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*Ghostwriting: Generating Authoritative Research Texts in Feminist Post-Realist  
Research*

## ABSTRACT

This article discusses the use of ‘ghostwriting’ as an interview-based research practice in the context of my doctoral research project investigating the possibilities of feminist scholarship in the contemporary Australian university. Ghostwriting is put forward as a post-realist methodology that: provides an account of the research process; troubles the relationship between text and reality by maintaining, rather than resolving, tension over meaning; and which, produces authoritative research texts that reflect the lived experience of the participants, which in this instance are senior Australian feminist academics. It is argued that ghostwriting is one possible way to address the ethical imperatives of feminist research, as well as those raised by postmodern critiques of realist interviewing.

## BIOGRAPHY

Kate is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of Technology, Sydney where her research is investigating the possibilities of feminist scholarship in the contemporary Australian university. Her Honours thesis (UNSW) explored student perspectives in Women’s and Gender Studies and she has a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Women’s Studies from the University of Tasmania. Her research interests include feminist scholarship in Australia, the future of women’s and gender studies and possibilities for political intellectual work in contemporary universities.

## **GHOSTWRITING: GENERATING AUTHORITATIVE RESEARCH TEXTS IN FEMINIST POST-REALIST RESEARCH**

This article will introduce the interview-based research practice of ‘ghostwriting.’<sup>i</sup> It will be explored in the context of its use as a methodology in my doctoral research; which investigates the possibilities of feminist scholarship in the contemporary Australian university. Ghostwriting will be put forward as a possible way to address one of the ethical questions raised by postmodern critiques of traditional qualitative interviews. Namely, if research can be understood as a type of fiction,<sup>ii</sup> what is the researcher responsible for, if not truth? The article will discuss how ghostwriting, as an interview-based research approach, allows the researcher to construct texts which reflect the lived experience of the participants, provide an account of the interview and maintain rather than resolve tension over meaning. By so doing, ‘ghostwriting’ as a methodological technique foregrounds ethical questions about the role of the researcher in constructing research and in representing the lives of the participants—in this instance, senior Australian feminist academics.

In this article I will firstly provide a brief discussion of ghostwriting, followed by the background and context of ghostwriting as a post-realist methodology. I will then introduce my doctoral research project and discuss how ghostwriting has been utilised in my research, in order to demonstrate its usefulness.

### **‘GHOSTWRITING’**

Ghostwriting as a research methodology was first developed by Carl Rhodes in his doctoral research project.<sup>iii</sup> It refers to the practice of constructing a negotiated research text from an interview, where the researcher writes an account of the interview in a narrative form as though they were the participant. In other words, the researcher ghostwrites the autobiography of the participant. The text then goes through a process of edits and re-writes in consultation with the interviewee until a mutually agreed account, which represents the lived experience of the interviewee is produced. The final text is one that tells the story of the interviewee, but in which, the researcher is also present as the constructor/creator of the text. The researcher remains in the text as a ‘ghost’ but it is the story of the participant that is central.

The primary purpose of ghostwriting is to acknowledge the role of the researcher in generating data for the research in order to contest assumptions about meaning-making and the relation between the interviewees, the research, the text and ‘reality’. In this sense, ghostwriting deliberately constructs a narrative from the interview material in order to draw attention to the constructed nature of the research interview, and more broadly, the research process itself. Ghostwriting enables the researcher to generate a (re)presentation of the data and foreground the tension between text and “reality.”

Ghostwriting is one technique from within a stable of postmodern research methodologies that attempt to trouble the traditional view of qualitative interviewing that regards the interview as a fact-gathering conversation, which the researcher must record accurately to produce “truthful” knowledge.

### **EPISTEMOLOGICAL CONTEXT: GHOSTWRITING AS A POST-REALIST METHODOLOGY**

Broadly speaking, ghostwriting is epistemologically located within a postmodern critique of traditional qualitative interviewing and research practices. It shares this critique with interpretive and hermeneutic traditions, but ghostwriting differs radically from these approaches in its conception of the relation between text and reality.<sup>iv</sup> As such ghostwriting is better understood as a post-realist or post-structuralist methodology. The implications of this perspective shift the focus of research practices to questions of representation and writing.

