Bad Intentions—Using Fiction to Interrogate Research Intentions

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In More Radical Hermeneutics: On Not Knowing Who We Are, John Caputo suggests that hermeneutic inquiry intersects with deconstruction when the researcher rigorously attends to the situated facticity of her intentions and allows her horizon of meaning to be breached by the irreducible alterity of the research subject (Caputo, 2000). Caputo demands that we bracket all humanist dreams of knowing the other on our terms, and focus instead on the displacement of the subject and the “infinite slippage” of meaning (55). He rehabilitates the facticity of hermeneutics, claiming that “Deconstruction pushes facticity to its limits, radicalizing it, remaining rigorously loyal to our factual limits, ruthlessly, without pity, without appeal, without nostalgia, without a desire for presence, right on up to speaking of an experience of the impossible.” (56).

This article consists of three short fictions about an educational researcher named Martha West who recursively and repeatedly interrogates her research intentions. The story of Martha West is inspired by the risk involved in pursuing Caputo’s form of radical hermeneutics. I wanted to create a portrait of a researcher that depicted the turmoil of pushing “facticity to its limits,” disrupting the border between inside and outside, and yet maintaining the “structural non-knowing” of the other, and resisting the desire to resolve the aporia and fuse the horizons. The resulting fictions are strangely melancholic, as though
the aporia and fuse the horizons. The resulting fictions are strangely melancholic, as though the character Martha West knew all along that her intentions were always already traces of yet other traces, indeed as though she was aware of this impossible situation even before I was.

The Problem with Intentions

My aim in depicting the self-scrutiny of Martha West is to trouble our reliance on the concept of intention. I believe that intention remains a crucial and problematic concept in the justification of social science research, and that many researchers, when pushed to the edge of the “so what” question, will appeal to the moral goodness of their intentions. Research intentions, however, are never innocent. Like other kinds of discursive strategies, they enter into a fully established, and yet always emergent, circle of recursive signification and re-inscription. That is to say, intentions are always already a part of public discourse.

Because inquiry is always already immersed in language and code, it is important to problematize the claim that good intentions emerge from a place of innocence. When we enact forms of inquiry, we spontaneously construct the other, which entails a troubling experience of duality and difference (Iser, 1994: 3). We are often forced to address or respond to the other in some restrictive fashion: to bracket, exclude, incorporate, assimilate, appropriate, reflect, or recognize (Iser, 1994: 4). This retinue of caging mechanisms fails miserably to esteem the unknown. Even the most determined effort to serve the other through research, can lead to entrapments of various kinds. Recognizing the complex structure of research intentions requires constantly deconstructing their authority and politicizing their emancipatory agenda (Fuller, 2000).

The traditional concept of intentionality fails to capture the basic displacement of agency within postmodern culture, and neglects the profoundly intersubjective or interstitial space of sense making. Despite Husserl’s attempt to theorize intentionality as integral to phenomenology, the concept has always been hindered by its ties to a Cartesian dualism of mind and body (intentions in the mind, actions in the body). Post-foundational forms of inquiry have problematized the notion of intention along the following axes:

(1) It is no longer tenable to posit the existence of an essentialized self or ego from which intentions are meant to emerge. The humanist notion of a unified and stable self is now fragmented through the postmodern lens. Rehabilitating “intention” will require our addressing the discourse of a shifting, unstable, and contradictory “self.”

(2) The postmodern “crisis in representation” (Lyotard, 1994) disrupts any reliance on an accurate translation between intentions and language, even if an interior space of undifferentiated will existed. The shift towards reader response theories of hermeneutic co-construction undermines theories of meaning-making that posit a direct correspondence between an inner thought and an outer speech act. Even if we could, therefore, posit an internal space where intention dwelled, there is no reliable mechanism for accurately translating from one register into another.

(3) Research acts cannot be cast as logical consequences or linear emplotments of previous states of consciousness. The discourse of intentions often deploys the promise of a linear unfolding, drawing on a naive conception of lived experience as an emplotment of will or choice without addressing the recursive or encircling processes involved in coming-to-know.

