

Writing the lives of others

Daigle, Megan

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Title:

Writing the Lives of Others: Storytelling and International Politics

Author:

Dr Megan Daigle, Research Officer, Gender & Development Network, London, UK

Author biography:

Megan Daigle received her PhD from Aberystwyth University. She is the author of *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

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*Academic writing supposes a precarious fiction.
It assumes the simultaneous absence and presence
of the writer within the writing.*

~ Naeem Inayatullah¹

This paper is a reflection on methodology, a chance to go back and scrutinise a practice of writing that I took up spontaneously and almost instinctively over the course of research, though it appears quite rarely in the discipline of International Relations (IR).² Storytelling is a method and a methodology with significant potential for IR. It is a method that I pursued in an attempt (sometimes futile) to mitigate and interrogate the relationship between researcher and informant across unequal relations of power, sharp economic disparities, a significant cultural divide, and a high degree of risk for my informants. Far from merely a stylistic choice, this practice of writing bears real ethical and political implications for the research produced and for the individual subjects implicated in its production, built as it is on feminist, postcolonial, and queer principles. Anthony Burke has noted that standard academic forms of writing imply a “fictive distancing” between the author and the subject(s) of research, a fact which conceals much of the research process and its conclusions.³ The name *storytelling* indeed implies a literary and creative slant, but Burke’s framing of the issue flips this script and asks which is the greater fiction – writing that speaks to the personal, the experiential and ‘unscientific’, or writing that attempts to conceal these same in-built and unavoidable elements of the research process?

In that spirit, I argue that storytelling presents a challenge to traditional ways of writing, thinking, and knowing in the world of international politics. It opens up space to engage with personal, lived, embodied experiences – of violence and abjection, as

¹ Naeem Inayatullah, ‘Falling and Flying: An Introduction’, in *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR*, ed Naeem Inayatullah (London: Routledge, 2011), 5.

² Inayatullah, ‘Falling and Flying’, 6.

³ Anthony Burke quoted in Elizabeth Dauphinee, ‘Writing as Hope: Reflections on *The Politics of Exile*’, *Security Dialogue* 44 (2013): 356.

others who I will discuss below have shown, but also of joy, love, freedom, and pleasure – and how those experiences mutate across lines of gender, class, race, and sexuality. It reveals the situated and contingent nature of research by refusing to conceal the presence of the author within the research and the writing. Finally, it facilitates an understanding of the way that the international acts at the level of individual lives and bodies – and vice versa. Amidst problems of representation, cultural and linguistic misunderstanding, reciprocity, and power relations, stories prove an invaluable method and methodology for international politics and especially projects inspired by feminist, postcolonial, and queer ideas.

My research – a project on so-called ‘sex tourism’ and its impact on political discourses and subjectivities in post-Soviet Cuba – found me listening every day to young peoples’ stories of sex, friendship, repression, love, fear, and hope. Time after time, their individual perspectives, backstories, and vibrancies refused to map onto traditional scientific notions of *data* or *results*. The only way to convey their “felt-fact aliveness” was to describe it richly, to share with the reader how it felt to be sitting there and listening to each story as it came.⁴ Storytelling gave me the tools to express fear and harm in ways that other methods simply could not, this is true, but it also allowed me to bring to life feelings of joy, pleasure, humour, and solidarity that equally colour Cuba’s sexual-affective economies of tourism. It has helped me to understand and to relate how another could do what I might not do; how trust, authenticity, and artifice can be mutually constitutive; and how love, sex, and money can be so intricately (and politically) intertwined.

In my stories, I subverted the questions I am so often asked: Who *are* these people? How could they do what they do? Instead, I tell you how it felt to be in their presence, the things we laughed about together, the things they feared, the kind of life and relationship they wanted, the way they wanted to be seen and understood, and the look in their eyes as they spoke. I seek to highlight that IR knowledge is not accomplished in laboratory conditions of objectivity and neutrality; rather it is co-

⁴ Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 22. Emphasis in original.

constructed with interlocutors through a process that is non-linear and uncertain. This is not a failure of research design or practice – or perhaps it is a kind of failure, but one that is not only inevitable but also illuminating, making for better research in the end. Stories that introduce uncertainty and contingency into scholarly writing help us to realise this.

This paper is also something of an experiment. Beginning from storytelling as a marginal but growing movement in IR and moving through my own research and writing experience, I shift registers and allow academic conventions to fall away, arriving at a conclusion that attests to the multiple voices that are possible in narrative writing. By narrowing the fictive distance between ourselves and our research, I want to make the fine line that we normally draw between the two apparent – and to make it strange, make us question the ideals of objectivity, detachment, and neutrality in research and writing. Storytelling and narrative, terms that I use more or less interchangeably, have the potential to open up IR thinking by asking us what could be learned by questioning the authority of the academic voice – and by seeing that authority for what it is: an illusion and, at the same time, an occlusion of multiplicity, contingency, and partiality.

Where are the stories in International Relations?

The world of international politics has seen cultural engagement of all kinds in recent years – novels, poetry, film, music, video games, and comic books all find their place as prisms for understanding and upsetting political norms, structures, and discourses.⁵ Less common, however, are scholarly attempts to engage in that which we study: literary, novelistic forms of writing, and what can be learned from and revealed by them. Jenny Edkins argues that political *literary* works are those pieces that make some kind of political sense while at the same time disrupting known categories, known

⁵ See, amongst others, Maja Zehfuss, *Wounds of Memory: The Politics of War in Germany* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Matt Davies, 'Do It Yourself: Punk Rock and the Disalienation of International Relations', in *Resounding International Relations: On Music, Culture, and Politics*, ed M. I. Franklin (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 113-140; Nick T. Robinson, 'Videogames and Violence: Legislating on the 'Politics of Confusion'', *Political Quarterly* 83, no. 2 (2012): 414-423; Kyle Grayson, 'How to Read Paddington Bear: Liberalism and the Foreign Subject in *A Bear Called Paddington*', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 15, no. 3 (2013): 378–393.

