

# Writing sociological fiction

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## Abstract

The value of fiction for public sociology and within qualitative research is well established. However, questions about process remain. Drawing from three contemporary projects – a novel, a series of short stories, and a collection of micro-fiction – this article focuses methodological attention on how sociological imagination may be crafted in and with fiction. In particular I discuss the poetics and aesthetic form of a story: the language, mode of storytelling and voice(s) with which a story is told; and the imagery and sensory qualities which bring a story-world to life. By bringing conceptual considerations together with practical concerns, this article aims to extend the considerable body of work on the value of fiction for the production and dissemination of social research.

## Keywords

Creative writing, fiction, sociological fiction, the sociological imagination, public sociology

## Introduction

How can we write sociological fiction? What makes fiction sociological? This article seeks to contribute to contemporary debates on the value of fiction in social research by focusing methodological attention on the craft of writing. In other words, it turns from the ‘why?’ of sociological fiction to the question of ‘how?’

Fiction is one of many creative approaches for illustrating research and engaging publics via styles, forms and spaces that traditional scholarly outputs – e.g. articles and monographs – often inhibit (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2013). As an ‘artful’ form of research (Leavy, 2012: 516), fiction offers more a translational tool for communicating research findings; as well as being adopted for public sociology (Watson, 2016), fiction is also valuable as a medium and creative practice for data collection and analysis. Creative writing is a generative method for probing relationships between theoretical concepts and the complex, sensory experiences that researchers seek to investigate (Gordy and Peary, 2005; Longo, 2015; Nairn and Panelli, 2009; Vickers, 2010). Novels,

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short stories and other fictional forms allow a scope and nuance that is constructive for exploring social worlds while centring the ‘inherent liveliness of social life’ (Back, 2015: 821). Fiction is a meaningful extension of disciplinary work and outputs, for public engagement and creative innovation in methods and analysis (Watson, 2020b), progressing the boundaries and collaborations of the discipline (Denzin and Lincoln, 2002: xi) and cultivating sociological imagination – an aim which remains under-addressed and in need of ‘renewed creativity’ (Beer, 2014: 6).

In this article, I draw on three contemporary projects which experiment with sociological fiction. The first is a novel, *Into the Sea* (Watson, 2020a). The second is *So Fi Zine*, an independent publication that has published over 170 pieces of fiction, poetry and other creative works since mid-2017. The third project, *Fiction @ The Sociological Review*, is an online series of short stories and accompanying exegeses. I have led each of these projects, as either author or series editor, and am thus ideally positioned to turn out their insides. I focus in particular on the poetics and the aesthetic form of these creative works. By poetics I mean to capture the language, mode of storytelling and voice(s) with which the stories are told. By aesthetic form I mean the imagery and sensory qualities which bring to life the story-world and make coherent its norms and values. I examine these selected texts to consider *how* sociological imagination may be enlivened in fiction.

To contextualise this effort, I first overview the considerable landscape of fiction-based social research. Second, I overview the sociological fiction projects noted above. In the main body of the article, I draw on illustrative examples from these projects, engaging with the issue of poetics and then aesthetic form. From this I offer points on craft for those interested in writing fiction in/as sociology.

## Background

There is great variety in the ways and reasons why sociologists have turned to fiction – as an object or data source for analysis, as a medium for public/audience engagement, and, increasingly, as a method for social research. This is unsurprising as arguably much, if not all, fiction offers a ‘wealth of sociologically relevant material’ (Coser, 1972: xvi). The study of literature and other fictional forms as cultural artefacts through frames of taste and distinction has a long history in sociology (English, 2010; Vána, 2020). As Vána (2020: 6–7) details, fictional texts are typically approached by sociologists as a pedagogical tool (see Coser, 1972; Hegtvædt, 1991; Weber, 2010), as examples of the sociological imagination (see Seeger and Davison-Vecchione, 2019; Piamonte, 2016), or a source of literary insight useful for progressing scholarly understandings (see Becker, 2007; Longo, 2015; Frauley, 2010; Corbett, 1994).

