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Are we allowed to use fictional vignettes in cultural geographies? **[AQI]**

cultural geographies

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DOI: 10.1177/1474474016673064

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Abstract

Fictional vignettes are narrative texts that academic researchers may invent in order to illustrate arguments or to present their research outcomes; they are stories or situations that do not strictly report factual realities observed by the author, but that, in any case, implement the heuristics for the arguments that the author wants to raise. Although there are several works in social sciences taking advantage of fictional narratives, geographers have started mobilising invented stories in their writings mostly recently, provided that a variety of creative methodologies had been introduced. The aim of this article is to present fictional vignettes as an integrative research method and writing technique, while discussing potential opportunities and limits relating to their use in geographical research, particularly within the recent rise of various ‘creative methodologies’ in cultural geographies.

Keywords

autobiography, autoethnography, creative methodologies, ethnofiction, fictional story, fictional vignettes, invented stories

At the end of their presentation at the Conference on Geography, both Sophie and Paul were ready for questions. The room was not at all crowded; probably less than 15 people took part in the session. After a few seconds, a man with a red beard raised his hand:

I think your analysis is interesting because it offers a vivid portrayal regarding a case for domestic violence, with an accurate description of the changing feelings of the male protagonist: his rising but castrated anger in a public space – when, in the restaurant, the female character started making fun of him – and then, later at home, his unexpected violent behaviour, coupled with his awareness of acting badly. But you never gave us details on your sources, on how you acquired the data; you just mentioned something like ‘fictional vignettes’. How did you access the intimate feelings of a couple that had had an experience like that?

Paul looked at Sophie: she was staring at him. It was clear that she expected him to reply to the question:

Well, actually . . . we accessed that material through psychoanalysis and a kind of fictionalised autoethnography. But these are marginal elements: the most relevant part of the analysis is the one concerning the spatialities of violence.

Then, a woman with many piercings on her face loudly joined in the discussion with a question:

What do you mean? Psychoanalysis? Did you acquire transcriptions of sessions?

Well, Sophie and I had psychotherapeutic treatment after . . . ehm . . .

The woman looked surprised:

You mean that you and your colleague are the protagonists of that horrible story you just analysed?!?

Not really . . . we changed most of the things but . . . actually . . . in some ways, yes . . . but we wanted to analyse the logic behind the facts, without talking directly about ourselves; violence is quite a common episode within many daily spaces, it's a sensitive topic that is exploited in journalism, without even focussing on the emotional implications for all the characters involved . . .

Oh my God. You are openly admitting that your analysis is false! It's not real! It is based on a story you invented! No interviews, no fieldwork, n-o-t-h-i-n-g!

Sophie was pale. This was exactly the kind of argument that she and her colleague Paul wanted to avoid. Feeling involved, it was her turn to defend their presentation:

What we have just described is not fake; it's fictional. And it's based on our own experiences, as we openly reported at the beginning of the presentation. The point is that our 'real' story was just one of many, and was not that interesting in itself. We decided to change many parts, in order to enliven it. We haven't built generalisations out of our own story, claiming for example that things usually work that way. But the story is definitely credible, and it allowed us to build and work on arguments which are coherent with the topic of this session. And we never said it was true; on the contrary, we are openly saying that it's fictional!

The man with the red beard started speaking again:

The problem is that the story is largely false, because it doesn't adhere to the observed reality, and this means that you're not producing geographical knowledge. Maybe a good story, maybe a novel, but not geographical knowledge. Not to mention that the guy over there [indicating Paul] is probably a violent jerk, and maybe you are a dominated subject if you are here presenting this very private shit!

Paul looked sadly at the floor. Sophie took a deep breath and replied,

I expected this kind of reaction, and that is one of the reasons that pushed us to mobilise a fictional story. We wanted to develop a theory out of the ideas that we cultivated from our daily life and from our sessions with our therapist. You are not supposed to think of Paul as the bad guy in the story. The point is not to raise moral evaluations or discuss the details of our private life.

The scholar chairing the session announced that it was time to move to the main hall for the plenary session. No one talked to Paul or Sophie during the walk to the main hall, but everybody moved away from them with a mixed sense of anger and confusion. As empathetic human beings, they felt disturbed, as if they really had been there, in the spaces the story described, experiencing the shift from the warmth of intimate places to the eeriness of topophobia. But as researchers, they were distressed, as if their role was being menaced or even erased by the proposal they had just listened to.

Introducing fictional vignettes

This article discusses potential uses and limits of fictional vignettes in cultural geographies, as in the one just presented: a fictionalised story about the spatialities of domestic violence presented in a conference that never took place, but that might have. There is not a single definition of what a fictional vignette is and indeed a number of philosophical contributions have questioned the boundary between fiction and non-fiction.¹ For the purpose of this article, we will not try to define fiction in terms of genre or narrative style; rather, we will just use a conventional and intuitive understanding of fiction, intended as a narrative material that is derived from the imagination of the author, in addition to, or rather than, from observed empirical facts or from secondary sources.² The kind of fictional vignettes discussed in this article are short stories invented purposely by the authors of academic papers for a number of reasons, for example, enlivening a text, like the two geographers in the initial vignette.