meanings.⁶ The point here, though, is not to draw a line between literary and non-literary, narrative and non-narrative; all academic writing adopts a narrative of some kind, electing to tell a certain story about the nature of politics and our place in the world. Some writing, though, recognises the constructedness of that story – positioning it *as a story* – as well as the embeddedness and subjectivity of the author, and in so doing pursues the kind of personal reflection and thick description (to borrow a term from ethnographic anthropology) normally associated with the novel.⁷

The last few years have seen the publication of a handful of genuinely innovative interventions into narrative international politics: the IR novel. The first of these, Elizabeth Dauphinee's groundbreaking book *The Politics of Exile*, was published in 2013. This book takes storytelling in IR to new heights with a narrative of conflict, cultural difference, and ethics rooted in the Bosnian War and the research process itself.⁸ Reflecting on her book and the use of a narrative form, Dauphinee offers the following:

The imperative to responsibility [...] cannot hinge on linearity or on the calm predictabilities of scholarly argumentation and exchange. This awareness expands both research and writing: it allows us to set aside the boundaries between scholarship and literature. It allows us to be touched by the things of the world that defy placement – that defy generalizability. For me, this is both the hope and the ethics of writing. It allows me to approach writing with more awareness of the encumbrances that accompany me – the encumbrances of education, of colonialism, of privilege and expertise.⁹

⁶ Jenny Edkins, 'Novel writing in international relations: Openings for a creative practice', *Security Dialogue* 44 (2013): 286.

⁷ Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 3.

⁸ Elizabeth Dauphinee, *The Politics of Exile* (London: Routledge, 2013).

⁹ Elizabeth Dauphinee, 'Writing as Hope: Reflections on *The Politics of Exile*', *Security Dialogue* 44 (2013): 354.

Dauphinee's writing offers new pathways to ethical engagement with the subjects of violence and trauma, and in particular the dead – those who cannot speak.¹⁰ Elaine Scarry contends that pain is the absolute of lived experience, both undeniable in the self who feels it, and unconfirmable in the other.¹¹ Thus, through narrative we can reach out across bounds of understanding and illuminate the unspeakable and unverifiable in lived experiences of violence, which seems to be Dauphinee's ethical focal point in her book.

The Politics of Exile was soon followed by Richard Jackson's *Confessions of a Terrorist* in 2014.¹² Taking the form of a transcript detailing an interrogation of a notorious 'terrorist' figure by a British intelligence officer, Jackson's manuscript is replete with blacked-out passages where information has been redacted and handwritten margin notes, ostensibly made by a government reviewer. Jackson himself describes his book as an attempt to engage in "discursive resistance" to received knowledge about the figure of the terrorist; the book is "part exorcism, part antidote."¹³ Jackson calls this kind of writing "affective rather than confrontational and argumentative (the prescribed academic form)."¹⁴ Once again, I want to question the drawing of lines that can only be arbitrary between writing that is affective or argumentative, literary or scholarly. Thus, Jackson's positioning of narrative as "antidote" is an interesting but also black-and-white assessment.

Through description and emplotment, both Jackson and Dauphinee speak powerfully to questions of ethics, identity, and politics – but they do this as novels rather than scholarly interventions. That is, both Jackson and Dauphinee's books are explicitly works of fiction. Their protagonists – Stojan Sokolović and the unnamed professor in *The Politics of Exile*, Youssef and Michael in *Confessions of a Terrorist* – may represent unnamed 'real' figures known to the authors, or even amalgams of multiple encounters, but neither author claims to be relating the testimony of particular research

¹⁰ See the forum published in volume 44 of *Security Dialogue* in 2013, including pieces by Dauphinee, Edkins, Inayatullah, Himadeep Muppidi, and Michael J. Shapiro.

¹¹ Scarry, *Body in Pain*, 1-23.

¹² Richard Jackson, *Confessions of a Terrorist: A Novel* (London: Zed Books, 2014).

¹³ Richard Jackson, 'Terrorism, Taboo, and Discursive Resistance: The Agonistic Potential of the Terrorism Novel', *International Studies Review* 17 (2015): 396, 408.

¹⁴ Jackson, 'Terrorism, Taboo and Discursive Resistance', 400.

subjects. Their avowedly fictional status leaves open the question of how to engage with storytelling and novelistic writing that communicates the lived experiences of informants – ethically, politically, stylistically. Likewise, Naeem Inayatullah’s collection *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR* deploys the personal narratives of IR scholars to demonstrate how these same stories shape articulations of theory in the discipline of IR.¹⁵

Himadeep Muppidi argues that stories alone are not enough, as colonialism and imperialism also traffic in their own, particular narratives of benevolence and progress. He asks, “How can we, in IR, engage better the diverse worlds of the human international, as they come to us through narratives, without losing sight of the politics of inequity staging their appearances and disappearances?”¹⁶ I want to argue that, when storytelling is used to spotlight voices not normally heard, those without a platform to speak and write and whose perspectives are not regularly sought, they can foreground this very inequity. Muppidi is right that stories alone are not enough – this is the problem with Jackson’s appraisal above – and neither are purely theoretical narrative engagements. The narrative turn must move beyond the IR novel and view storytelling as a method for empirical (but theoretically informed) social and political research in the field. Elsewhere, Muppidi writes that, “international relations scholars rarely engage the objects of their research as full citizens of the world capable of thinking, writing, and answering back.”¹⁷ While storytelling as a platform for theorisation risks being inward-looking and thus navel-gazing and limited, storytelling as a method for opening up our minds, disciplines, and conclusions to the perspectives, experiences, and worlds of others offers the possibility for that kind of engagement.

Bringing storytelling out of the ivory tower of theorisation and into the field is one way of beginning to address criticisms of the narrative turn. Increasingly, there is a move towards narrative writing within the more ‘standard’, mainstream world of

¹⁵ Naeem Inayatullah (ed), *Autobiographical International Relations: I, IR* (London: Routledge, 2011).

¹⁶ Himadeep Muppidi, ‘Reflections on Narrative Voice’, *The Disorder of Things*, 23 March 2013. Available at: <https://thedisorderofthings.com/2013/03/23/reflections-on-narrative-voice/> (accessed 30 May 2016).