Within this diverse body of work, many scholars reflect back their analysis to consider disciplinary implications in ways valuable for our focus here on writing. This includes Penfold-Mounce et al.’s (2011) work on the sociological imagination of the HBO TV show *The Wire*, and Steckle et al.’s (2020) recent work on Ken Kesey’s novel *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*. They highlight the social insights these texts offer, into ‘American urban social decay’ (Penfold-Mounce et al., 2011: 157) and agency and resistance within the institution (Steckle et al., 2020: 300–301) respectively, and

acknowledge their pedagogical value. Further, through reading these texts the authors critically consider what is at stake in how we practice public sociology and criminology. *The Wire*, the authors argue, does not just illustrate key disciplinary concepts but, as a form of lyrical sociology (cf. Abbott, 2016), in fact ‘stimulates’ the sociological imagination in/with viewers (Penfold-Mounce et al., 2011: 162–164). Steckle et al. (2020: 301–302), in concluding their piece, reflect on the ‘twin functions of mediation and translation’ regarding the kinds of understandings that creative public projects do and can cultivate. As these analyses show, working with fictional texts offers great potential for developing how we conceptualise and approach efforts to engage with audiences/publics in creative and affecting ways. As I have explored elsewhere (Watson, 2016), writing fiction as public sociology is one valuable way, we can address imperatives to ‘go public’ (see Gans, 2009; Hills Collins, 2007; Burawoy, 2005; Steckle et al., 2020).

Creative writing is increasingly used as a method across qualitative research – that is, for the production of data and knowledge, rather than (only or primarily) for engagement with publics beyond the academy. Key approaches include auto/ethnographic fiction (Ellis, 2004; Inckle, 2010; Langnes and Frank, 1978), arts-based research (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Leavy, 2020; Liamputtong and Rumbold, 2009), collaborative storytelling (Satchwell et al., 2020) and creative writing prompts (Watson and Lupton, 2020; Lupton and Watson, 2020; Hinton-Smith and Seal, 2019; Braun et al., 2019). These variously involve researchers and/or participants in creative writing, from crafting short fictional scenarios, to producing full-length novels by fictionalising from fieldnotes or creating from other relevant sources and studies. Epistemologically, these approaches build from the understanding that art, including fiction writing, ‘can create and convey meaning’ (Leavy, 2020) through ‘expressive qualities of form’ (Barone and Eisner, 2012: xii). Langnes and Frank (1978: 18) consider how, ‘Like standard ethnography, ethnographical fiction has as a conscious and integral part of its goal the accurate description of another way of life, but unlike ordinary ethnography, it does this through the addition of character and plot’. For them, this raises a series of ‘epistemological problems’ concerning how ‘the experience of an individual observer get converted to “facts” in standard monographs and to “fiction” in ethnographic novels’, and what ‘standards of evidence’ determine ‘a description to be true or real’ (Langnes and Frank, 1978: 18). Both Penfold-Mounce et al. (2011) and Steckle et al. (2020) consider such issues by attending to the basis and qualities of authenticity and realism in *The Wire* and *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest*.

The fact versus fiction divide has been challenged by many recent qualitative research approaches (Frauley, 2010: 51–63; Gibson, 2020: 2–3). Cate Watson (2011) similarly troubles this binary. In critiquing distinctions between ‘analysis of narrative’ and ‘narrative analysis’ (see Polkinghorne, 1995), Watson (2011: 405) argues that ‘in both cases the researcher takes a narrative and fashions another in response to it’. This turn to considerations of form is also one Inckle (2010) makes in work on writing ethnographic fiction. Attending to issues of representation and embodiment, Inckle (2010: 39) turns to fiction to convey the ‘complexity, contradictions, pains, pleasures and politics’ of their research and ‘how we come to make and privilege certain kinds of knowledge’. Doing this, Inckle’s work speaks to the value of fiction as a *product* and a *process* in/as critical social research (see also Satchwell et al., 2020). Interestingly, Inckle’s article ends with a short piece of fiction rather than a scholarly conclusion. Reflecting on this practice, Inckle

