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Writing With vs. Writing About: Co-producing Consciousness-Raising Fiction With Young Women From Aid-Supported Communities in Malawi

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Abstract

While some African women have access to education and avenues for writing and publishing their creative work, there remains a gap in accessibility for young African women from aid-supported communities to write and share stories of importance to them. In contrast to their own silencing, these young women are often written about by the aid organizations supporting their communities for fund or awareness raising purposes. The way in which young women from aid-supported communities are written about can present issues of representation, as often the author is from another culture and a position of privilege. Co-producing consciousness-raising fiction with young women from aid-supported communities offers another approach to representing their stories and has the benefit of sharing knowledge, skills and networks. Through this activity, young women from aid-supported communities can gain access to further education, develop networks for submitting and publishing their creative work, and find their own voice. Furthermore, writing with rather than writing about these young women allows authors working with aid-supported communities to co-produce stories of both cultural and global relevance.

Keywords: consciousness-raising, fiction, aid-supported communities, representation, Malawi

Introduction

The research project *Writing with vs Writing about: co-producing consciousness raising fiction with young women from aid-supported communities* came about through my involvement with educational and skills based programs at the Home of Hope Children's Mission in Malawi. I was frequently asked by colleagues at the orphanage to please "spread the word" about projects and work that we were doing. On the one hand, I felt I had a sense of social duty to share these stories of hope, love, loss, compassion, triumph, and humanity with the world. On the other hand, I felt that these were not my stories to share and an opportunity was being wasted for the young people of Home of Hope to learn creative writing skills to be able to share, or co-produce, their own stories.

During this time, my university studies began to focus on writing about the people, issues, and experiences of Malawi. In critiques of my creative work, I always received the same question: where are *you* in this? I felt that despite my involvement with the Home of Hope, and writing about the issues, themes and stories from discussions with the community, I did not want to put myself into the narratives, because I wanted to share the stories of the people of Malawi without having my privileged self as the focus. However, this is problematic for many reasons the main issue

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being that it continues to perpetuate a power imbalance by speaking for those I sought to represent. It is this problem of representation that led me to this research project to develop a new creative method for writing with adolescent females from aid-supported communities, as I remain convinced that sharing these stories has the power to create change. Sue Wilkinson and Celia Kitzinger (1996, 21) acknowledge that:

> 'These two commitments – to 'giving voice' and to effecting social change – do not always sit easily together. There is, of course, the practical problem policy makers are generally more easily persuaded by large-scale survey research, concise qualitative data and experimental evidence, than they are by collections of personal subjective accounts from a relatively small number of people.'

While this is true, and although large-scale research provides larger quantities of data, the use of fictive stories has the potential to identify issues faced by communities that may be missed in a large-scale qualitative survey. Furthermore, stories as opposed to data have the potential to be communicated more broadly to diverse audiences. Initiatives such as UnCut/Voices Press support this approach (2018) 'To give voice to victims, artists, policy-makers, academics, and others with a personal and professional interest in the subject [female genital mutilation] whose work finds no home in the established press.'

This paper specifically explores issues of representing "the Other" and one potential strategy for destabilizing or interrupting Othering in consciousness-raising fiction. It does this through the development of a method for authors to co-produce fiction about issues/themes of relevance to a particular community. The method aims to address current power imbalances and issues of representation that occur when an author from outside the culture or community writes about the Other instead of with the people being represented. The creative method I present is currently situated within an African context, specifically Malawi, after my own experiences and dialogue with young women from the Home of Hope Children's Mission, an orphanage in Mchinji, Malawi.

Writing About the Other

There are many organizations – NGOs, charities, international government aid programs, etc. – that use stories as a way to raise awareness and funding. Often these stories are non-fiction, journalistic in style, such as the Humans of New York series from countries including Pakistan, Colombia, Iran, South Sudan, Vietnam, to name a few, or *The Born Frees* by Kimberly Burge. But stories can also be written in fiction, particularly when trying to provide an overarching look at a theme or issue an organization wants to shed light on. Examples of this style include *The Heaven Shop* by Deborah Ellis and the UNICEF commissioned Young Adult novel series *Through My Eyes*.