¹⁷ Himadeep Muppidi, ‘On *The Politics of Exile*’, *Security Dialogue* 44 (2013): 300.

academic publishing. Works of this kind include Roxanne Lynn Doty's *The Law into Their Own Hands* (2009) and *Politics and the Art of Commemoration* by Katherine Hite (2012) – books that situate their own authors within the research, make abundant use of the 'I', describe encounters with informants and settings in detail, and acknowledge the specificity and contingency of their conclusions.¹⁸ My own book carries on this intellectual turn by representing field research in a storytelling style, what might (somewhat heretically and simplistically) be called fictionalised non-fiction.¹⁹ In the next section, I will take a moment to make the case for storytelling, as both method and methodology, in the discipline of IR through the lens of my research Cuba, showing storytelling as a means of illuminating lived and embodied experiences – of pain, violence, joy, hope, love, uncertainty, and freedom – that shape and are shaped by international politics.

Putting stories to work in the field

My own foray into storytelling took place in the context of ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Cuba. My research centred on the purported rise of 'sex tourism' in Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union. Such interactions between Cubans and foreigners form part of a broader network of activities that is locally called *jineterismo* – a sort of shadow economy which straddles the boundary between the licit and the illicit, and which has become the sole means of subsistence for many Cubans, and especially for urban youth in the midst of economic crisis. The Cuban government has set out to police sexual and romantic relations between Cubans and tourists, deploying mass and arbitrary arrests, sending women to rehabilitation centres, exposing them to police corruption and harassment, and ultimately creating a climate of fear in and around the country's tourist hubs. In so doing, the Cuban government has revealed a number of embedded ideas about gender, race, and the 'good' citizen: it has primarily targeted

¹⁸ Roxanne Lynn Doty, *The Law into Their Own Hands: Immigration and the Politics of Exceptionalism* (Tucson, AZ: University of Arizona Press, 2009); Katherine Hite, *Politics and the Art of Commemoration: Memorials to Struggle in Latin America and Spain* (London: Routledge, 2012).

¹⁹ Megan Daigle, *From Cuba with Love: Sex and Money in the Twenty-First Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2015).

young, attractive women of Afro-Cuban descent. It bears noting that this dynamic of sexual self-creation and state discipline is unlikely to be transformed by the reestablishment of US-Cuba relations, as the inflow of foreign cash deepens inequality and the Cuban government attempts to maintain its hold on social, political, and economic authority.

Nonetheless, it was this disciplinary governance, and its impact on the Cuban political imaginary, that I set out to investigate. The informants I met, observed, and interviewed defied easy categorisation – they came from all backgrounds, social classes, levels of education, and professions. More important, however, was the fact that the interviews themselves were unpredictable, each one demonstrating in turn the impossibility of the perfect, by-the-book interview for which I had prepared myself. The naive mental image I had held of smooth, professional field research was shattered by malfunctioning digital recorders, background noise, endless interruptions, my own stumbling, disinterested or oppositional informants, and an agonising inability to connect across the space between us. It had not occurred to me before I began my research that someone (and multiple someones at that) might agree to be interviewed, but then be evasive and tight-lipped, irritable, or even belligerent, for example. Often the obstacles were insurmountable, or I surpassed them only by accident, but the process of navigating them proved as illuminating as the interviews themselves when it came to understanding the worlds of my informants and the social, political, and economic challenges they faced. The interviews were awkward, uncomfortable, funny, challenging experiences. Simply relaying the ‘results’ of this research in my writing would have concealed all of these complexities and unexpected experiences from the reader. Speaking with each of my informants progressively opened my eyes to a way of being – at times jaded, at times joyful and rebellious – that entailed the rejection of prescribed ideals and the forging of a new understanding of the good life.

On my return – to a university in the United Kingdom, and to my desk to begin writing up my findings – I ran up against a wall. How to best present interviews that were unstructured, contingent, and sometimes quite difficult posed a real problem, and

I was acutely aware as a fieldworker and as a writer of the power I held as a relatively affluent, white foreigner in Cuba. In Havana, as a fumbling and self-conscious researcher, the colonial potential of authorship felt readily apparent; at my desk, it was not so obvious, and thus the danger of misappropriation and misrepresentation felt even greater – this had an important impact on my writing. In the end, the style in which I wrote up my research evolved naturally out of the project; in fact, taking stock of the material I had gathered in the field left me with the impression that there was no other way I *could* write it. Storytelling became a means of not only addressing the complexity and confusion of the field experience, but also a means of flagging up and confronting moments of uncertainty or discomfort, and a way of engaging with the ethical problems of interpretation, representation, and appropriation that haunt ethnographic research.

Storytelling allows me to be honest and transparent about what a continual process the fieldwork was, and how the project evolved over time. I can be open about how fuzzy the line between work and life really was, how personal some of my field experiences were, how my position impacted on my work, how what I learned at each stage affected what happened later. In short, I do not have to pretend that I knew things at certain stages that I simply did not know yet, as indeed, some of the most fascinating things I learned came entirely accidentally. This is not an idiosyncrasy of research or even a comment on my facility as an ethnographer, but rather a key cog in the politics of the Cuban setting and others like it. Research is, as Bina D’Costa writes, a “dynamic, non-linear, and interpretive research process” – a constructed and contingent narrative in itself, before the author even sets pen to paper.²⁰

This isn’t just about the specificities of my own research, either: using narratives in my writing showcases the multiplicity inherent in *any* research, understood as a shared meaning-making exercise between researcher and researched. I had set out, at least in part, to challenge the singularity of the received narrative on *jineterismo* as a sexual practice in Cuba – that is, in a nutshell, that young women who engage in sexual-affective relations with foreigners are universally selfish, naive, reckless, and morally lax.

²⁰ Bina D’Costa, ‘Marginalized Identity: New Frontiers of Research for IR?’, in *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, eds Brooke Acklerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True (London: Cambridge, 2006), 137.