(2010: 39) notes, ‘instead of concluding with a finite, closed assertion or truth claim, I wanted to leave people with thinking, feeling questions and open to a whole range of possible meanings and developments which much more closely reflected the dynamic experiences of my research participants’. This is a point a number of arts-based researchers similarly make: that fiction and other arts practices can generate multiple meanings, and often intentionally do so – they open up ‘multiplicities in meaning-making instead of pushing authoritative claims’ (Leavy, 2020: 27). Leavy elaborates, ‘the kind of dialogue that may be stimulated by a piece of art is based on evoking meanings, rather than denoting them’ (Leavy, 2020: 27). Further, as Barone and Eisner (2012: 53) argue, the purpose of creating art ‘is not to arrive at a singular and unchangeable slice of knowledge; it is to generate questions.’ Rather than trying to ‘mirror reality’, the epistemological value of using arts practices such as fiction writing in research is to explore ‘alternative possibilities for society, organizations, and communities’ (Camargo-Borges, 2017: 92). In Benjamin’s (2016: 2) words, ‘Such fictions are not meant to convince others of what *is*, but to expand our own visions of what is *possible*’. Through writing fiction, we can open multiplicities in what and how we can know about social worlds, and critically centre our motivations for doing such work.

In sum: the blurry, porous boundaries between what is and is not fiction have long been discussed. It is not to this debate I am aiming to contribute here. The focus of this piece is on the craft of writing fiction, as and within sociology. I want to draw methodological attention to some sociological and literary elements of this craft in order to further the use, quality and ambition of fiction writing across social research. I begin from the understanding – as the scholars above argue – that writing fiction is a valuable practice within the discipline, for our own development as scholars and for the ways we engage various others. Many of the markers of quality and the literary elements I draw on similarly apply to narrative non-fiction including ethnography and life writing. Something significant however when we do focus on fiction is the craft of creation. Unlike when trying to evocatively capture a scene in an accurate and/or representative sense as with non-fiction narrative forms, with fiction you are making it all up. *Because* you are making it all up, it matters what choices you make – not only of what to highlight and what to obscure, but of every detail from the specific choice of words a character uses to the colour of a passing car. It can matter if the car is red or blue. It is through the cumulation of such poetic and aesthetic details across a story that we may evoke sociological meaning.

### Three sociological fiction projects

Since 2014, I have been involved in three sizeable sociological fiction projects, either as author or creator/editor. The first is *Into the Sea* (Watson, 2020a), a novel. Set mostly in Sydney, Australia, the story follows a small group of young people over the course of a calendar year. Chapters unfold a series of small moments: a family barbecue on New Year’s Day, a shopping trip to IKEA, a funeral, a dinner party with friends, a day trip to the beach. Crafted using the methods braiding technique (Watson, 2020b), centrally, *Into the Sea* is a creative response to two sociological texts of notable contemporary significance: C Wright Mills’ (1959) *The Sociological Imagination* and Michael Burawoy’s (2005) ‘For Public Sociology’. Mills’ work on the promise and craft of

sociology is a key definer of the discipline's contemporary sensibility (Burton, 2016; Gane and Back, 2012). In recent years, Burawoy's argument – that, while there is 'no shortage of publics', we 'have a lot to learn about engaging them' (2005: 8) – has generated much discussion and critique of sociology's disciplinary structure and moral attachments (see Christensen, 2013; Deflem, 2013; Keith, 2008; Tittle, 2004). Both texts sketch a spirited vision of the discipline and offer practical ways forward for fulfilling its potential social influence. Building from this work, I undertook a practice-based exploration of the public 'promise' of sociology with fiction as a sociological craft. The novel is both an artefact that illustrates some of the workings of the public sociological imagination, and a project through which I have interrogated the boundaries and limitations of this disciplinary vision. The novel was published by Brill, in the Social Fiction Series: a series for full-length fictional works that are informed by social research.

The second project is *So Fi Zine*, an ongoing creative publication for social science and arts cross-disciplinary inquiry (see [sofizine.com](http://sofizine.com)). I created *So Fi Zine* in mid-2017 and have since edited and produced eight editions making for more than 170 pieces of micro fiction, poetry, visual art, mini zines and creative essays published. *So Fi Zine* has a diverse international contributor pool, from undergraduate students to senior professors, and established creative practitioners to first-time creative writers. In each edition, guest editorials have also been contributed by field-leading scholars: Patricia Leavy, Howard Becker, Les Back, Nirmal Puwar, Raewyn Connell, Michael Burawoy, Deborah Lupton, Ruha Benjamin and Mark Carrigan. Each edition is loosely themed around these contributing scholars' work, and pieces variously engage with sociology. Content is diverse, ranging from stories about kitchens in share houses to train journeys, football games, murder, technological dreamlands, nights at the pub, conversations with parents and what it is like to be the subject of ethnography. In line with the political ethos of such publications (Watson and Bennett, 2020), I approach my editorial work as a more curatorial-type role (see Puwar and Sharma, 2012); I copy-edit submissions but largely avoid more significant editing so to cultivate diverse and 'raw' voices across pieces.