Of course, the fictional is not a category standing in dichotomous opposition to the non-fictional, as there can be different extents of fictional elements in different stories. For example, changing the names of the persons mentioned³ and other marginal details when reporting an observed story, in order, for example, to preserve the anonymity of the characters, to remove elements that may sound offensive to the readers, or to hide illegal acts performed by the researcher during her or his activity, implies a relatively low level of fictionalisation. Conversely, the invention of a story from scratch, in order to mobilise some elements of the narration in a metaphorical sense, implies a high amount of fictionalisation. But the boundary between these two cases is subjective and ambiguous, as emphasised in recent debates on the role of stories and storytelling in geography.⁴

In order to clarify the terminology used in this article, we will use the expression fictional vignettes in strict relation to 'ethnofiction' (in this article being used as a synonym for 'ethnographic fiction') and 'ethnographic novels', terms that will be discussed later in the article. While fictional materials such as movies, novels and comics have been widely examined in cultural geographies, for example, in order to study landscapes, cultural discourses and spatial representations, the academic geography writer usually did not 'invent' stories, at least up to recent times. Recently, debates on the rise of creative expressions as disciplinary practices have started a new cooperation between artistic expressions and geographic scholarships. Geographers are more and more keen to speak other languages, to cross boundaries and to perform action in new terrains.⁵ In this sense, it will be argued, fictional vignettes may play a role in developing analysis and texts in cultural geographies, given some risks that will be discussed in the final part of the article.

In order to present these arguments, the next section introduces the existing body of literature on fictional vignettes developed in other disciplines, particularly history and anthropology, and it is followed by a section discussing the crisis of the imaginary of 'truth' in social sciences. Subsequently, the section 'Fictional Stories, Creative Writing and Creative Methodologies in Cultural Geographies. Problems and Possibilities' situates fictional vignettes in the field of geography, particularly within recent debates on creative methodologies arising in cultural

geographies. Then we will go back to the fictional vignette presented at the beginning of this article to introduce some concluding remarks and to summarise the potential benefits, limits and risks connected to the use of fictional narratives in cultural geographies.

From Hayden White to James Clifford. Questioning academic narrative styles

Debates about the role of fictional elements within social sciences have been developed in different disciplines. Broadly speaking, there are at least two ways of conceptualising the fictional. On the one hand, a large number of authors, particularly in the framework of post-structuralism, have stressed how every scientific representation is always, to some degrees, fictional; on the other hand, a more limited number of authors have explicitly embraced fictional techniques in order to develop their arguments and writings.

The first argument, which refers to the well known impossibility of building representations mirroring reality, has pervaded many disciplines, such as history, whose ultimate goal is commonly perceived as giving meaning to the ‘facts of the past’.⁶ Many authors, during the 1970s, in fact discussed how history may have been intended as a narrative discourse. This is particularly the case of Hayden White, an author who has had a meaningful impact also in cultural geographies.⁷ White investigated the role of tropes, poetic figures, metaphors and styles in building historiographical styles and approaches, in order to argue provocatively that there is no possibility of establishing absolute ‘scientific’ knowledge concerning the past, and that history is ultimately ‘a form of fiction-making’.⁸

Conversely, the explicit use of fictional stories has been particularly developed in the field of anthropology, and works of ‘ethnographic fiction’ were frequently written, particularly in the 1920s and 1930s.⁹ Despite the fact that many anthropologists often discouraged novelistic writing in order to strengthen the ‘scientific’ status of the discipline, Clifford Geertz’s exhortation to produce ‘thick description’ and to ‘blur genres’ opened the way for a series of ‘literary turns’.¹⁰ A key text that provoked huge debates inside and outside the sphere of anthropology has been the 1986 edited collection *Writing Culture*. In the introduction to the book, James Clifford wrote,

Ethnographic writings can properly be called fictions in the sense of ‘something made or fashioned’, the principle burned on the word’s Latin root *ingere*. But it is important to preserve the meaning not merely making, but also of making up, of inventing things not actually real.¹¹

Clifford’s words should not be intended as a suggestion for anthropologists to ‘make up’ their data; rather, they have pointed to the creative interpretation inherent in any representation of society, and to the evident fact that – in a way similar to Hayden White’s argument for history – ethnographic truths are always partial, committed and incomplete.¹² In this sense, Clifford and other anthropologists suggested that ethnographies *are fictions*. At the same time, some authors have pushed the argument in a different direction, suggesting that it is possible to produce ethnographies that *are fictional*, in the sense of entirely imagined fabrications more or less disconnected from fieldwork, mixing literature, poetic sensitivity and dense description.¹³

A meaningful example along these lines is, in a different academic area, Bruno Latour’s *Aramis*; a highly experimental work described by the author himself as ‘scientifiction’.¹⁴ The book includes a scientific discussion of interviews and elements of a detective story concerning the ‘killing off’ of Aramis, a personal rapid transit system that was supposed to be implemented in Paris. Here, the fictional elements are largely mobilised in order to produce intriguing and lively dissertations on abstract theories, such as Actor-Network Theory, and in order to draw a bridge between reflections on technology and culture:

What genre could I choose to bring about this fusion of two so clearly separated universes, that of culture and that of technology, as well as the fusion of three entirely distinct literary genres – the novel, the bureaucratic dossier, and sociological commentary? [...] The hybrid genre I have devised for a hybrid task is what I call *scientification*.¹⁵

A recent work explicitly playing with the hybridisation of academic and fictional writing is Marc Augé's 2011 book *No Fixed Abode: Ethnofiction*; the book does not characterise itself as a novel, nor as ethnography in the strict sense.¹⁶ According to Augé, it is an intermingling of the two, blending both ethnographic research and fictional narrative. In the book, no details are provided about the methodology at the heart of this blending, and Augé's book is mostly a provocative critique of the idea that social sciences have to be detached, objective and unbiased, rather than a well-defined methodological alternative.¹⁷