Each person I interviewed had a perspective and an interpretation of the events of their own lives that varied, sometimes slightly and sometimes markedly, from the others. Their stories highlight this and, in turn, work to dissolve the category of the *jinetera*. Like Amalia Cabezas, I was learning that the “unified object of my research [...] did not exist, was ambiguous, or at the very least was quite an unstable subject.”²¹ It was imperative to me that I not just *say* that this was true, but demonstrate it through the speech and personalities of my informants themselves, and thereby challenge the Cuban state’s framing of the so-called *jineteras*. Annick Wibben notes that, “the imposition of a particular form becomes a tool to dismiss alternatives.”²² This form allowed me to make my choices in the field evident – and thus the potential for alternatives, and even what shape some of those alternatives might take.

Enframing events and identities within a narrative is never a neutral undertaking. Offering alternative interpretations of the meanings of experiences, identities, and relationships – with the implication that no one amongst them can ever be the ‘correct’ one – through stories which contest, subvert, or re-appropriate dominant understandings is thus a key way of challenging totalising narratives, or in Wibben’s words, “arguing against the primacy of a particular plot.”²³ Following Jacques Rancière, Jenny Edkins also argues that the potential of novelistic writing is in “disruption and the ability to confound existing categories”, and Caroline Ramazanoğlu and Janet Holland call on feminists to produce social research in which the subject is decentred and multiplied, identities are shown to be iterative and performative, and truths are local rather than universal.²⁴ This is the kind of space that narrative forms of writing open for us, outside the usual academic strictures of writing.

²¹ Amalia L. Cabezas, *Economies of Desire: Sex and Tourism in Cuba and the Dominican Republic* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009), 8; see also Lorraine Nencel, ‘Feeling Gender Speak: Intersubjectivity and Fieldwork Practice with Women who Prostitute in Lima, Peru’, *European Journal of Women’s Studies* 12, no. 3 (2005): 345-361.

²² Annick Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies: A Narrative Approach* (London: Routledge, 2010), 44.

²³ Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies*, 51.

²⁴ Edkins, ‘Novel writing in international relations’, 285; Caroline Ramazanoğlu and Janet Holland, *Feminist Methodology: Challenges and Choices* (London: Sage, 2002), 90-94.

It was not until I had already begun writing stories that another aspect of it became clear: the challenge that this kind of methodological choice presents to the discipline of IR, and even to the subset of feminist IR. My attempts to reconcile the “strange bedfellows” that are ethnography, narrative writing, and IR were not always well received.²⁵ On early drafts of this very paper, I was advised to completely re-write it in a way that “embeds it within the literature” of IR theory and conforms to a more standard structure. On this notion of *the literature*, Doty writes:

Like a colonizing power who takes away the indigenous languages of the peoples who are colonized, forcing them to express their thoughts in words of the dominant power, ‘the literature’ can colonize our souls forcing us to write in sanitized, anonymous voices, in the ‘proud but calcified language of the academy’.²⁶

The literature – and the overwhelming pressure to master it, come to grips with it, gesture to it – can be as constraining as it is helpful. Narrative writing makes use of description and lived experience as sources in their own right – a fact that makes some in the discipline uncomfortable. I argue, as Wanda Vradi has about ethnography, that narrative writing presents a critique of “the method of separating the world ‘out there’ from theories ‘in here’ and on the methodology of putting these parts back together by evacuating all traces of plot, character and dialogue from theory.”²⁷ Narrative writing opens up new possibilities in terms of structure, formality, and tone. It may (or it may not) eschew conventions of citation, signposting, and exposition, turning instead to thick description and experience to mine for insight. To argue that this makes storytelling inherently a less robust or rigorous form is to assert that other, more traditional styles are not also constructed, situated, and contingent.

On a similar note, what I had been taught of methodology in IR relied heavily on notions of objectivity, neutrality, and, quite frankly, the ability to predict – and to

²⁵ Wanda Vradi, ‘Dr Strangelove, or how I learned to stop worrying about methodology and love writing’, *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 39, no. 1 (2010): 87.

²⁶ Roxanne Lynn Doty, ‘Maladies of our souls: Identity and voice in the writing of academic international relations’, *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 17, no. 2 (2004): 377–378.

²⁷ Vradi, ‘Dr. Strangelove’, 5.

control – what will happen in the field. Following Marysia Zalewski, I contend that these are impossible and not necessarily even desirable ideals in the context of an ethnographic, feminist project dealing with marginalised subjects across lines of race, gender, class, and culture.²⁸ The experience of ethnographic fieldwork often left me feeling that I was the last person with any sway over the outcomes of my work, as I was totally dependent on others who had no obligation to help me. Elana Buch and Karen M. Staller point out that this line between participant and observer, insider and outsider is really more of a sliding scale, and one's degree of embeddedness and acceptance is decided not by the researcher but by the subjects of research.²⁹

In the field, my curiosity was usually not rewarded with straightforward answers. I learned something new from each interview, but often not what I set out to learn. Circumstances constantly changed, and the meanings of ideas, categories, and words shifted before my eyes: terms like *prostitute* or the Cuban term *jinetera*, but also ones like *freedom* and *love*. A high degree of flexibility had to be built into the design of my research, both methodologically and conceptually. These elements themselves – how events played out, how I came to meet certain people, why I asked certain questions of some and not others – are not just gaps that need to be explained through narrative, but crucial parts of the project itself. Recounting them as a narrative story allows for a more complete, nuanced picture of what life in the Cuban setting was like, for me and for the people with whom I worked, and of the non-linear and unpredictable development of my research.

Looking back at my interviews now, it strikes me that they might have gone entirely differently if I met each person at a different time, a different place, or under different circumstances.³⁰ Mine was just one of many possible voices, and over time I became increasingly convinced that the very same project done by someone else would

²⁸ See Marysia Zalewski, 'Distracted Reflections on the Production, Narration, and Refusal of Feminist Knowledge in International Relations', in *Feminist Methodologies for International Relations*, eds Brooke A. Ackerly, Maria Stern and Jacqui True (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 46.

²⁹ Elana D. Buch and Karen M. Staller, 'The Feminist Practice of Ethnography', in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, eds Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy (London: Sage, 2007), 202-204.

