

KERRY TUCKER

Swinburne University of Technology

**‘Authenticating ‘Wentworth’:
the prison consultant from cell to screen**

ABSTRACT

For most people, being incarcerated by the state for seven years would disable the rest of your life. For Kerry Tucker, however, living in a cell opened new doors and has led her to work with television production studios to ensure their representation of prison are accurate and true to the experience of imprisonment. This paper will explore the role and legal processes of the authenticity consultant in television series’, with particular reference to Foxtel’s ‘Wentworth’, a re-imagining of the long running Australian television production ‘Prisoner’. It will consider the impact of the consultancy process on the quality, success and creative processes of the show and discuss the dilemmas and boundaries, both legal and ethical, of using lived experience as a source of storytelling and representation.

KEYWORDS

authenticity consultant
prisoner representation
Wentworth TV Series
autoethnography
Kerry Tucker

How can those of us who have not experienced the pains of imprisonment claim to understand them? Or how can we write about what we do not understand.

(Ward 1991)

Representations of prisons and prisoners on stage, page and screen have proven endearingly popular with a fascinated public (Marsh 2009; Bouclin 2009). These narratives, however, inevitably focus on the experience of the male incarcerate (Bouclin 2009). This is not surprising given the large number of male prisoners commensurate to female prisoners. Yet when narratives, particularly television series, centred on women in prison do appear, they are arguably extremely successful. The UK television production *Bad Girls*, for example, ran for eight series, scooped a range of awards and was on sold to 17 countries (Wikipedia 2013a);

and of course Reg Grundy's Australian television drama series *Prisoner* ran from 1979 to 1986 (Wikipedia 2013b).

Australia's Fremantle Media attempted to re-capture this success when they created a 're-imagining' of the original *Prisoner* series and set it in the world of today. Its new title *Wentworth* positioned it as an acknowledgement of the popularity, location, and sentiment of the original series and yet marked it as a re-versioning with significant differences (Enker 2013).

The series was regarded as needing an authenticity consultant and hence I was contacted by the writers Lara Radulovich and Pete McTighe. Lara had seen an episode on Australian Story that told the story of my journey from prisoner to university lecturer, to PhD student and had also been referred to me by representatives of the prison family welfare organisation VACRO. Additionally, by this time I had a significantly high profile in the prison/Justice and Corrections fields.

This paper explores the experiences, nature and role of authenticity consultants. It takes as its methodology personal narrative auto ethnography and seeks also to contextualise the experience of being an authenticity consultant against a relevant body of literature on media representation.

THEORETICAL FRAMING: AUTOETHNOGRAPHY

This discussion on the nature and experiences of an authenticity consultant is framed through the methodology of auto ethnography. Auto ethnography is an approach that allows an individual to both acknowledge their singular experience and to reposition them as text that offers a broader social meaning and relevance, 'connecting the personal to the cultural' (Ellis & Bochner 2000: 739). It requires 'highly personalised accounts where authors draw on their own experiences to extend understanding of a particular discipline or culture' (Holt 2003: 18). It is an approach that particularly suits both writing about the prison experience and also about the process of transferring that first person prison experience into guided filmic translation. For as Tierney explains, it is 'through self-reflective response,' that 'representational spaces that have marginalised those of us at the border' can be reclaimed and explored (Tierney 1998: 66 cited in Holt 2003: 20). Ellis and Bochner (2011) highlight how these articulations of marginalisation serve a more universalising function when they argue that evocative, personal narratives 'sensitize readers to issues of identity politics, to experiences shrouded in silence, and to forms of representation that deepen our capacity to empathize with people who are different from us'.

The above aims of auto ethnography share a natural overlap with the process of acting as an authenticity consultant. For just as through the auto ethnographic eye the personal experience stands as a piece of unique knowledge and data, so too personal experience becomes a marketable commodity to television writers wishing to ensure the believability of the detail, characterisation and plot events of their filmed world. A clear parallel can be seen between auto ethnography’s intention of encouraging the telling of autobiography through a more distanced ethnographic lens (Ellis and Bochner 2011) and the authenticity consultant’s sharing of specific knowledge and personal anecdote as a way of making an audience feel they understand a foreign world.