In this section, I will discuss the postmodern critique of traditional conceptions of interviewing, which is shared by interpretive approaches. I will then discuss how ghostwriting fits in a post-realist framework that acknowledges that reality can only be known through language, which shifts the focus of research practices towards issues of representation, writing and textuality, and ultimately towards the issue of researcher responsibility and ethical imperatives.

A postmodernist critique of realist interviewing contends that language is not bounded and stable; meaning is not fixed; the people, place and time affect the interview and that data analysis is not the development of an accurate representation of the data.<sup>v</sup> A postmodernist perspective regards the relationship between meaning and language to be ‘contextually grounded, unstable, ambiguous, and subject to endless reinterpretation.’<sup>vi</sup>

The implications of this perspective are that the relation between the researcher and the participants must not be understood as one where information passes from interviewer to interviewee in a linear fashion, in which meanings are shared and fixed but rather the relation must be understood as one in which meaning is constructed and contested and is subject to the 'complexity, uniqueness and indeterminateness of each one-to-one human interaction.'<sup>vii</sup> Scheurich argues that 'what we need are some new imaginaries of interviewing that open up multiple spaces in which interview interactions can be conducted and represented, ways that engage the indeterminate ambiguity of interviewing, practices that transgress and exceed a knowable order.'<sup>viii</sup>

I am proposing ghostwriting as one possible way to 'engage the indeterminate ambiguity of interviewing.' By transforming interview transcripts into ghostwritten stories, the ambiguity and indeterminateness of the interview is foregrounded because of the visibility of the construction of the research text. Also, the deliberate construction of the texts acknowledges the complexity and uniqueness of the research event, in the sense that the interview, and the resulting text, occurred as a result of my instigations.

Therefore, any texts that result from the interview must not be understood as accurate or "truthful" accounts of the interview itself or the participants' "real" experience, but as textual (re)presentations of the interview in which meanings associated with the lived experience of the participant are constructed and contested. Therefore, ghostwriting can be described as a post-realist methodology, because its focus is on the textual (re)presentation. In this sense, research texts are always a kind of fiction, in that they are representations that have been generated and used by researchers for a particular purpose. These representations are always different from the things they represent: representation is partial because it can not recreate the specific circumstances of the thing it represents, something is always lost, but it is also in excess because it produces something new, which generates multiple meanings.

From this perspective, traditional criteria of validity do not apply. Instead, a focus on reflexive practice becomes the measure of "validity." Post-structuralist feminist researcher Patti Lather positions "validity" as an 'incitement to discourse.'<sup>ix</sup> She argues for a 'reconceptualized validity that is grounded in theorizing our practice' and that 'entails a reflexivity that attends to the politics of what is and is not done at a practical level.'<sup>x</sup> In other words, 'validity' can be understood as the need to be reflexive about the process by which research is produced.

Furthermore, if we accept that research is always a type of fiction, this begs the question what, if not telling the truth, if not representing reality, are researchers responsible for? Following Lather, researchers have a responsibility to provide a reflexive account of the research process, but what other responsibilities do they have? What is the relation between a research text and the material world that it seeks to (re)present? This is not a question with an answer, but rather an ethical question that must be asked of all research. It will be taken up later in the article in relation to the ethical imperative in feminist research.

Throughout the humanities and social sciences there are various examples of research methodologies that seek to, in Scheurich's terms, 'exceed a knowable order.' Certainly research methodologies that involve self-reflexive practice, such as auto-ethnography, are gaining popularity.<sup>xi</sup> Some recent doctoral work (which was later published) has attempted to transgress genre boundaries by engaging with poetics and fiction. For example, Mary Zournazi's thesis in which she engages in conversation through texts and radio interviews, with several scholars, to produce what she terms a poetics of foreignness,<sup>xii</sup> or Katrina Schlunke's *An Autobiography of the Bluff Rock Massacre*,<sup>xiii</sup> in which she explores five accounts of the massacre in order to investigate how truths are created through text.