³⁰ Many of my informants preferred to limit our meetings to a single occasion, so as not to be closely associated with me or my work, which could flag them up for police scrutiny and harassment.

look very different. My race, gender, nationality, education, upbringing, and lived experience – and what I and the people I interviewed took those things to mean – had all marked me and shaped the kind of interactions I would have with these people, the kind of interviews I would and could conduct, and the writing I would eventually produce, as Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber notes.³¹ Even the emotions in the room – my own, and my interviewees’ to whatever extent I felt I could read them – are a “necessary feature of all knowledge.”³² It is impossible to abstract ourselves from our work as researchers, nor should we try to do so. In that sense, to return to Doty, storytelling is a platform for the “questioning of our own identities within the stories we tell (and we should never forget that this is what we do, tell stories).”³³ We construct not only the subjects of our research through writing, but ourselves as subjects as well, and narrative forms give us the space to acknowledge and engage with this fact while leaving behind the misleading claims to impartiality and objectivity that disciplinary demands of us.

The ethics and politics of telling stories

Over the course of my field research, the differences between me, a white, middle-class, English-speaking Canadian woman from a university in the United Kingdom, and my informants, who were mostly young black and mixed-race women who had grown up in Cuba under very different circumstances, were significant and certainly influenced our perceptions of one another. We were often close to the same age, but otherwise looked at one another across a gulf of experience with few commonalities. As a “character-bound narrator”³⁴, I was as situated and biased as they were, and there were probably more moments than even I realised where we just did not understand each other. A narrative style of writing helped me to make these lacks of

³¹ Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, ‘The Practice of Feminist In-Depth Interviewing’, in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, eds Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy (London: Sage, 2007), 129.

³² Alison M. Jaggar quoted in Abigail Brooks and Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, ‘An Invitation to Feminist Research’, in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, eds Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber and Patricia Lina Leavy (London: Sage, 2007), 14.

³³ Doty, ‘Maladies of our Souls’, 387-388.

³⁴ Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies*, 47.

clarity visible to the reader and a major part of the resulting project, engaging with the political and ethical problems of representation, appropriation, and interpretation. It is also part of the ethical stance that I have tried to cultivate between myself and the subjects of my study, a personal ethics of research that was as important to me as 'ethics board' ethics for a number of reasons.

First, it allows for a degree of slippage and uncertainty that is analytically necessary, not just incidental. Through thick description and storytelling, multiple readings are possible by a variety of readers. Some things remain unexplained, some meanings are left open to interpretation, some comments are not followed up. Leigh Gilmore presses us as scholars to ask "what the self is that it could be the subject of its own representation, what the truth is that one person could tell it, and what the past is that anyone could discharge its debt in reporting it."³⁵ As researchers and writers of any kind, we know that a coherent story is as much a construction as it is 'true'; narrative writing incites us to acknowledge and even celebrate that constructedness, not because what we have produced is a *fiction* per se, but because all writing is some kind of fiction – or rather, *fictionalised* – from the very beginning. There are many possible interpretations of the stories I tell in my work, of which mine is only one. I assert that a responsible and ethical researcher should not lay claim to a complete understanding of the lives, perspectives, and remarks of others.

This leads me to my second point: narrative writing provides a space in which to challenge the sovereignty and imperialism of our own voices as writers, academics, and researchers in the social world and, in so doing, create a more ethical relationship between researcher and researched. Throughout my fieldwork in Cuba, I worked to make my interviews as reciprocal and conversational as possible, in an attempt to mitigate problems of imperialism, but knowing that nothing could erase them. I tried to let interviews develop organically, with one question leading into the next, and I invited my informants to change the subject, ask me questions, shut down uncomfortable topics, and steer the conversation. As a researcher, I was dependent on the willingness

³⁵ Leigh Gilmore, *The Limits of Autobiography* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001), 9, quoted in Dauphinee, 'Writing as Hope', 356.

of people with no responsibility or obligation to help me, and some who faced real risks, and so I made a conscious decision not to press them for more information than they were willing to share. Many of my interviewees asked me questions, and the resulting exchanges were often as interesting as the questions I asked of them. I tried to centre these moments in my writing and showcase the pushback. In James Clifford's words, each was (and is) a "speaking [subject], who sees as well as is seen, who evades, argues, probes back."³⁶

Many, including Maria Stern and Lorraine Nencel, argue that the process of writing ethnography ought to be reciprocal, and the interviewees should be able to read and comment on the finished product.³⁷ This was never possible for me, as my informants frequently risked arrest or other forms of repression for admitting to and discussing their involvement with foreigners, and they often preferred never to see me again after our interviews for their own safety. In my writing, I have tried to lay bare these challenges, working them in as essential elements of the project itself rather than glossing over or explaining them away – showcasing pushback and disagreement with my informants is one of the ways I have tried to accomplish this. In research, and especially research dealing with marginalisation and repression, the silences, failures, and obstacles have as much to teach us as the words spoken. I cannot claim to have relayed my informants' voices or opinions with complete accuracy – and I would contest the idea that such an accuracy truly exists – but this problem speaks to multiplicity and indeterminacy of lived lives, which comes to the fore in narrative writing.

Imperialism is a charge which ethnography has worked hard to tackle through efforts to "[confess] its arrogant colonial assumptions and [confront] the politics of its

³⁶ James Clifford, 'Introduction: Partial Truths', in *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, eds James Clifford and George E. Marcus, 25th anniversary edition (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2010), 14.

