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CREATIVE NONFICTION IN SOCIAL SCIENCE: TOWARDS MORE ENGAGING AND ENGAGED RESEARCH

Abstract: *The paper aims at identifying, explaining and illustrating the affordances of "creative nonfiction" as a style of writing social science. The first part introduces creative nonfiction as a method of writing which brings together empirical material and fiction. In the second part, based on illustrations from my ethnographic research of European "crisis reporters," written in the form of a novel about a fictional journalist, but also based on a review of existing social science research that employs a creative method of writing, I identify several main affordances of creative nonfiction in social-scientific research. In particular, I argue that creative nonfiction allows scientists to illustrate their findings, to express them in an allegorical way, to organize data into a narrative, to let their pieces of research act in the social world, and to permeate research accounts with self-reflexive moments. I also discuss some apparent negative affordances: challenges that creative nonfiction poses to readers and to the institutionalized academic discourse. Finally, I suggest that writing about sociological problems in the style of creative nonfiction can help to produce more engaging and engaged texts, and I discuss the ethical implications of the approach.*

Keywords: *creative nonfiction; ethics; writing; social sciences*

Kreativní nonfikce v sociálních vědách: Myslet angažovaně, psát poutavě

Abstrakt: *Článek identifikuje, vysvětluje a ilustruje afordance „kreativní nonfikce" jako stylu psaní o sociální vědě. V první části představuji kreativní nonfikci jako metodu psaní, která kombinuje empirický materiál a imaginaci. Ve druhé části na základě ukázek z vlastního etnografického výzkumu evropských "krizových reportérů", psaného formou románu o fiktivním novináři, a také na základě jiných sociálně-vědných výzkumů, které používají kreativní metody psaní, identifikuji několik hlavních afordancí kreativní nonfikce v sociálněvědním výzkumu. Kreativní nonfikce zejména umožňuje vědkyním a vědcům jinak a někdy lépe ilustrovat jejich zjištění, vyjádřit tato zjištění alegoricky, organizovat data a vytvářet narativ, podpořit efektivitu výzkumů v sociálním světě nebo také proložit výzkumný narativ sebereflexivními prvky. Text ale diskutuje i zjevné negativní afordance, tedy výzvy, které potenciálně plynou ze setkání kreativní nonfikce se čtenářstvem a s institucionalizovaným akademickým diskurzem. Nakonec diskutuji některé etické implikace představeného přístupu a tvrdím, že psát o sociologických problémech ve stylu kreativní nonfikce může pomoct vytvářet texty, které budou angažované i poutavé.*

Klíčová slova: *kreativní nonfikce; etika; psaní; sociální vědy; afordance*

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Introduction

"Creative nonfiction," "scientifiction," "sociological novel," and similar labels have been used to describe literary/narrative approaches to factual, research-based storytelling. Combining facts with narrative or even fictitious storylines or poetry has a long tradition in social anthropology.[1] Authors of the transgressing genres have aimed to criticize – typically from feminist or post-structuralist positions – traditional social-scientific writing styles, together with the established power relations between "authors" and "their research subjects." However, social scientists sometimes write research-based poetry, novels, short stories or autobiography simply because they believe that it helps their scientific texts achieve things that conventional writing styles are hard pressed to do. As Ivan Brady, who has routinely published anthropological poems in academic journals, mainly *Qualitative Inquiry*,[2] puts it, these forms "open new modes of communicating experiences and knowledge and thereby potentially new dimensions for understanding the subject matter itself."[3] As such, creative forms of writing are believed to be endowed by specific affordances – "opportunities for or invitation to actions"[4] – that they, as communication tools, make available to social scientists.

In this paper I aim to identify and illustrate some of the affordances of "creative nonfiction"[5] as a style of writing social science. In the first part of the paper, I explain the principles of using creative nonfiction. Based on a review of current examples of creative nonfiction coming from within

[1] E.g., Paul Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997).
[2] Ivan Brady, "Two Poems," *Qualitative Inquiry* 5, no. 4 (1999): 566–67; Ivan Brady, "Mohave Runner," *Qualitative Inquiry* 19, no. 7 (2013): 533–37.
[3] Ivan Brady, "Narrative Soup," *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 5 (2010): 361–63.
[4] Leah A. Lievrouw, "Materiality and Media in Communication and Technology Studies: An Unfinished Project," in *Media Technologies: Essays on Communication, Materiality and Society*, eds. Tarleton Gillespie et al. (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), 21–52. This meaning of what was initially J. J. Gibson's term referring to possibilities of environment is borrowed from media studies, where the term "affordances" is used to describe possibilities that specific communication tools and technologies provide their users.
[5] Darrel N. Caulley, "Making Qualitative Research Reports Less Boring: The Techniques of Writing Creative Nonfiction," *Qualitative Inquiry* 14, no. 3 (2008): 424–49.

sociology, anthropology and media studies, and on my ethnographic research on the professional identity and emotional labour of European "crisis reporters," written in the form of a novel about a fictional journalist (an excerpt of which is included below),[6] I then identify some positive and negative affordances of creative nonfiction in social-scientific research. In the conclusion, I discuss the ethical implications of creative nonfiction while arguing that rather than leading to ontological relativism, creative methods can go hand in hand with enhanced researchers' responsibility.

