



## Juxtaposing and Jostling: The Art of Writing History?

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### ABSTRACT

This reflective essay seeks to question, through my creative practice, methods of writing the history of post-1945 events for a young adult reader. Using creative techniques to add depth to the research, I explore the scope of the future project through a palimpsest diagram as well as poetry, word association and vignettes of my lived experiences. I compare how other creative writers have treated historical narrative in fiction, memoir and drama. Building on scholarly debate on the role of life writing in historical processes, both source materials and historiography, the essay analyses the scholarship on postmodern representations of the recent past in the literature, including personalised life writing and autobiography as well as novels. Problems jostle for attention: blank spaces in the historical records, unreliable memories, competing definitions of truth, Western class-bound identity and twenty-first century retrospection. My conclusions suggest that novelistic and lyrical techniques and voices may be an effective medium for shining a spotlight on the themes of the late twentieth century. The resulting work of *auto/history* will be written and read through a personal lens that is at the same time a memoir, history and historiography, which juxtaposes a microscopic life against the constellation of world events.

*Keywords:* life writing, historiography, practice-based research, experiment

### INTRODUCTION

People born into the complex twenty-first century deserve to understand what led up to their epoch and to realise the ‘distance travelled’ in the previous fifty years, yet access to a clear understanding of recent history

is muddled by the plethora of ‘fake news’ that floods teenagers’ in boxes. Much of the explosion in multiple forms of life writing in the last decade relates, examines and analyses this past within living memory. In 2019, a whole issue of ‘Life Writing’ was devoted to the ‘convergence’ between history and autobiography, exploring the conflicts and borderlands between the two. Some life writing, like Suniti Namjoshi’s *Goja*, is an ‘autobiographical project [that] opens spaces and meanings inaccessible to formal historiography’ (Aurell and Davis, 2019, 507). However, questions remain about the validity of life writing as a historiographical form. In ‘Identity History is not Enough’, Eric Hobsbawm, points out how life experiences get in the way of history (Hobsbawm, 2002). More recently, Christian Heuer considers the limitations of ‘Everyman his own historian’ (Heuer, 2019). Other scholars make a distinction between literature and history, believing that the ‘made up’ elements of life writing, such as reconstructed memory and fictional embellishments, cannot be included in the sweep of fact-based interpretive historical narration or depiction. However, like Carolyn Steedman’s view of her book *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986), I prefer my story to be called history, whereby the life narrative serves as a device to make the past accessible and to endow historical happenings with meaning.

In this essay, I develop this strand of thought, aiming to find a place for my work in ‘the continuum of forms of writing about the past’ (Aurell and Davis, 2019, 508). I decide to italicise my thoughts in a creative quest alongside the fact-finding mission to provide a foundation for my yet-to-be written history.

## PEOPLE-FOCUSED HISTORIOGRAPHY

During the twentieth-century evolution of historiography, increasing attention was paid to ‘ordinary people’, broadening the space for historical storytelling. Great men, wars and revolutions, regime change and the balance of power still featured, but the French *Annales* school headed by Fernand Braudel and E.P. Thompson’s *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) ushered in a wave of social history that focused on the lives and times of those who were not in power. The History Workshop movement founded by Raphael Samuel in the 1970s paved the way for multiple forms of historiography concentrating on the voices of the disempowered: oral history, local history, and public history to name a few. Simultaneously, feminist and post-colonial history, followed later by queer scholarship, opened up new interpretations of the past from the point of view of women and subjugated peoples. Blending with postmodern critiques of objectivity, these movements authenticated diverse points of

view and untold stories, relegating the notion of ‘objective’ third-person historical narration to its own corner of historiography. Autobiography and life writing brought a further dimension of the first person into both historical materials and narratives.

As a twenty-first century historian narrating through a first person trajectory, I intend to blend personal and historical narratives to show a young audience how a girl from Birmingham experienced the space race, pop music, Windrush arrivals, wars hot and cold, technology and movements for social equality, and explain the forces behind them. Through the lens of the self, I aim to bring clarity to the period 1950–2000, telling a history which combines the creative writer’s use of language and the historian’s use of archives. I suggest that the resulting work builds on the form of *auto/history* that elucidates the currency of the recent past, thus helping young people navigate through today’s fast-moving and complex world.