But there are some dangers inherent in this kind of work. There is the danger of producing work that is self-serving, that is only about oneself and doesn't contribute to our understanding of others/the Other. There is also the risk of transgressing so many boundaries that the text becomes inaccessible and does not communicate to its readers. As Rhodes and Pullen have argued 'all texture and no text renders one incomprehensible.'<sup>xiv</sup> And there is the danger that the text is not persuasive. This is particularly important in political or ethical research, such as feminist research, because if the text is not convincing to its readers what chance does it have of challenging the concept of gender or improving the lives of women?

In feminist research, the ethical question of what researchers are responsible for is extended further to a responsibility to the implications for the lived experience of women. In this sense, feminist researchers are responsible for presenting a reflexive account of how the research was produced but also for producing research with the potential to challenge gender constructs or improve women's lives. Again, this is a question that

researchers must continually ask but which can never really be answered. It is in the asking that the ethical imperative lies.

Following Rosalyn Diprose, I take ethics to be ‘the problematic of the constitution of one’s embodied place in the world,’<sup>xv</sup> rather than a set of universal principles. In a research context, we can interpret this as a necessity to attend to the embodiment of both the researcher and the researched in (re)presenting the lived experience of the researched.

So how might we conduct and represent research interviews in ways that attend to this necessity and transgress a knowable order? How do we generate authoritative research texts once we have destabilised the authority of the research event itself? And how do we produce research that also meets our ethical and political imperatives as feminist researchers?

I am presenting ghostwriting as one possible way to do this. Ghostwriting is not about trying to impose a new order or authority on the research event. Rather, ghostwriting seeks to keep the idea of the author and authority in play by recognising the tensions between reality and representations of reality, as well as acknowledging the constructed nature of the research interview. Ghostwriting explicitly attempts to trouble the ways that ‘power’, ‘language’ and ‘meaning’ are produced in and by the research.

In summary, a postmodern critique of traditional qualitative interviewing prompts a view of interviews as being contextually grounded research events, in which meaning is constructed and contested and furthermore, that any texts resulting from the interview must be understood as a kind of fiction, because of which a reflexive account of the process must be given. Ghostwriting is presented as one possible way to conduct interview based research from within a post-realist epistemology. Ghostwriting will now be explored in the context of my doctoral research; however, it is first necessary to introduce the research project.

## **RE-THINKING POSSIBILITIES OF FEMINIST SCHOLARSHIP IN THE CONTEMPORARY AUSTRALIAN UNIVERSITY**

My research investigates the possibilities of feminist scholarship in the contemporary Australian university. The starting point for this research is the current moment of academic feminism which has been described as ‘epistemic,’<sup>xvi</sup> insofar that it is transforming from one type of movement, a social movement, into another, one linked to the institution of the academy. Within feminist discourse, there has been much discussion on the institutionalisation of feminism within the academy.<sup>xvii</sup>

Other doctoral research in the field, done by Megan Jones has suggested that the history of feminism in the academy is viewed in either one of two ways.<sup>xviii</sup> The first is a view that depicts the origins of Women’s Studies in the 1970s as a glorified, coherent and legitimate project, which has been corrupted by dispersed and depoliticised crossings into theory. The other regards 1970s Women’s Studies as an outdated, naïve and inevitably erroneous attempt to bring women into academia which has thankfully been transformed by more serious intellectual efforts to develop feminist theory that attends to the differences among women.<sup>xix</sup> Jones argued and I concur, that these narratives of success or failure serve to limit the possibilities of the field and limit our abilities to attend to the complexity of feminism’s history but also its future.