Principles and Pioneers

Creative nonfiction brings together empirical material and fiction. While some authors claim that it developed in the 1960s and 1970s under the influence of "the new journalism,"[7] it is more likely that both new journalism and creative nonfiction – or the methods of "experimental writing" in general – emerged from feminist and postmodernist criticisms of earlier ethnographic/journalistic reporting. These criticisms sought to reposition the author and the reader and diminish the persisting hierarchy in their relationship.[8] The model has gradually spread in the reporting of qualitative research since the 1980s; more recently, Kathleen Galvin and Monica Prendergast claimed that the human and social sciences have seen a growing "aesthetic move," including more widespread use of creative nonfiction.[9]

The principle of creative nonfiction is the combining of the most reliable information with an imaginative and narrative approach. In practice, this often means combining factual and fictional narrative, the two being distinguished by the relationship between author, narrator and character.[10] While within factual narrative the author and the narrator are unified, regardless of the fictional or factual status of the narrative/fabula, the presence of a secondary narrative, e.g., a story told, dreamt or imagined by a character (which is often the case in novels, short stories and poetry) is an indication

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[6] Johana Kotišová, *Crisis Reporters, Emotions and Technology: An Ethnography* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019). This paper also expands upon arguments outlined in the methodological chapter of the book.

[7] John J. Pauly, "The New Journalism and the Struggle for Interpretation," *Journalism* 15, no. 5 (2014): 589–604.

[8] Douglas Ezzy, *Qualitative Analysis: Practice and Innovation* (London: Routledge, 2002).

[9] Kathleen T. Galvin and Monica Prendergast, *Poetic Inquiry II – Seeing, Caring, Understanding* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2016).

[10] Gérard Genette, "Fictional Narrative, Factual Narrative," *Poetics Today* 11, no. 4 (1990): 755–74.

of fictionality. In this sense, creative nonfiction is both fact (because the research data is real and reconstructed by the author-narrator) and fiction. Importantly, the genre of academic writing makes the factuality prominent. Research accounts written in the form of creative nonfiction, as with any type of social science narrative, are typically based on real-world stories that claim referential truthfulness,[11] or more precisely, on data reconstructed with scientific rigour.[12] In other words, even creative nonfiction can and must remain true to the validity and integrity of the information it contains.

Despite the distinctions between fictional and factual narratives, major literary theorists[13] have argued that there are numerous borrowings, exchanges and intersections between the two, such as plotting and other novelistic devices. The very suggestion that what we find in academic journals is descriptions, theorizations and discussions of empirical facts, while in novels we expect creative, fictionalized stories invented by the author, is superficial.[14] As a result, in actual practice, there is nothing like pure fiction or completely rigorous history; fictional literature and scientific literature are not as distant from each other or as homogeneous as they are commonly believed to be.[15]

Hayden White uses the example of historical discourses to show that what we are used to calling "discourse of the real," as against "discourse of the imaginary," draws its realism precisely from the possession of the character of narrativity.[16] Stories are more realistic than, say, annals. This is so because we desire to have real events and to see them as coherent, full. This closure of life through its narrativization, however, can only be imaginary, because events do not offer themselves as stories. In short, discourses of the real use the imaginary to seem realistic.

Within the realms of sociology and anthropology, various authors have used diverse names for scientific borrowings from fictional genres. For example, Charles Wright Mills in his letter to Dwight McDonald spoke about "sociological poetry": "a style of experience and expression that reports social

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[11] Jean-Marie Schaeffer, "Fictional vs. Factual Narration," in *Handbook of Narratology*, eds. Peter Hühn et al. (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 2012), 179–96.

[12] Caulley, "Making Qualitative Research Reports Less Boring."

[13] Genette, "Fictional Narrative"; Schaeffer, "Fictional vs. Factual"; Hayden White, "The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality," *Critical Inquiry* 7, no. 1 (1980): 5–27.

[14] Schaeffer, "Fictional vs. Factual"; Carl Rhodes and Andrew D. Brown, "Writing Responsibly: Narrative Fiction and Organization Studies," *Organization* 12, no. 4 (2005): 467–91.

[15] Genette, "Fictional Narrative."

[16] White, "Value of Narrativity."

facts and at the same time reveals their human meanings."[17] For Mills, the reading experience linked to sociological poetry stood between the thick facts of ordinary sociological monographs and the thin meanings of art forms that do away with facts. In comparison, Bruno Latour in his *Aramis or the Love of Technology* uses the term "scientifiction" for the fusion of distinct literary genres such as the novel, sociological commentary and the bureaucratic dossier.[18] Such a fusion, Latour believes, well corresponds to the fusion of culture and technology; scientifiction, unlike science fiction, journalism, realism, mere fiction or the conventional discourse of human sciences, allows the author to place technology at the centre of the plot, to focus on the process of becoming certain states, to call the hard sciences into question etc. In short, the term describes a hybrid genre devised for a hybrid task. Before Latour, Clifford Geertz used the word "faction" for "imaginative writing about real people in real places at real times" and appealed to anthropologists to explore its potential (in so doing, he believed, the discipline would continue as a contemporary intellectual force and avoid sterility).[19] Last but not least, the potential for intimate links between the social sciences and literature has been recognized by Zygmunt Bauman, who argued that sociologists and poets share the calling to demolish "the walls of the obvious and self-evident" and that sociologists should seek inspiration from poets and "come as close as the true poets do to the yet-hidden human possibilities."[20]