### JOSTLING PROBLEMS

Problems occur when foregrounding the historical element of life writing, as it shifts a work’s focal point from the individual to the collective, and individual memory is converted into cultural memory. The text thus transcends the personal and becomes political, which is exemplified by Gloria Anzaldúa’s *autohistoria* writings. Reaching for her truth was problematic, beset as much by ignorance as by knowledge, and was only solved by digging into her people’s barely visible past, which she accessed through experimenting with myth and fantasy (Pitts, 2016). Do I need myth-making in my history?

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*Problematising - 'orrible word - is a problem. Finding it problematic probably isn't going to solve the problem. I'm sinking in a problem soup, stewing in problems of probity while probing sensitive areas, prodding, poking, prospecting for prospective answers, hoping to dissolve the mass of problems into a solution. Assessing the probability of the problem proving intractable - problematic - unless it is effectively problematised.*

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I’m not the first to marry facts with lived experience, but I’m the first to tell **my** truth, **my** (her)story. In the Foreword to his hybrid text *Someone Called Derrida* (2007), John Schad gives me permission to use ‘novelistic’ technique to ‘tell the truth’, yet in the Internet era, slippery truth is becoming increasingly problematic. Robert Poole considers that a lot of history is ‘fairy-tales with data’ although his ambition as a historian is to tell stories ‘in the best possible way that is closest to what actually happened (Poole,

2019)'. Truth, itself, is a recurring problem which I cannot solve but I will persist in my allegiance to accuracy. My story will carry the authenticity of personal witness, whilst paradoxically containing unavoidable partiality. However, as a doctor swears to do no harm, I commit to the pursuit of truth, accepting the aesthetic and ethical obligations involved.

The recent boom in young adult (YA) books saw titles more than doubling in the decade 2002–12 according to Valerie Peterson, analyzing data from the American Library Association. She concludes that 'new adults' aged 18–25, known to consume e-books more than teenage readers, are contributing to the 'dramatic' increase in YA readership (Peterson, 2018). While the YA/new adult nonfiction market lags far behind fiction, it too is enjoying increasing popularity. Kelly Jensen maintains that styles and techniques which appeal to readers of YA fiction are now being used by nonfiction authors writing in 'thoughtful, encouraging, engaging and exciting ways' (Jensen, 2016). I take heart from nonfiction writers who expect audiences to read their works with the articulacy that successive generations of teenagers have gained from YA fiction exploring societal and moral issues over the past twenty years. Jacqueline Wilson and Malorie Blackman's works are typical examples of dealing with difficult issues, such as living in a children's home and the destructive divisions caused by racism, respectively (Wilson, 1991; Blackman, 2001).

Blogger Paul@Lulu helps me think how I might make history relatable by importing elements of 'emotional truth and intensity' from YA fiction and speaking through my youthful experience so that young readers 'connect to the story' (Paul@Lulu, 2018). Rather than readers' 'journeys to self-knowledge' being about understanding their own lives ahead of them (Peterson, 2018), I'm hoping my work will generate understanding of what lies just behind their twenty-first century existence. Emulating *Sugar Changed the World* (2010), whereby Marc Aronson and Marina Budhos explore the implication of sugar in their family history encompassing New World explorers, the slave trade and revolutions, my history will explore the connections between a Quaker girl in 1960s England, chocolate manufacturers of the industrial revolution and cocoa plantations in Ghana.

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*I'm collecting facts. In 1961 the first human astronaut, Yuri Gagarin, launched into space, my infant schoolteacher was Miss Richardson and I loved John Lennon.*

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My ideas jostle between the genres of historical fiction, narrative history and memoir, looking for a space to create living history, which allows young readers to make sense of the world they have inherited. Through Beverley Naidoo's *Journey to Jo'burg* (1985) readers can picture life under apartheid in South Africa as they follow two siblings' journey to fetch

their mother – a domestic servant in the city – back to their village. It's a worthy guide, but fictional. I want to tell real stories rather than tales or myths.