Vivian Yenika-Agbaw (2008, 114) identifies, that 'A new trend is emerging now as non-profit organizations attempt to fill in the publishing vacuum as well,' which has seen, among other efforts, UNICEF series of novels titled *Through My Eyes*. The series, published between 2013 and 2015, contains six books, each set in a country either currently in the grip of war or beginning to rebuild after an extended period of conflict. The novels are aimed at a Young Adult market and written by Australian, Canadian and American authors who have either lived or volunteered in the country they have written about. The novels are used in schools to create discussion and learning

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opportunities. Each book in the series donates a portion of the sales, up to a total of $5,000 per title, to UNICEF. This method, method like the other methods used by outsider-authors, does not account for issues of misrepresentation and the act of silencing that occurs when a privileged author "speaks for" those who are oppressed.

A history of writing in Malawi

The issues of writing about the cultural, gender, socio-economic, and ethnic diversity in Malawi stem further than just stereotypical depictions from non-Malawian authors. To begin to understand the issues of representation in literature written about Malawi, it is important to address the colonial, political and social history of Malawi and its impacts on Malawian culture, literature and women. This history helps to provide context of why there are few Malawian writers, let alone female Malawian writers. It provides context of the political forces used to create fear and persecution of anyone writing or producing literature that identified the realities of life in Malawi during the Presidential rule of Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda (1964-1994).

On July 5, 1964, Malawi formally ended the British rule, obtaining its independence. Five weeks later the Malawi cabinet erupted into crisis and 'the Banda dictatorship' began (McCracken 2012, 336). Dr. Hastings Kamuzu Banda, former Life President of Malawi, was then in power until he stepped down in 1994 (Lee 2010, 33). Lupenga Mphande (1996, 80) identifies that during Banda's reign, Banda 'regulated literary productions in Malawi so as to maintain British cultural hegemony, but to do so as part of an overall plan of and for an African autocracy.' It became a 'criminal offence, punishable by imprisonment, to possess, import, print, publish, distribute, display, exhibit or reproduce any publication the [Censorship] Board had declared "undesirable"' (ibid.). In an interview with Christopher Lee (2010, 37) Malawian writer, Steve Chimombo described the literary censorship as, 'more politically powerful here than in other countries, with the exception of South Africa.' Many Malawian writers during this time were imprisoned or exiled for expressing dissenting views in their written work, while others, had their work halted before publication or banned. Chimombo (ibid., 38) recalls 'you didn't know if it was for religious or political reasons something was banned.' In one instance a book was 'banned because of a single word; someone said "hell" in the story' (ibid.). The impact of this censorship was that many people either were not writing about issues and themes that explored politics, gender inequality, social and cultural traditions and expectations, or other themes that were banned in order to avoid prison.

Another of Banda's methods to gain control of Malawi and its people was the reintroduction of the 'Chewa matrilineal social structure that were crucial for the control of land inheritance. It was a social structure, he claimed, which had suffered from benign neglect under British rule' (Mphande 1996, 80). Banda used the hatred of Malawi's colonialist past to manipulate this traditional system of mediation to 'full and personal advantage' (ibid., 81). As part of Banda's self-appointed position within the matrilineal structure, he also required women to wear clothing made from fabric with his portrait printed on it, and any woman found not wearing Banda's image could face prison (ibid., 81).

In the wake of the colonial experience and Banda's Eurocentric reign, The Malawi Writers Group was established in 1969. The group, 'a handful of students from Chancellor College' was 'designed to fill an important gap in the social and intellectual life of Malawi society' (ibid., 83). The aim of the Malawi Writers Group was to 'find spaces for political criticism and literature of dissent to counter the officially established canon' and to 'restore a sense of identity and pride in the Malawi student by bringing into the classroom works by African writers' (ibid. 83-4). From its

inception, up until the time Banda stepped down as President in 1994, many Malawian writers were exiled or imprisoned. When Banda resigned, many writers did not return to Malawi, however, those that returned or those that managed to survive the censorship years, continue to publish works and create writing opportunities for other writers in Malawi, so that the new generation can begin to write and explore issues and themes relevant to life in Malawi.