This paper, then, utilises the ‘personal narrative’ method or school of auto ethnography. Personal narratives position the author as the object of study through the sharing of the story as a way of understanding how an element of life or self interacts with an aspect of culture (Ellis and Bochner 2011; Ellis 2004: 46). Reflexive analysis is then used to give further insights and contextualisation. With this in mind, this paper will firstly outline the nature of the personal experiences that functioned as authentic and marketable data, and then discuss the range of ethical issues that arose as a result of this process.

EXPERIENCE AS MARKETABLE DATA

The authenticity consultant needs to hold a particular set of knowledge or experiences whose scarcity makes them valuable. As Kirby (2013) notes, one of the primary tasks of the expert adviser is to provide information on methods, techniques and what procedures are needed to achieve certain outcomes. This information, while often of a basic nature to the expert, is outside the realms of ordinary knowledge for the scriptwriting and may prove too labour some for them to research, investigate or discover. The expert, as is often the case with investigative crime and forensic science series, may have multiple specialist degrees or have worked in a field for such an extended duration that they have gathered a career long stock of area specific knowledge.

So too individuals with specific insights into cloistered or marginalised communities can be seen to have marketable knowledge. Through the frame of auto ethnography, these insights can be experiential or of a participant observer nature. This approach captures the nature of my own marketability as a source of data for the television producers and writers of *Wentworth*.

In 2003 I was arrested and incarcerated in a maximum security women’s prison. Given that only 340 per 100,000 of the population have experienced incarceration, and, of

these, only 25% of women spend time in a maximum security prison, I was in a position of privilege in that I suddenly became an articulate and reflective member of a highly marginalised community that has traditionally played a large part of the Western cultural imagination.

Aspects of this experience fell under what Kirby (2013) considers basic information. This included prison vernacular, often an odd evolution of terms and phrases whose roots are as various as old English terms, rhyming slang, and plays on visual detail. Making a cup of coffee, for example, is most commonly termed in the outside world as ‘having a cuppa’, whereas in prison it is referred to as ‘making a brew’, a short sentence in prison is termed a ‘drunk’s lagging’, a 10 year sentence is a ‘brick’ and a new prisoner to the community is a ‘new by’. Also the visual particularities of the prison officer’s uniforms were referred to as a ‘one-pipper, two-pipper, super or Gov.’, as opposed to the recognition of insignia on police uniforms in the community.

Part of my unique knowledge was that I spent a long enough time in prison to become intimately familiar with procedures, the nature of the crimes committed by the inmates, and the behind the scenes dynamics of this hidden and often strange world. Whereas various moments and events within the incarceration experience can be gleaned from secondary sources and anecdotal encounters, longer term incarceration yields both a cycle and continuum of cause, effect and trauma that can not be envisaged unless lived. As I held an MA in writing that included studies in fiction and scriptwriting, a further unique knowledge that I possessed was the ability to articulate these events in terms of creative practice and creative license. I also regularly journaled about my experiences, which allowed me to record, reflect and later contextualise through autoethnographic consideration, the experiences encountered in this marginalised and hidden world.

My incarceration began when I was locked away in a state of remand for the two years it took for my case to get to trial. When it finally did present before the court, I was sentenced to 7 years, 5 years of it behind bars. Over time I settled in, accepted my sentence and became very experienced in all things legal and prison. I also gained the respect of my fellow inmates, and was approached very early in my sentence by Prison Management to become a Peer Educator. Myself and the other peer educators were then formally trained over a period of 15 weeks. As Peer Educators we were given access to all high security areas, the isolation/management unit, the Protection Unit, the Remand Unit and the Special Needs Unit. We could enter these areas and liaise with the women housed in them.

The women selected as peer educators must be respected and trusted by the population of the inmates or the women will never use them. One of the biggest demands on a Peer Educator is conflict resolution and negotiation. In order to do this, you must be respected or the women won’t approach you in the hope of getting you to intervene before violence takes over. Dealing with conflict in this way meant that I became adept at predicting and defusing situations. For the screenwriters I worked with, this became invaluable as I was able to map out very quickly relationships between cause, effect, and consequence in terms of plot actions and character changes. For instance, one has to be aware of the flow on effects when presenting and diffusing conflicts, in particular resolution. These issues will directly result the continuing plot of the character. For instance, when it came to the lead character knowing who it was who beat her, it was essential that this character didn’t inform authority who it was or the character would have been removed to Protection and hence, the lead role would have been diminished to the point of mere support cast.

