

## The Truth Behind Fiction-Based Research

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**Abstract:**

Narrative is both a vital research method and an essential component of life (Bochner & Riggs, 2014). In the former, narratives carry great potential and power as it allows humanity to imagine, inquire, inspire, reflect, and comprehend individuals, cultures, societies, etc... (Richardson, 1997; Miller, 2008). In the latter, narratives allow one to experience situations by envisioning alternative futures and make sense of the world (Mattingly, 1991). Unlike other narrative research practices, 'fiction-based research' (also known as 'fiction as a research practice') has only been on the rise for the past two decades, and is notably evident in identity research, feminist research, and research working from a critical lens perspective (Leavy, 2015). Moreover, within the realm of narrative research practices, fiction-based research remains undervalued and misrepresented as a disempowered research method due to its fictional component. As a method that challenges ways of understanding, this paper will explore the limitations and strengths of fiction-based research.

**Keywords:** Narrative, fiction-based research, fiction as a research practice, Patricia Leavy, truth, validity

Narrative is both a vital research method and an essential component of life (Bochner; Riggs, 2014). In the former, narratives carry great potential and power as it allows humanity to imagine, inquire, inspire, reflect, and comprehend individuals, cultures, societies, etc... (Richardson, 1997; Miller, 2008). In the latter, narratives allow one to experience situations by envisioning alternative futures and make sense of the world (Mattingly, 1991). Unlike other narrative research practices, 'fiction-based research' (also known as 'fiction as a research practice') has only been on the rise for the past two decades, and is notably evident in identity research, feminist research, and research working from a critical lens perspective (Leavy, 2015). Moreover, within the realm of narrative research practices, fiction-based research remains undervalued and misrepresented as a disempowered research method due to its fictional component. As a method that challenges ways of understanding, this paper will explore the limitations and strengths of fiction-based research.

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### The drawbacks to fiction-based research

The three primary concerns evident in fiction-based research are the following: (i) the method struggles to demonstrate truth, validity, and objectivity due to its fictional component; (ii) as a subjective form, the research cannot be properly assessed; and, (iii) reflexivity is difficult to achieve when working with fictional research participants. Due to its reliance on fiction, fiction-based research brings the fact versus fiction dichotomy to the forefront (Leavy, 2015), and as a result, it is disfavoured in qualitative research (even though qualitative methods challenge ways of understanding validity and reliability), as further demonstrated by Benson (2014), who argues that narrative researchers will continue to struggle within academic settings that pedestal “valid”, “objective” and “testable” research findings. Such stigma is created mainly because of the denotations and connotations surrounding the term, fiction-based research. The term, ‘research’, implies truth and substantive knowledge/contribution, but when placed alongside the term, ‘fiction-based’, the method becomes contradictory and an oxymoron, which not only undervalues the method but also the researcher/author/novelist. Henry James (1884) says the following regarding the debased role of the novelist: “It implies that the novelist is less occupied in looking for the truth (the truth, of course I mean, that he assumes, the premises that we grant him, whatever they may be) than the historian, and in doing so it deprives him at a stroke of all his standing room” (p. 438). In addition, such obsession for proving the truthfulness of stories has caused a further divide in the realm of fiction and nonfiction, as shown in categorizations such as “nonfiction novels” versus “historical novels” and “creative nonfiction”<sup>1</sup> versus “fiction inspired by actual events” (Leavy, 2012).

Nonetheless, such a dichotomy is evident in all forms of research as truth and validity will always be subject to scrutinization. Ethnography, in particular, is known for its history “of blurring nonfiction with fiction in order to most effectively ‘write’ culture and get their writing out to the public audiences” (Leavy, 2013: 31). This is further illustrated in the Margaret Mead and Derek Freeman debate and their encounters with the Samoans.<sup>2</sup> Here, it is important to acknowledge that not all

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<sup>1</sup> Creative non-fiction, which emerged in the 1960’s and 70’s (Leavy, 2015), is a method that “tells a story using facts, but uses many of the techniques of fiction for its compelling qualities and emotional vibrancy [...]. Creative non-fiction requires the skills of the storyteller and the research ability of the conscientious reporter” (Cheney, 2001, p. 1, as cited in Leavy, 2013: 35).