Following the lead of Margot Singer and Nicole Walker in *Bending Genre* (2013), maybe some genre-bending is in order, balancing personal and public, with the story tilted towards world events. Narratives of self that reflect on events of the time overlap with historiography (de Haan, 2014), and although Margaretta Jolly's *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* (Jolly, 2013) asserts the impossibility of defining life writing, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson do define the concept in *Reading Autobiography* (Smith and Watson, 2010). By including 'historical' in their 52 categories, they give me permission to continue exploring the idea of presenting myself as a minor character in twentieth-century history. Akala's memoir, *Natives* (2018), uses his lived experience as the starting point for analysing racialised Britain and is an excellent model to adapt for a blended historiographical work. Shima Shahbazi's analysis of 'micronarratives' as a source of historical understanding of the recent past in Iraq, cited by Aurell and Davis (Aurell and Davis, 2019, 507), provides validation for using a micronarrative – my life – as a source to represent a 'historical understanding' of twentieth-century UK.

## THE QUEST BEGINS

*I'm floundering in a sea of words, thoughts, jumbled ideas, monographs popping up on Google Scholar as I type key words – literature and history, narrative, criticism, cultural turn, postmodern, metamodern, superpostmodern (no results for that last one.) I'm sinking more than swimming, flailing my arms and legs, exhausted like William Golding's Pincher Martin, who lived a whole life but never got his seaboots off. I can see land, need to fix my eyes on a point, take several deep breaths and swim steadily. Although the land never seems nearer, I believe that my strong strokes and the swell will gradually transport me there. I just need fortitude and resilience (Golding, 1956).*

I plunder my memory, then use my practice to explore the problem, and my quest generates clues.

*First clue. Draw a picture.*

*Second clue. Remember how you got here.*

*Third clue. Listen to other people.*

*Fourth clue. Read a load of stuff.*

*Fifth clue. Listen more and read more.*

*Sixth clue. Work out what the question is.*

*Seventh clue. Try out what you have to say.*

## SIMPLE PAST

### First clue. Draw a picture.

The graphic history *Peterloo* by Polyp, Eva Schlunke and Robert Poole (2019), shows how drawings sometimes communicate better than words. The picture I draw shows my story as a million raindrops adding meaning to the pool of history (See Figure 1). The interplay between text and other signifiers exemplifies Jacques Derrida's concept of *différance*. By flipping a page and drawing on the back, it overwrites the text and talks to the reader in a *différent* manner (Derrida, 1982). This palimpsest, drawing and writing on top of previously erased, but still visible work, leads me to mimic Robin Nelson's playful anagramming in 'Set Map Slip = Palimpsest' (Nelson, 2001) and create my own anagram: *Simple Past*.

## THE SELF AND THE PAST

I'm influenced by the French concept of *ego-histoire*, which translates as both story and history emanating from the self and is simultaneously critical and autobiographical. Furthermore, the twentieth-century transformation of historical narrative highlighted the limitations of distant 'objective' representations of the past, while post-colonial and feminist approaches opened a door for the representation of multiple perspectives. Queer and working-class texts, notably Didier Eribon's *Returning to Reims* (2018), where the past is ever-present, show me how to challenge temporality.

These developments have affected my practice. Issues of representation demand transparency about how identity shapes my worldview. In the same way that Akala skilfully weaves his identity throughout *Natives*, whereby he gives 'a personal face to the forces' of class, empire and white supremacy, and how they 'shape the life experience of a random child in ....early 1980s England' (Akala, 2018, 22), I can represent myself through lived experiences. Consulting summaries of representation, subjectivity and identity theories takes me further (Weedon, 2000; Howarth, 2011; Mansfield, 2000). Whether I'm conforming or resisting, Judith Butler suggests that my life is a performance of cultural practices forging my female, middle class, white, lesbian identity. Louis Althusser challenges me to analyse my outlook as a 'knowing subject' at risk of treating what's outside my frame of cultural reference as 'the other'. Just as I consider myself 'half Celtic' rather than 'half English', I need to negotiate a path that represents the world, avoiding a hegemony based on my class, education, citizenship, ethnicity and