All these works emphasise the hybrid status of fictional elements; on the one hand, fictional vignettes may be imagined as methodological devices which allow for accessing and analysing specific social phenomena (such as domestic violence in the made-up paper presentation at the beginning of this article), and, on the other hand, as representational tools for describing and translating, in an effective and appealing way, the results of research.¹⁸ In fact, the use of fiction as a style for presenting the results of analysis may enhance the interest of the reader or the audience, provide a deeper sense of participation, suggest open-ended alternative endings and conclusions, and widen the accessibility of research advancement outside the borders of the academia.¹⁹

Mobilising fiction and decentring truth

In the previous section, we have discussed some works that can be considered seminal references in questioning the seemingly complete and unbiased 'truth' of certain styles of academic narratives. Similarly, decentring truth is at the basis of the hybrid character of fictional vignettes, since they stand in-between academic writing and fiction. But fictional vignettes have a hybrid status also for another reason; they are always in-between 'real' and 'imagined' worlds. Indeed, there is not a clear boundary separating the fictional from the non-fictional; all fictional works draw on the 'real' world.²⁰ According to Richardson and St Pierre, given the progressive blurring of genre and our contemporary understanding that all writing is narrative writing, the main difference separating fictional writing from scientific writing is the claim that the author makes for the text.²¹ And the positionality of the author matters also for another reason: the fact that the situations at the basis of stories have been created from the authors' imagination, strongly situates them in a position which is close to the boundaries of autobiography and autoethnography.²² Fictional stories, in fact, must not be considered as cultural products that are 'external' to the author who produces them. The invention of a fictional vignette requires the mobilising of a mixture of personal memories, experiences, fantasies and imagination. Putting it another way, although fictional, the evoked stories and characters frequently resonate, at least partly, with experiences gone through or dreamt of by the author, or with stories that have been read or heard by the author. It is not a coincidence that many authors stress that their fictional vignettes have all been produced by the assemblage of personal observations, fragments of dialogues and other 'real' experiences.²³ At the same time, common to both autobiography and autoethnography is the possibility of privileging the role of emotions, situated knowledge and perceptions, in ways, it can be argued, that are not too distant from fictional writing.²⁴ The point here is that, in order to clearly operate a conceptual distinction between autoethnography and fictional vignettes, it is necessary to mobilise the quite controversial concept of 'truth'. In fact, as anticipated, the 'truth' is conventionally the fundamental distinguishing factor between fiction

and other genres, such as the social sciences and journalism, which are supposed to present accounts of 'real' people, places and events. Looking at the intersection of literature, writing and social sciences today, this simple binary opposition is being eroded.²⁵ The truth is indeed slippery: as anticipated, it is relatively easy to argue, from a theoretical point of view, that there is no single 'truth' to be discovered,²⁶ that science is an interpretative social practice,²⁷ that any kind of knowledge is embedded in discourses and, ultimately, in power relations,²⁸ and that there is no 'nature' except a nature that is subject to human classification.²⁹

Autobiography and autoethnography are methodological tools and practices specifically emphasising the role of situated forms of knowledge, subjective perceptions and interpretations, and access to emotions and commitment.³⁰ With their theoretical emphasis on issues of positionality and reflexivity, autobiography and autoethnography stress the partial, negotiated, processual, relational and representational nature of truth and knowledge.³¹ This does not mean that researchers do not need to be rigorous and transparent in their works: the literature on qualitative methodologies commonly stresses that one of the challenges of qualitative writing consists in the ability of the author to explore and make explicit assumptions and research agendas, and to write a text that somehow gives voice to what has been observed; reflexivity and openness to scrutiny by readerships would establish the validity, credibility and trustworthiness of a research text.³²

Fictional stories, creative writing and creative methodologies in cultural geographies. Problems and possibilities

Geography has a long history in mobilising stories as part of its repertoires.³³ However, it is just in recent years that stories, storytelling and fictional styles have gained a renewed centrality. According to Hayden Lorimer, 'geographers can make some reasonable claim to having rediscovered the power of the story'.³⁴ This is particularly visible in the field of cultural geographies, which has been recently characterised by important and meaningful debates on creative methodologies³⁵ and creative forms of writing, often going beyond a mere binary opposition between fiction and non-fiction, as well as truth and untruth. In the framework of what he calls 'non-representational ethnography', Phillip Vannini³⁶ reflects particularly on the various possibilities that researchers may adopt to emphasise the momentary, viscous, spirited, embodied, more-than-human, precognitive and non-discursive dimensions of spatially and temporally lived experience, by building on empirical narratives that 'make sense' within the world encountered. At the same time, these narratives shall underscore the situatedness, partiality, contingency and creativity of that sense-making. In order to do so, Vannini refers to authors such as Latham, Dewsbury and Thrift,³⁷ and calls for a fight against 'methodological timidity', for the disruption of research habits and for the experimentation with novel expressions of creativity.

Among these novel expressions, and crucially for the arguments of this article, some recent contributions have focused on fictional stories and fictional narrative techniques in order to develop their arguments. Derek McCormack, for example, writing in a special issue of *cultural geographies* on 'Excursions – Telling Stories and Journeys', assembled various stories concerning the excursions of 'atmospheric things', mixing different styles, autobiographical narratives, narrative approaches, in order to stress their 'circumstantial' qualities. In the same issue, Parr and Stevenson analyse the touching story of Sophie, a missing person.³⁸ The story is partly fictional, partly based on real facts derived first from interview transcripts, and still ongoing, and it allows the authors to develop arguments about crisis-led mobilities, traumatic stories and the possibility of transforming traumas, also by the means of telling stories.