In recent history, Steve Chimombo, an author and teacher at Chancellor College at the University of Malawi, was 'involved in the establishment of different organizations, specifically Malawi PEN and the Malawi Writers Union (MAWU)' as well as editing and publishing 'WASI, one of the few magazines committed to the arts in Malawi' (Lee 2010, 33). Writing opportunities throughout Africa continue to expand with writing prizes such as the Caine Prize for African Writing, Writing groups/NGOs such as FEMRITE in Uganda, and opportunities for publishing online and in eBooks. Literacy NGO Worldreader is an organization that supplies 'e-reading solutions' to schools and libraries in Africa, 'including culturally relevant books' and 'critical resources' (Worldreader 2016). Worldreader have also produced an app that allows readers to access content via a mobile phone or tablet. There are currently five schools out of the estimated 6500 schools in Malawi (State University 2016), plus the Malawi National Library Service, benefiting from the Worldreader E-Reader Program (ibid.).

For girls and women in rural areas of Malawi, access to literature via free avenues such as the Worldreader app provides an opportunity to support literacy and potentially engage young women to complete school. While young people may not own their own mobile phone, they will have access to someone within their community who does. Dejan Zurovac, Ambrose O. Talisuna and Robert W. Snow (2012) identify that, 'It has been estimated that over two-thirds of the population in Africa is covered by a mobile network with a penetration rate of 50%, reaching over half a billion mobile phone subscribers across the continent.' The gap in literacy has the 'potential to be bridged through the rapid expansion of mobile network coverage, availability of inexpensive handsets, and decreasing costs of mobile phone services' (ibid.). At present, school participation and attendance rates for females drop from 86.2 percent in primary school to 10.4 percent in secondary school (Unicef 2013). By engaging young women in literacy and education through easily accessible online materials, such as those provided by Worldreader, young women may be encouraged to complete their education. Through access to stories, which are relevant to the lives of young women in Malawi, young women may be encouraged to seek out further literature, discuss the issues presented, and potentially write about issues relevant to their own lives.

Malawi is a country heavily reliant on international aid. For the period of 2004-2011, 'Malawi received 5.3 billion dollars in foreign aid' (De and Becker 2015, 6). Because of this, there are many organizations – NGOs, charities, international government aid programs, etc. – that use stories as a way to raise awareness and funding. Often these stories are non-fiction, and journalistic in style, but stories can also be written in fiction, particularly when trying to provide an overarching look at a theme or issue an organization wants to shed light on, such as Deborah Ellis's *The Heaven Shop* (2004) which, in part, is inspired by a Malawian radio serial dedicated to informing the community about HIV/AIDS. It is this consciousness-raising fiction that this thesis will investigate further, as well as specifically exploring the benefits to community through co-producing creative works.

Creative Writing in the Malawian context

We are at a moment in history where it is important to get Malawian women's stories written down and out into the world. The stories and voices of Malawian women, particularly rural women, have always been important; however, due to the culture of oppression that formed during and after the President Banda enforced censorship of Malawian writers, and again in 2011 when President Bingu wa Mutharika passed a bill into law enabling 'government to restrict any publication that it deemed contrary to national interests' (Wroe 2012, 140), many Malawian women feel that their voices are still silenced. The culture of oppression traditionally stems from political leaders in Malawi. Malawi is an aid-dependent nation due to its 'lack of natural resources or developed markets' (ibid., 141) and this dependency creates a 'gatekeeper state' situation, 'in which ruling powers maintain their position not through widespread internal support but through their access to external resources, their control of the "gate"' (ibid.). A key way to controlling the "gate" is to silence the internal community from voicing what is really going on to the external community who is funding the government's behaviour. Both Banda and Mutharika used censorship as an effective way to oppress the people of Malawi.

Since the censorship lifted the Malawian male voice has seen a resurgence, first through the return of exiled or imprisoned writers after Banda resigned and secondly through the creation of Malawian writer's groups so that the new generation of writers can be published. But many of the writers and educative and publishing opportunities are available to men, while Malawian women still struggle to find avenues to learn literacy, write and publish their stories. At present, determining the number of female Malawian writers, or literature about Malawi, has proven difficult. Makewana's Daughters (2014), an online forum, was developed as a space to promote Malawian women's writing. Dr. Hendrina Kachapila-Mazizwa (History Department, University of Malawi), Dr. Ranka Primorac (Department of English, University of Southampton), and Dr. Timwa Lipenga (French Department, Chancellor College Malawi), the creators of Makewana's Daughters, discovered that, 'Malawian women were still writing, and they are still writing. The fact remains, however, that they have not written as much as the men have done' (Makewana's Daughters 2014). They went on to acknowledge that those Malawian women who were writing, would keep their work as they 'do not know where to send it to' (ibid.). We are starting to see programs and publication opportunities, such as Makawena's Daughters and VoiceFlame appear in the Malawian writing and publishing scene, but in order to work towards the UN Millenium Development Goal (MDG) Goal 3: Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women (UN 2008), now is the time to really engage Malawian women of all literacy levels to share the stories of importance to them to raise awareness of issues both within the local community and the rest of the world.