The third project is *Fiction @ The Sociological Review*, of which I am the editor (see [thesociologicalreview.com/category/structure/fiction](http://thesociologicalreview.com/category/structure/fiction)). A series for short stories (of ~3000 words) that are 'sociological in style, scope and sensibility' published pieces explore depression and poverty in Scotland, a futuristic dystopia of gilded communities and organ donation, international airport security and immigration raids, a school bus ride and fresh groceries and an evening at a student nightclub. With each piece, authors also submit an exegesis: a short (~500 words) critical unpacking and contextualisation of their story. This accompanying writing offers authors a space to overview linked research, discuss their writing process, flag or further explore key concepts, explicitly bring their work into dialogue with other texts and demonstrate their story's sociological significance. As a whole, each publication creatively interrogates the social world and sociology as a discipline. In this project, I take a significant editorial role, akin to the work of a literary journal editor, often working with accepted authors through multiple revisions so to strengthen both the 'literariness' and the sociological quality of each piece (further discussed below).

What makes these fiction projects sociological? They each intentionally engage with sociological foci and ways of thinking. However, intent is not everything. There are key

questions I ask of each piece, whether I am the author or am working as an editor. These include: is the work grounded in sociological knowledge? Does it progress or explore sociological understandings? What is the quality of the work, in literary and sociological terms? Such questions resonate with discussions of criteria across qualitative and arts-based research, which raise key attributes from coherence to rigor, resonance, evocation and aesthetic merit (Barone and Eisner, 2012; Lafrenière and Cox, 2013; Leavy, 2020; Richardson, 2000; Sparkes, 2018; Tracy, 2010). These are useful criteria for sociological fiction writers to review. From these, the methodological question becomes: *how* does a work achieve its literary and sociological qualities? What can we do to craft fiction that is sociological?

In a recent article on fictionalisation for data representation, Gibson (2020) moves from discussing evaluative criteria of rigour and reflexivity to the critical point that ‘writing fiction is a skill, and it seems risky to assume that academics (or anyone else) can automatically produce engaging fiction without training/guidance or substantial practice’ (2020: 12). I similarly do not want to underplay the time and work involved. However, writing sociological fiction may be a capacity picked up ‘on the job’ as an extension of the sociological writing craft, with some careful practice and attention.

## On writing

For novice creative writers, who may be interested in using fiction to illustrate their research or test their sociological imagination (solo, or with colleagues, participants or students), but are unsure exactly how to begin, a method I commonly use is one I call ‘think-with’. The hyphen in this is important: I draw this from Jackson and Mazzei (2011) and Puig de la Bellacasa (2012). First, choose a setting, and note this down on your paper. This might be your site of research, a public place, or a private one – a living room, a train station, a park, for example. Second, invent two characters. You (or a fictional projection of yourself) may be one of them; they might be amalgamations of your participants; they could be two strangers; one character might not be human, but instead a pet, a device, a memory. Third, select a concept or issue which is relevant for your purposes. This might be a big sociological concept, such as race or class, or might be something more specific, such as the problem of a secret, or a difficult form that needs filling in. Once these three elements are down – where, who, what – set a short timer for a few minutes, and begin to free write. You may start by describing the setting in detail, and including multisensory elements such as colours, sensations, sounds and light. Introduce your characters, and try to bring some action to the scene, by narrating who they are and what is happening in this place. Keep the concept or issue at your elbow; do not labour too much, in these first few free writing minutes, over successfully illustrating this point in the story; simply try to keep it in view, something to ‘think-with’ as you create. Once the timer rings you might like to do another round, extending what you have written without editing what is already down. Or, you might like to start again from scratch. Either way, the key in this activity is to try and write consistently for the whole time period set. Try to avoid the immediate editing, or the pausing and thinking over what ‘should’ come next. Write without stopping. Shift focus from the end product, of having a finished piece



of sociological fiction you may wish to share, to the current process of thinking-with and sociological creation. Once you have the bones of story, you may move on to the work of rewriting and editing.