What probably first strikes the reader – actually, what happened to us – is the highly touching and fascinating construction of these articles. Put it simply, they are far from 'boring'; on the

contrary, they are lively, moving, provocative and challenging. But, more crucially for the arguments of this article, they largely build on fictional elements, hence leading to question if the fictional and narrative elements are secondary elements in these essays, or rather if they are the most crucial ingredients of the texts.

This consideration is central for the recent contribution of Fraser MacDonald 'The ruins of Erskine Beveridge':³⁹ it is a narrative essay concerning the story of a Scottish archaeologist and his family. MacDonald's work aims at challenging ordinary conventions of writing papers in academic journals, particularly by suggesting that issues of form and style deserve the same attention commonly attributed to methodology. In this sense, he proposes a text that is primarily a fictional narrative, but that at the same time has to be considered as an example of a style of writing that might be useful for performing and for reporting geographical research. In MacDonald's intentions, his essay, while being a fictional narrative, is analytical in its scope. Indeed, the analysis is not always explicit, but it can find expression in allegory and can be 'tucked away in the shadows of significant narrative detail'.⁴⁰

Despite brave experiments like these, it is clear that the explicit mobilisation of fictional stories as research strategies is still quite uncommon in this discipline. A possible explanation may be that the 'truth' is, by and large, a moral category. In the initial vignette, at the beginning of this article, the listeners at the conference felt upset by acknowledging that the story was, to a certain degree, 'fake'. In a similar vein, it is not that unusual to suppose that the more data adheres to a supposed and conventional truth that is external to the researcher ('objective', 'positive' data), the more the research is considered 'good' or even 'useful'. Indeed, the accuracy of data is a very important aspect of research, but 'untruth' and 'fictional' materials are arguably 'real' materials that can also provide interesting insights on social phenomena.

Most theories in the social sciences are developed on the basis of the observation of evidence and case studies. Specific and situated phenomena are often described in order to let the reader imagine larger 'social facts'.⁴¹ Fictional vignettes have to be considered in this latter framework: the fictional story may be so explicative as to be a sort of Weberian ideal-type, which is an assemblage of characteristics and elements of the given social fact, without a direct correspondence to all of the characteristics of any one particular case.⁴² Used as a descriptive device, the fictional vignette works therefore as a metaphorical tool: it describes something by the means of describing something else. However, metaphors are by definition 'false': their use is to stimulate the production of knowledge through the search for analogies.⁴³ In the same vein, fictional vignettes may not be true, but they may be useful in order to detect working mechanisms in social facts; they can evoke a sense of place and work 'nonrepresentationally' in order to express sensuous geographies.⁴⁴

This emphasis on the potential role of imagined elements in research processes obviously has to be handled with caution. Fraud and misconduct are just around the corner, and issues of trust and reliability are at play. Critical debates originated in other disciplines may be useful. Roger Chartier, for example, notes that the ideas of Hayden White, and particularly his thesis that historical knowledge is not conceptually different from the knowledge brought by fiction, raised a number of objections: by holding history to be a form of fiction-making, an absolute and highly dangerous relativism is implicitly supported, one that denies all possibility of establishing 'scientific' knowledge concerning the past, ultimately losing all the capacity to choose between the true and the false, to tell what happened, and to denounce falsifications.⁴⁵ This position echoes the kind of critique that has been raised, in the opening fictional vignette, by the girl with many piercings.

In the field of anthropology, Kirin Narayan⁴⁶ has argued that for ethnography to become too much like fiction is to lose clarity, so that readers have to puzzle along, trying to guess what is the point of the text and how likely such events would happen. In different terms, it means losing

the power of disciplinary shorthand for situating lives, to take potentially dangerous liberties in attempting to speak from within other minds, and to undermine the importance of close, respectful attention to the lives of other actual people that characterises most empirical research, also in geography. This position resonates with the kind of critique that has been proposed, in the vignette, by the man with the red beard.

Given these reasonable problems, the question of how to set up the boundary between ‘creative’ inventions and useless distortions is evidently a difficult one. While a clear, definite, answer would be nonsense here, it sounds reasonable that, in producing fictional vignettes, their logics and rationales have to be fully discussed, the balance between the fictional and observed data has to be clearly stated, and the overall result has to be judged in terms of its effectiveness and usefulness, rather than realism or, even more, adherence to a supposed reality.⁴⁷ In this sense, they need as much crafting skills as reporting ethnography, even if they may or may not be based on participant observation or a ‘true’ fact of somebody’s own life but on an imaginative effort.

Fictional vignettes may be particularly important for our discipline. Geography, emphasising the role of heterogeneity and diversity,⁴⁸ is generally sceptical in regarding to essentialism, reductionism, universalism and ‘grand narratives’. Any way of reporting research is a way of ‘telling a story’, but there are a variety of ways to produce this story, or – in the words of the commitment beyond this act – to tell facts about socio-spatial phenomena.⁴⁹ The production of fictional vignettes may be a strategy for opposing universal claims.