<sup>2</sup> According to Margaret Mead, female Samoans were sexually promiscuous beings before and during marriage. As a society, Samoans were represented as people lacking

autoethnographic and ethnographic studies are nonfictional; some studies do turn to fiction (Leavy, 2015), which only reinforces the value of incorporating fiction into one's research. Arguably, even though all research is narrative, narrative is particularly ever-present in the humanities and social sciences (dating back to the early 20th century). Leavy (2013) makes the following comment on the importance of narrative in research: "In the academic world, researchers are storytellers, learning about others and sharing what they have learned. Whether we go into the field in an ethnographic study or conduct oral history interviews, we are charged with telling the stories of others in creative, expressive, dynamic, and authentic ways" (p. 35). Methods and methodologies such as narrative inquiry, diary study, testimonials, memoirs, creative non-fiction, narrative ethnography,<sup>3</sup> "*life history, language learning history, language learning experience, language biography, autobiography, [...] autoethnography*", etc. further demonstrate the importance of narrative as an alternative approach to research (Benson, 2014: 156; Leavy, 2015). Furthermore, case studies and ethnography are also occasionally described as narrative research: "From research design to data collection, analysis, and representation, researchers bring their assumptions and experiences to bear on their projects. For example, field notes, on-the-fly notes, theoretical memos, and analysis memos all require the researcher to write his or her understandings and impressions of the social reality under investigation" (Hesse-Biber; Leavy, 2011, as cited in Leavy, 2013: 30; Benson, 2014).

Numerous scholars, however, are dispelling the belief that fiction equates invalidity due to the following reasons: (i) as a social research, fiction also aims at "knowledge-building and meaning-making; at accessing, expressing, and negotiating truths and then effectively communicating those 'truths' to relevant audiences" (Leavy, 2013: 22); (ii) the fictional characters in fiction are never wholly true or wholly invented because their experiences, emotions, thoughts, values, etc. are "real" (Franklin, 2011); and (iii) the settings and situations all draw on the "real world" (read: verisimilitude) (Banks, 2008; Leavy,

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strong bonds. Mead's representation was questioned by Derek Freeman, who believed that Mead provided a romantic account of the Samoans and did not take the nurture versus nature debate into consideration.

<sup>3</sup> According to Chase (2005), narrative ethnography is "a transformation of both the ethnographic and life history methods. Like traditional ethnography, this approach involves long-term involvement in a culture or community; like life history, it focuses heavily on one individual or a small number of individuals. What makes narrative ethnography distinct is that both the researcher and the researched are presented together within a single multifocal text focused on the character and process of the human encounter" (p. 659).

2012, 2013; Barone; Eisner, 2012; Viswesaran, 1994). Here, literary devices such as metaphors are extremely powerful in fiction because they have the “extraordinary power of redescribing reality” (Ricouer, 2000: 110). Iser (1997), in particular, argues that there is an overlap between fiction and “the real” through his threefold model: selection, combined, and disclosure. In selection, writers choose elements from the real/referential world and include them into their fictional work. In combined, the elements are simultaneously combined through the meaning-making process. And, in disclosure, writers disclose information about the text by deeming a work a short story or novel on the title page. In addition, Marie-Laure Ryan (1991) coined the term “principle of minimal departure”, which refers to the notion that the world in fiction resonates with reality (Leavy, 2013). It is because of fiction’s attempt in representing life that James (1884) describes fiction as “a direct impression of life”. Furthermore, in order to view fiction-based research as truthful, one must revisit the notion of “findings” and “data,” as further emphasized by Banks (2008). Also, as suggested by Leavy (2013), data and findings may come directly from a literature review or from traditional data collection methods such as interviews, field research, etc.