When I first became involved with the Home of Hope and young women of Malawi, people I knew back home in Australia would ask where Malawi was or mistakenly confuse Malawi with other countries, instead asking me how my travels in Mali, or even Hawaii, had been. Very few people I knew had any idea of where Malawi was. Given that Malawi is a relatively small land-locked country on the continent of Africa and free from civil unrest, terrorism and large-scale corruption, which often feature more regularly in the Western media, it was understandable that a larger percentage of the people I met in the Western world had not heard of Malawi before. However, Malawi frequently featured in the bottom twenty on country comparison lists for health care and health issues (such as HIV/AIDS and Malaria), mortality rates, lack of education of girls, GDP, and many other MDGs or criteria for being considered a developed nation, so how was it

that so many Western people had no idea where Malawi was or what the issues were that the people of Malawi faced on a daily basis?

Mary Tuchscherer, founder or VoiceFlame, identified that, 'Before I went to Malawi, I didn't think about women in Malawi. I didn't have a face I could identify; I didn't have a relationship with the struggles that were happening on the other side of the world. It didn't have anything to do with me' (De Jesus 2012). She continues, acknowledging that 'Once they [Malawian women] shared their stories, they became real' (ibid.). Tuchscherer highlights why people in the Western world know so little about Malawi: what we don't see or read about, doesn't exist to us. Tuchscherer 'established VoiceFlame, a nonprofit organization providing writing workshops, leadership training, school scholarships and publication opportunities to Malawian women' with the aim to 'build awareness about these women' (ibid.). While VoiceFlame is one example of writing opportunities now available to women in Malawi, there is still a long way to go as women's voices remain under-represented, particularly that of young rural women with limited literacy skills.

For young women from rural communities in Malawi, there are three main benefits to writing stories reflective of their lifestyles and interests. These benefits include: 1) Improved literacy skills or interest in literacy/education; 2) Education about issues faced in their community; and 3) Empowerment by bringing into the public sphere a broader discussion about women's issues in Malawi.

Edith Mmela (2006, 7) identifies that 'for many children [in Malawi], the classroom is almost the only place where they come face-to-face with English language.' As mentioned previously, school participation and attendance rates for females drop from 86.2 percent in primary school to 10.4 percent in secondary school (Unicef 2013), therefore, it is important to create interesting and engaging experiences that encourage young women to not only stay in school and complete their education, but, provide opportunities for further engagement and skills based learning outside of the classroom setting. Uta Papen (2005, 5) identifies literacy in the context of development as, 'more than a set of uniform technical skills; it is more appropriate to think of literacy as a social practice, situated in discourses, social relationships and institutional contexts.' Papen continues, suggesting that 'the teaching of new skills, […], needs to build on learners' existing literacy practices' (ibid.). Current curriculum and English teaching in Malawi do not support adequate literacy learning, particularly within a development context:

> 'English language learners score very well on grammar tests, but rarely are capable of communicating in English. They read but without comprehension and translate English text with much difficulty. Students assume passive roles and there is little feedback from the teacher to the learner. Moreover, learning is limited to low levels of learning that is, memorizing facts in order to pass tests. Teachers often ask questions which can be answered by a single word. Such language exchange limits rather than expands children's language and learning. Teachers generally decide what will be talked, read or written about and how. Children are faced with a contradictory situation with regard to how language functions because in their home environments talking develops out of common practical everyday activities, while at school it is controlled and centers around tasks that are relatively abstract and have little to do with prior knowledge (Newman, 1985).'
> (Mmela 2006, 12)

The implementation of a creative writing workshop that allows participants to critically engage with stimulus creative work, as well as express themselves and discuss, or write about, issues of importance to their lives, can assist in improving participant's literacy skills.