While not all of these influential authors presented sociological knowledge using creative nonfiction (Latour was perhaps an exception), all of them believed that creativity and poetic elements can add some value to social science research accounts. According to Douglas Ezzy, utilization of the links between fiction and fact leads to a more sophisticated approach to social research, rather than to relativist scepticism.[21] As Galvin and Prendergast claim, social research as a human endeavour includes valuable and deeply insightful affective and aesthetic dimensions.[22] Understanding the rich potential helps to challenge traditional methodological approaches and can

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[17] Charles Wright Mills, "Sociological Poetry," in *The Politics of Truth: Selected Writings of C. Wright Mills*, ed. John H. Summers (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 33–35.
[18] Bruno Latour, *Aramis: The Love of Technology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996).
[19] Clifford Geertz, *Works and Lives: The Anthropologist as Author* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1988), 141.
[20] Zygmunt Bauman, "On Writing: On Writing Sociology," *Theory, Culture and Society* 17, no. 1 (2000): 79–80.
[21] Ezzy, *Qualitative Analysis*, 149.
[22] Galvin and Prendergast, *Poetic Inquiry II*, xiii.

yield new useful insights. Similarly, Laurel Richardson believes that these approaches lead to a more aesthetic, avant-garde and metaphoric, but also richer, transgressing, multivocal, and thus more moral and ethical science.[23] Recent examples of creative nonfiction include novels combining fictional narrative and real data,[24] poems,[25] drama,[26] works combining intimate narratives with research reports,[27] and even performances.

The affordances of creative nonfiction suggested below are partly based on a review of these recent works and on how the authors themselves make sense of the affordances of the creative genres, and partly on my own experience with writing a research monograph in the style of creative nonfiction. Excerpts from this monograph are included in the following section.

Excerpts

What follows are several excerpts from a book[28] based on my research on crisis reporters' emotional labour. The research takes the form of a novel filled with ethnographic data (forty-seven in-depth interviews with European crisis reporters and fieldnotes from observations in foreign affairs newsrooms) reconstructed in accordance with social-scientific research principles. The novel includes a story of a fictional young journalist named James who is on his way to a fictional island, San Lorenzo, because he has been assigned to report on a potential global catastrophe that has affected the island. A lethal material called ice-nine is spreading uncontrollably: upon contact it turns the molecules of liquid water into molecules of ice-nine. The ice-nine kills soft tissues instantly; the catastrophe threatens to expand globally and freeze the world's oceans. On his journey to the scene, James recalls his conversations (my interviews) with his colleagues (the interviewees) and

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[23] Laurel Richardson, *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997).

[24] Kotišová, *Crisis Reporters*; Latour, *Aramis.*

[25] Cristina Archetti, "Journalism, Practice and … Poetry," *Journalism Studies* 18, no. 9 (2017): 1106–27; Michael Bloor, "The Rime of the Globalised Mariner: In Six Parts (With Bonus Tracks from a Chorus of Greek Shippers)," *Sociology* 47, no. 1 (2012): 30–50; Brady, "Narrative Soup"; Galvin and Prendergast, *Poetic Inquiry II.*

[26] Rostislav Brožík, "Kaj o aligatoris – Kde je krokodýl," in *Romské osady v kulturologické perspektivě*, eds. Marek Jakoubek and Ondřej Poduška (Brno: Doplněk, 2003), 131–58.

[27] E.g., Mona Livholts, "The Loathsome, the Rough Type and the Monster: The Violence and Wounding of Media Texts on Rape," in *Sex, Violence and the Body: The Erotics of Wounding*, eds. Vivien Burr and Jeff Hearn (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2009), 194–211.

[28] Kotišová, *Crisis Reporters.*

his memories from newsrooms where he worked (where I conducted the fieldwork). These "conversations" and "memories," being actually real-world data, are quoted and anonymized in a standard way. The fictional narrative therefore frames the real-world story rather than replacing it.

The story begins at an unidentified airport where James is getting ready for his exciting and demanding task.

> James accepted his boss' offer—or rather demand—to report on the catastrophe at the island of San Lorenzo with a sense of responsibility. Not that he naïvely believed that his individual action would matter, locally or globally. Rather, he had made the choice to enjoy the game while sticking to some journalistic principles and ideals that he maintained and even believed in. Apart from the frozen corpses that were rumored on Twitter, James did not really know what to expect. After all, it was supposed to be his first experience with crisis reporting. He was therefore making a thorough research into anything relevant and, after that, less relevant. While waiting for his flight to San Lorenzo in the departure lounge and scrolling through the web, he eventually chanced on several personal confessions from experienced reporters.