The second issue with fiction-based research is that because of its subjective nature, fiction as a research practice cannot be properly assessed as truthful and valid. Debates surrounding truth and validity have always been (and will continue to be) of concern, as demonstrated in the qualitative versus quantitative debate. When writing a fictional work, especially, the process and outcome is certainly subjective. Thus, rather than positioning the work as objective, accepting that it is subjective – and therefore useful and constructive – is more effective, for even in “objective” research with “objective” findings, subjective interpretations are inevitable. Even Jean-Paul Sartre (1947) urges authors to embrace the subjective quality of writing fictionally. He says, “But if we ourselves produce the rules of production, the measures, the criteria, and if our creative drive comes from the very depths of our heart, then we never find anything but ourselves in our work” (p. 624). Furthermore, Leavy (2013) argues that regardless of its “biased,” “introverted,” and unobjective state, the method can be assessed according to the traditional evaluative criteria in qualitative research. However, these criterions must be slightly transformed and reimagined because fiction as an untraditional qualitative method “move[s] away from a methodological practice that produces ‘findings’ to a writing practice that produces a fictional rendering that reflects research, teaching, and/or personal experiences, it is important to evaluate that

work on its own terms” (Leavy, 2013: 79). According to Leavy (2013), qualitative research is evaluated according to the following nine (but certainly not limited to) criteria: (i) validity; (ii) rigour; (iii) congruence; (iv) transferability or generalizability; (v) thoroughness; (vi) trustworthiness; (vii) authenticity; (viii) audience; and (ix) substantive contribution. All these criterions, Leavy argues, can also be applied to fiction-based research. In fiction, validity can be assessed by considering if whether the work could have happened. Rigour can be decided by looking at the aesthetics and use of literary tools that are present in the fiction. Congruence can be judged by focusing on the fiction’s “architectural design” (ie. genre, themes, motifs, style, and tone), structure, and narrative congruence. Transferability or generalizability can be measured by asking if whether or not the fiction succeeded in achieving empathetic engagement. Thoroughness can be evaluated through ambiguity.<sup>4</sup> Authenticity can be interrogated through verisimilitude. Trustworthiness can be gained through reflexivity, which can be demonstrated through character development, disclosure of theoretical practices, and narrator’s point of view. Additionally, the writer’s “personal signature” is also important when determining reflexivity (Banks, 2008; Barone & Eisner, 1997, 2012; Leavy, 2013).<sup>5</sup> When examining the eight category, audience, tone, style, and the genre of the fiction must be appropriate for its target audience. Also, the author’s willingness to disclose his/her work (in an abstract, preface, foreword, etc.) and invite audience response should also be taken into consideration here. Finally, whether or not the researcher is contributing to a knowledge area or disciplinary field will determine if whether or not the fiction is a substantive contribution.

The third controversy regarding fiction as a research practice is that researchers are able to dismiss the importance of reflexivity because their participants are fictional. In all forms of qualitative research, one is simultaneously demonstrating and exercising one’s power over others. Therefore, reflexivity is crucial throughout the entire research process because as “an ongoing self-awareness”, reflexivity forces the researcher to pursue research in “non-exploitative ways” (Pillow, 2003: 178). In writing fictionally, especially, one must pay close attention to reflexivity: “writing can be used as a method of inquiry that engages the researcher in a cycle of reflection that can result in ‘deeper knowing’”

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<sup>4</sup> Leavy (2013) defines ambiguity as the inclusion of gaps intentionally created by the author to allow the reader to make their own meanings, and the insertion of “ambiguous” narratives that open the text the multiple meanings.

<sup>5</sup> Leavy (2013) defines an author’s “personal signature” as “imbuing the text with the writer’s personal fingerprint (style, tone, and content choices)” (p. 90).