Language and literature have long been used to assist in disseminating messages of importance. Research conducted through the University of Malawi identifies ways that health issues and information can be spread to the young people of Malawi, so that the burden of communicating this information does not fall solely to health professionals. G. H. Kamwendo (1994, 26) argues that, 'in schools or colleges, the task of disseminating health messages is the duty of every tutor, even those in subjects such as Geography, Mathematics, Language and Literature, who normally are not expected to teach health education.' Professor Moira Chimombo, a language methodologist at the University of Malawi, introduced AIDS education through a language lessons project at a secondary school in Malawi, 'she encouraged her teaching practice students to use authentic AIDS literature (e.g. newspaper articles, posters, statistics on AIDS etc.) in teaching the four language skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening' (Kamwendo 1994, 26). Another method of disseminating health information is through creative writing. Kamwendo (1994, 26) identifies a written assignment given to a class of first year English Language and Literature students at the University of Malawi:

> 'The class tutor asked the class to write a critique of a short story entitled "Tears of Nomsa". The tutor's aim was to give his students practice in applying principles of literary criticism to the short story. My [Kamwendo's] interest here does not lie in the story's technical matters, but in its central topic – AIDS. […] In producing a critical appraisal of the short story, pupils had an opportunity to get the warning about AIDS.'

The process of learning creative writing skills through the proposed workshops, therefore, provides a variety of learning opportunities for the young women participants to potentially engage with issues of importance in their lives. The act of creative writing provides a space for the young women to then explore issues relevant to their own lives, thereby empowering the participants to voice concerns, issues, and stories that they feel should be represented.

There are a variety of ways literacy programs can empower participants. Learners from the National Literacy Programme in Namibia (NLPN) discussed, 'the importance of social relationships and economic status with regards to their understanding of literacy and of education more broadly' (Papen 2005, 10) during conversations with ethnographer Uta Papen. Papen (ibid.) identifies that:

> 'In this situation, many learners used their lack of education and their inability to communicate in English, to explain their continuing misfortune and economic hardship. Their lack of proficiency in English, which for them was a language that confers status and authority, further reinforced their idea of themselves as 'weak' and lacking both economic power and social standing.'

The choice of English as the main language for the proposed creative writing method, is a decision that is fraught with issues regarding authority, power balances, and respect for the language of the community the project will be implemented in. However, as highlighted in the

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discussion with learners from the NLPN, obtaining proficiency in use of the English language is an empowering quality that provides pathways to further education and employment opportunities otherwise not available to non-English speaking Africans. The choice of creative writing as a form of empowerment for young women in aid supported communities, is not traditional in an African context, however, Augustine H. Asaah (2001, 194) acknowledges that:

> 'In effect, African women's appropriation of the written word reconnects them to power as they seek to positively re-engineer and re-orientate societal growth by using fiction as a source of multifaceted counter-discourse to gender discrimination emanating from diverse sites: traditional African patriarchy, modern androcentric state and violent international order.'

It is why consciousness-raising fiction has been chosen as the creative writing method for this research project, as opposed to creative non-fiction.

Stereotypes and Diversity in Africa

In recent times, female authors globally have attempted to address the male, white, privileged gaze, by challenging the representations previously provided in literature through writing about the female experience. Ania Loomba (1998, 70-1) recognizes that, 'literature is also an important means of appropriating, inverting or challenging dominant means of representation and colonial ideologies.' While there is a need to represent women's experiences and lives in literature, Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003, 24) states that 'Sisterhood cannot be assumed on the basis of gender; it must be forged in concrete historical and political practice and analysis.' In other words, it is not enough for a woman to write about women as though all women are one homogenous group with the same culture, background and experiences, as this could continue to perpetuate incorrect or stereotypical representations of Other. As a result of these issues of representation, Yenika-Agbaw (2008, 67) concedes that, 'depicting adolescent girls in literary works continues to be a challenge even to African female writers.'

How, then, can any author navigate this problem of representing young women from aid-supported communities in consciousness-raising fiction?

In his work, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Freire (1970/1996, 77) identifies that:

> 'It is not our role to speak to the people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world.'

