

“Locked In”: The Ethics of Infidelity in Adaptation and Cross-Cultural Arts-Based Research

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A friend of mine was recently rushed to the hospital from his home. When he was “filling me in” about his sudden and unexplained absence, he sent me an e-mail that included this statement: “I got to have the horrific experience of being asked where I was, being sure I was in VGH [Vancouver General Hospital], wanting to tell them where I was but, for some reason not recognizing the particular room I was in meant [that] I could not say the words” (Irvine). This account reminded me immediately of locked-in syndrome, a condition where one is completely awake and alert but, due to a paralysis of voluntary muscles, unable to move or speak. While this may seem like a very strange way to begin an article about adaptation studies and arts-based research, I am interested in the ways that my friend’s experience and “locked-in syndrome” are analogous to – though clearly more intense, “horrific” and traumatic than – the feelings that people have when they recognize something as an adaptation but cannot “express themselves” or don’t see themselves or their own “imaginary *mise-en-scène*” in it (Stam 55). As Stam articulates, when we are confronted with someone else’s phantasy, we feel the loss of our own phantasmatic relation to the text (54-55). In other words, we feel that we have been “locked in” to a vision that does not include our personal preferences. The intensity of the comparison that I am drawing to the medical world can perhaps go some way to contextualizing the intensity of what Stam has called the “profoundly moralistic” language of criticism surrounding adaptations, including words such as “infidelity, betrayal, deformation, violation, vulgarization, and desecration” (54). Certainly, many of these words would be easily accepted in a hospital situation where lives are saved and lost.

This terminology and the analogy of locked-in syndrome can also be applied to the context of research and cross-cultural arts-based research in particular. More directly than a “source text,” a research participant or informant can speak back to/up against erroneous interpretations that researchers make of their words. The challenge is that often participants aren’t given the opportunity to “check” the researcher’s interpretations and/or the researcher claims final authority over the work and is thereby empowered to disregard participants’ perspectives. More challenging still is the fact that misunderstandings can be so profound that they aren’t apparent on the surface. As the aphorism goes, “we don’t know what we don’t know” and so researcher and participant are not always aware of the ways in which they are miscommunicating with and potentially misunderstanding each other. As Polanyi quipped: “we know more than we can tell” (4). Locked in syndrome brings that condition to a disturbing apex. However, it is experienced in lesser degrees all the time when we face difficulty in conveying meaning across cultural gaps. Take for instance the common occurrence of someone stating that there “is no good translation” for a word. Frequently this statement will be followed by a roughly translated explanation of the context of the word. But it is clear that there is much being “lost in translation,” as the saying goes. I am curious about the frequency of these “losses” in situations where it appears as though we are speaking the same language and thus where it is easier to assume that we intend the same meanings by our words. At times, participants may be able to recognize that a researcher is misinterpreting their words; however, they may not be able to make the specifics of their meaning clear because that would require the researcher to have had different life experiences that more closely match those of the participant. I imagine that this must be a helpless feeling, like that of being “locked in” a body that recognizes and is aware but cannot act or speak to change the course of action around it. While small and even larger misunderstandings in the research context are perhaps, by themselves, not as horrific as the experience recounted by my friend, it is important to recognize that these kinds of academic misunderstandings have been used to disempower, discount, and even dispossess peoples of their culturally significant understandings in both intentional and unintended ways.

While this is generally a challenge for all participant-based, empirical research, arts-based research seems to be, at least partially, conscious of its status as an adaptive medium. For instance, in