(Miller, 2008: 349). Oftentimes, discussions surrounding issues of representation are generally evident in research that studies “real settings” with “real participants”. Such an approach is problematic because researchers should be aware of how their participants are represented at all times, whether the participants and/or settings are fictional or nonfictional. Fiction-based researchers are in a position of immense power. As creators, they are authoritative, controlling every aspect of their fictional work from beginning to end. However, fictional characters also carry immeasurable power, both over the reader and the writer. Characters possess the strength to challenge and unsettle readers’ and writers’ views, beliefs, values, etc. However, in the latter, as characters develop, they seize the potential to take over the writer’s artistic control. For example, as characters progress, the author may be inclined to change the plot of the story in order to remain true to his/her characters. However, regardless of their powerful entities, the characters’ fate ultimately lies in the hands of their creator. Even when characters are based on/inspired by interviewed participants, researchers are in complete control because they determine which stories are “storyworthy” (Chase, 2005). As a result, fiction-based researchers must take reflexivity in every stage of character development into consideration. Arguably, every action, dialogue, and interior monologue that a character is a part of (or not part of, for that matter) reveals more about the researcher’s ethical practice than the actual character itself (Leavy, 2013). Even when writers provide characters with interior dialogue to represent their characters as “authentic”, writers are exercising their power over their characters, as further argued by Chase, who warns researchers “against the romantic assumption that narrators reveal ‘authentic’ selves and speak in their ‘own’ voices, as if their selves and voices were not already mediated by the social contexts in which they speak” (Chase, 2005: 670). Aside from character development, reflexivity must also play a role in other structural design elements, especially setting. Setting is important because it brings up issues regarding the “insider”/“outsider” debate. For example, is Deborah Ellis, author of *The Breadwinner Trilogy*, exploiting and participating in cultural appropriation by setting the plot of her story in Afghanistan? In addition, writers must be reflexive when selecting a narrator’s point of view. In first-person narration, by giving the appearance of presenting an “authentic I”, the writer’s voice may not be as apparent (de Freitas, 2008). Also, other characters’ voices may not be as visible as the story is told from the perspective of one character. On the contrary, in third-person narration, even though writers have the freedom to tell the story from the perspective of more than one

character, and thereby provide a bigger picture, their voice as an interpreter/researcher may once again render invisible (Leavy, 2013).

### **The strengths in fiction-based research**

Four strengths in particular position fiction-based research above other qualitative methods, such as: (i) fiction creates innumerable possibilities; (ii) fiction is engaging and engaged; (iii) fiction reaches a wider audience; and (iv) fiction allows one to bear witness. The possibilities in fiction are endless. The power of imagination grants researchers and readers entry into imaginary (or possible) worlds, which may be inaccessible through other methods (Leavy, 2013). Also, the ambiguities and gaps present in fiction allow for a multiplicity of meanings and interpretations to emerge (Barone & Eisner, 1997; Abott, 2008).<sup>6</sup> Fiction is engaging because storytelling – rather than a traditional report of findings that are often evident in traditional dissertations – carries great power. Fiction is also engaged because fiction has the potential to be transformative by confronting, challenging, and disrupting dominant ideologies in a creative fashion (Leavy, 2013). Oftentimes, traditional dissertations and academic articles published in specialized journals are only read by other “academic experts”, especially because the language (ie. academic jargon) is inaccessible to the public (Leavy, 2013: 38). However, through fiction, researchers are not only increasing public scholarship, but they are also educating a wider audience by making their work accessible beyond an academic setting (Leavy, 2013). Hence, fiction can be written for both the disciplinary reader and the “everyreader”<sup>7</sup>. Finally, by creating a fictional setting with fictional characters, readers are being educated and bearing witness simultaneously (Leavy, 2013). When readers bear witness, the transformative aspect of research becomes more apparent.

Chase (2005) and Leavy (2013) suggest that fiction as a transformative research practice is a form of social research due to the three primary goals of social research that exists in fiction-based research, which are:

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<sup>6</sup> As previously mentioned, ambiguities are understood as a feature of fiction by which the author intentionally creates uncertainty of meaning or intention. Gaps, on the other hand, are included in fiction so that readers fill in the blanks (Leavy, 2013). Both ambiguities and gaps grant readers the power to participate in endless meanings and interpretations.

<sup>7</sup> Pare et al. (2009) make a distinction between the “everyreader” and the “disciplinary reader”. The former is understood as any reader who happens to come across the text whereas the latter is understood as one in which a discipline’s rhetoric is laid bare.

1. portraying the complexity of lived experience or illuminating human experience (linking the particular and the universal, or micro and macro levels);
2. promoting empathy and self-reflection (as a part of a compassionate, engaged, or social justice approach to research);
3. disrupting dominant ideologies or stereotypes (including building critical consciousness and raising awareness (Leavy, 2013: 38).