From here, my phrasing tends towards a process where the first draft of a story has been written (perhaps using the ‘think-with’ method above) and the task now is to ‘sociologise’ it and strengthen its literary quality. By literary I mean the conventional sense of being ‘well written’, having a lyrical style and layered narrative (Saricks, 2001: 128). Whether or not a first draft does exist, these more complex elements build on foundational parts which I take as a given here – characters, a setting, a plot. Being able to understand the workings of such elements in one’s own and others’ texts is a critical capacity in/for this creative method.

### Poetics

A significant practical challenge of writing sociological fiction is avoiding contrasting sections of story and explanation: to avoid writing in a non-narrative (e.g. descriptive, expository or argumentative) mode and instead craft a poetic with which you may evoke, rather than denote, meaning (see Leavy, 2020). Achieving this is as much a matter of style as of substance. Poetics concerns the selective vocabulary and stylistic language techniques used in writing – the ‘selection of words and organization of the salience of the experiences represented’ (Vickers, 2010: 558). In other words, poetics concerns how and why a particular lyricism (Abbott, 2016) is constructed and structured through language. In sociological research, authors engage particular disciplinary language and structural style to frame the social world in a sociological way (Bauman and May, 2019: 1–4), and engage with or subvert other concepts and understandings. In fiction, literary devices such as syntax, diction, irony, imagery and metaphor significantly contribute to the conceptual impression of a story-world (Grenville, 2010: 98–100). These facilitate different kinds of reader engagements with ideas, events, characters and narrator(s). Through particular poetic choices, sociology and fiction may be fused. Rather than explaining or signposting disciplinary ideas throughout a story, sociological concepts may be creatively rendered through literary devices. Literary devices may also open up and progress sociological understandings (see Clarke et al., 2005). This is through, for example, unusual conceptual pairings in imagery and metaphors, the subversion of semiotic meaning through playful syntax, and the challenging of scholarly framings through lyrical diction and narrative structuring. Becker (2007: 253–267) offers a useful consideration of this, in discussing how the novelist Perec crafts an analysis that is interestingly comparable ‘to what social scientists do’, through the selective tense, grammar and hyper-detailed style of description in his novels.

In ‘Stealth Love’, published in *Fiction @ The Sociological Review*, Massimo Airoidi crafts a short story of an almost-romance with frenetic immediacy (see [thesociological-review.com/fiction-stealth-love](http://thesociological-review.com/fiction-stealth-love)). Told in first person, the unnamed protagonist oscillates between narrating present tense action and past tense passages of dream and memories. The story, Airoidi explains in the accompanying exegesis, is ‘not about love. It is about techno-social control in a near-future London where surveillance is ubiquitous and diffuse’. For example, one section reads:

I looked around, touching compulsively the smart watch, and then looked around again, and again. We were hundreds – no, thousands! – standing on the pavement, motionless, earphones in our hands, looking like victims of a collective hallucination, or smartly dressed survivors miraculously escaped from a plane crash. A few seconds later, a wave of klaxons and screams washed away the odd silence. Panic in the streets of London.

In terms of *what* happens here, there is an internet blackout, a public throng of strangers collectively pause to register this, and then, after doing so, panic. How this scene comes to life is through the lyrical variability of the sentence structure: longer, compound sentences with multiple commas (and therefore multiple pauses) slow the reader's pace as the people in the story also pause; a deliberately short sentence, quickening the reader's pace again, marks the crowd's panic. Such crafted lyricism controls the pace of the narrative *and* gives a tempo to the story-world. Through such language use, in this story '[t]ime, as it were, thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history' (Bakhtin, 1981: 84). Another part reads:

For the first time in my life, I understand my bedridden mother and her mysterious, black-boxed sufferings.

Such sentences bring into coalescence the sociological imagination and a literary poetic. By using the scholarly concept of the black box as a literary metaphor – an evocative turn from the obfuscation of algorithmic processing to the emotional depths we cannot plumb of those we love – Airoidi roots the future techno-dystopia in a contemporary sociotechnical imaginary. We can see how this future world is projected from the present time; through the story's poetic, the narrator's way of being in the story-world is both sociologically opened and made coherent.