> "I never thought I'd get PTSD. I was calm, rational and decisive. I enjoyed being in charge of large editorial teams. I felt I could detach myself from tough situations when needed. [...] The flashbacks, the anxiety, my emotional numbness and poor sleep had long worried my wife, Mary," the editor Dean Yates, who had been working for Reuters for 23 years, wrote in a special report for the news agency [...]. In a podcast recorded for War College, he expanded upon his current emotional state: "Even crying, for example. One of the problems that I found, I just... I find it hard to really express my emotions. Because I've been emotionally numb for so many years" [...]. His post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) resulted from the long-term stress he had experienced as a reporter, covering, among other things, the tsunami in Indonesia's Aceh province in 2004, the Iraq War between 2003 and 2008, and the Bali bombings in 2002. In particular, Dean struggled with feelings of guilt after two Middle Eastern colleagues for whom he was responsible were shot dead by a US Apache helicopter. [...]

> In another Reuters story [...], former BBC reporter Chris Cramer, suffering from a similar problem, admitted: "The last thing you wanted to do in those days was to admit to your boss that you kind of lost your nerve. [...] Newsrooms were very macho places, you know." Cramer had been carrying his PTSD since 1980 when he, together with 25 other people, was taken hostage in Teheran by six Iranian gunmen. [...]

There was a unique and deeply intimate experience behind each of the quotations. At the same time, they were all journalists' publicly shared narratives about the personal consequences of covering various crisis situations—post-traumatic stress disorder, emotional numbness, feelings of guilt, denial of emotional problems, physical risks, loss of insightfulness, neglecting one's own emotional health when face to face with the tragedies of other people, trauma caused by witnessing distant suffering, confrontation with the paradoxes of passion and detachment, and acting and observing. Obviously, the journalists' own stories accounted primarily for the emotional experiences that ultimately pervade their social and professional lives. All the stories, placing the journalists themselves at the center of the narrative, were also cases of extreme, escalated visibility of journalists' own emotions being reported in the news. It was one of the few occasions when James saw that journalists were the story, not just writing it. [...]

James glanced up to the ceiling; one of the light bulbs was flickering. Then, his gaze, usually searching and radiant with interest but today rather groggy, slid down to an empty massage chair directly opposite him. The bleak space of the early morning hall, albeit situated in the heart of the "First World," was already stirring up melancholy. Studying journalists' emotions is particularly essential in the field of research on crisis reporting. Journalists' emotions lie precisely at the core of the paradox of the traditional journalistic commitment to objectivity/detachment and witnessing other people's suffering [...].

How should (and can) I, James thought, live through, let in, sympathize with, work with, let out, and use for the sake of the story people's tragedies that constitute crises? (How) can I stay detached, neutral, emotionally disinterested, when I actually am there? And do I want to?

He looked at the departure board. The flight to San Lorenzo was 35 minutes late, so he still had almost two hours until boarding. Although he was one of those who felt more comfortable on the move, armed only with independence, and who showed little interest in the steady, calm, and homely kind of happiness, he was never able to focus on work at airports—these boundary zones, these no man's lands. Ruminating about the problem of journalists' emotions, and immersed in the questions it raised, James' thoughts kept wandering to his chaotic memories of colleagues' stories, his own college years, and his newsroom experience.[29] [...]

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[29] Kotišová, *Crisis Reporters,* 1–6.

Importantly, being on the spot and empathizing with the victims often meant that James' colleagues experienced a sharp contrast between the two worlds—the privileged, "superficial" life in European fashion and food capitals and the crisis zones. In the first, people were troubled by being unable to book a holidays trip; in the second, people were starving and dying. In turn, this existentialist feeling of facing more real humanity during crises strengthened the contact, identification, and empathy with the people affected by a crisis: "I felt more connected to the people I met in the crisis zones—people in big difficulties. Looking at them, you see the real face of a human." (Bob) This feeling leads to developing very deep (albeit often short-term) relationships in the field (Bob, Anthony, Diego, Ines, Giuseppe, Gloria).

But it also means that when you come back, as Anthony expanded on the contrast, few people can understand you. "You get in the shower, you turn on the water, and you're crying, because you have hot water and they don't." (Gloria) In the end, you want to go back. To be sent back, "you are just pretending that you are ok" (Anthony). You cannot show any weakness [...].[30]

James did not meet any journalists who were noticeably broken at that moment. At least not at first sight. At second glance, as he traveled down the rabbit hole, he started to meet empty bottles, squeezed out blister packs and traces of other panaceas. Seldom, panic-stricken eyes flickered from the darkness, but immediately vanished, startled by other observing eyes. A few times James had had the chance to meet someone Broken in person. Several reporters told him that they had had problems with alcohol or that they had been seeing a psychiatrist (which, after all, could show also strength). Often, he used to hear pitiful or condescending stories about the pasts of some of his colleagues and mainly his colleagues' colleagues, sometimes told by those in leading (Marek, Čestmír, Olga, Marie) or informally supervisory (Bob, Nicolas, Jesse, Vítek) positions:

> And we have people that are just on medical treatment, that are ill. (Nicolas)
> A half of journalists are alcoholics. ... I don't have a survey on how many journalists work only based on anti-depressants. Hard to say. (Marek)

As Hopper and Huxford [...] observed, there was a lot of truth "in the old stereotype of the reporter who heads straight to the bar at the end of the day." According to some, alcohol had a prominent position among the cure-all treatments, for it had therapeutic properties (see the section "Coping Strategies").

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[30] Ibid., 78.

