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Exhuming voices: repurposing historical texts for fiction narratives

Biographical note:

With a background in public health and education, Denise Beckton is a lecturer in Creative Industries at Central Queensland University in Noosa, Queensland. Denise has recently completed a research higher degree in Creative Industries (creative writing), which comprised the writing of a Young Adult novel and a related dissertation that explores the construction and use of invented languages in fiction. Denise has recently been accepted for the 2016 Hachette Australia Manuscript Development Program for Fiction and Non-Fiction Writers.

Keywords:

Creative writing – Historical fiction – Invented language – Repurposing text

Background

The narrative of the novella ‘The last statue’ is intended to echo some of the culture, traditions and landscapes of Easter Island, and its people, during the turbulent era that corresponds with the island’s demise. The characters and also the political representation of clans, border territories and rituals (as represented on the map of Easter Island that prefaces the narrative and also within the story itself) are entirely fictional, although some of the names of characters and villages can be found in, or are adapted from, historical texts. The narrative, which is essentially a love story, follows protagonists Kaia and Pepa on their journey to understand and unravel the prophecy that foretells of the Island’s destruction.

The prologue and epilogue below are used as a framing device to the main text, and are designed to mirror the language used by Mrs Katherine Routledge in her published anthropological study of Easter Island *The Mystery of Easter Island* (1919). As Routledge explains (in this fictional prologue), her expedition discovers some tablets that contain examples of the language, which they believe documents the story of the island’s demise. They are able to decipher some of the symbols (below) and these symbols form the basis for the prophecy, which is revealed, in parts, throughout the novella. The narrative is written in expository form, to evoke the ethnographic language of sociology reflections (of that time), in order to detail the mystery of the undeciphered Rongorongo language. The use of some phrases and words, such as the word ‘natives’ and the cook’s response to the lack of wood on the island, are purposeful and reflect the accounts in Routledge’s own published notes.

Prologue

Notes on Easter Island, by Mrs. Katherine Routledge,
for The British Association for the Advancement of Science,
The British Museum, and the Royal Geographical Society
On this day, Sunday, the 29th of March, 1914

It is hard to believe that 147 days have passed since we left Southampton aboard the *Mana* and still another 63 days since our expedition’s safe arrival on Easter Island. I am happy to report that, apart from the odd storm at sea and the difficult task of avoiding ports known to harbour yellow fever, the crew has enjoyed a relatively pleasant journey at sea.

We approached Easter Island from the south, where it appeared as a long grey mass through the haze of evening sunset, then made our way along the northern coast past the headland, and the many huge statues that dotted the shore, before dropping anchor in the heart of Cook’s Bay. At first, we thought that the island was uninhabited as, apart from a few stray horses, there was no sign of life and not a vestige of timber or brushwood to be seen. Bailey, our yacht’s cook, expressed our thoughts best when he said, ‘I don’t know how I am to make a fire on that island, there is no wood!’. The barren scene was perplexing given that Mother Nature had forged the curiously symmetrical island out of a mass of flowing lava, leaving fertile volcanic soil in her wake and a number of extinct craters that were now filled with an abundance of fresh

water. The small triangular island had, it seemed, everything required to create, and sustain, vegetation as well as human life. It was also obvious, from the presence of the many monolithic sculptures, that the island was once home to a thriving population. All of which beggars the question – what went wrong?






















The question was partly answered not two weeks after we made land, when life – in the form of natives – emerged from the many hidden caves around our settlement. They approached us with spears in hand and white painted faces, which was a startling sight but, to the crew's credit, no one reached for their gun. I shudder to think what could have happened if someone had, as they have proven themselves a gentle folk who mean no harm. In fact, it turns out that they had been observing our daily movements ever since we arrived on the island. Imagine my surprise! Me, an anthropologist, whose job it is to observe others, becoming the object of a controlled study. Luckily for us – after handing over gifts from the ship's supply and many displays of animated sign language that looked like a bad game of charades – they obviously decided that we were not a threat to them.