Feminist scholarship has undergone many changes in the last thirty to forty years, both inside and outside the academy. The social and political position of feminism has changed significantly since the 1970s. Feminism as a social movement declined while Women’s Studies programs flourished, until a period of decline in the 90s triggered by post-modern theoretical interventions, generational crises and broad-scale criticism of the white, Western bias of academic feminism.<sup>xx</sup> These changes were coincident to funding cuts and the downsizing and restructuring of the universities in general. During this period the focus and purpose of the university as a social institution shifted significantly, Bill Readings describes the change as a shift from a modernist social institution to a trans-national bureaucratic corporation, in which issues of content become meaningless as “excellence” is promoted as the purpose of the institution.<sup>xxi</sup>

Along with these changes observed from the literature, two questions developed the research problem. The first was where did the feminists go? Despite the decline of Women’s Studies programs, most women who entered the academy doing explicitly feminist intellectual work are still working in universities either in Australia or overseas, yet their work is very rarely explicitly identified as feminist. Thus the question of where did these women go and why? Furthermore, what kind of intellectual work are they doing now and is it feminist? The second question that helped to develop the research problem came up during a pilot interview.

In the initial stages of the research, I conducted a pilot interview with Dorothy Broom, formerly director of the Women's Studies program at ANU,<sup>xxii</sup> but who has been working as a Health Sociologist for the National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Control at ANU for the past decade. I suspected that she might be one of the feminists who made a move from an explicitly feminist location into a more mainstream environment and indeed she was. During the interview she said to me that one of the reasons for her move into NCEPH was that it was much easier to do feminist work in a mainstream location. By this she meant easier intellectually, politically, emotionally, and personally. She told me that she no longer spent most of her time justifying her existence within the academy and that she could now get down to do what she considered to be the real work of feminist scholarship—research that will improve the lives of women.

This encounter suggested an answer to the first question of where did the feminists go and why, and furthermore, it suggested that instead of adding to the plethora of publications decrying what's wrong with feminism, that it might be more intellectually interesting and more political productive to approach the question in a positive way. So instead of "The Impossibility of Women's Studies," which was the title of Wendy Brown's 1997 paper,<sup>xxiii</sup> why not "the possibilities of feminist scholarship"? Why not focus on the places where feminists have gone and what kind of work they are doing now?

In order to achieve this, I have chosen to interview senior Australian feminist scholars on the record, meaning that they will be named in the research. The reasons for the interviews being on the record are both practical and methodological. Firstly, the academic feminist community is quite small and close knit and participants would be easily identified by their biographical details in the interviews. But more importantly, the interviews will be on the record for methodological reasons.

Foucault states '... the property of discourse—in the sense of the right to speak, ability to understand, licit and immediate access to the corpus of already formulated statements, and the capacity to invest this discourse in decisions, institutions, or practices—is in fact confined ... to a particular group of individuals.'<sup>xxiv</sup> Therefore targeting the particular group of individuals who 'own the property of discourse' is a useful way to investigate the possibilities of feminist scholarship in the contemporary university.

Put another way, I am employing the strategy of researching up or researching the powerful. Cookson states that 'elites create a public conversation that sets the legitimate boundaries of discourse,'<sup>xxv</sup> thereby allowing the researcher access to conversations that define and delimit the field. In my research, the participants are the women responsible, through their intellectual work and their institutional positioning, for defining the boundaries of legitimate feminist discourse in Australia.

In order to target these powerful women, I investigated the ways in which feminists can be seen to be powerful within the field of feminist scholarship. I identified several categories of scholars that might be considered senior or powerful for the purposes of this research question and met Miles and Huberman's checklist for sampling in qualitative research.<sup>xxvi</sup>

The categories included:

- a. women's or gender studies coordinators
- b. feminists in management or senior-management positions
- c. women who identify as radical feminists who have chosen to stay in the academy
- d. feminists who have changed their positions in relation to feminism ('gendered to general')
- e. historians of feminism and feminist scholarship
- f. feminists in the highest growth area of feminist scholarship (humanities, particularly in philosophy, literary theory and cultural studies)
- g. feminists involved in key controversies in the field
- h. feminists with highly visible public profiles

- i. scholars with self-declared problematic relation to feminism
- j. indigenous feminists
- k. feminist in non-traditional disciplines
- l. Australian feminists currently working overseas

I then constructed lists of Australian feminist scholars who could be classified in one of these categories and chose ten women, seven of which agreed to participate in the research. During 2007, I conducted interviews with:

- Dr Kalpana Ram, Senior Lecturer in the Department of Anthropology, Macquarie University.
- Dr Kate Lilley, Senior Lecturer in the Department of English, University of Sydney.
- Associate Professor Catharine Lumby, Director of Degree in Department of Media and Communications, University of Sydney.
- Associate Professor Sheila Jeffreys, Department of Political Science, University of Melbourne
- Professor Ann Curthoys, Professor of History, Australian National University.
- Professor Erica McWilliam, Assistant Dean for Research, Faculty of Education, Queensland University of Technology.
- Professor Terry Threadgold, Head of School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies and Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Cardiff University in Wales.

The interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. From the transcripts I produced the ghostwritten texts, through a process of editing and some rewriting.

The first edit involved “cleaning up” the transcripts, meaning removing the ‘ums’ and ‘ahs’ from the text and also removing unnecessary repetition. I then removed my voice from the texts. As the interviews were based on one question: “how did you become a feminist academic?” there were very few points in the text where I, as interviewee, was present in the transcript. Most of the questions were in the form of prompts, for example, “could you tell me more about your time at x?” so the process of removing my voice was fairly simple, although this may produce problems in ghostwriting other types of interviews.

I then began to re-order the stories so that they followed a rough chronology of the life of the interviewee. In most instances, the ghostwritten stories follow the chronology of the interview, as it was common for the interviewees to tell their story chronologically. However, in some cases, the stories have been substantially re-ordered to better fit a biographical narrative.

The next stage of the process was to provide linking sentences between the paragraphs to improve the flow of the text and enhance the narrative elements. I tried to add as few words as possible in order to maintain the personality and style of the interviewee throughout the text.

Something that I noticed during this stage was that the disciplinary background of the women shone through very strongly in the transcripts. For example, Kalpana Ram’s interview transcript focused heavily on the cultural influences of her early childhood in India and her adolescence in suburban Sydney. She discussed the influence of her large family and the significance of her kinship structures on her identification as feminist. This is consistent with her disciplinary background in Anthropology. Whereas Erica McWilliam focused on specific examples from her experience teaching in classrooms, indicative of her vast secondary teaching experience and her position in a Faculty of Education for twenty years. I attempted to retain these elements of the transcripts by changing as few of their words as possible and where words were added I tried to stay within the vocabulary used in the transcript.

Finally, the ghostwritten texts were sent back to the interviewees for comment, and final edits were made based on these comments and taking the points made above into consideration. The process of ghostwriting produced seven stories about “being a feminist academic” over the last thirty or more years.

Ghostwriting has allowed me to produce compelling narrative accounts of the lives of the women who participated in the research but it has also provided a reflexive account of the research process itself. Ghostwriting has enabled the embodied experience of these powerful women to remain central and still acknowledge that the text was constructed by me, the researcher and as a result of me specifically asking these

women to be interviewed. By engaging ghostwriting as a methodological technique I am not trying to create “an accurate record” of the history of academic feminism as one might in conducting oral history interviews, rather I am producing research texts that are embodied, personal and particular accounts of the history of feminist scholarship. The ghostwritten texts are partial in the sense that they cannot reproduce the events that created them, but they are also in excess of the research event that produced them, in the sense that they are (re)presentations generating multiple meanings.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, ghostwriting is an interview based research methodology that generates stories of participants’ lives through a process of editing and rewriting by the researcher, who writes as though they were the participants. This article explained how ghostwriting is epistemologically located within a post-realist framework, and how ghostwriting was utilised in my doctoral research on re-thinking the possibilities of feminist scholarship in the contemporary Australian university. Ghostwriting has been presented in this article as one possible way to address the ethical imperatives of post-realist and feminist research. It has been argued that ghostwriting achieves this in three ways. Firstly, it provides a reflexive account of the research process. Secondly, ghostwriting contests assumptions about meaning making by maintaining rather than resolving tension over meaning and between the text and ‘reality’. Finally, ghostwriting allows a (re)presentation of the lived experience of the research participants, while simultaneously acknowledging the role of the researcher in constructing the text.

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