Some of his friends were so thorough in undergoing therapy that during their talks, James sometimes had a hard time keeping up with them.

James stopped the flight attendant, who was just passing by, and ordered a beer. [...]

Luckily, probably most of James' colleagues were rather Cynics, the typical postmodern characters [...]. More precisely, according to their own narratives about their emotional paths, suspending the emotional reaction and distancing oneself from the emotionally disturbing experience of witnessing close or distant suffering, as seen from a long-range perspective, led to cynicism:

> My father told me, "haven't you become hard-bitten?" [...] You really get hard-bitten. [...] ... if I broke down every time, I couldn't do it. (Ester)
> I think that one displaces the emotions somewhere, and it must seem to you that we are a bunch of ironic fellows. But I think that without such an attribute one couldn't work here. [...] ... it is terribly cynical, but that's the way it is. I think that people gain experience and get tough. (Marie)[31]

Taken together, the excerpts from my interviews and fieldwork, fictionally recalled by James but scientifically interpreted by the author, tell the story of how crisis reporters live inside crises rather than simply being detached observers; how reporters develop specific emotional styles among which cynicism holds a particular position; and how the technology of newsmaking, including the media organizations, power relations, routines, devices, work with words and images and the journalists' own work on their selves, shapes crisis reporters' experiences.

As I will show in the following section, this style of writing seeks to transform the intersections of the factual and fictional narratives into affordances, i.e., opportunities for the author.

Affordances of Creative Nonfiction

Creative Nonfiction Provides the Opportunity to Illustrate What Happens in the Data

Creative nonfiction makes it possible to interconnect content and expression/form: what once would have been called the "form" of the work can convey some of its arguments.

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[31] Ibid., 97–98.

As in the excerpt above, one of the arguments of the text as a whole is that the detachment, neutrality and impartiality that have been traditionally understood as synonyms with journalistic objectivity,[32] are in fact impossible because journalists inevitably enter the situations they "cover." In the same vein, and contrary to the positivist-realist notion of scientific methodology, arguing that values have no room in scholarly research and research reports and that scientists should present only objective facts,[33] researchers and scientists inevitably speak from a certain personal/philosophical/ideological perspective. They have preconceptions that ought to be self-reflexively acknowledged rather than denied (which, of course, must be carefully distinguished from ontological relativism).[34] Their bodily existence makes the Cartesian-based notion of a detached observer producing a neutral, omniscient narrative, surviving and being praised both in journalism and in science,[35] inadequate. As Genette says, the omniscient narrative is, logically, the least verisimilar of any form of focalization.[36] Geertz even warns that simulating the omniscient perspective conceals its own strategic persuasiveness:

> The pretense of looking at the world directly, as though through a one-way screen, seeing others as they really are when only God is looking, is indeed quite widespread. But that is itself a rhetorical strategy, a mode of persuasion.[37]

The use of creative nonfiction questions such an understanding of research accounts in practice.[38]

Although this critique has been already put forward by feminists and poststructuralists, their "bloodless language" – as Paul Stoller puts it – implies that they unintentionally reinforce the dualism they criticize.[39] The fictional style of writing allows the author to bring in the body more than other forms of prose, to bring in the fusion of intelligible and sensible, to

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[32] Mark Deuze, "What Is Journalism? Professional Identity and Ideology of Journalists Reconsidered," *Journalism* 6, no. 4 (2005): 442–64.

[33] Ezzy, *Qualitative Analysis.*

[34] Brian Fay, *Contemporary Philosophy of Social Science: A Multicultural Approach* (Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell, 1996).

[35] Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship.*

[36] Genette, "Fictional Narrative."

[37] Geertz, *Works and Lives*, 141; cf. White, "Value of Narrativity."

[38] Sharlene Hesse-Biber and Patricia Leavy, eds., *Handbook of Emergent Methods* (New York: Guilford Press, 2008), 12.

[39] Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship.*

better incorporate the sensuous body, smells, textures, sensations, and emotions. Similarly, Cristina Archetti claims that writing poems allows her to resituate vividly the individual and the everyday into her research; to offer a glimpse into her interviewees.[40] She routinely accompanies her fieldwork with poems, which she has published in addition to conventional academic papers. In her research on foreign correspondents in London and Oslo she uses poems to bring her interviewees to life through details and anecdotes and to "give the reader a sense of what it feels like to be there."[41]

In short, creative nonfiction can help to illustrate arguments based on research findings and bring the data to life.

The Fictional World Can Serve as an Allegory of the Real World

The fictional story is also able to allegorically express what unfolds in the research data.

In my case, the fictional narrative – the travels of a journalist during which he gains experience and gets tougher – can serve as an allegory of the real story – the emotional development of journalists under crisis circumstances. The whole allegory consists of several metaphors. For example, the figure/process of freezing that forms the essence of the fictional catastrophe at San Lorenzo is a metaphor of the process of becoming cynical. The character of James forms another important metaphor, because the personality traits of this ideal-typical figure are built upon my interviewees' sensemaking of their past selves. He is a harsh, hyper-moral idealist yet lets the catastrophe and the mythic haze of crisis reporting arouse him.