Freire's point on developing a dialogue with people is key to navigating the problem of representing young African women from aid-supported communities in consciousness-raising fiction. Pamela S. Gates and Dianne L. Hallmark (2006, 1) suggest that, '[A]ll children need to see themselves and their culture depicted realistically and authentically in picture books and novels.' By developing a dialogue, authors become aware of the views of others. Dialogue provides the opportunity for young people to voice their concerns, and to identify issues they feel are important to their lives, and allows all participants of the co-produced work to be able to 'critically recognize' the causes of oppression and misrepresentation (Freire 1970/1996, 29).

While there is a lack of consciousness-raising fiction, or any type of fiction, with diverse representations of young Malawian women and the issues they face, written either by Malawian or by privileged authors, Augustine H. Asaah (2011, 194) acknowledges the importance of African women and the written word:

> 'African women's appropriation of the written word reconnects them to power as they seek to positively re-engineer and re-orientate societal growth by using fiction as a source of multifaceted counter-discourse to gender discrimination emanating from diverse sites: traditional African patriarchy, modern androcentric state and violent international order.'

Whether an author is Malawian or not, creating a dialogue and opportunities to write with those the author seeks to represent in consciousness-raising fiction the notion of the Other can potentially be destabilized, or interrupted, and a variety of new representations can be formed.

While some African women have access to education and avenues for writing and publishing their creative work, there remains a gap in accessibility for young African women from aid-supported communities to write and share stories of importance to them. Co-producing consciousness-raising fiction with these young women, rather than writing about them, offers another approach to representing their stories and has the benefit of sharing knowledge, skills and networks.

Consciousness-Raising Fiction

So, what is consciousness-raising fiction? Consciousness-raising fiction explores themes, issues, and representations identified by an oppressed group and is written in a way that actively seeks to transform representations of their world to provide a varied and multi-dimensional view of experiences lived by the oppressed group.

The term consciousness-raising fiction has been used previously in relation to Chick lit as it is 'told in a more confiding, personal tone frequently using first person narration' (Gruslytė, Taujanskaitė, Žemaitytė 2013, 125), and 'In addition, chick-lit has monumentally changed the representation of single women in literature by portraying not figures of pity, illness or derision, but a cast of funny, usually capable women not looking to settle' (Harzewski quoted in Gruslytė, Taujanskaitė, Žemaitytė 2013, 125). In this paper, I draw on the definition provided by Paulo Freire's (1970/1993) work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. In his work, Freire identifies the term '*conscientização*,' which 'refers to learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality' (1970/1993, 17). The action he seeks to take is through education, in order to displace power imbalances over those oppressed. In the foreword to *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Richard Shaull suggests that:

> 'Education either functions as an instrument that is used to facilitate the integration of the younger generation into the logic of the present system and bring about conformity to it, *or* it becomes "the practice of freedom," the means by which men and women deal critically and creatively with reality and discover how to participate in the transformation of their world.'
> (1970/1993, 16)

It is this "practice of freedom" that consciousness-raising fiction seeks to stimulate.

Methodology

One potential method for destabilizing or interrupting Othering is for an author to co-produce consciousness-raising fiction with young women from aid-supported communities rather than write about them. Stefan Lundström and Christina Olin-Scheller (2014, 149) acknowledge that 'young people not only want to be spectators or consumers but they also want to be active participants and co-creators of cultural products.'

The objectives of this research project are: (1) to examine the ways in which authors of multiple cultures can work with aid-supported communities to co-produce fictional stories about the issues faced by aid-supported communities; (2) to produce a suite of stimulus short stories that are informed by an analysis of fiction by other writers, discussions with people from aid-supported communities and my own experiences in Malawi; (3) to develop a method for creative writers who wish to engage with aid-supported communities; (4) to reflect on the implementation of the creative method with young women at the Home of Hope Children's Mission within the Malawian context.

To achieve these objectives, this research project will be practice-led and employ action research, textual-analysis and auto-ethnographic methodologies.

Practice-Led Research

Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean (2009, 2) propose that practice-led research characterizes 'the way in which practice can result in research insights, such as those that arise out of making a creative work and/or in the documentation and theorization of that work.' Carole Gray and Julian Malins quoted in Enza Gandolfo (2012, 64) describe 'Practice-led research in the creative arts as:

> […] firstly, research which is initiated in practice, where questions, problems and challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners […]'

These methodologies and specific methods, as elaborated on by Brad Haseman (2006, 100), 'include: the reflective practitioner, (embracing reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action); participant research; participatory research; collaborative inquiry, and action research.'