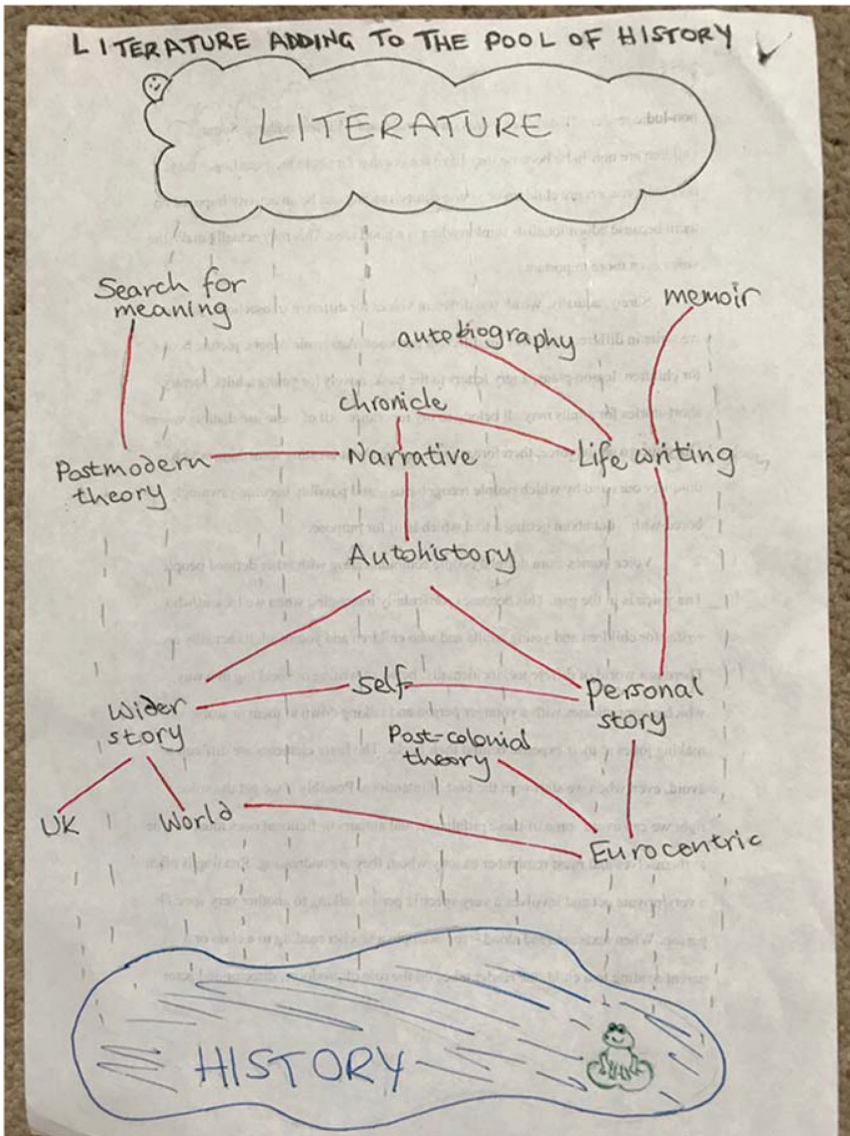


Fig. 1 Palimpsest and Anagram: Simple Past.

Western ideology. According to Jean-François Lyotard, my story could be one of many competing 'metanarratives', each claiming to represent a universal viewpoint.

The urge to portray my times prompts me to understand how *auto/history* can be conceptualised alongside *auto/biography*, whereby the slash denotes personal comment entering a study. In my first trawl of sources, autohistory appears limited to studies of Amerindian peoples, international criminal trials and one history of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) (Sioui, 1992; Brzezińska, n.d.; Stolk, 2015). However, deeper investigation reveals further studies. The September 2019 issue of ‘Life Writing’, devoted to the theme of History and Autobiography, refers to ‘auto-historiography’ and ‘microhistorical ego-narratives’ (Aurell and Davis, 2019, 505, 507). Maybe *auto/history* could inhabit the shared space between literature and historiography, nestling next to autofiction, which itself ‘occupies a liminal space between fiction and nonfiction’, according to Marjorie Worthington (Worthington, 2017). ‘Liminal space’ is a phrase used by Gary Baines’ account of the South African Border War (idem, 505). Here is a nudge to implement Margot Singer’s ‘narrative realism’ in writing about the past with the authority of personal experience, backed up by reliable research and presented in story format (Singer, 2013).