As Archetti writes, academic enquiry is unable to capture and convey the full complexity of reality.[42] In *Aramis*, Latour claims that using scientifiction, injecting a bit of emotion and poetry into austere objects, allowed him to come closer to reality in depicting the conflict and mutual shaping of scientific worlds.[43] Metaphors enable us to suggest the unspoken and to address diverse issues in one single image. Therefore, they allow us to express more complex meanings, tensions, senses, emotions and materiality, and alternate viewpoints, and make for more comprehensive research practice.[44] After all, while metaphor and allegory may seem to belong to the realm of

[40] Archetti, "Journalism."
[41] Ibid., 1114.
[42] Archetti, "Journalism."
[43] Latour, *Aramis*, ix.
[44] See also Hesse-Biber and Leavy, *Handbook of Emergent Methods.*

fiction, White believes that every realized story, fictional or otherwise, is a kind of allegory, because it endows events and actions (that in reality exist in a form of a sequence) with particular significance.[45]

In short, on one hand, using metaphors and putting them into allegories can help the researcher to address certain complex issues in more accurate terms. On the other hand, the metaphor, such as the metaphor of James, can also provide us with a tool for generalization and construction of ideal types.

Creative Nonfiction Helps to Organize the Data into a Meaningful Discourse

The complex, multifaceted sequence or rather ball of events, actions and information that forms our research data needs to be addressed in a meaningful way: ordered into a well-written linear story with a beginning and an end.[46] The order of the fictional narrative can thus have also an organizing function, because its chronology and linearity[47] creates a storyline that is easier to follow and that helps to impose a linear order on the data and related literature.[48] Such a story can help us to understand even cultures or groups that are very different from our own: as White puts it, "We may not be able fully to comprehend specific thought patterns of another culture, but we have relatively less difficulty *understanding* a story coming from another culture."[49]

Poetry, however, can also help to organize the data, although the order and structure of poems can be less linear. Michael Bloor sought to organize his research data and enhance his research account on globalized mariners by including a pastiche of S. T. Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*. In his poem, Bloor analyzes the social contexts of globalized mariners: the characteristics of the shipping industry, global value chains and outsourced labour force. The following strophes form only a small part of the piece:

So spake the doleful mariner,
Transfixing with his e'e,
In fluent, graphic English –
The language of the sea.

Proficiency in English
is a requirement of a seafaring
career.

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[45] White, "Value of Narrativity."
[46] Ezzy, *Qualitative Analysis*, 139.
[47] Genette, "Fictional Narrative."
[48] See Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).
[49] White, "Value of Narrativity," 5.

'I had no wish to work on ships –
Filipinos know it's hard –
Mouths were many, jobs were scarce,
From birth my life was marr'd.

The Mariner telleth of early hardships
and how he and his parents were
cheated by the maritime colleges
and the crewing agents.

'From green island homes we travel,
As mariner, nurse, or maid,
And remit to our loved ones
The pittance we get paid.[50]

Similarly, Archetti stresses that writing poems about foreign correspondents – her communication partners – helped her to reflect on her conversations more freely and creatively (than through the lenses of her initial hypotheses), make sense of the data, and sort important and unimportant details. Writing poems thus became her methodological and analytical tool. At the same time, poems allowed her to include what did not fit into her academic articles while "offering a rounder, more nuanced, and perhaps more engaging view of the practices described in the article and the locations in which they take place."[51]

Creative Nonfiction Can Make the Research More Engaging, and Thus More Engaged

By including the poem on seafarer fatigue, long hours, reductions in crew numbers, seafarer training etc., Bloor seeks to add to the public value of his sociological research.[52] Some other authors and readers of creative nonfiction also agree that a well-organized narrative, even more so when it employs fictional narrative and uses realistic details, is potentially more reader-friendly, which makes research reports less boring,[53] and helps to evoke emotions and images in the audience. This is particularly important when the work aspires to be a piece of participatory (action) research/public sociology: the more people read research accounts, the more people can get engaged. According to one contemporary proponent of creative nonfiction, Asleigh Watson, this is so because sociological novels are able to bring the

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[50] Bloor, "Rime," 31.
[51] Archetti, "Journalism," 1120.
[52] Bloor, "Rime."
[53] Caulley, "Making Qualitative Research Reports Less Boring."

local and the global into a dialogue, stirring up knowledge exchange and interlocutor engagement.[54]

My own experience with the reception of my draft book by my interviewees and other media professionals – some of whom were most interested in the style and their consumption of my main arguments was thus a side effect of this interest – confirms Bloor's hopes.

In short, if the research subjects are more interested in the research due to the fictional narrative, they and potentially also policy makers or the general public[55] can be more easily made aware of social-sociological problems. Thus, in Bauman's words, creative nonfiction can be deployed "in the fight against the social sources of all, even the most individual and private, unhappinesses."[56] This is what makes the "experimental" forms of writing, including creative nonfiction, poetry and pastiche, allies of participatory action researchers and public sociologists.

Creative Nonfiction Can Help to Infuse the Text with Self-Reflexive Moments

Mona Livholts claims that including a personal narrative contributes to the analytical and reflexive strength of research.[57] In her study on media construction of masculinity in the news coverage of the so-called Yorkshire Ripper (a serial rapist and murderer), she developed a reflexive metanarrative approach based on memory work and autobiography. As the author explains, her personal, fiction-style metanarrative invites the reader "to take part in understanding how analysis of media reporting in the present activates memories from the past."[58] This "scholarly autobiography" allowed her to contextualize the study and include reflections upon how the researcher's changing life conditions impact on and are affected by the study.