A poetic does not necessarily direct the content of stories in terms of *what* characters, issues, plot events and spaces are involved, but concerns *how* a story is told. The kind of narrator telling the story can therefore be instrumental in why such language choices – from syntax to paragraph structure – are made. Becker (2007), in his analysis of Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*, illuminates how Austen uses her narrator to move the reader to engage in social analysis with her. We are led to see how 'wealth and social position. . . affect the chances and results of marriage at many points along the class scale' (Becker, 2007: 250) *through* the irony with which her narrator delivers key lines, including the well-known opening sentence: 'It is a truth universally acknowledged that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife' (Austen quoted in Becker, 2007: 239). From Austen, we can see how a narrator may be used to float critical ideas and 'many and varied hypotheses' about social life (Becker, 2007: 250), especially those at the heart of sociological imagination: 'within [this society], what is the meaning of any particular feature for its continuance and for its change? 'How does it differ from other periods? What are its characteristic ways of history-making?' (Mills, 1959: 6–7).

A narrator who floats sociological questions is something I worked to craft in *Into the Sea*. Through many draft iterations, including a major rewrite from first to third person



and the introduction of a close but distinct narrator, I found a tone that could funnel the subtext of scenes towards Mills' questions without shifting into a didactic and non-narrative mode. My aim was to not teach readers about what the sociological imagination is but rather engage them in the activity of sociologically imagining as they read the story. One technique I found generative for this was quickly zooming out and in again, from a moment of intimacy or interior insight to a macro view of the scene as societal in scale. For example, at a New Year's Eve party (see p. 12):

Caleb wrapped his arms around Taylah, holding her from behind, and they grinned at the high arc of the Bridge sparking in the distance, what they could see of it between the other apartment blocks and eucalyptus trees. The change was intimate: the clock face reset like it does every night yet this difference in time is heavier and more seen than any other. This glowing moment, an annual lighthouse even when you try to avoid the sharp overhype, ties people to each other. And not just this group of half-adults, in one lounge room with a floral couch in a tall apartment block by the water, in one brightly lit up city in a tiny bottom-hand corner of the globe.

'Cheers guys,' said Caleb.

'Yeah, cheers.'

'Happy New Year.'

Intentionally, it is the narrator who shares this macro view with the reader, and not the protagonist. Selective single words – such as the use of 'you', where the narrator directly addresses the reader with a long sentence that slowly zooms out from an apartment to the globe, while the characters are still quietly looking towards the Harbour Bridge – can draw the reader into camaraderie with the narrator. As Becker argues Austen does, here I used the narratorial lens to move the reader to engage in social analysis *with* the narrator. I was 'thinking-with' Abbott (2016)'s conceptualisation of lyricism while crafting this narratorial voice and role. Abbott (2016: 87) argues for sociological writing in which the 'ultimate, framing structure should not be the *telling* of a story – recounting, explaining, comprehending' but rather 'an image or images' (2016: 91), which 'communicate a mood, an emotional sense of social reality' (2016: 87). To apply this lyricism, we can focus on the analytic tone and sociological point of view a narrator has as well as the way language and literary devices, especially including imagery, are used to describe and emphasise particular observations *as sociologically significant*. For example, in the excerpt above, rather than complete the 'And not just this group of half-adults' argument with an explanatory line about cultural rituals, I finished the narrator's direct connection with the reader on the image of night-time globe, Sydney city lit up in lights like an image taken from a satellite. It is this image that lingers as the story snaps back to the characters, as we join them again for their conversation. Becker (2007: 269), concluding his analysis of the novelist Perec, writes:

All these considerations, finally, leave us to wonder whether every kind of social description does not have two aspects: a desire to show and a desire to explain. Perhaps is it the tension between these two that holds every kind of social analysis in place.

What generatively holds this tension in sociological fiction, between showing and explaining a social world, is poetic choices. We may craft a sociological poetic in fiction by using techniques such as varying sentence structure, creatively applying scholarly concepts as literary metaphors, zooming in and out, and following a sociological line of argument with a resonant image.

### *Aesthetic form*

Aesthetics broadly encapsulates the style of the story-world. This includes its material and non-material elements: what kinds of things make up its settings; the patterns of lifestyles the characters have; its institutional systems and cultural rituals. Aesthetic form also includes how the norms and values of this world are enlivened in (and understood though) the particular styling of material elements. That is, aesthetic form concerns how a paradigm is expressed through, for instance, appearance or behaviours, and the ‘traits and styles’ of patterns (Miller, 2008: 293) which ‘gives order, balance and harmony to the world’ (Miller, 2008: 287). As such, using aesthetic form here I mean the style of paradigm through which a story-world and characters’ experiences are made intelligible for characters and readers (see Brown, 1977: 2–3; van Rees, 1983: 297–298). In sociological fiction, we can consider how the setting of the novel-world is rendered through the sociologist’s eye – how social structures, relationships, patterns and possibilities are constructed with a particular aesthetic form that draws on and employs sociological theory and concepts. The opening of Fabian Cannizzo’s short story ‘Unbecoming Strangers’, published in Edition #3 of *So Fi Zine* (see [sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-3](http://sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-3)), offers an evocative example:

Sally had been working at a call centre for months now. Nothing permanent, she was sure to mention to any prospective employer. Just a casual stint. Night relief. But in truth, her contract had mutated into regular 40 hour and upwards weeks. Taking calls was mostly mindless scripted work, but her co-workers brought relief to the droning shifts. On the edges of the city, they were a family of convenience, married in the shared isolation of unsociable hours. . . . At night, the city was clear. Almost open. In the grooves of these rhythms, Sally became attuned also to its asynchronicities. An ill manager meant understaffing. A missing bus was 45 minutes of pay docked. The life of the day-dwellers had been blessed with unnoticed conveniences. The night transformed a metropolis of abundance into frontier of far-out places.

Cannizzo here does more than ‘set the scene’ in a static way. Through description that is attentive to both material details (the night; a missing bus) and the significance of these seemingly minor factors in the protagonist’s life (unsociable hours; 45 minutes of pay docked), this opening scene illuminates the tempo and experience of the protagonist’s lifestyle. As this excerpt shows, how writers establish an aesthetic illuminates much more than the location and period within which the story is set (see Lodge, 2015: 205–210); the aesthetic form, while superficially focused on material elements, also implicates the temporal, epistemological and ontological dimensions of the narrative.

The setting is also pivotal to the imaginative possibilities contained within a story. Fictional worlds are a ‘constellation, created by the text, of objects, individuals, space, time, events, regularities’ (Eder et al., 2010: 7–8). How settings are constructed may

illuminate the patterns, relations, structures and dynamics that sociologists focus on in researching the social world. Which settings might best serve a sociological story, and what sociological ideas may be drawn from how these settings are constructed, are key things we can consider when crafting sociological fiction. ‘The Rest Stop’, a short story published in *Fiction @ The Sociological Review* by J.E. Sumerau (see [thesociological-review.com/fiction-the-rest-stop](http://thesociological-review.com/fiction-the-rest-stop)), is an evocative example of the sociological workings of aesthetic form. The story opens with the line:

A light skinned young woman with deep brown eyes matching shoulder length auburn hair pulled off at a rest stop.

The opening paragraph continues:

There were so many rules, so many expectations, so much she thought she could or could not, should or should not do, but was any of that real? She could turn around. She had a life back there. There was a routine back there. There were plans. There were goals. It was comfortable. It was familiar. She pulled off the highway to think it through.

As Sumerau explains in the accompanying exegesis, the story ‘explores the social space between continuity and change through the eyes of a transgender woman attempting to decide whether or not to meet up with a potential romantic interest she met online’. The titular setting is pivotal in the action and the sociological meaning of the story. The spatial manifestation of ‘The Rest Stop’ holds narrative weight as a concept and a metaphor – as a literal and figurative place where we can see the relational ‘inner negotiation of order, meaning, and desire’ and societal ‘norms, routines, and assumptions’ in tension (Sumerau). As such, in the editorial process, I worked with Sumerau to strengthen the aesthetic form of the story. My meso-level suggestions focused on the descriptive details used for key settings so to enhance how the norms and values of the story-world were enlivened through the material style of these scene. For example, my comments on the first submission draft, on the brief scene set in the protagonist’s home, included:

A little more scene detail in the space I’ve made here would give this interaction some more weight – e.g. bodily or emotional reaction from Lillith, and/or some descriptive detail of the room they are in – is it a comfortable/familiar/well-worn in (too comfortable?) couch/room for them both? (Private correspondence)

Similarly, my comments on a section where the protagonist is reflecting on her options, read:

I like this tension in this reflective para but I think the sociological significance of this reflecting could be strengthened a little. . . a little more scene detail or character history detail perhaps will balance the present-tense questioning and better show what’s sociological about interiority/growth/memory (Private correspondence)

When considering the sociological significance of spaces in stories such as this, and the action implicated in or made possible in those spaces, I find Bakhtin’s (1981) concept of

the chronotope a useful one. Bakhtin is concerned with how time and space are dually materialised in literary renderings, and how, through the chronotope, ‘the knots of narrative are tied and untied’ (Bakhtin, 1981: 250). Comparable to how May and Thrift (2001) see that time and space are bound up in the constitution of society and peoples’ social practices, Bakhtin highlights how the creative unity of time and space is ‘tantamount to the world construction that is at the base of every narrative text’ (Bemong and Borghart, 2010: 3). This is in a micro sense, in terms of the material elements of a setting, as well as in a macro sense, in terms of how narrative structure is shaped overall.