³⁷ Maria Stern, *Naming In/security – Constructing Identity: 'Mayan-Women' in Guatemala on the Eve of 'Peace'* (Gothenburg: Department of Peace and Development Research, Gothenburg University, 2001), 70; Clifford also argues that, "Western texts conventionally come with authors attached [...] But as ethnography's complex, plural *poesis* becomes more apparent – and politically charged – conventions begin, in small ways, to slip." Clifford, 'Introduction: Partial Truths', 17.

storytelling.”³⁸ There is a well-established relationship between social research, and especially ethnography, and imperialism – Linda Tuhiwai Smith discusses this in some detail in her book *Decolonizing Methodologies*.³⁹ That danger is still there when Western researchers show up to glean insights and extricate information from exoticized others in the so-called Third (or even Second, as can be argued about Cuba) World. There is always a power relationship inherent in interviewing, and particularly in interviewing vulnerable individuals, with one party demanding and the other providing information. This almost unavoidably extractive and “colonial”⁴⁰ relationship behoves the ethnographer to be mindful in taking a reflective and self-critical approach to interviewing. “All social researchers [...] can exercise power by turning people’s lives into authoritative texts: by hearing some things and ignoring or excluding others.”⁴¹ It is not enough to assume that a feminist or anti-racist standpoint will act as a safeguard against exploiting others – it is a “messy business” from beginning to end.⁴²

In narrative, I found the space to reflect openly on the risks inherent in ‘speaking for’, especially when it comes to representing the lives of marginalised individuals. The problems of paternalism and imperialism are very real, and novelistic writing can serve as a way of acknowledging and negotiating these representational problems by showcasing – not hiding – the intersubjective nature of interpersonal research.⁴³ Wibben also notes that, however incompletely, “narrative makes it possible, both in fiction and life, to express the vision of another.”⁴⁴ The slipperiness and indeterminacy, of social life and of knowledge of others, become part of the project itself. While the problem of imperialism in research cannot be overcome through narrative writing

³⁸ Vradi, ‘Dr. Strangelove’, 88.

³⁹ Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books), 1.

⁴⁰ Stéphanie Wahab, ‘Creating Knowledge Collaboratively with Female Sex Workers: Insights from a Qualitative, Feminist, and Participatory Study’, *Qualitative Inquiry* 9, no. 4 (2003): 637; again, see also Nencel, ‘Feeling Gender Speak’.

⁴¹ Ramazanoğlu and Holland, *Feminist Methodology*, 113.

⁴² Daphne Patai, ‘U.S. Academics and Third World Women: Is Ethical Research Possible?’, in *Women’s Words: The Feminist Practice of Oral History*, eds Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (London & New York: Routledge, 1991), 139, 150.

⁴³ Buch and Staller, ‘Feminist Practice of Ethnography’, 216-217.

⁴⁴ Wibben, *Feminist Security Studies*, 49.

alone, if indeed it can be overcome at all, it is far better to confront them explicitly through a form of writing that centres uncertainty and subjectivity than to gloss over these issues and, in so doing, accept them.

Even so, there were moments during my time in Cuba in which I felt some unease with my role or my relationships in the field. This uneasiness made me consider not just my own positionality, as I discussed earlier, but also *who I was* to my Cuban informants. I thought a fair bit about how my informants saw me: there were times when I believed that some saw me as a friend, but some seemed not to like me at all; in other cases, I am certain they spoke to me in the hopes that I could buy them dinner or introduce them to affluent foreigners, which I occasionally did. I was at times a friend, a potential benefactor, a confidante, and a (hopefully fleeting) source of annoyance. My field experience taught me that, as Edkins underlines, “we cannot abstract ourselves from the world as academic convention pretends.”⁴⁵ I often felt cast in a role, as Daphne Patai discusses, but that role changed from time to time.⁴⁶ Some of the young people I met forbade me to use their experiences in my writing, but still very much wanted to share them with me. On the other hand, others implored me to ‘tell their story’. As a foreigner and, in the eyes of most Cubans, a perpetual tourist, I felt forever on the outside – which may have had its advantages at times⁴⁷ – and my very topic of research marked me out for many as at best peculiar and at worst a “moral transgressor and thus *una mala mujer* [a bad woman].”⁴⁸ As Western academics, we are taught to believe in the relevance and irrefutability of our own words, our right to speak about others, and a neutrality as authors and speaking voices that we do not actually possess. For me, narrative writing was and is a space to challenge that singularity of perspective, which is

⁴⁵ Edkins, ‘Novel writing in international relations’, 282.

⁴⁶ Patai, ‘U.S. Academics and Third World Women’, 140.

⁴⁷ Nancy Wonders and Raymond Michalowski argue that, “[a]t some level, we remain global tourists ourselves. Given our research focus, however, we believe that this vantage point has its advantages.” This is in reference to the very different (but also unpredictable) ways in which Cubans may respond to a foreigner as opposed to a fellow Cuban. See Nancy A. Wonders and Raymond Michalowski, ‘Bodies, Borders and Sex Tourism in a Globalised World: A Tale of Two Cities – Amsterdam and Havana’, *Social Problems* 48, no. 4 (November 2001): 548.

⁴⁸ Cabezas, *Economies of Desire*, 9. Nencel also discusses the unintelligibility of women who are not prostitutes, and especially those who are foreigners, but who exist in and around the world of prostitution; see Nencel, ‘Feeling Gender Speak’, 351.

ultimately imperialist, by introducing uncertainty and engaging with a multiplicity of voices and standpoints.

The ethical problems of uncertainty, representation, imperialism, and risk can never be fully resolved, but that does not mean that struggling against them is futile. It is important to ask these questions, even if no satisfactory answer can be found. We can flag up the harms (and potential harms) encountered along the road, even as we work to confront and diminish them – for me, writing in new ways was a step that direction in the absence of a way out. Our theories and our experiences show us the all-important limits of what we can do and know, even if they can't help us overcome those limits.⁴⁹ Likewise, Nencel argues that an awareness of the oppressive frameworks like race, gender, and class cannot “erase the divide” between researcher and researched, but it can help mediate these problems and create a space for respect, trust, and even humour⁵⁰ – and consciousness of these issues can make for a more honest and accurate representation of the field experience. As the orchestrator and manager of the narratives produced by the conversations I had with young Cubans within the sexual-affective economy, I felt keenly aware of my precarious ethical position towards the people I met and the stories they entrusted to me. Stéphanie Wahab expresses something similar:

I was acutely aware of what felt like a colonial position I was taking, if nothing else, by virtue of managing their/our words and stories. Furthermore, I dreaded the sensationalising process that occurs once knowledge and experience are uttered and recorded. We were already swimming in sensationalism and sexiness given the topic we were exploring.⁵¹

⁴⁹ D'Costa, 'Marginalized Identity', 137; Ramazanoğlu and Holland, *Feminist Methodology*, 102.