Then I discovered Gloria Anzaldúa’s *autohistoria-teoría* and turn to the critiques of white feminism – which was my feminism – by women of colour. Anzaldúa asserts that self-knowledge is a subversive practice, and wilful ignorance is a mainstay of the oppressive status quo. Her definition of *autohistoria* emphasises the unity of ‘personal and collective history’ which might contain fictive elements. Andrea Pitts describes *autohistoria-teoría* as a collaborative process to produce ‘a personal essay that theorizes’ (Pitts, 2016, 357). This spurs me on in my endeavour to involve others in creating stories from my life, which generate meaning not just for me but also for a wider audience.

I write a few exploratory paragraphs from my childhood and include them in my reflections. (These are distinguished by the date heading and different typeface).

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### 1963

*We lived The War and yet we were ignorant. I was a coarse 8-year old singing*

*“Hitler has only GOT ONE BALL  
The other is in the Albert Hall  
Göring’s are very small  
Himmler’s are similar  
and Goebbels has no balls at all”*

*shouting “Achtung!” before simulating machine gun fire – “aa-aa-aa-a-a-aa-aa”  
and dropping to the ground in a blaze of heroic glory. We wore my dad’s blue RAF*



*combat jacket and sat on Flight Sergeant Somerset's tin trunk while plotting how to parachute our spies into enemy territory. Children's comics provided storylines telling how Tommies fought on the beaches and bombed dams. 'The Great Escape' told us how it was. Even 'The Sound of Music' was a story of resistance against the Nazis.*

*We knew about rationing and making dresses out of curtains and turnip jam and the blackout and the Blitz. But we knew nothing of terror. The explosions erupting from our mouths weren't screams of flesh tearing and eyeballs searing: unbearable knowledge that parents could not pass on to children, even though many children had lived through it half a generation previously. We knew about evacuation and gas masks, but we'd never heard of the Kindertransports, the lucky ones. (How could it be lucky to leave your family for ever?). We didn't know that Dad's best friend Klaus was incarcerated as an 'enemy alien' in the Isle of Man, and my Jewish friends at school didn't mention disappeared cousins.*

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### Second clue. Remember how you got here.

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*Thinking, like Pincher did, will help. Drowning, like Pincher did, will not. Happily, I'm not wearing seaboots, and even more happily, I'm only metaphorically drowning, so I can think in the luxury of the library about the prospects my island holds; yes, it's an island, I've invented that detail. That's another problem, since my project commits, like John Schad, to tell the truth and renounce invention.*

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Looking for texts whereby the author's life is the springboard from which the reader can understand the world, I consider whether Günter Grass' *My Century* (1999) demonstrates Porter Abbott's insight that differentiation stems from the reader's experience rather than the writer's output:

The difference, then, between an autobiography and a novel lies not in the factuality of one and the fictiveness of the other but in the different orientations toward the text that they elicit in the reader (Abbott, 1988, 603).

But in many ways, with a reverential bow to a great author, *My Century* is a lesson in how not to do my project. The hundred stories it contains succeed in reflecting belligerence and beastly behaviour during Germany's twentieth-century, but only partially build an understanding of where and how history happened. It doesn't hang together: too microscopic, too much assumption of the reader's foreknowledge, the shift from fiction to memoir too opaque.

It's a reminder to make no assumptions in using similar fiction-like techniques to 'climb inside' the past while relating it, as described by Gillian Polack (Polack, 2016, 26), so that the reader can experience the drama of the twentieth century against the backdrop of my unfolding

story. In addition, adult historical fiction covering my period provides a treasure trove of techniques to consider, from the nameless Northern Irish protagonist's guarded narration in Anna Burns' *Milkman* (2018), to the magical realism sweeping through *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie, as India's post-partition history unfolds. Mimicking life writing, epistolary fiction, too, speaks to modern readers, and is used to devastating effect by Lionel Shriver in *We Need to Talk About Kevin* (2003) to expose the phenomenon of school massacres in the 1990s. Historical subject matter is also portrayed as a gripping tale about European vampire folklore up to the 1970s, conveyed as a letter to the reader, in *The Historian* by Elizabeth Kostova (2005). I'm leaning towards hybrid voices and multiple viewpoints from different geographical and temporal perspectives.