Thinking with this idea, when writing and editing (our own and/or other’s) sociological fiction, we can attend to the aesthetic form of a story in a few concrete ways. We can work to write evocative description that captures the sensory elements of a scene – the visual, the aural, the aromatic, the atmospheric. We can also, drawing from literary writers and ethnographers, write this with the understanding that description is more than a ‘simple documentation method’ (Hirschauer, 2006; see also Ellis and Bochner, 2000; Atkinson, 2019). By choosing specific aesthetic details to highlight in a scene *vis-a-vis* what significant is happening in that scene, we can craft a mood in a story and can evoke meaning. This includes sociological meaning; it is through the texture (see de la Fuente, 2019) of a story-world that we can bring to life and make affective the sociocultural workings of a narrative.

## Conclusion

There are many ways to write fiction. In this article I have focused on two elements of stories – their poetic and aesthetic form – to consider *how* we may write fiction that is meaningfully sociological. Of course, I agree with Coser that arguably all fiction offers a ‘wealth of sociologically relevant material’ (1972: xvi). Here however I have focused my attention on process, for those interested in writing sociological fiction themselves for and/or with others, with the hope that these reflections help further the quality, application and ambition of fiction writing across social research. Drawing from three recent projects, and my own writing process, the work I do as an editor, and the writing of authors published in these projects, I have drawn a series of techniques which together make up a sociological fiction writing method. We can: Vary sentence length depending on what is happening in the scene; sentence structure is one way to control the pace of the story, and make affective the action and atmosphere of the narrative. Make use of sociological concepts as literary metaphors; experiment with doing this by, for example, subverting the category of entity which the concept is typically applied to. Switch the tone or tense that the narrator uses to draw the reader into the work of sociological imagination; direct critical lines to ‘you’ or to ‘we’. Change the focus of the narratorial view to bring the different scales of the social into relation; zoom in and out and in again, to connect these planes of social life. Draw on key imagery to *show* rather than explain a sociological point; offer a sociological question and, instead of providing an answer, craft a resonant image which can linger and open up multiplicities of view. Add multi-sensory details to descriptions of settings; draw attention to the material things that are there – what you can see – as well as what you can hear, sense, smell, feel. Consider how

time and space unite in each part of the story; scenes bring together settings and actions, neither the simple backdrop of the other but each making each.

Fiction offers an inventive space through which lived, messy, sensory realities may be commonly experienced. Creating the impression of a world seen is a qualitative, affective endeavour. Across the projects I have discussed here, the creative pieces do not make sociological arguments; rather, they help inspire sociological questions, and capture what doing social research means through what is noticed, heard, shaped, felt and (re)told. By engaging with this kind of work not (only) as a translation exercise but as a dually literary and sociological effort, sociological fiction as a process and as a product may help attune us to the many ways that social meaning is tied and untied in the everyday. I end here with a reflection I made in an editorial of *So Fi Zine* (see [sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-3](http://sofizine.com/latest-edition/edition-3)), which I probed with my analysis here and think holds water:

Designing this edition I reflected a lot on what [Back and Puwar] say about becoming attentive to how the sensory constitutes the social texture of life. This sensory constitution is something I've worked to become more attentive to. A large part of my creative writing practice is spent crafting this texture. While putting this edition together I've also been thinking a lot about sociological voice – how sociological imagination is brought to a piece through style and authorial position rather than via explanation. I am interested in how certain voices and perspectives can open a scene sociologically for a reader. . . It is my sense that sociological imagination comes to life in art in the intersection of texture and voice.

By attending to how we craft the poetic and aesthetic form of a story – the intersection of voice and texture – we may focus on the friction involved in aesthetically evoking meaning, and enliven sociological imagination in and with fiction.

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