Consider, for example, a sentence like ‘in heterosexual families, women are subjugated because of their particular position regarding waged work and, above all, the non-waged activities they carry on in the sphere of reproduction’. This is a general idea, but it is far from a universal law. Is it possible to propose a counter-argument, without an empirical observation of a couple, where the woman is not in a marginalised position but, rather, the man is in a subaltern position? Fictional vignettes allow us to explore the universe of possibilities. By assembling ideas from social sciences, personal observations and personal imagination, it may be possible to describe the hypothetical case of a woman who is in a more powerful position in comparison to her partner, and in that position she explicitly or implicitly assumes paternalistic (should we say maternalistic?) attitudes towards her partner, for example, ‘helping’ him in advancing his career, and he in turn becomes depressive and dominated. The case is not strictly real; the author might not have had the possibility of having an interview in this sense, but the vignette, in general, presents a plausible case for counter-argumentation. A fictional vignette like this may also offer interesting insights on the authors, their cultural frameworks and their sensibilities as writers. A recent experiment that may be considered here refers to the recent ‘Future Fossils’ exhibition, which has been curated and organised by Beth Greenhough, Jamie Lorimer and Kathryn Yusoff.⁵⁰ The exhibition focuses on an imaginary group of future earth-writers, in 5000 AD, in an exhibition of specimens from their recent Earth expedition, dating from the period informally known as the Anthropocene, that is to say our contemporary age. The images, fragments and discourses provocatively exhibited tell many stories about the various authors involved in the exhibition, about the way we imagine the future, ultimately producing knowledges and sensibilities strictly connected to geographical speculations. In this sense, fictional materials may have a highly communicative and even educational potential. A good and informative fictional film may be much more effective than a boring documentary and, similarly, well-constructed fictional stories can be catchy and emotionally touching. The aim of fictional vignettes, in fact, is not so much about representing a stable reality ‘out there’, or developing an argument in a conventional sense, but rather to engage in a form of play with possibilities.

Finally, it has to be noticed that some stories, spaces and geographic materials exist only in the mind of the researcher. Consider the example of research on the spatialities of dreams and daydreaming, or the imagined geographies of the Afterlife:⁵¹ Is it really possible to make a

distinction between fictionalised and real stories in cases like these? Maybe mobilising the fictional would be strategic for entering into the sphere of such phenomena, which challenge conventional understandings of observation, realism, factuality.

Conclusion: fictional vignettes and geography

Later, that day, Sophie and Paul were having dinner together in a fancy restaurant by the waterfront. They started discussing their afternoon at the conference. Paul seemed to have overcome the stress he had shown during the presentation:

Ok, it has been sort of funny, and this episode will probably give us enough material for a paper or two, but next time – if there is a next time – you’ll be the ‘baddie’ in the drama.

Paul was joking, but Sophie thought it wasn’t that nice. They had actually invented the story after a terrible row about some work issues they had had in the yard of the university where they both work. They had continued arguing in their office in a very inappropriate fashion considered where they were, and the role they each covered. The thing they were arguing about was stupid, but the row was terrible and violent and had marked her. It was just that sometimes after the episode she had been back to Paul and told him how she had infused her research materials into an imagined story.

Recalling that episode, Sophie was still agitated, but she liked the presence of Paul next to her, in that particular moment far away from their work place or the meeting. Sophie thought about the role of space in shaping emotions and relations and she concluded that yes, geographers are right in placing such an emphasis: things with Paul work differently depending on whether they are in their office, they are in a conference room, or they are together in a fancy restaurant by the waterfront:

It’s not possible. You know, in a story like this that the guy has to be the ‘baddie’, it doesn’t work as well with a ‘female baddie’. But if you invent a completely different story where it works to be a female baddie, that’s fine by me.

Mmm let me think . . . What about the drama of a male academic who is not so well thought of at work, and who is in the shadow of his prestigious wife, who is also an academic? Let’s hear this: the man has been hired as professor in a department, solely because the head of the department wanted to hire his wife, but has been forced to hire both of them, because the wife enforced it as a sort of ‘binding condition’.

Sophie knew that there was something ‘real’ behind that joke. She heard about a story like that, although it wasn’t verified, only stupid gossip. She decided to keep on chatting:

Yeah, great idea! Maybe the prestigious wife explicitly told the head of the department, in front of his husband and a couple of colleagues, something like ‘We go together: if you want me, you have to take him, too. Sorry, it’s a complete package, take or leave it’. What a humiliation for him!

They shared a smile. Yes, they were having a good time together at the restaurant. Then, Sophie started to think back to the situation in the room where they had presented their paper. Since her experience with psychoanalysis, she has developed an attitude towards the description of her feelings and her free association. She started thinking about the room where they had presented the paper as a hostile, dark and dusty set of walls populated by unknown creatures; none of these latter elements being at all factual. By now, was it possible anymore to distinguish which space was ‘real’ and which was ‘unreal’? Did it really matter?

The main thesis of this article is that there is space, in cultural geographies, for the mobilisation of fictional vignettes. Different kinds of fictional stories may serve to communicate research outcomes, to explore specific topics and to build meaningful arguments, in ways that effectively take into account and connect multiple events, diverse perspectives, non-linear chronological structures, downplaying 'grand scholarly stories', in favour of small stories and everyday lives.⁵² Such stories may perform pedagogical, emotional and taxonomic work. And fictional vignettes also allow the exploration and representation of problems and spaces that only exist, or can in any case only be accessed, in the minds of the researcher. This is the case of the fictional vignette which was mobilised in this story; it is fictional, but we think this story may stimulate questions and emotional reactions concerning issues of honesty, credibility and the reliability of the authors, and the kind of relation that is built up between the authors and the readers.