(4) Focus on intentions is often a way to rationalize, bracket, and erase the significance of desire. Intentions are envisioned as inherently structural, whereas desire is often a more disruptive experience. We must ask ourselves as researchers to recognize the role of desire in the production of research texts.

The three short fictions included here are used to explore some of the problems associated with the concept of intention. Each fiction follows Martha West as she sustains a self-
disturbing interrogation of her research motives, enacting a kind of “rigorous disorientation” (St. Pierre, 2004) through her unrelenting interior monologue. Her story is almost a non-story, a rhizomatic writing that works the ruins of post-foundational inquiry. Such writing, as Elizabeth St. Pierre states, has given up on intentions and cannot see far down the road, “It stalls, gets stuck, thumbs its nose at order, goes someplace the author didn’t know existed ahead of time, stumbles over its sense, spins around its middle, forgoing ends, wraps idea around idea...” (St. Pierre, 2002: 65). These fictions highlight the writtenness of research, underscoring the non-immediacy of the research act, the uncomfortable paralysis of not knowing the other, and the interminable risk in recognizing the unthought. Through the use of fiction, I hope to have moved tentatively toward one possible goal of educational research, as identified by Maggie Maclure and Ian Stronach in Educational Research Undone, in which ambivalence is in the foreground, and the power relations between researcher and researched are repeatedly troubled (Maclure & Stronach, 1998).

Why Fiction?

Fictionality always subsidizes the unknowable.
—Wolfgang Iser, 1997, 6

Fictional narratives function as “experimental epistemology” (Fluck, 2003: 23) because of the inherent duality of the fictional speech act. Fiction conveys (and constructs) both the possible and the real, tracing the inscription of the one onto the other while subverting the very notion of reference or correspondence as a criteria for understanding. The act of fictionalizing subverts the Cartesian epistemological heritage and thereby positions both the reader and the writer in a “beyond” proto-phenomenal location.

The fictional text is thus inherently contradictory, its meaning and significance awash with possible subject inversions, its reading transgressing the usual border between inside and outside. Every word in fiction becomes dialogic, essentially doubling the “Intra-textual semantic field.” (Iser, 1997: 3). Through this doubling, the absent is read against the present, and what is said ceases to mean itself. What is not said, the absent trace of the present interpretation, the shadow of otherness that haunts the text, gains ground through reading the text.

The self-proclaimed fictional research stories of Peter Clough, for example, dwell on the process of narrative composition, “and so question assumptions about the distinctness of researcher and researched, and about the very nature of social science data” (Clough, 2002: 12). Clough refers to Iris Murdoch’s conception of the twentieth century novel as crystalline, “a small quasi-allegorical object portraying the human condition and not containing characters in the nineteenth century sense” (Clough, 2002: 97). According to Clough, contemporary fiction plays with the mirrored absence of the main character, troubling the desires of the reader to project and identify with a subject who is never fully present. Such fiction seems well suited to the exploration of desire and intention in the actions of the social science researcher.

Fictional narratives that indulge singular invested positions are often associated with disfiguring the other, under the assumption that the most ethical representation is one that appeals to the empirical notion of fidelity to an original text. Detractors fear that poetic monsters will tamper with shared, communal understandings, and that bourgeois aesthetic individualism will celebrate the imagination over the radical and unassimilable difference of other lives. Fiction, accordingly, is always dangerous. But that is precisely why it is such a powerful form of engagement.

The fictions included here — So What and Alien Desire— are written in third-person narration. The third person voice locates the narrator outside the story. The outsider status is compounded when the narrator focalizes on the private thoughts of the character Martha West. In The Rhetoric of Fiction, Wayne Booth suggests that access to the inside of another
is perhaps a key characteristic of fiction, “The most important single privilege is that of obtaining an inside view of another character, because of the rhetorical power that such a privilege conveys upon a narrator” (Booth, 1961, 129).

In the case of Martha West, my insider privilege as author and narrator is meant to stir reader suspicion. The question as to who is telling this story complicates the critical questions that Martha asks of herself: whose voice is heard, and who is silenced? I chose to not write these fictions in first-person, reluctant to deploy the seemingly authentic “I” because of the way it would legitimate reader access to Martha’s reflexive self. The reader tends to assume uncomplicated access when the first-person voice is employed (de Freitas, 2007).