By achieving verisimilitude, getting at particulars, portraying inner voice and interior dialogue of characters, and demonstrating narrator's points of views, fiction-based research is able to illustrate the complexity of human experience "more holistically than other forms of conducting and writing research" (Leavy, 2013: 38). In many qualitative research methods, researchers generally do not have access to participant's inner voice and interior dialogue; thus, understanding participant's psychological processes may be difficult to achieve (Leavy, 2013). Fiction, on the other hand, is able to provide a better understanding of human experience through different points of views such as first- or third-person narration. Leavy (2013), however, argues that third-person narration is the most effective perspective because it not only allows the researcher to include his/her voice, but most importantly, the voice of multiple characters: "Narrators are able to present the 'big picture' and show how the different characters fit into it. The third person can thus be used as a means to allow the author to make connections and show interconnections, and as a way for the researchers to explore macro-micro links in their fictional renderings, which is particularly important for researchers in the social and health sciences" (p. 49). The second goal, empathy and self-reflection, is also important to a social justice approach. Once empathy and self-reflection have occurred, readers are able to grow as individuals (Leavy, 2013). However, the promotion of empathy is challenging because researchers have to make sure that by creating empathy in readers, they are not removing agency from the characters.

Finally, the third goal focuses on the disruption of dominant ideologies or stereotypes and the building of critical consciousness and raising awareness (Leavy, 2013). Here, characters, in particular, play a great role in dismantling ideologies and revisiting stereotypes. Another way researchers can disrupt ideologies and stereotypes are by troubling "master plots" (also known as "master narratives")<sup>8</sup>. In addition,

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<sup>8</sup> According to Abbott (2008), master plots (or master narratives) are stories that are told over and over again in different ways. These stories draw on deeply held values, hopes, and fears, and they frequently reappear in the literature within a given culture and at times across cultures. Some master plots are essentially universal – the quest story, the story of revenge, etc.

historical fiction, holocaust fiction, fiction on “present-day” issues such as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and “storytelling from marginalized people of colour provides powerful counterstories challenging the majoritarian stories that make White privilege appear natural” (Solovzana & Yasso, 2002, as cited in Dunbar Jr., 2008: 18; Leavy, 2013). However, fiction-based researchers must be extremely reflexive and cautious when writing such fiction because oftentimes such fiction tends to romanticize, homogenize, or essentialize marginalized communities. Hence, as warned by Clough (2000), researchers must avoid writing on trauma culture without offering a theory and/or politics of social change.

Moreover, as a social research, fiction as a research practice is crucial to postcolonialism. Like postcolonialism, fiction-based research makes space for “subjugated” and “minor” knowledges (Gandhi, 1998) and is aimed at disrupting stereotypes and dominated ideologies and gearing towards social change, simultaneously.

### **Fiction-based research: A far more rigorous method?**

Fiction-based research is argued to be far more rigorous than other traditional qualitative methods due to specificity and aesthetics. Even the title, novelist/author/writer, and the product, novel, comes with great expectations. James (1884) positions the role of the writer with the philosopher and painter, and claims that the novel is “the most magnificent form of art” (p. 445). Sigmund Freud (1907), on the other hand, compares the writer with a child at play. Similar to a child, the creative writer plays – with emotions, settings, and plots – and then begins to fantasize as he/she gets older. Furthermore, according to other literary critics, a novel is supposed to transport, elevate (Longinus, 1867), engage, and represent/mimic life. Such surpassing expectations from the author are questioned by Jean-Paul Sartre (1947). He asks, “One can conquer by arms. Why does it have to be *writing*, why does one have to manage his escapes and conquests by *writing*?” (p. 624). Due to the nature of fiction as a practice of showing rather than telling, reporting, or chronicling (Leavy, 2015), specificity may not always be clearly demonstrated in fiction-based research. Moreover, narrative’s point of view, ambiguity, and the power of reader response might further contribute to the hindrance of specificity. Therefore, fiction is required to use language articulately and effectively in order to illustrate the researcher’s intentions (Leavy, 2013). Likewise, such attention paid to language is emphasized by Elizabeth de Freitas (2004): “In my own fiction writing, I plunder my experiences, my language, and my very being, to achieve an exactness in my sentences and paragraphs,

grooming them over and over until they match my intentions and my sense of potential impact. Nothing is sloppy in fiction.... Composing fiction is a rigorous act” (p. 269–270). In addition, according to Longinus (1867), through language, writers are able to transport their readers. Longinus (1867) describes five principle sources of “elevated language”: (i). the formation of great conceptions; (ii) and (iii) “vehement and inspired passion”; (ix) “noble diction”; and (v) “dignified and elevated composition” (p. 84).

