical, practice-led theses, one is not neutral. One develops instead, what Smyth & Holian (1999) describe as a “professionally intimate supervisory relationship.” One’s role is to help the student manage the research. I imagine that each candidate has on either shoulder, a small personification of hope and fear. They hope that in involving the self they might achieve higher levels of discovery, authenticity and impact in their work, but they fear the cost and the unknown. One’s role as a supervisor shifts with the journey of the thesis. One is at times a mentor, a critic, a proactive planner, a reasoned objector, and occasionally a shoulder to cry on. This is not soft supervision. It is simply responsive. It recognises that the import of the self into a research project is more than an intellectual decision. It is also an act of faith with emotional consequences.

⁸ Williams, L. (2009, November). *U can't touch this: the haptic as a semiotic mode of production in a multi-modal novel*. Paper presented at the Art.Media.Design Writing Intersections Conference, Melbourne, Australia.

Williams, L. (2010, November). *Are two heads still better than one? Collaboration as a research method in a creative production Ph.D. project*. Paper presented at the New Zealand Women's Studies Association Conference: "Connecting Women: Respecting Differences", University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.



Figure 5: Image produced for the project employing the silver sulfide treatments that gave distinctive pigment and tonal effects to photographs of the period. The character is not named, but the image is housed in an old cardboard frame. The photograph operates as an enigma until two separate issues (housed in different components of the novel) are connected.

CONCLUSION

Because of the central position of the 'self' in autobiographic research it may be possible to draw into close proximity relationships between an inquiry and the development of the person. Mooney (1957, p.166) has discussed the nature of research such that its pursuit might interface "with the acceptance and fruitful development of one's self." As graphic design becomes increasingly concerned with the implications of, and responsibility for, what it produces, this relationship becomes an increasingly significant consideration.

Autobiography is demanding, but its potential to progress highly gifted graphic designers beyond the professional and academic formulas that have brought them to levels of competence is considerable. Questions regarding its selection as a method of inquiry, however, should be considered not only in relation to the research, but also in relation to the researcher. The truth is that autobiographic theses in graphic design can be fraught and demanding. With too little care and forethought they can cost a researcher emotionally and professionally when the thesis moves into the public domain. In addition they can harm unknowing or

unwilling participants. Conversely, if the methodology is not applied with rigour, the thesis can end up posturing at commitment and analysis and falling short of its potential.

I am reminded that Bullough and Pinnegar say, "Who a researcher is, is central to what the researcher does" (2001, p.13). This statement has insights on a very deep level. In an autobiographic design thesis, not only the methodology, but the costs and responsibilities of the methodology need to be considered very carefully. The candidate's research and the life they live are drawn into very close proximity. There is richness in this state but also vulnerability. The researcher is completing a highly advanced thesis but also a story of, and to the self... and others.

The internal pathway, whatever its obstacles, must lead authentically and ethically, outwards.

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