These fictions, in contrast, trouble the reader’s sense of insider access precisely because they are written in a third-person voice. The narrator trespasses into the mind of the character, performing a rhetorical practice common in fiction, but considered highly problematic in reflexive inquiry. It is precisely because these are works of fiction that I am able to more fully address the issue of inner voice, good intentions, and the limits of facticity. This first fiction depicts Martha West in the school archives of Charlton Academy, a private girls’ school in Ottawa.

She explores the archives with shameless curiosity, poking about in places, skimming files, and rearranging documents. The volunteer alumnas who have organized everything would shudder to see Martha scatter her thoughts about the carefully structured room. She moves from document to document, without apparent reason. She disrupts the chronologies of fact, constructing entirely new narratives of cause and consequence. She hopes there is a validity in what she does. She hopes her work will act catalytically in the service of some needed social transformation.

Martha wants to disrupt the archives. She longs for a place of freedom where her unique aesthetic instincts can playfully question the flatness of master narratives. She has always found herself within the walls of repressive and conservative institutions, engaged in tedious, stultifying acts of submission. Each new commitment, no matter how passionately begun, ends trapped by coercive rules. She wonders if her life history will simply be a
testament to resistance, or if there will be some other agenda enacted through her choices. Is it that she simply refuses to serve anyone? Is she despairingly without cause? Every cause, she reflects, always turns sour and pigheaded. And yet she knows that no cause is pure. There is no innocence. She knows that bias and judgment and desire are human traits to be celebrated and not regretted.

And yet she hates the severe disappointment of abandoning ideals. She hates the thought that she too may be simply serving her own interests while pretending to fight for a greater cause. What if her underdog (oh, that cherished thing) is nothing more than a projection of her desire? She hopes that her subversive acts of interference will create a new altered space where new kinds of freedom will be articulated. She sits amongst the groomed Charlton archives and wonders how her research could possibly alter anything. It seems rather unlikely. Who at Charlton, she wonders, is in need of liberation?

She sits down on the floor in front of a book shelf and examines the brown accordion folders filled with black ledger books filled with columns filled with numbers. Numbers followed by other numbers. Multi-digit and decimal, summed and divided, the tally continuing page after page. A nameless slanting scrawl traces the plight of a secretary or treasurer, penciling the numerical rhythm of daily expenses.

This, thinks Martha West, is a document. No other archival entry is so factual and meaningless. No other page can say so little and yet be so perversely detailed. She smudges a number with her finger and wonders what future worlds will be altered by her intervention. She skims the pages, in search of some direction or development, but the progress of numbers is modest and unassuming. The books say so little; the books, indeed, dissimulate. They contain only the re-inscriptions of commercial exchange. Martha reads these numbers as attempts to escape the narrative flush of time.

And yet she knows that some future generation will reconfigure these figures; stories will be squeezed out from them, like blood from a stone. Perhaps the most persuasive stories. Her eyes flit across each page, her brain firing away questions that no one can hear: how can truth be broken off from time? How can her story already be a part of these fifty-year-old ledger books? Where is she named on these pages? Why does she feel as though she is always already scripted into future accounts? Where does that feeling come from?

Martha’s mind shakes off the feeling. She is in the habit of shaking off feelings. It is the only way she can have a good look at them. And yet all too often her feelings vanish under scrutiny. Martha, alone, her mind free of feelings, knows that numbers cannot lie. They have no intentional propensity. Numbers are the perfect existential being. They bring on nausea, our sickness unto death. Now, thinks Martha, here is a feeling. Nausea is visceral. She wishes she could eat the numbers up and swallow them whole and feel that gut-wrenching nausea.

She finds the last entry in one of the black books, selects a finely sharpened pencil from the jar, and begins scratching numbers down. She is unaware of how long she stays there, and how many pages of sabotage numbers she enters. She is unconscious of the time passing. She wonders if her actions are arresting time. Could it be that she has become the time-keeper? Can everything be so easily upset? She looks now at her hand holding the pencil, and immediately time re-enters. She compares her random numbers to the previous pages, and perceives how little has changed. Good, she thinks, I won’t bother erasing it.