It is an easy task to stress what fictional vignettes cannot do. Invented stories cannot substitute conventional research approaches. They cannot be analysed in order to detect regularities and recurrences in social phenomena and, ultimately, as materials for a hypothetical-deductive model of geographical explanation.⁵³ Building on Gayatri Spivak's famous reflection on the subaltern,⁵⁴ fictional vignettes definitely cannot 'speak for' the subjects and spaces represented, and neither 'speak of' them. Surely, they tell something about their authors. And fictional vignettes can also 'speak around' the subjects and spaces they talk about, as they may help to describe, bring up, report, test and challenge specific aspects of social and cultural phenomena or theoretical problems. But, at the same time, we have to be aware that the fictional has to be mobilised wisely because the excessive and non-explicit use of fictional elements may confuse the reader, in a way that is not necessarily constructive and provocative. As stressed by Patricia Price, the devil of dilettantism is dangerous, at the crossroads between the fictional and cultural geographies, and hence serious critical reflections are needed in order to 'push our stories'.⁵⁵

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. See, for example, W.Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); G.Currie, 'What Is Fiction?', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 43(4), 1985, pp. 385–92.
2. According to K.Nayar, fiction is 'a practice of writing that is not linked to any particular discipline and leaves the author free to invent': K.Nayar, 'Ethnography and Fiction: Where Is the Boundary?', *Anthropology and Humanism*, 24(2), 1999, pp. 134–47, p. 135.
3. In certain cases, changing the names of the persons referred to in the research is not sufficient. Observed facts have to be strongly modified by introducing fictional elements, or by combining different observations, or by inventing a story that resonates with what the researcher wants to show, but cannot write. Consider the case of S.Orbach, *The Impossibility of Sex: Stories of the Intimate Relationship between Therapist and Patient* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1999). The author, who is a psychotherapist and a social critic, analyses the erotic nature of the contact between the psychotherapist and her patients, focusing on the effects the clients have on the therapist and her sexual fantasies. In order to explore this field, and to avoid evident problems in revealing confidential materials, Orbach analyses six fictional stories invented by her. Orbach specifies that the stories are based on composites of patients she has seen over the years, but the stories are fictional – for a comment, see A.Elliott and C.Lemert, *The New Individualism: The Emotional Costs of Globalization* (London: Routledge, 2006). This article does not explore this dimension of fictional vignettes, as strategies for anonymity have already been widely discussed in literature on ethnography and qualitative methodologies: see, for example, C.Katz, 'Playing the Field: Questions of Fieldwork in Geography', *The Professional*

- Geographer*, 46(1), 1994, pp. 67–72; M.Crang and I.Cook, *Doing Ethnographies* (London: SAGE, 2007).
4. See, for example, E.Cameron, 'New Geographies of Story and Storytelling', *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(5), 2012, pp. 573–92; M.Ward, 'The Art of Writing Place', *Geography Compass*, 8(10), 2014, pp. 755–66.
 5. AAVV, 'Fictional Worlds', *Environment and Planning D: Society & Space*, 29(3), 2011, pp. 551–67; G.Eshun and C.Madge, "'Now Let Me Share This with You": Exploring Poetry as a Method for Postcolonial Geography Research', *Antipode*, 44(4), 2012, pp. 1395–428; S.Marston and S.De Leeuw, 'Creativity and Geography: Toward a Politicized Intervention', *The Geographical Review*, 103(2), 2013, pp. iii–xxvi; W.Shaw, D.DeLyser and M.Crang, 'Limited by Imagination Alone: Research Methods in Cultural Geographies', *cultural geographies*, 22(2), 2015, pp. 211–15. See also innovative and playful contributions such as those of Mrs Kinpaisby, 'Taking Stock of Participatory Geographies: Envisioning the Communiversity', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 33(3), 2008, pp. 292–9; J.Wylie, 'Cultural Geographies of the Future, or Looking Rosy and Feeling Blue', *cultural geographies*, 17(2), 2010, pp. 211–7; or the 'Writing Collaboration' project promoted by Ian Cook, <<https://writingcollaboration.wordpress.com/>> (26 May 2015). **[AQ2]**
 6. See the classic book by E.H.Carr, *What Is History* (New York: Knopf, 1962): 'The historian without his facts is rootless and futile; the facts without their historian are dead and meaningless' (p. 30).
 7. See particularly J.S.Dundan, 'Me(trope)olis: Or Hayden White among the Urbanists', in A.D.King (ed.), *Re-Presenting the City: Ethnicity, Capital and Culture in the 21st Century Metropolis* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), pp. 253–68. See also R.Shields, *Places on the Margin: Alternative Geographies of Modernity* (London: Routledge, 1991).
 8. H.White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1978), p. 122.
 9. D.Byler and S.D.Iverson, 'Literature, Writing & Anthropology', *Cultural Anthropology*, 2012, <http://www.culanth.org/curated_collections/5-literature-writing-anthropology> (May 2015). Kirin Narayan considers as a first case the novel *The Delight Makers*, written by Adolph Bandelier in 1890: see Nayar, 'Ethnography and Fiction'.
 10. Among Geertz's works, see particularly C.Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic, 1973); C.Geertz, 'Blurred Genres: The Refiguration of Social Thought', *The American Scholar*, 49(2), 1980, pp. 165–79. On the 'literacy turns' see the famous collection of essays edited by J.Clifford and G.E.Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986); see also C.Ellis and A.Bochner, *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira Press, 1996); Byler and Iverson, 'Literature, Writing & Anthropology'.
 11. J.Clifford, 'Introduction: Partial Truths', in J.Clifford and G.Marcus (eds), *Writing Culture. The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: University of California), pp. 1–26, p. 6.
 12. Narayan, 'Ethnography and Fiction'.
 13. E.M.Bruner, 'Introduction: The Ethnographic Self and the Personal Self', in P.Benson (ed.), *Anthropology and Literature* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 1–25; Narayan, 'Ethnography and Fiction'.
 14. B.Latour, *Aramis, or the Love of Technology* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993).
 15. Latour, *Aramis, or the Love of Technology*, pp. viii, ix.
 16. M.Augé, *Journal d'un SDF: Ethnofiction* (Paris: Seuil, 2011); English edition *No Fixed Abode: Ethnofiction* (London: Seagull, 2011).
 17. K.Frank, 'The Management of Hunger: Using Fiction in Writing Anthropology', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 6(4), 2000, pp. 474–88; D.Leorke, 'Augé, Marc 2013 No Fixed Abode, Reviewed by Dale Leorke', 2014, <<http://societyandspace.com/reviews/reviews-archive/auge/>> (5 February 2015).
 18. R.Rinehart, 'Fictional Methods in Ethnography: Believability, Specks of Glass, and Chekhov', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4(2), 1998, pp. 200–24; C.R.Ronai, 'Wrestling with Derrida's Mimesis: The Next Night Sous Rapture', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 5(1), 1999, pp. 114–29; see also M.Lancione, 'The Ethnographic Novel as Activist Mode of Existence: Translating the Field with Homeless People and beyond', *Social & Cultural Geography*, in press. **[AQ3]**