Archetti also suggests that creative nonfiction (poetry, in her case) enhances self-reflexivity by bringing the researcher to the fore.[59] Our identities, ways of thinking, gathering, selecting and interpreting data are the

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[54] Asleigh Watson, "Directions for Public Sociology: Novel Writing as a Creative Approach," *Cultural Sociology* 10, no. 4 (2016): 431–47.

[55] Bloor, "Rime."

[56] Bauman, "On Writing," 89.

[57] Livholts, "Loathsome"; see also John Van Maanen, *Tales from the Field: On Writing Ethnography* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993).

[58] Livholts, "Loathsome," 198.

[59] Archetti, "Journalism."

cumulative product of our personal and academic histories; including more loosely narrative parts and poems in academic texts can help to show some of the thinking processes and experiences behind the work. For example, in one of her poems, Archetti mixes reflection on her position as a researcher in an increasingly commercialized university environment with her experiences witnessing places connected to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. She writes:

> The poems make apparent those gut feelings and impressions that inevitably guide the researcher in the interpretation of the results [...]. Providing these verbal sketches is a way to document the thinking processes and perhaps even the emotional aspects of research that would otherwise be hidden. This ultimately enables the researcher to achieve greater intellectual honesty.[60]

As I argue in the conclusion below, the enhanced honesty of creative nonfiction can relate not only to one's own intellect, but also to other aspects of research.

Limits, or Negative Affordances

Creative nonfiction has also negative affordances: it poses some challenges both to the author and the reader and complicates some actions that the more traditional writing styles make possible. In this section, I argue that the negative affordances of creative nonfiction are constituted by two main challenges: first, by the difficulty of determining the reading horizon and, second, by the challenge of evaluating the aesthetic merits of scientific texts.

The first and the most important challenge is that both factual and fictional narratives behave differently towards the story which they "report": in the former, the story is "truthful," in the latter, it is invented by someone.[61] The combination of fact and fiction in one discourse makes it complicated to determine the "reading horizon," i.e., to specify whether (or what parts of) the narrative should be believed or read as imaginative.

On one hand, the official status of the text is helpful here, because it determines the reading horizon; the academic status of the text guides the way of reading.[62] On the other hand, the institutional circumstances surrounding the academic discourse, such as publication processes including

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[60] Ibid., 1115–16.
[61] Genette, "Fictional Narrative."
[62] Ibid.

peer-review practice, require some criteria of quality. These criteria are already debated within the community of qualitative social scientists.[63] The second challenge, therefore, is that creative nonfiction further complicates the process of finding some universal criteria applicable to the complex social-scientific landscape, because it raises the question how scientists should deal with aesthetic criteria.

The first challenge – to determine the reading horizon in creative nonfiction – can be dealt with by the author by clearly indicating the historical narrative (i.e., what parts of the narrative are referential) and the features of heterodiegetic fiction (i.e., which parts of the narrative are told, dreamt or imagined by a character and, if need be, which characters are fictional).

The second challenge can be resolved only by peer reviewers and any evaluators of others' work, who need to learn how to deal with the aesthetic aspects of scientific texts. Mills believed that "hard" and "poetic" aspects of texts need to be treated in a systematic way and that any formal rules for sociological poetry would have to do with the ratio of meaning to fact; "maybe success would be a sociological poem which contains the full human meaning in statements of apparent fact."[64] However, no one teaches scientists how to recognize that a poem/short story/novel "contains the full human meaning"; in fact, we are rather taught to be sceptical of any discourse that claims fullness. As Hayden White reminds us, "every narrative, however seemingly 'full', is constructed on the basis of a set of events which *might have been included but were left out*; and this is as true of imaginary as it is of realistic narratives."[65] Sarah J. Tracy proposes that "when considering aesthetic merit, a good question to ask is: 'Did this affect me?'"[66] If the text "is presented in a beautiful, evocative and artistic way," the answer will be probably "yes." Although this might seem inappropriately subjective, such an objectivization of subjectivity (or objectivization of emotionality) is routinely practiced by professional cultural critics who use their emotions and first impressions to guide their criteria-based aesthetic evaluations.[67]

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[63] Tracy, "Qualitative Quality."

[64] Mills, "Sociological Poetry," 34.

[65] White, "Value of Narrativity," 14.

[66] Sarah J. Tracy, "Qualitative Quality: Eight 'Big-Tent' Criteria for Excellent Qualitative Research," *Qualitative Inquiry* 16, no. 10 (2010): 837–51.

[67] Johana Kotišová, "An Elixir of Life? Emotional Labour in Cultural Journalism," *Journalism* (submitted for publication).

Conclusion: Ethics and Aesthetics

Not all the above-mentioned affordances, both positive and negative, are exclusively linked to creative nonfiction. Just as both camera and camcorder allow us to create visual representations of reality, both creative nonfiction and conventional scientific storytelling can enable us to illustrate and organize our findings or can pose challenges to readers and reviewers. The list of affordances above is therefore based on the experiences of creative nonfiction authors, including my own, with *what creative nonfiction allows us to do to a greater extent* than conventional writing does. Taken together, the affordances of creative nonfiction also imply that a creative approach can lead to more ethical research, which is an answer to some of the criticisms directed towards creative nonfiction.