I got to know the women very well, their issues both personal and medical, their children and their crew allegiances. This knowledge let me advise on fictional character flaws, motivations and tendencies. For example, I knew what would work between crew loyalties once we had established the various crews. I knew how women would act in the situation that involved a child so the motivation was quite different when it came to a) the protection of a child living within the prison and b) the use of a child to traffic drugs into the prison. Given the women’s individual experiences in relation to children, I knew what would motivate them in any given scene.

The experience of stepping out of jail and onto the outside world after a long sentence is also a knowledge that few others have lived. As I, and the women I had served with, tried to deal with their approaching release date and the difficulties of trying to rejoin the community and reuniting with family, I unwittingly gathered a long list of emotional ups and downs that later functioned as inspiration and data for the events of the TV series. For instance, the practice of reuniting with children was very emotionally charged given the lapses in time of separation and reunion. Characters were also emotionally vulnerable and experienced dislocation from their prison community and isolation from the community as a whole. Financial vulnerability and family turmoil played heavily in the roles of women leaving prison, as did prolonged self-esteem issues. One of the main issues that characters have to balance is their unresolved drug issues which were ever present upon release but also provided the cause and effect of recidivism and hence character longevity in the series.

CHALLENGES

When writing about varying notions of authenticity, Kirby argues that storytellers consider an event or procedure to be accurate if it could happen at all, yet for the consultant, accuracy depends on how likely it is that an event could happen. My own experience echoed this tension. When approaching planned incidents in the scenes, the writers first needed to know whether or not an event could happen. This is an easy assessment to make once I accepted that the question of how likely it was to happen was secondary. I had to first place the likelihood in context, in that it would have rarely been able to occur but dramatic licence demanded the situation, so in that I then had to assure that there was a degree of authenticity surrounding it.

When the moment came for me to articulate how this event could occur, the process of maintaining accuracy became decidedly more difficult. In these situations, I'd had no experience of these actual events for dramatic licence, so I had to re-invent the experience around security issues and how this could occur should we overcome gaps or laps in security. Only then could the event hold some sense of authenticity.

I'd also advise whether a particular set of circumstances could happen in regards to systems, security, culture and custom of the women. The narratological concept of suspension of disbelief also causes difficulty when trying to maintain authenticity of information, events and environment. One of the difficulties in translating real life event to screen is determining how to represent events that actually occurred but that may seem unlikely. Suspension of disbelief is a fragile beast and some happenings in life just seem so incredulous that no amount of build-up in terms of character development or plot scaffolding can make them seem likely inside the stricture of a story. For the authenticity consultant, this can be a sad moment as the highlights and transformational moments of one's own life often must remain outside the story. For instance, I was known for my success rate in representing women in court hearings both inside and outside prison. So much so, that for the last 6 months of my sentence I actually worked 2 days a week at a law firm in a suburb near the prison. I was ferried there by a plain clothed prison officer, and picked up at the end of the day. This yielded some humorous moments that one would think of as naturally filmic. For example, one rainy day, a miscommunication within the prison meant that no officer arrived to pick me up and I was, effectively, forgotten about on a street corner. I was technically left able to move throughout the community. Yet this would not work as a believable situational event in the TV series as prison, for the purposes of dramatic licence, needed to be seen as a harsh and dark place full of overt regulation and limited contact with the outside world.

Events of a similarly ‘unbelievable’ nature included my writing of a Children’s book which the prison later published, completing a Master of Arts and graduating with full ceremony in prison, then commencing a PhD just as I was being released. While these events have become defining moments in my movement from prisoner to public figure and advocate, for the purposes of likely narrative and audience identification, they must not enter the story.