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### 1961

*On Wednesday, 12<sup>th</sup> April, home from school, sniffing the reassuring smell of Mum's cigarette, I heard about Yuri Gagarin, the First Man in Space. Elvis Presley's Wooden Heart – "Please don't break my heart in two" - was number one. My heart bursting with excitement, I couldn't wait to tell Dad there'd been a Man in Space who'd orbited the earth. I was spellbound by the front-page photo in next morning's Birmingham Daily Post and decided to call my first child Yuri when I grew up. The space race had begun, and Russia won the first round, wrong-footing President Kennedy and the USA.*

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In my desire to produce a work that is accessible to teenagers and young adults, I will fuse a style that entertains as well as educates. Lived experience communicates knowledge powerfully through works in diary or epistolary formats. The most obvious for my audience is *Diary of a Young Girl* (1947) by Anne Frank, the immediacy of her daily journal transporting the reader into second world war Jewish experience alongside the author in her attic. As a teenager in the 1970s, I learnt about the Black Panther movement in the United States of America from George Jackson's prison letters, *Soledad Brother* (1970) which were deeply personal and seething with injustice. I intend to accentuate these forms of life writing in my work by incorporating extracts from my diaries and letters interspersed through the text. In addition, I'll draw on primary sources from other people's letters, diaries, photographs and memories to portray a temporal landscape, supplemented by secondary sources chronicling the twentieth century. As memory and other subjective sources are often problematic, I will triangulate with other sources to verify or at least add weight to the probability of something happening as described. My memory of President Kennedy's assassination, for example, does not match reality. It was a

Friday evening, so I cannot have read the news in the ‘Stop Press’ column of the *Birmingham Post*. Yet my remembered childlike response is valid if I acknowledge the factual imperfection.

## IMAGINATIVE ENQUIRY

### Third clue. Listen to other people.

At the 2019 Historical Fictions Research Network conference in the UK, Josie Gill explained how ‘literary archaeology’ ‘jostled’ between fact and fiction, exploring the body’s physicality through poetry to produce literature based on the real (Gill, 2019). Following Toni Morrison’s method of examining ‘remains’ and using imagination to reconstruct the world they inhabited, and whilst not exactly fiction, poets employed inventive techniques to divine what might have been true (Gill, 2019; Toni Morrison, 1995). Sensing with fingertips the dug-up bones of slaves, Vanessa Kisuule wrote:

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I can feel the jostle.  
 No, just a skull  
 I grip it  
 Waiting for answers  
 That won’t come  
 .....  
 Like what – what would his teeth ache like?  
 .....  
 The past is losing its teeth  
 .....  
 I cannot sink my teeth into this story  
 I am met with things that crumble (Gill, 2019).

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Learning from archaeologists seeking insight through poetry to breathe life into slave bones, I turned to writing verse to articulate the concepts I was mining.

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*Actuality*  
*The personal is political, the personal is BIG,*  
*The personal is critical, a bird that hovers, spits,*

*O god, she’s gone poetical*

*the person is split*  
*an actor and a character,*  
*spectator and player,*

*The person's got a role to play:  
a principal  
on the fringes, in the middle,  
tethered,  
umbilical withered.*

*The personal is physical, a seething mass of particles,  
your genuine article. You could say magical  
but that would be heretical,  
to cast the human spectacle as some kind of miracle,  
a life that's immaterial.*

*Spare the philosophy. Get on with it.*

*Forget spiritual. Let's get literal. Try the past participle:  
the life was lived, the self was there*

*Where?*

*In the liminal straddling then and now,  
trivial and large,  
local and global;  
the space amongst the stars -  
astro-physical.  
The personal is universal.*

*Yeah, yeah, and you're a twittable.*

*Belittling is habitual,  
this argument's vulnerable, could be called whimsical.  
but I submit  
there's a gleam in it,  
albeit indistinct.*

*I'll commit a heresy and say  
"I did, therefore it was."  
Feci, ergo erat.*

*Fake it - er - what?*

*The principle's invincible.*

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Paying attention to Gloria Anzaldúa, I attempt to reach beyond conventional knowledge and plumb murky depths which might transform into consciousness. She tells me:

Through creative engagements, you embed your experiences in a larger frame of reference, connecting your personal struggles with those of other beings on the planet, with the struggles of the Earth itself. (Cited by Pitts, 2016, 359).