Commentary

Martha is trapped by institutional frames, and hopes to rescue some deserving and needy participant. Her naive concept of intervention fails to disrupt the reams of official documents squirreled away forever in the school archives. She is tormented by a relentless reflexivity that questions her motives and her ability to change anything. The dissymmetry between her paltry intervention and the fullness of hope, despite or perhaps because of the delusional status of the latter, creates a space of contested ideology.
The reader senses the gaping incongruity between her hope and her action and is made aware of the coercive discursive practices operating within the school. Martha demonstrates how our best intentions are already traces of the invisible or tacit structural forces operating through our longing to engage the other. The reader is invited to identify with Martha’s struggle and empathize with her frustration at how each of her utterances is always implicated in power and performative strategies (Bhabha, 1994: 36). The structural forces that infuse her language are tacitly ramified in the numerical digits she enters into the ledgers. She aims to expose those who oppress others, but longs for a purely innocent method, and cannot help but re-inscribe power relations that she hoped would be dispersed.

Martha belongs to language in ways that she cannot control. Like any other saturating medium, language is never completely operative or efficient. The space of interpretive life is always already supplementary, always indeterminate, always producing a possible “third space” (Bhabha, 1994: 35) beyond the act of communication. It is in this liminal space of understanding, beyond the structures of reference, beyond both intention and ideological agenda, where the play of meaning maps out an enigmatic signification. This non-instrumental aspect of language is precisely where the unnamable thrives. According to Caputo, you must risk yourself and “experience all the difficulty of this aporia, all the paralysis of this impossible situation, and then begin where you are and go where you cannot go” (Caputo, 2000: 59). The dilemma for Martha West is whether she is ready to risk herself and recognize the radical alterity of the other whom she cannot know.

The following piece depicts Martha West as she pursues an interview with a teacher. Her relentless self-scrutiny problematizes the very concept of research as intentional liberation.

**Alien Desire**

Martha wishes there was some way of reclaiming inquisitive dialogue so that it wasn’t always tainted by the colonialist brush. She wishes the spotted flux of engagement, that chaotic space between persons, contained the potential of free and playful construction, and that her motives were no more dominant than that of the other. She wants to interview the young alienated Agnes, a novice teacher new to Charlton Academy. She is conscious of that desire, of how desire is the first feeling. She wishes she could stop herself and interrogate that initial desire, but it vanishes beneath the layers of her scripted intentions.

“I want to ask you some questions,” she begins, her eyes hungry for contact. There is a sense of urgency to her presence now, a sense that necessity is at work and that somehow Agnes needs this interview as much as Martha. She shuffles her weight in her chair, anxious to pursue the questions. She wonders if she really cares for Agnes. She wonders whether Agnes is completely arbitrary. She likes what she imagines to be Agnes’s pain and struggle just a little too much. What would Agnes be if it weren’t for her fragmented isolation within the institution? Another boring teacher? Would Martha even bother with her if she didn’t have that mark of alienation? Would she notice her existence if it fit smoothly into the Charlton model? She realizes that she is drawn to individuals and repulsed by models. She relishes the rough abrasion of lives lived in contrast to their contexts. They are the blips that leave a trace on her memory while the rest conform.

But what if all along she’s been making naive conclusions concerning the rule and how to break it? What if there are other perspectives that admonish her petty fight in light of greater goals? What if her struggle against the status quo is founded on some foolish need to resist the norm? She hates the thought of being naive. Martha can’t remember the last time she forgot herself in a conversation and simply chatted. She can’t listen to a word without imagining the worlds entailed. She begins to hate listening, as though that were the source of her troubles. She surfs the responses of Agnes for immediate significance, and tries to ignore the infinite referral to elsewhere.