In many ways, this dilemma is one commonly discussed in theories of adaptation. Storytelling, in the words of Walter Benjamin, ‘is always the art of repeating stories’ (Malsey et al 1992) and it is the role of the adaptors to decide what elements we will repeat and what elements we will turn into ‘something different, something other’ (Hutcheon 2007). As an authenticity consultant charged with selecting and transforming my own experiences into a secondary text, my own life effectively becomes the source material and it is up to me to evaluate what to offer, and up to the scriptwriters to negotiate with me how this material asserts in the final text. These choices can be contextualised by the work of adaptation scholars. For example, Andrew offers a continuum of fidelity to reinvention that could be categorised as borrowing versus intersection versus transformation (1980: 10-12). Wagner (1975) suggests we think about degrees of fidelity as analogy versus commentary versus transposition. Klein and Parker present adaptive approaches as a tension between three aspects: the source as raw material, the possible reinterpretation of only the central narrative structure, and the idea of literal translation (1981:10). What these three theorists are offering are, effectively, similar broad steps along the line between a faithful adaptation from a source at one end, to a highly interpretative adaptation at the other. Of these, no one approach proved useful every time, but Andrew’s model of a continuum was the most applicable: I borrowed from my own life’s source material, allowed it to intersect with the new ideas and intentions of the Wentworth scriptwriters in a negotiated way, and then altered aspects as needed to allow that information to be transformed into a new storyline or event. If an aspect did not translate well, it was left out.

RESPONSIBILITY OF REPRESENTATION

Australian media academic Kate Bowles defines representation as ‘the end point in a series of production choices’ (2009: 65) that function to make an audience believe that end point is a correct portrayal. The key idea here is choice, for as Jason Bainbridge suggests, every text has undergone a process of selection of ‘what to include, what to focus on, and what to discard when presenting its message to you’ (2008: 186). An audience may believe this ‘end point’ or representation is correct because human experience is more limited than those we

are exposed to in media, literature and other mediums and we may not have had first person, real world involvement with these issues or types the media present to us. Therefore we do not have experiences to counter those that media present to us (Bowles 2009: 66). In fact, these representations we absorb may cause us to adjust 'our impression of the real world accordingly' (Bowles 2009: 66).

The danger of offering representations that reinforced a stereotypical 'end point' (Bowles 2009) was particularly relevant to offenders, prisoners and prison. As Steve Morgan argues when discussing the value of using prisoner autobiography as a form of penal research, incarcerated tend to be defined in popular culture as outlaws or objectified by perceptions of their 'essential nature and motivations' (1999: 331). A longitudinal study of depictions of crime in mass entertainment media (film, television and press) from 1945 to 1991 supports this, revealing that in the post 1980s films studied, 80% showed offenders using excessive or sadistic force, and 85% suggested the offenders enjoyed committing their crimes (Reiner et al 2001). Women in prison films, as Bouclin notes, tend to occupy the role of 'supportive wives, girlfriends, mothers, and/or deceitful vixens that coerce, frame or seduce men into lives of crime' (2009: 21). Allowing women to take a lead role in prison narratives could be seen as a positive shift, assuming that the representations open a space of dialogue that explores some of the difficulties particular to female incarceration and the methods of criminalisation of women by legal, political and economic institutions (Bouclin 2009).

This felt like an awful lot of responsibility: now not only did my set of representations present myself to the world as a former prisoner, it could also, according to Bowles, affect or change how the audience saw prisoners and prisons overall. As an activist who had spent considerable time and energy attempting to redress the common misperceptions about prisoners, I had seen the damage done by inaccurate or essentialist representations not only of prisoners, but also of conditions such as parole. This sense of responsibility is what contributed to my desire to help create a narrative that was honest and yet engaging.

These concerns about representation were also shared by the writers and producers, although for a different reason. While I felt a huge responsibility to the women that they be portrayed as not only prisoners, but women, mothers, sisters, daughters and friends, so too the writers wanted the women's backgrounds to be rounded and troubled by divided loyalties as way of making them feel more like living beings and capable of a wide range of emotions. I was also aware that the women I had lived with would hold me accountable for their own particular representations. Most of the women that I actually served time with knew of my

involvement with the series and expected me to represent them correctly. That in itself was problematic as how I saw them during my sentence might be vastly different to how they saw themselves. This was further complicated by the fact that I was publicised as an authenticity consultant, and so in the eyes of the real life prisoners and public, I could be seen to be of blame if the representations were regarded as inaccurate. While I was comfortable with the notion of creative licence, those who had served in prison might not be as they saw the program as being about them and as representing their lives and dilemmas.