I dive way under the surface of my history-telling and continue the quest.

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*The prospects my island holds. Prospect. Gold. It's a Treasure Island, and Jim-lad has transgendered, it's really about me, Jo-Lass. There's treasure in my endeavour.*

*Suddenly this is going much better. My task is to search for clues, to burrow: nose twitching and snuffling and scrabbling front paws but Help! Gulps of sea water warn me off diversions, the danger of drowning. I'll risk it – if I can't burrow, I'll ferret among the island's foliage to sniff out evidence like Sherlock Holmes' bloodhound.*

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As a white woman, I need to express my gratitude for the thinking that will bring my *auto/history* to life. Toni Morrison talks of re-memorizing the pasts of African slaves (Toni Morrison, 1995, 92), and Gloria Anzaldúa urges 'dismembering and re-membering oneself'. This may initially produce terrifying 'mismatched parts' akin to Frankenstein, a process involving confrontation and self-criticism (Pitts, 2016, 361–2). I owe a debt for the intellectual and emotional work that Anzaldúa has undertaken in producing an ongoing '*autohistoria* [which] involves creating new personal and collective narratives that can render one's experiences meaningful and transformational' (idem, 364). Discovering how Anzaldúa queered her story and explored the liminal space to create her *autohistoria* clears a path in formulating my own *auto/history*.

## THE SELF AND THE WORLD

### Fourth clue. Read a load of stuff.

I venture along the *pomo* path, to unearth pointers on how to write about multiple realities, power and sexuality; female presence and absence; and time's shifting viewpoints. Julia Kristeva's *Women's Time* simultaneously complicates and unveils new vistas in my mission. Her assertion that female engagement with temporality involves 'cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which [is] all-encompassing and infinite' allows a feminist weaving that may warp widely accepted stories. Through 'interweaving of history and geography', I can catch threads from forgotten time and unusual places to form a new web that creates previously unseen images (Kristeva, 1981, 13, 16).

Keith Jenkins sets out the postmodern historians' position articulated by Hayden White thus: 'All interpretations of the past are indeed as much invented (the contexts) as found (the facts)' and all narratives are 'ultimately self-referencing'. He goes on to cite F.R. Ankersmit's conclusion that because historians create stories out of incomplete facts, the resulting narrative is 'as much invented/imagined as found' (Jenkins, 1995, 19–20). I try again to grasp the thorny issue of truth, but question Hélène Cixous' attempt to frame truth in relation to postmodern concepts, reducing the concept to imagination and feeling: 'Let us imagine that it [truth] exists. The word exists, therefore the feeling exists' (Cixous, 1994). Guided by John Schad, I tussle with Derrida's view that communication is little better than a scrawled picture postcard from an unfamiliar and probably undated place (Schad, 2007).

I return to the ancient philosophers for some solid ground. Aristotle's three elements of persuasion: pathos, ethos and logos underpin Hayden White's assertion that the important thing about stories is not their truthfulness but that they are 'coherent, consistent and persuasive' (Jenkins, 1999, 20). Whilst absolute truth is elusive, probably non-existent, searching for truth as a 'correspondence with the facts' carries weight, especially when contrasted with its opposite – falsehood – which resonates in our 'post-truth' era.