⁵⁰ Nencel, 'Feeling Gender Speak', 348; see also Heidi Hoefinger, *Sex, Love and Money in Cambodia: Professional Girlfriends and Transactional Relationships* (New York: Routledge), 7.

⁵¹ Wahab, 'Creating Knowledge Collaboratively', 637.

The role of the author in ethnographic accounts is one of “both getting out of the way and getting in the way”⁵² – far from invisible or neutral (nor should it be), and not always even helpful to the unfolding of the text. Life stories, as Clifford notes, are contingent and allegorical: it is the telling – as my informants told them to me, and as I have retold them in here – that is the most important. “Ethnographic truths,” he writes, “are thus inherently *partial* – committed and incomplete.”⁵³ What I have written about Cuba has not been entirely of my own making. Whether or not my informants’ voices are there alongside my own in some form is perhaps beyond my express control, but what I can do is to write in a way that breaks down the sovereignty and mastery that we so often assign to the authorial voice.

Looking back at what I’ve just written, I can see that there is a tension amongst my reflections between storytelling as an ethical practice towards the subjects of my research and, I know, a certain amount of inward-looking auto-ethnography. I cannot escape the thought, though, that there is no really meaningful line to be drawn between ethnography and auto-ethnography, their narratives or mine. As academics, we so often expunge the personal in order to appear authoritative, achieve mastery, but that claim to authority is itself so problematic and conceals so much – about lived experience and research experience alike. Implicating the author in the text, as a character and as an obstacle to ‘objectivity’ or ‘neutrality’, is one more way of addressing this. Paul Kirby has raised the point that auto-ethnography comes with its own risks – things like navel-gazing and the so-called ‘diary disease’, which I mentioned earlier as well. And he’s right: there is a danger in narrativity that our stories will enact a certain coherence onto messy lives and events, that its presentation as testimony will foreclose criticality. But has narrative become so strongly associated with the quixotic pursuit of ‘authenticity’ that virtually *anything* could be smuggled in under its guise? By opening the door to the ‘I’, do we lay out the welcome mat for any ‘authentic’ experience – without further discussion? I’m not so sure. Our writing remains our most powerful tool as scholars,

⁵² Deborah Green quoted in Patti Lather, ‘Postbook: Working the Ruins of Feminist Ethnography’, *Signs* 27, no. 1 (2001): 207.

⁵³ Clifford, ‘Introduction: Partial Truths’, 7.

whatever forms that writing may take. Stories of all kinds should be subject to criticism, just like any other kind of writing. Perhaps the nature and forms that criticism can take, in the face of deeply intimate stories of trauma and embodied politics, is a site for further excavation.

What I am left with, in the end, is a series of narratives that are inevitably always going to be *my version* of my interviewees' stories. But this (I think) is precisely the point. When I set out to write my book, I wanted to destabilise the dominant narratives about sexuality and young women of colour in Cuba, and by using a narrative style and writing about uncertainty, divergence, and indeterminacy, I show that no single meaning can be applied to their relationships or identities, least of all from the outside. The fact that I encounter these problems in my writing, and discuss them explicitly and openly, is part of the end game in itself: there is no one single truth – not the state's, not any particular one of my interviewees', and not mine either. The stories of my meetings with young Cubans are the products of specific situations, circumstances, and personalities coming together. They do not represent a definitive telling, much as they have something valid to offer. I present them as 'fictions' not in order to oppose them to truth, but to highlight the constructedness of life stories, which are more than simple chronologies: they represent each individual's articulation of self. I'm not working through 'two levels of distortion', my interviewees' and my own, as someone recently said to me. My point is that this form of writing denies that any 'real', factual bedrock exists beneath the layers of supposed distortion. 'Truth', in the end, does not really matter, since we all create our own truth – it is the *telling* that matters.

What would you do?

Storytelling, of course, depends on having a story to tell. At the end of my first six weeks of my fieldwork, I had achieved very few interviews and had begun to believe my project an abject failure. Then, one afternoon, I receive a call from a contact who I'll call Mario to say that he has found me an interview. He neglects to mention until I arrive at our meeting place that he has actually found *four* young women willing to speak to

me – not so much an interview as a focus group. We meet in the food court of Havana’s largest shopping mall, but Mario casts a glance around at the surrounding tables and advises we find somewhere more private. “You never know who might be listening,” he says sagely.

Now, with four sets of eyes boring into me, I try to gather my thoughts. They’ve agreed to speak to me as a favour to Mario, but so far I would venture to say that it’s going very poorly. The five of us are sequestered in the upstairs room of tiny house, with low ceilings and semi-darkened windows. We’re sitting on a pair of rusty, creaking twin beds, and it’s too hot and sticky in the room to turn off the electric fan that drones loudly in the background – so loudly that I know my recording will be virtually useless and I will have to rely entirely on my notes.

Ana, Sara, Yoaní, and Taimí all come from Batabanó, south of Havana. Ana is the eldest at 28, and she exudes a motherly air towards the other girls – and even, at times, towards me. Her eyes are lined and tired and her olive skin pale, but she’s dressed the same as the other girls, in tight denim shorts and a bright, sparkly top that can barely contain her tall, curvy form. Sara, by contrast, looks far younger than her twenty years. She is tiny and compact, and she sits alert and upright at the edge of the bed observing me with an expression in her dark brown eyes that I cannot read. Taimí is the youngest at 18, and she seems almost childlike, with round cheeks, a voluminous ponytail of black curls, and a band of chubby, tanned midriff peeking out from under her top. It’s clear that she would rather be anywhere but here, too: she sighs loudly, smacks her chewing gum, and drums on her knees. The quietest is Yoaní, who sits tucked into a corner against the wall. She alone is dressed in black and she has yet to meet my eyes.