One of the natives, known as Te Hana, who claimed to be the chief (or *Ariki*) of the island, seemed just as interested in our ways and customs as we were in his, and soon overcame his wariness to investigate everything from our clothes and tools to the workings of our ship. After a time, Te Hana was willing to share some of what he knew about his island home, including the mysteries behind the construction and movement of the many huge statues (which the natives call *Maoi*) and the fate of the ancestors who built them. I now understand Te Hana's wariness of foreigners – who he blames for introducing death and disease to his people who had no immunity to the new pathogens.

Unfortunately, Te Hana was unable to account for much of the island's history before this and I fear that a great deal of knowledge of indigenous traditions has been lost over the generations. I sensed that this fact shamed Te Hana somewhat, as he tried to fill in the gaps, so to speak, by guiding us through some of the underground caves on the island – which were very impressive indeed! Most contained intricate wall carvings and painted depictions (mostly in white relief) of what appeared to be culturally specific scenes and Te Hana dramatized some of these rituals for our pleasure, with the help of his men.

As a finale to this performance, Te Hana produced a large wooden tablet (approximately 40 inches high x 20 inches wide), which contained rows upon rows of intricately etched symbols, which Te Hana called *Rongorongo*. It was tantalizing to feel how near we were to their translation – yet how far. While Te Hana was able to translate the meaning of some of the symbols to us, our understanding was limited by our mutual language barrier and also the fact that the symbols did not seem to translate directly to words. That is, one symbol often represented a full phrase or cultural ritual rather than a phonetic sound or word that could be linked together with following symbols for meaning. I am afraid that without knowledge about these past rituals, translation of these symbols will be difficult, although I am keen to continue the quest to understand them in the hope that they will elucidate the mystery behind

the demise of this amazing culture. The list below identifies the symbols that Te Hana was able to translate and I will use these as a foundation for further translations:

	cursed		life		suffer		tears
	Gods		bird		fish		cricket
	statue		island		turtle		erupt
	boy		wind		strength		fertile
	The hidden		renewed		free		hope
	ocean		flower				

Katherine Routledge

Epilogue

Notes on Easter Island, by Mrs. Katherine Routledge,
for The British Association for the Advancement of Science,
The British Museum, and the Royal Geographical Society
On this day, Sunday, the 29th of August, 1915

Today is the Sabbath and we are homeward bound. It is true to say that in many ways Easter Island has become our home and, as such, I'm sure that I can speak for the crew when I say that we will miss her greatly. We set out early in the day with the principal objective of visiting Tahiti to collect all the letters, newspapers and money that have been forwarded to us over the past twelve or so months. It seems desirable to also visit Pitcairn Island on the way thither as, even though it is a little out of our route, I am keen to either prove (or disprove) Te Hana's translations. After presenting the tablet of Rongorongo symbols to us on Easter Island, Te Hana has indicated that the symbols form a prophecy of sorts, and provide a clue as to the demise of the island's population. According to Te Hana, the message on the tablet is a warning from the Gods – a caution that, if not heeded, foretells of a potentially cataclysmic event. Te Hana is adamant that the prophecy was fulfilled, and that the island was indeed subjected to such an event several generations before he was born. He claims that many people escaped this event in boats while others stayed to rebuild the island.

Te Hana's version seems unlikely to me given the limited availability of wood to build the boat, however, the records show that a tsunami did hit islands in this region during this time. If Te Hana's translations, and my calculations of ocean and wind currents are accurate, then Pitcairn Island can be the only possible destination for such a journey. We follow this same path now, as we steer the *Mana* on her 1,100-mile journey, towards Pitcairn Island.

Katherine Routledge

Research statement

Research background

An extract from a historically-informed fiction, 'The last statue', this work utilises a number of literary devices including story framing (Crew 1990), the construction and inclusion of a fictional language and the repurposing of factual texts to evoke the voice of pioneering anthropologist Katherine Routledge (1919), in a way that Griffiths describes as 'an intriguing dance between history and fiction' (2015).

Research contribution

This contributes to investigations of fictional language and narratives (Stockwell 2006), and is one of a series of articles relating to the construction and use of fictional language to enhance narrative elements such as characterisation, setting, atmosphere and plot (Beckton 2014, 2015).

Research significance

This research adds to current discourses around the fictionalisation of history and the controversy associated with fictionalising historical events. It has been accepted for publication in a peer refereed journal.

Works cited

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