Is it freedom she needs? Freedom from being wrong? How can she be anything but wrong if she struggles against what is sanctioned as the established right? She is always already wrong. That was her first smooth move. She feels a weakening in her desire. She laughs at
her weakness. Her laughter lightens her load even further. Nothing like ironic self-deference to make one feel lighter. My god, she thinks, this is interminable! What exactly is my motive? She suddenly sees her intentions as shabby attempts at self-aggrandizement: Agnes is just a vehicle for exploring her own borders. Agnes is the condition that makes Martha possible.

She wishes she felt differently, but then who would tell her story? She wishes her tolerance and her empathy were enough to make others trust her, but then why make them trust her? What sort of trust is made by one agent to speak on behalf of the other? What sort of trust is so deliberately constructed to test the limits of her voice? A performative trust. A very suspicious trust. Martha almost regrets her own eager desire to learn. She doubts whether she and Agnes were ever meant to walk together, strolling arm-in-arm, Agnes the known, and she the knower.

Is it the act of hoping that is wrong? Is she wrong to ground her moral rectitude in the face value of their mutual presence, in the hope that they might embrace? Some people simply swear off embracing, and banish all hope, but Martha is sufficiently privileged to hope for embraces. In the face-to-face encounter she strives to understand the other.

“I want to help you,” she says, despite knowing that her words are politically awkward.
“Why?” asks Agnes.
“Because I think I can.”
She is holding onto her motives.
“Is it obvious that I need help?” asks Agnes, the unknown.

Concluding Remarks

Martha dwells on her ethnographic intentions, naming the constraints that regulate her voice, questioning the process of re-inscription in the school archives, and tracing the path of power relations across the school terrain. She thoroughly subjunctifies all future action, transforming her intentional state into a detached conditional and dislocating herself from her purpose. Such extreme interiority can disrupt the linear flow of narrative and stall the temporal development of plot. Her intentions no longer function as reasons for action in a diachronically structured story. Martha is kept from entering narrative time, locked in a cerebral moment that is not a moment of agency. The reader may want to move on, want to move with her, sense her potential, imagine a future, anticipate action, and expect development. But the reader is made to dwell in the moment of reflexive paralysis.

Through unrelenting self-scrutiny, Martha emerges, ironically, as a disengaged researcher, distancing herself from the very facticity in which she hopes to interfere and assist. Her fetishizing of ‘effective action’ reveals her obsession with an instrumentalist ethics. The roots of her dilemma lie in the humanist tradition of good intentions. She longs to serve the researched community, as though doing so were a straightforward matter of finding the correct intentions and following through with them.

As the author of these fictions, I have to interrogate my choice to center Martha within the narrative, but withhold from her the power of self-narration. The fictive third person voice traces and reconfigures the voice of Martha West, and sets up a power relation between the character and the voice-that-tells. The story of Martha West struggling with her research assignment is couched in a language that doesn’t belong to her, and yet it circumscribes her every move. My focus on Martha’s internal monologue within the confines of third person narration traces another layer of dissonance around the notion of privileged access to transparent intentions. My aim was to craft a multilayered text in which the third-person voice of the narrator was burdened by the interior reflections of the character. Martha’s story, her plot, is continually stalled and interrupted by the sustained ruminations of the researcher as she negotiates her own voice both in the school and in the narrative.

In fictionalizing the educational researcher, I have tried to underscore the textual politics of
writing research. The fictions included here dwell on the non-innocence of inquiry and the power/poison of outsider intentions. The research fictions taken together with the radical hermeneutic framing set up a shifting unstable ground in which all possible insider positions are troubled. I have used fiction as a means of exploring the “postmodern paralysis” arising from unrelenting attention to our provisional and ideological grounding. I suspect that this paralysis is a profoundly embodied experience that demands an arts-informed approach to research. I offer the story of Martha West to the reader as a possible passage way through this paralysis, a strategy for carving out a “potential space for alternative acts and alternative intentions to be articulated” (Popkewitz, 1998: 3), under the assumption that sustained and “ruthless” attention to the paradox of intentions will, as Caputo claims, allow for a radically divergent interpretation to be heard.

Resources


About the Author

Elizabeth de Freitas is an Associate Professor at Adelphi University. Her research interests include narrative, cultural studies, discourse analysis, and mathematics education. She has