I feel a rivulet of sweat trickle down the back of my neck as I stare at my notes and blink. Our entire conversation had remained tense and stilted, no matter how hard I try to put them at ease. We’ve covered names, ages, home towns. I’ve told them a bit about myself and my work. Nothing sparks any interest in them. I am struggling to find the Spanish words that I need. Car horns in the street outside make me flinch and lose

my train of thought. I'm beginning to feel as if I'm wasting their time. I'm really bad at this.

"Would you like to stop?" I ask resignedly.

They look at me, then at each other, and silently shake their heads, seemingly bewildered at such a stupid question. Yoaní raises an eyebrow with a look of exasperation, while Taimí flops back on the bed, plonks my sunglasses that she snatched from me earlier over her eyes, and feigns sleep. Washing her hands of me. *Just get on with it.* I take a deep breath and carry on.

Through a painfully long series of one-word answers, I manage to discover that Ana trained as a nurse, and that Taimí and Sara are still in school. Yoaní is close to seven months pregnant, and I've known since before we met that the father is an Italian boyfriend who disappeared the day she told him the news. She tells me she quit college and has no intention of going back, now that she is going to be a mother.

Blindly, I stumble onto some relative success when I ask what they think of the word *jinetera*, the Cuban neologism for women who sleep with foreigners. "I don't like it," says Ana. "It means you just want money from people. It's what I do – being with foreigners makes you a *jinetera* – but it doesn't make me feel good."

"But it also means you're in charge – that you solve problems in your life," Sara observes, and Ana nods a concession.

We wind up playing a sort of game, where I list the names that are commonly used in Cuba to describe young women who date foreigners, and they tell me what they think of each one.

Prostituta (prostitute): "That's what the police say," Ana notes.

Putas (whore): "Who? Me?" Taimí giggles sarcastically. "Dirty," says Sara.

Atrevida (brazen one): "That you have no shame," Yoaní says, still looking at the floor.

They still speak with a sullen air of resignation – they don't see themselves reflected in any of the terms – but that's already something, and at least now they're talking, disagreeing with each other, and expressing some opinions.

The last one I pose to them is one that I have only recently encountered: *luchadora*, or one (specifically a woman) who resists and struggles against the daily onslaught of hardship.

(Now, let me pause for a moment to tell you that *la lucha* is a very evocative and relatable concept in Cuba. It's used often to refer to struggles ranging from revolutionary guerrilla warfare to the current economic strife. In Cuba, people often ask one another *¿Cómo va la lucha?* as a kind of greeting. Placing dating foreigners within *la lucha* is a powerful way to legitimate it as an acceptable and even laudable part of many Cubans' efforts to make ends meet for themselves and their families.)

Ana, by now seated directly to my left, smiles for the first time. She says she likes that one, that it seems strong and beautiful. She tells me that a *luchadora* is a noble figure who does what it takes to support and protect her family. She never gives up. The others nod.

All four of them appear as if a weight has been lifted from their shoulders. The altered mood in the room is remarkable: soon Taimí and Sara are regaling me with stories of the Germans, Russians, and Canadians they've met. When I ask them what they like about foreign men, Taimí quips, "I like white chocolate," and collapses in paroxysms of laughter. The others roll their eyes and smile, going on to tell me that European and North American men treat them well, and they see no reason why they shouldn't pursue the kinds of men who can take them out for dinner, give them nice gifts, and help them support their families.

"They open the door and let you go through first," says Sara.

"And foreign men don't hit," says Ana.

This shocks me, and I tell them so, but Ana seems surprised that I'm so astonished. Matter-of-factly, she shrugs and tells me she has never had a Cuban boyfriend who did not hit her, and never a foreign date who did. I pause at this. Needless to say, many Cuban men don't physically abuse their female partners, and certainly some foreign men *do*. But Ana is speaking to her own experience, her own truth – she doesn't need me to explain this to her or tell her that she's wrong. (And, if I

can pause to interject once more, Ana and Sara would not be the only informants who would cite tourist men's "gentlemanly" behaviour, including a perceived aversion to hitting their partners, as a reason for seeking them out as dates and partners.)

Yoaní, leaning back and resting one hand on her belly, remarks – as if to drive home Ana's point – that she fully intends to find another foreign boyfriend once her baby arrives.

"It's the only way," Ana says. "I have a little boy I need to support. The jobs here – they don't get you anything. It's the only way to have a life. It doesn't always make me happy, but it's better than the alternative."

I ask her if she would consider leaving Cuba with a foreign boyfriend if the opportunity arose, and Ana shakes her head. This is her home.

The others, however, nod vigorously. Yoaní says she would like to move to England, and Taimí solemnly concurs. They have seen British films and met some British tourists whom they liked. Sara says she would prefer Spain, so she wouldn't have to learn another language.

Eventually, I tell them I'm out of questions. Sara and Taimí emit comical sighs of relief, as if they've been released from detention, and Taimí giggles. I ask the four of them if they have any questions for me. Shrieking again with laughter, Taimí asks if I've got a brother she could meet, but Sara cocks an eyebrow at me. With a smile playing at the corner of her mouth, she asks me, "Would you do it?"

My mind goes blank. But then I hear myself saying yes without thinking, and in the moment I believe it's because I don't want to judge or offend them. Later, though, as I walk away from that tiny house and rehearse the interview in my head, I consider the question again. The more I think about it (and the more I speak to other Cubans like Sara in the weeks and months to come) the more I come to understand the true impact of scarcity and isolation. Cuba's embargo-born economic struggles, its government's strict management of tourism and other avenues for resisting austerity, and Cubans' exposure to the relative affluence and mobility of foreigners – all of these factors mean

that the ability to say that money doesn't matter in a partner, and to condemn those who disagree, is a privilege.

As I turn onto the thoroughfare of Avenida Salvador Allende, it slowly becomes clear to me that, when we first sat down to talk, those four women believed I was there to assess them and their choices. The idea that multiple interpretations of their lives and relationships were possible, that their own take on the matter was allowed and just as significant as the others, that I might even be on their side, for whatever that was worth: this was what had changed in the room. I don't know how I could have better mitigated the misunderstandings between us, even in hindsight. I hope my voice recorder managed to catch everything, or something, or at least not nothing. All of these thoughts swirl in my head as I make my way home through the centre of Havana.