This opened many of the ethical dilemmas faced by memoir writers and those who pen autobiographies. What if accuracy shows the women in a way that makes prisoners in general seem unsympathetic and violent? How could I show that, like all human nature, there is good as well as bad without creating a negative stereotype of the officers and the prisoners? I resolved this by thinking of my involvement as an extension of my activism and dedication to helping improve the lives of incarcerated women. In a sense, this positions me beside consultants like Roni Baht, who undertook work on the Israeli TV series *Be Tipul* as a way to ‘uphold the public reputation’ of his profession (2010). One could argue my involvement in the story is also a way of protecting the reputations of the women whose story the series tells. This imbued a responsibility not only to the work, but to the women whose lives I shared. Telling their stories becomes a way of giving voice to those who cannot articulate their experiences, often due to shame or lack of access to the means of articulation. This is a common response from those who have survived incarceration. A former detainee who feels he must speak for those who cannot explains that ‘I realise that he cannot talk to others, even his lawyers, as he can to me. So, I have to speak out for him here’ (Brittain 2011: 58). This act of representing those who cannot represent themselves can be seen as offering a type of healing. Victoria Brittain, a journalist who writes about Guantanamo Bay detainees explains that they ‘decided to speak now...because they have realised that it is only former prisoners like themselves who can reach men so scarred by the horrors and injustice that they have suffered that they have given up all hope of ever returning to normal life’ (Brittain 2011: 57).

A further issue arose in terms of how my family, particularly my two children, would view the world I had helped create. Throughout my incarceration I had done my best to assure my family that I was safe and looked after. Yet in the series I was revealing details about the most common forms of violence within the prison and the traumas that accompanied being a prisoner. How would my family react to this? The main character was a loose amalgamation of myself and the original protagonist of the *Prisoner* series, Bea. However, the character of Bea in the *Wentworth* reimagining bore a distinctive physical similarity to myself and during

the scriptwriting I had called on many of the scenes from my own domestic life. Yet there were also differences: the character was a victim of domestic violence and had killed her husband. I knew where my life ended and the imagined life of the character began, but my children may not. I resolved this by going to great lengths to assure my children that this world and this character were both exaggerated and simplified, and that the stories were about other people's lives, not just parts of my own.

In the end, I decided that this telling of the stories of others could also be a way of expressing my own story without incrimination, without recrimination and as a way of keeping the details of one's own crimes and trauma's blurred from public view. In reality, the stories of others are, of course, also their own story as they have suffered similar actions to the prisoner whose story they are telling. The narrative protection, however, awards the teller a sense of distance that is both a shield against having to relive their own experiences and against audience disapproval. So, in effect, by telling the typified stories of the women I shared my time with, I am sharing the story of myself, and by telling my story, I am telling theirs.

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CONTRIBUTOR DETAILS

Kerry Tucker is a Media and Communications academic at Swinburne University, Victoria and has worked as an authenticity consultant on the Foxtel series ‘Wentworth’ and on a number of films. Her research into women’s incarceration has seen her appointed to the Board of Corrections as an advisor, and has resulted in numerous consultancy and panel appointments related to the challenges faced by women prisoners. She is completing a PhD, and has written and performed a season of a sold out one-woman show at Melbourne’s La Mama Theatre. She is also a sought after media commentator and public speaker and has featured in the Australian Women’s Weekly, numerous radio programs, and on the national documentary series Australian Story.

Contact: ktucker@swin.edu.au

SUGGESTED CITATION

Tucker, K. (2013), 'Authenticating 'Wentworth: the prison consultant from cell to screen', *Peer Reviewed Proceedings of the 4th Annual Conference Popular Culture Association of Australia and New Zealand (PopCAANZ), Brisbane, Australia, 24-26 June, 2013*, P. Mountfort (ed), Sydney: PopCAANZ, pp.237-248. Available from <http://popcaanz.com/conference-proceedings-2013/>.