Besides the claim that science written in the form of creative nonfiction is not scientific enough – which I do not deal with here, as it concerns the question of what social science should *do*)[68] – the immediate, at-hand critique that I and perhaps also others[69] have encountered is that creative nonfiction disturbs the clear distinction between facts and inventions, thus contributing to the post-truth fuzziness filling up the public sphere with the rise of social media, which makes creative nonfiction unprofitable or even "dangerous." According to this perspective, fictional writing "enables one to 'say anything' without recourse to the 'facts' of the matter."[70]

Although systematic methodological explorations of the ethical implications of creative methods have only started to emerge,[71] the practitioners of creative nonfiction concur that the reverse is the case. Rather than leading to ontological relativism, creative methods can go hand in hand with enhanced researcher responsibility. Rhodes and Brown, while discussing fictionality as a methodological issue, oppose the view that using fiction leads to "anything goes" relativism. Using creative nonfiction, of course, does not suggest that fact itself is a mode of fiction nor rule out ontological realism. Creative nonfiction by no means implies that the data on which the research accounts are based are fake. The fact that discourse and narrative are constructions does

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[68] Robin Usher, "Telling a Story about Research," in *Perspectives on Methodology and Practice*, eds. George MacKenzie, Jackie Powell and Robin Usher (London: Falmer Press, 1997), 27–41.
[69] Rhodes and Brown, "Writing Responsibly."
[70] The critique forms a part of a trend of methodological conservatism that has been, according to Sarah Tracy, "creeping upon" social science since the beginning of the 21st century.
[71] Helen Kara, *Creative Research Methods for the Social Sciences: A Practical Guide* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2015); Rhodes and Brown, "Writing Responsibly."

not necessarily mean that fact is fiction, and does not make them unreal.[72] The argument of Rhodes and Brown, put forward from within organization studies, expresses the same in other, only seemingly opposite words:

> (1) fictionality can be seen to be a characteristic of research writing in general and therefore; (2) explicitly fictional stories can be regarded as appropriate empirical material for organizational research; and (3) fictional genres can be used as a legitimate mode for the writing of research.[73]

Both types of arguments stress that what creative nonfiction does is allow the author to highlight and self-confess the construction in a Brechtian way, rather than erasing the distinction between fact and fiction.

White claims that narrativizing discourse serves the purpose of moralizing judgements whether authors like it or not;[74] Richard Harvey Brown agrees that plot itself "conveys a moral meaning by encoding in actions some item of wisdom that auditors can decode into their own experience."[75] Therefore, White adds, the objectivistic narrativization of reality risks hiding the moral under the aspect of the aesthetic. On the contrary, employing fiction in research encourages openness, because it requires author and audience to come to terms with the "invented" dimensions of social science writing and the role of the researcher in that inventing. As a result, creative nonfiction leads to firmer incorporation of self-reflexivity into the research process. Vice versa, a researcher's failure to recognize the fictional aspects of her and others' work means, according to Rhodes and Brown, embracing falsehood, and has serious ethical implications:

> To label one's writing 'factual' is to claim an equivalence between one's representations and an externally located 'reality' that not only sidelines the need for reflexivity, but also denies the author's responsibility for his/her writing.[76]

The claim that research represents reality unproblematically, in principle, can undermine the author's responsibility for and ethical approach to her field and communication partners. In this regard, Helen Kara argues

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[72] Schaeffer, "Fictional vs. Factual."
[73] Rhodes and Brown, "Writing Responsibly," 469.
[74] White, "Value of Narrativity."
[75] Richard Harvey Brown, *Society as Text: Essays on Rhetoric, Reason, and Reality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 144.
[76] Rhodes and Brown, "Writing Responsibly," 476.

that there is a link between thinking creatively and working ethically.[77] Based on a study of 258 doctoral students from the physical and social sciences, Michael Mumford et al. found strong and consistent relationships between ethical decision-making and creative thinking.[78] Furthermore, the very openness about creativity in research is an ethical position: "This is because," Kara writes, "such a position recognises that research is constructed, with aesthetic aspects; something that was hidden by the traditional styles of social science writing and presentation."[79] Similarly, according to Stoller, "sensuous," imaginative and creative scholarship is tightly linked to humility.[80]

Creative nonfiction emphasizes that rather than in claims for neutral, objective representation of the Other, a researcher's responsibility is located inside the connection between her self and the Other, i.e., in the way she constitutes the particular others as objects of knowledge.[81] Research ethics resides between our decisions on *what* to write about and *how* to write about it. Creative nonfiction thus interconnects the ethics and aesthetics of writing.

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[77] Kara, *Creative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*.
[78] Michael D. Mumford et al., "Creativity and Ethics: The Relationship of Creative and Ethical Problem-Solving," *Creativity Research Journal* 22, no. 1 (2010): 74–89.
[79] Kara, *Creative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*, 35.
[80] Stoller, *Sensuous Scholarship*.
[81] Rhodes and Brown, "Writing Responsibly."

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