19. D.Caulley, 'Making Qualitative Research Reports Less Boring: The Techniques of Writing Creative Nonfiction', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 4(3), 2008, pp. 424–49; R.Sennet, *How I Write: Sociology as Literature* (Münster: Rhema-Verlag, 2009).
20. A.Banks and S.P.Banks, 'The Struggle over Facts and Fictions', in A.Banks and S.P.Banks (eds), *Fiction & Social Research: By Fire or Ice* (New York: AltaMira, 1998), pp. 11–29. See also K.Viswesaran, *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994); W.Iser, 'The Significance of Fictionalizing', *Anthropoetics III*, 1997, <http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0302/iser_fiction.htm> (5 February 2015).
21. L.Richardson and E.St. Pierre, 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry', in N.K.Denzin and Y.S.Lincoln (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage, 2005), pp. 959–78.
22. It has to be stressed that there is not a univocal distinction between autobiography and autoethnography: some scholars distinguish between the two by stressing the pivotal role of personal experiences in the case of autobiography, and collective experiences of the group in which the author is situated in the case of autoethnography; conversely, some authors intend autobiography as a cultural product that is designed to be read by an audience, while autoethnography is a research process where the product may never be read at all. See P.Moss, 'Engaging Autobiography', in P.Moss (ed.), *Placing Autobiography in Geography* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), pp. 188–98; I.Cook, 'You Want to Be Careful You Don't End up like Ian', in P.Moss, *Placing Autobiography in Geography* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2001), pp. 99–120; A.Banks, 'Autobiography and Cultural Geography. Using Personal Experience to Form Research', in A.Blunt, P.Gruffudd, J.May, M.Ogborn and D.Pinder (eds), *Cultural Geography in Practice* (London: Hodder, 2003), pp. 88–90; A.Coffey, 'Autobiography', in M.S.Lewis-Beck, A.Bryman and T.F.Liao (eds), *The Sage Encyclopedia of Social Science Research Methods* (London: SAGE, 2004), pp. 45–6.
23. As in the cases of Orbach, *The Impossibility of Sex*; Elliot and Lemert, *The New Individualism*; Augé, *Journal d'un SDF*; P.Leavy, *Low-Fat Love* (Rotterdam: Sense, 2011).
24. Moss, 'Engaging Autobiography'; Banks, 'Autobiography and Cultural Geography'; Mercer, 'The Dangers of Autobiographical Research'; see also M.Purcell, 'Autobiography', in R.Kitchin and N.Thrift (eds), *International Encyclopedia of Human Geography* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2009), pp. 234–9. Finally, see also G.Rose, 'Situating Knowledges: Positionality, Reflexivities, and Other Tactics', *Progress in Human Geography*, 21(3), 1997, pp. 305–20.
25. Byler and Iverson, 'Literature, Writing & Anthropology'.
26. See, for example, H.Maturana and F.Varela, *The Tree of Knowledge: The Biological Roots of Human Understanding* (Boston: Shambhala, 1987); D. Haraway, 'A Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Social-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', in D. Haraway (ed.), *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991), pp. 149–81.
27. B.Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers through Society* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1987).
28. M.Foucault, *Les mots et les choses: Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); English edition: *The Order of Things* (New York: Vintage, 1973); E.Saïd, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1978).
29. J.Butler, E.Laclau and S.Žižek, *Contingency, Hegemony, Universality: Contemporary Dialogues on the Left* (London: Verso, 2000).
30. Moss, 'Engaging Autobiography'; Purcell, 'Autobiography'; Crang and Cook, *Doing Ethnographies*; D.Butz and K.Besio, 'Autoethnography', *Geography Compass*, 3, 2009, 1660–74.
31. C.Ellis, *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography* (Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 2003).
32. Richardson and St. Pierre, 'Writing: A Method of Inquiry'. In the text, Laurel Richardson stresses four aspects that have to be considered in evaluating 'CAP ethnographies' (where the CAP stands for creative analytical practices): a) substantive contribution; b) aesthetic merit; c) reflexivity and d) emotional and intellectual impact. See also Crang and Cook, *Doing Ethnographies*.
33. See, for example, P.L.Price, 'Cultural Geography and the Stories We Tell Ourselves', *cultural geographies*, 17(2), 2010, pp. 203–10.
34. H.Lorimer, 'Caught in the Nick of Time: Archives and Fieldwork', in D.DeLyser, S.Aitken, M.A.Crang, S.Herbert and L.McDowell (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research in Human Geography* (London: SAGE, 2009), pp. 248–73, p. 268.