Initially, this research project came about because of a creative impulse, rather than a distinct problem to solve. Haseman (2006, 100) suggests that 'many practice-led researchers do not commence a research project with a sense of "a problem". Indeed, they may be led by what is best described as "an enthusiasm of practice".' This "enthusiasm" leads practitioners to 'commence practicing to see what emerges' (Haseman 2006, 101). This practice of writing stories of aid-supported communities began long before this PhD project. Through the continued practice of writing these stories, the problem of a privileged author representing aid-supported communities emerged.

This research project, therefore, arises from a problem with the creative work and creative practice, and solving the problem – how to co-produce consciousness-raising fiction with young

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women from aid-supported communities – leads the research. The proposed impact of this research is the development of a strategy for authors to utilize to co-produce fiction with aid-supported communities. The strategies success will be measured through auto-ethnographic reflection. The final outcome of this research project is the creative method; however, other potential outcomes include networks established between participants and other creative writers in Malawi, participants connected to potential publication outlets, and the creation of an ongoing writers circle.

Action Research

Hilary Bradbury Huang (2010, 93) identifies action research as, 'an orientation to knowledge creation that arises in a context of practice and requires researchers to work with practitioners.' Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead (2011, 7) state that practitioners:

> 'produce their accounts of practice to show: (1) how they are trying to improve what they are doing, which involves first thinking about and learning how to do it better; and (2) how they try to influence others to do the same thing. These accounts stand as their own practical theories of practice, from which others can learn if they wish.'

In this research project, I explore ways of improving current practice when representing and writing about Other. The development of the creative method to write with Other, rather than about them, provides a practical theory of practice that other authors may choose to implement or modify. The cycle can be envisaged as follows:
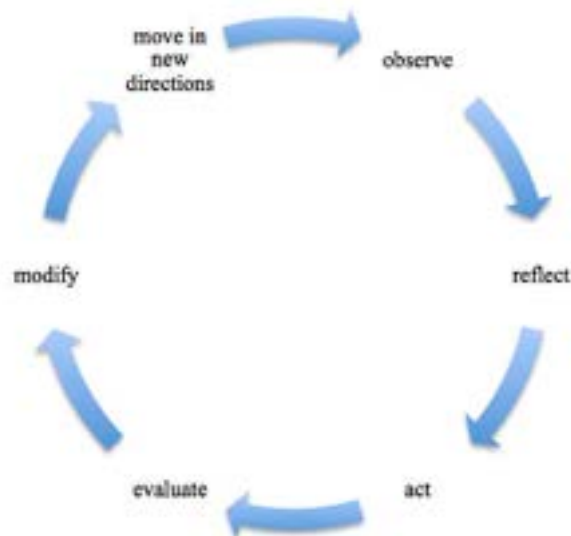

Figure 1.1 An Action research cycle

Patrick J. M. Costello (2011, 9) states that, 'while action research can often involve undertaking a single cycle of planning, acting, observing and reflecting, it can also lead to more lengthy and substantial studies.' The creative method moves through two rounds (due to time limitations of the PhD) of the action research cycle to investigate the proposed creative method and to allow for

changes to be made based on observation and reflection of the implementation of the creative method.

Auto-ethnography

Carolyn Ellis, Tony Adams and Arthur Bochner (2011, para 1) define auto-ethnography as, 'an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze (graphy) personal experience (auto) in order to understand cultural experience (ethno).' Ann A. Neville-Jan quoted in Sally Denshire (2014, 831) identifies auto-ethnography as 'an alternative method and form of writing.' Denshire (ibid.) continues, stating that auto-ethnography falls 'somewhere between anthropology and literary studies' and that '[w]riting both self and others into a larger story goes against the grain of much academic discourse.' This research project examines my own practice and responses to the implementation of the creative method. It does so to identify potential negative, or harmful, representations of Other in the creative work by testing the method in the community, and through my engagement with the young women of the Home of Hope. My own auto-ethnographic reflection will attempt to investigate whether I am perpetuating the privileged "savior" position through the creative method, as well as exploring the cultural and social practices of both myself and the participants from the Home of Hope. I acknowledge that it is difficult to step outside of one's self, therefore, the analysis of responses from the participants, and the community, will help investigate markers of my own privilege. Wolff-Michael Roth (2005, 9) acknowledges that:

> 'auto/ethnography, when […] conducted in a disciplined manner, can therefore, contribute tremendously to the study of cultural practices concretely realized in our patterned behaviours acquired in and through socially mediated participation in societal affairs.'