Furthermore, fiction’s attention to aesthetics might also prevent the delivery of specificity. For example, certain literary tools and devices (such as metaphors, symbols, motifs, etc.) may not be clearly delivered or received. However, I strongly believe that the aesthetic component of fiction is what makes fiction-based research rigorous. In fiction, writers are compelled to not only create a fictional story, but, most importantly, to produce an engaging and well-written (ie. aesthetical) story, which is again highlighted by de Freitas (2004): “When the fictional rendering has deep aesthetic impact, then rigour has been achieved” (p. 269). And, once such “aesthetic pleasure” or “aesthic joy” is achieved, Sartre (1947) claims that the role of the writer has also been achieved. Fiction calls the researcher to appeal to the five senses. Fiction invites researchers to consider tone, atmosphere, and style. Fiction pushes researchers to use literary devices such as metaphor, juxtaposition, motifs, symbols, etc. However, consideration to aesthetics does not guarantee a “good” story, for fiction must also possess strong plots, creativity, authenticity, engagement, character development, verisimilitude, closure<sup>9</sup>, etc., making fiction even more rigorous. Nonetheless, such expectations are also substantial to ethnographic writing, for according to Clifford Geertz (1973), the descriptions found in fictional writing are similar to the “thick descriptions” found in ethnographic writing. Hence, fiction-based researchers are far more susceptible to critique than any other qualitative researcher due to one’s taste, as voiced by David Hume (1757):

One person is more pleased with the sublime; another with the tender; a third with raillery. One has a strong sensibility to blemishes, and is extremely studious of correctness: another has a more lively feeling of beauties, and pardons twenty absurdities and defects for one elevated or pathetic stroke. The ear of this man is

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<sup>9</sup> Closure refers to a resolution: “As readers develop expectations, they anticipate the ending of the story and will often judge a ‘good’ ending based on how well it satisfies their expectations. In other words, readers don’t want to be disappointed. Master plots, for example, typically end in anticipated ways, providing closure for readers. However, whether or not we are drawing on a master plot or common genre, we do not need to fulfill readers’ expectations” (Leavy, 2013: 63).

entirely turned toward conciseness and energy; that man is delighted with a copious, rich, and harmonious expression. Simplicity is affected by one; ornament by another. Comedy, tragedy, satire, odes, have each its partisans, who prefer that particular species of writing to all others (p. 250).

The majority of research products such as dissertations, articles, etc. are expected to be well written, comprehensible, and factual; however, they are not required to be written imaginatively or creatively in the same manner as fiction-based research.

Finally, fiction as a research practice requires more proof of reflexivity. Since reflexivity is crucial to fiction-based research, Leavy (2013, 2015) urges writers to be explicit in communicating their ethical practices by including either an abstract, preface, foreword, or afterword. Through this process, which situates fiction-based research as rigorous in comparison to traditional fiction writing, writers have the opportunity to educate readers on the body of scholarship that informs the work “so that at a minimum the readers understand the vantage point or theoretical agenda of the writer” (Leavy, 2013: 51). In addition, some scholars argue that writers should reveal whether or not narratives were derived from a literature review, rooted in personal ideas or fantasies, or grounded in observations and interviews (Leavy, 2015). However, many researchers believe that by disclosing too much, the fiction no longer stands as an artistic work but rather a disclosure of data (Leavy, 2015).

#### **Concluding remarks: The truth to fiction-based research**

Fiction-based research is a powerful research method both in autoethnography and qualitative methodology. Regardless of its limitations, fiction as a research practice is an empowering and effective method when reaching and educating both an “academic”/“non-academic” setting simply due to humanity’s interest in hearing stories that resonate, transform, reflect, and inquire. The truth behind fiction as a research practice is that through fiction, writers are able to achieve truth and rigour. Writing is also important to the field of postcolonialism as it calls for transformation through the use of creative writing and empowering the subaltern.

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