35. See particularly AAVV, 'Fictional Worlds'; Eshun and Madge 'Now Let Me Share This with You'; Marston and De Leeuw, 'Creativity and Geography'; Mrs Kinpaisby, 'Taking Stock of Participatory Geographies'; Shaw et al., 'Limited by Imagination Alone'; Wylie, 'Cultural Geographies of the Future, or Looking Rosy and Feeling Blue'.
36. P.Vannini, 'Non-Representational Ethnography: New Ways of Animating Lifeworlds', *cultural geographies*, 22(2), 2015, pp. 317–27.
37. A.Latham, 'Research, Performance, and Doing Human Geography: Some Reflections on the Diary-Photograph, Diary-Interview Method', *Environment & Planning A*, 35(11), 2003, pp. 1993–2017; J.D.Dewsbury, 'Performative, Non-Representational, and Affect-Based Research: Seven Injunctions', in D.DeLyser, S.Herbert, S.Aitken, M.Crang and L McDowell (eds), *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Geography* (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2010), pp. 321–33; N.Thrift, *Non-Representational Theory: Space, Politics, Affect* (New York: Routledge, 2008).
38. H.Parr and O.Stevenson, 'Sophie's Story: Writing Missing Journeys', *cultural geographies*, 21(4), 2013, pp. 565–82.
39. F.MacDonald, 'The Ruins of Erskine Beveridge', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 39(4), 2014, pp. 477–89.
40. MacDonald, 'The Ruins of Erskine Beveridge', p. 478.
41. Augé, *Journal d'un SDF*.
42. M.Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences* (New York: The Free Press, 1949).
43. R.M.Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); G.Lakoff and M.Johnson, *Metaphors We Live by* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980). The literature on spatial metaphors and on the use of metaphors in geography is huge; a pivotal text in the field is T.Barnes and J.Duncan (eds), *Writing Worlds: Discourse, Text & Metaphor in the Representation of Landscape* (London: Routledge, 1992).
44. M.Jacobson and S.C.Larsen, 'Ethnographic Fiction for Writing and Research in Cultural Geography', *Journal of Cultural Geography*, 31(2), 2014, pp. 179–93.
45. R.Chartier, *On the Edge of the Cliff: History, Language, and Practices* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997).
46. Narayan, 'Ethnography and Fiction'.
47. Leavy, 'Fiction and the Feminist Academic Novel'.
48. These are the key features mobilised by Doreen Massey for defining geography: see D.Massey, *For Space* (London: SAGE, 2005).
49. Cameron, 'New Geographies of Story and Storytelling'.
50. See <<http://societyandspace.com/2015/08/28/future-fossils-greenhough-lorimer-yusoff>> (17 February 2016). Another stimulating and innovative example may refer to the idea of 'anticipatory history' proposed in C.DeSilvey, 'Making Sense of Transience: An Anticipatory History', *cultural geographies*, 19(1), 2012, pp. 31–54.
51. This example may easily support a 'free association' with a different story, in a different discipline: It is well known that Freud himself invented a large part of the dreams (and the patients) analysed in his fundamental book *The Interpretation of Dreams – Die Traumdeutung*, 1899; English edition: *The Interpretation of Dreams* (Ware: Wordsworth, 1997) – as later admitted by Freud himself in his letters and demonstrated by historical investigations on documentary sources; see, for example, J.Bénesteau, *Mensonges freudiens: Histoire d'une désinformation séculaire* (Sprimont: Mardaga, 2002). We may speculate whether Freud chose to hide this reality because he was worried about academic reactions in the positivist cultural framework, which was dominating science in his period. No matter what the answer is, can we really say today that Freud's work is unscientific and useless because of its fictional character? And wouldn't it be geographically more meaningful to map the spatialities of Freud's dreams? On this perspective, see particularly S.Pile, *Real Cities: Modernity, Space and the Phantasmagorias of City Life* (London: SAGE, 2005); see also A.Vanolo, 'Locating the Couch: An Autobiographical Analysis of the Multiple Spatialities of Psychoanalytic Therapy', *Social & Cultural Geography*, 15(4), 2014, pp. 368–84. A similar case is the one of the imagined geographies of the Afterlife, proposed in A.Vanolo, 'Exploring the Afterlife: Relational Spaces, Absent Presences and Three Fictional Vignettes', *Space and Culture*, 19(2), 2016, pp. 192–201.

52. The reference here is to H.Lorimer, 'Telling Small Stories: Spaces of Knowledge and the Practice of Geography', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 28(2), 2003, pp. 197–217. See also Prince, 'Cultural Geography and the Stories We Tell Ourselves'.
53. D.Harvey, *Explanation in Geography* (London: Arnold, 1969).
54. G.Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in C.Nelson and L.Grossberg (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 217–313.
55. Prince, 'Cultural Geography and the Stories We Tell Ourselves'.

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