the book *Arts Based Research*, Barone and Eisner write about “informants-turned-characters” and acknowledge that arts-based research often inhabits a space in between what is conventionally referred to as “fact” and “fiction.” Expressed differently, arts-based research exists in the liminal spaces between what is conventionally referred to as “research” (fact) and “art” (fiction) (Barone and Eisner). I recognize that transnational and transdisciplinary studies are also areas where scholars are working hard to remove themselves from the limited and seemingly binding context that can be presented in certain researcher/participant relationships. In this vein, it is interesting here to look briefly at one aspect of transdisciplinary studies: so-called “based on a true story” film adaptations. Very often, there are still many layers separating the filmmaker(s) from the “informants” for whom the story is “true.” The filmmaker(s) are therefore able to deal with the “characters” of the story and are not directly involved in the “informants-turned-characters” process. When filmmaker(s) are directly involved with the informants, this is most often referred to as documentary filmmaking and is usually not labeled or even overtly acknowledged as “adaptation.” This categorization of documentaries is intriguing to me because this is a space where arts-based research and adaptation practice overlap directly. Indeed, Barone and Eisner would call this “research based art” – research conducted to “serve as a basis for creating a work of art” (9). Yet this is a space in which both the words “research” and “adaptation” are rarely applied.

A central consideration of arts-based and other forms of research that is, perhaps subconsciously, acknowledged in the “profoundly moralistic language of adaptation criticism” is ethics. While Stam can state in the context of adaptation studies that one needs to “trust the tale not the teller” (57), there is an explicit recognition in research contexts (although certainly in some disciplines more than others) that “trusting the tale” means trusting your own interpretation of the tale over the interpretation of the teller. While this prioritizing of the researcher’s interpretation is still quite often the case in academia, and can, indeed, be an important move for opening up new meanings and new avenues for consideration, it can also be problematic as it supports the privileged academic voice. This is something that many researchers and particularly arts-based researchers find troublesome and are trying to address through new forms of collaboration in and representation of research.

Leitch proclaims that “whatever their faults, the source texts will always be better at being themselves” (161). Part of the challenge – particularly of cross-cultural work – is that in academia, the researcher’s voice has often been accepted as superior to the “source” accounts themselves. Stl’atl’imx/Celtic poet-scholar Peter Cole demonstrates this in the context of white academics researching Indigenous peoples:

some of those precious white academic poets and proseurs need us too
 those indian experts who have out-indianed indians
 canadiana Americana Mexicana peruviana Indiana cabana banana panna
 those white academic cognoscenti are the real indians
 they have invented themselves as native experts through/despise us
 they have validated themselves as authorities in cross-cultural interaction
 (72, spacing, italics, and spelling original)

the stories once filtered out of our languages out of the spoken living realm
 cease to be our stories we have been edited out our ancestors edited out
 and white knowings are edited in experience as is eclipsed by information about
 expertise of that variation that variety means it’s been killed and is now a/trophy (52,
 spacing, italics and spellings original)

I have quoted extensively from Cole both because he powerfully names the insidious ways in which academic research can speak for participants, and because I believe that his playful use of poetic language exemplifies the open spaces for engagement that can be created through arts-based research – aiming to engage with, rather than subsume, a variety of perspectives. Cole also demonstrates that, in research contexts, the adaptive text (the “scholarship”) is sometimes considered to be better “at being” – or at least authoritatively understanding – participants than they are themselves.

While the ethical imperative of research is often strictly based around “fidelity” imperatives – remaining true to the “essence” or “spirit” of the data, privileging participants’ voices, etc. – “infidelity” is also an important part of academic ethics. This is demonstrated every time academics change names and other details to “protect” their participants. Infidelity is also present when academics draw on sources external to the participants’ own context/worldview to “disprove” or “discredit” participants’ perspectives. In arts based research, universities have actually insisted that work be unfaithful (i.e., fictionalized, rendered anonymous), even when participants and researcher did not feel that this was necessary to “protect” themselves or would rather have chosen to be “unprotected.” In her article, “Research that Matters,” Chambers recounts the story of one her master’s students, who engaged in an arts based thesis project:

Michelle Bertie-Holthe, a life-long resident of Taber, was an English language arts teacher at W. R. Myers School at the time of [a school] shooting [...] She was a witness to most of the events that she reported [in her thesis] and those few things she didn’t witness directly, Michelle Bertie-Holthe reported verbatim from the public record. Because Michelle’s thesis used her own first-hand observations and reflections on events she either witnessed or were part of the public record, I advised Michelle that she need not apply for approval from the Faculty of Education Human Subjects Research Committee [...] events following the successful thesis defense, initiated by senior administration in the university, forced Michelle to choose between not graduating and revising her thesis so that the central event, the location and the people involved bore no resemblance to the Taber shooting (2-3).