Auto-ethnographic (Holman Jones 2005) reflection is employed to examine 'other-self relationships' (Tomaselli 2013, 166). Through reflection on the implementation of the creative method, I can identify issues with: the method; the participant's engagement in the process; and my own practices. Based on the findings in my reflective practice, an amended creative method can be implemented as the second action research cycle.

Textual analysis

The SAGE Encyclopedia of Qualitative Research Methods (Lockyer 2008, 865) states that '[t]extual analysis is a method of data analysis that closely examines either the content and meaning of texts or their structure and discourse.' Alan McKee (2003, 2) relates this definition back to researchers and practitioners as 'a way for researchers to gather information about how other human beings make sense of the world.' McKee (ibid.) explains further that '[w]hen we perform textual analysis on a text, we make an educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text.'

This research project read texts that have been written by authors – from a different culture – writing about aid-supported communities in an African context to underline some of the problems with this approach. I investigate the UNICEF commissioned novel, *Amina*, from the *Through My Eyes* series, and the Deborah Ellis novel, *The Heaven Shop*, through a textual analysis,

in the form of thematic analysis, to explore 'interpretations of texts made by people who consume them' (McKee 2003, 2). The interpretations of these texts, specifically examine theme choices in the works of fiction and how the themes represent Other, as this is the focus of the creative method research.

Creative Writing Method Steps

In order to develop this strategy for co-producing consciousness-raising fiction, I suggest the following four steps take place:

1) Consultation with community
2) Write short stories as stimulus
3) Conduct Creative Writing Workshops
4) Co-produce stories

Before any co-produced writing can take place, it is vital that an author consults with the aid-supported community they seek to work with to develop a greater understanding of the communities needs and cultural differences that can impact a co-produced project. Once consultation has taken place, an author can develop a set of stimulus stories based on the outcomes of the community discussions. These short stories can then be used in a series of creative writing workshops to encourage discussion about issues of representation, themes, and other tropes of fiction writing. For the initial set of workshops, stimulus stories will be used as it provides a starting point for participants as they learn creative writing skills and provides them with material to begin to discuss issues of representation.

The first research cycle of creative writing workshops, which are part of the creative method, will take place with young women aged 16-18 years who attend secondary school at the Home of Hope Children's Mission in September this year. All interested female students in the age range will be invited to participate in the workshops. A minimum of five participants will be selected to participate in data collection by working together with myself to either re-write a stimulus story originally written by me or write a completely new story.

The co-produced writing approach to constructing a new text adopts the 'Shared Writing' approach, as identified by Elaine Bukowiecki (2014, 17). It is this method that I propose will allow an author and young people from aid-supported communities to collaborate to create a piece of consciousness-raising fiction that works to remove power imbalances and issues of representation of the oppressed Other that can be found in current fiction written by a privileged author, especially when authorship also lies with the entire collaborative writing team.

As this method is yet to be tested, I accept that this may seem an overly-simplified solution to a complex problem. This method, however, is a starting point for creating a new, or multiple new ways, of collaborating with young people to not only share their stories, but to foster skill development and networks for young people from aid-supported communities to write their own stories and share them with the global community.

Conclusion

By engaging with the people or community during the writing process, consciousness-raising fiction can be critiqued for issues of representation before the story is published, as well as providing an opening for the co-production of creative works and sharing skills and opportunities

that do not follow the traditional writing pathways. Linda Alcoff (1991-1992, 23) recognizes that, 'We should strive to create wherever possible the conditions for dialogue and the practice of speaking with and to rather than from the possibility of misrepresentation.' Consciousness-raising fiction therefore has the potential to interrupt Othering through the collaborative engagement and involvement of an author and young people from aid-supported communities in the creative writing process.

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