I consider this to be an example of “infidelity,” because the student was required to alter her personal account of events – her writing of her “data” and her “truths” – in order to receive her degree. As Chambers describes it, the student was made to “lie in order to tell the truth” (12). For the university administration, this was explicitly a matter of ethics and it was deemed that “infidelity” was the most ethical route. Ethical research therefore cannot simply be equated with “fidelity” or capturing the “truth” of an experience.

That being said, some arts-based researchers, despite an apparent recognition of their role as fictionalizers, continue to ask themselves how to discover what Stam refers to as the “extractable ‘essence’” or “heart of the artichoke” (57) in their source “data.” For example, note this comment from dramatists and arts-based researchers George Belliveau and David Beare:

I think it’s inevitable and essential for us to manipulate the data as we shape our scripts, because in the end we are playwriting, turning the research into an art form. However, there is an ethical obligation to stay true to the essence of what was said or recorded during the research [...] Our goal is to represent dramatically the multiple voices of participants’ experiences in an honest, truthful, and efficient manner (146).

This perspective is prevalent in spite of the explicit chorus in arts-based research that our job is not to reveal truths but rather to create evocative work that inspires new perspectives, presents challenges to the mundane and the status quo, and asks difficult questions (Barone & Eisner).

Given the hyphenated identity of arts-based research, this emerging field seems to sit between two stools – one marked by artistic concerns with aesthetics and the opening up of new possibilities, and the other tied to research conventions, which include stringent ethical considerations including a belief in the possibility of “fidelity” to participants’ accounts despite an overt recognition of the challenges of interpretation and even of adaptation of media and purpose. These are similar challenges to those faced by transdisciplinary studies, especially those focused on adaptation: pulled on the one side by a popular belief that “traduire c’est trahir” (Stam 62) and on the other by a commitment to the ways in which “art renews itself by creative mistranslation” (62). Both seem to be finding their way to a justification for ethical infidelity, which can open up new possibilities without giving over to an “ideological and aesthetic mainstreaming” (Stam 75). In other words, we need to be attentive to whether our “novel readings” of source texts or participant accounts are actually

appropriative readings from lenses of power that serve to better fit texts into academic or mainstream preferences. Locked in between the impossibility of literal “fidelity” and the demands for a deliverable “kernel of meaning or nucleus of events” (Stam 57), I wonder where these interdisciplinary disciplines will find solace? Perhaps we can take comfort in Wittgenstein’s aphorism that “aesthetics and ethics are one” (105). What is clear from considering arts-based research and adaptation studies together is that the relationship between art, research, adaptation and ethics is complicated and that these considerations attend each other at all times. Even if aesthetics and ethics are not, in fact, the same, questions of aesthetics in the worlds of adaptation and research are perpetually attended by questions of ethics. As we learn to pay more attention to this ongoing relationship, learning lessons across disciplinary boundaries, our research, our art, and our ethical attentiveness will be enhanced. It is my current sense that making space for the ethics of both “fidelity” and “infidelity” in research, art, and interdisciplinary studies will contribute significantly to this discourse – challenging us to consider moments when “fidelity” is not only impossible but also unethical and when acknowledgment of “infidelity” can be productive of more generative and complex engagements with our work.

My friend was never able to tell his side of the story at the hospital that day, but he trusted that those around him would do what they had to do. He is now back on his feet, speaking up and articulating his “side of the story.” He plans, in his own words, to be “milking this one for stories and sympathy a long time” (Irvine). I haven’t heard any of his doctors’ accounts of that day, but I am sure that they would tell an entirely different story.

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