I find – don't laugh – that I'm not alone in wanting to make sense of the world that revolved and evolved around me. In *On 'What is History?'* (1995), Keith Jenkins asserts that we can only 'read the past, not access it directly', and refers to F.R. Ankersmit's view that invention is involved in the selection and putting together a 'picture of the past' (Jenkins, 1995, 21). Lynn Wolff refers to the 'perpetual problem of literature's relationship to reality', considering W.G. Sebald's work to be 'literary historiography' (Wolff, 2014, 1). History, too, has issues with its relationship with reality, as the selection and interpretation of facts is always subjective: once again, a partial truth that is nevertheless attempting a worldview. I must re-examine to what extent re-presentation also involves redefinition or re-drawing of previously accepted boundaries. Looking into contemporary meanings drawn out from classical myths is one way to do this, as Hélène Cixous, Carol Ann Duffy and Judith Butler have ably demonstrated in essays and poems rewriting the stories of Medusa and Antigone with a feminist slant (Cixous, 1994; Duffy, 1999; Butler, 2000). But I mustn't stray too far in this direction, as I need my work to be rooted in my own era.

Like the subjective viewpoints of Akala and Anzaldúa, my work is 'ideologically charged' (de Haan, 2014, 279), and my representations of 'truth' and 'fact' will diverge from those whose experiences of gender, race, class or era differ from mine. When decoding the text's messages, my readers,

with their twenty-first century sensibilities, may place a different meaning than I intended. I am motivated to articulate unheard voices, influenced by personal stories from the 1970s feminist and gay movements, and multiple viewpoints of disabled people, black, Asian and mixed heritage people in subsequent decades. Through exposure to polyphonic voices, I hope my readers will understand the nature of hard-won freedoms that they may have hitherto taken for granted.

However, there are many ethical dimensions to consider, and some parts of my history trouble me. My undoubted Eurocentrism and active participation in what Reni Eddo-Lodge criticises as the ‘white feminist’ movement are problems (Eddo-Lodge, 2018, 168). Reading Robert Young’s arguments, who references influential works by Edward Said, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Homi Babha, how can I follow those who’ve ‘decolonize[d] “History”’ and ‘deconstruct[ed] “the West”’ from my birthright of ‘implacable whiteness’? (Young, 2004, 4) Fortunately, Eddo-Lodge’s analysis of the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993 shows how to uncover ‘spaces no longer blanked out by that ruthless whiteness’ (Eddo-Lodge, 2018, 24). As I was involved in challenging ‘institutionalised racism’ in public services at that time, I see a way to represent the impact of racism in its various forms – crude, brutal, and subtle – through my own personal history in the preceding decades. Colonialism is harder, but the blinkered innocence of the missionary family in 1960s Congo depicted in Barbara Kingsolver’s *The Poisonwood Bible* (1998) gives me ideas about how to approach the connections between my Quaker upbringing, cocoa and empire.

Since 2015, the challenge of cultural appropriation by the #ownvoices movement has generated controversy about authors’ ‘right to write’. As a white cis woman, I consulted *Writing with Color* and *Writing Beyond the Rainbow* online resources and am encouraged by authors of colour to write beyond my own reference point. A lead article in *mslexia* (Dec/Jan/Feb 2019–20) quotes Kit de Waal’s manifesto on cultural appropriation:

...when one culture, the dominant one, uses stuff that belongs to a minority culture, that minority culture can feel a sense of loss or injustice... [However] We want the freedom to write the book we choose, to inhabit other lives and explore the full range of our imagination and ability (*mslexia*, 9).

The lesson is to listen carefully and write sensitively. ‘It’s not “write what you know” but “write what you want to understand”’, said Aminatta Forna, referring to her memoir *The Devil That Danced on the Water* at a Manchester University event in 2020. This is indeed, thin ice, but crossing boundaries, speaking about others, pulling up unspoken experiences – these are the life-blood which my history dares to liberate: telling true stories that are

also a version of the universal narrative. Furthermore, as someone whose moral compass has grown up within feminism, I must also pay attention to the feminist ethic outlined by Liz Stanley and Sue Wise, obliging me to consider the ‘objects’ of my research as subjects in their own right, and not to assume intellectual superiority over them (Stanley and Wise, 1993, 200).

## THE ART OF HISTORIOGRAPHY

Re-framing historiography involves endowing it with a new identity. Telling history through life writing brings us into the realm of creative writing, where experiments with narrative forms, genre-bending and queering factual representation are ably described by Julia Novak (Novak, 2017). Life writing which straddles history and literature is creating an artistic product from personal historical content.

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*Historiography – the art of telling history. That’s it! The art of telling history. Telling history through art. Hilary Mantel says ‘If we want to meet the dead looking alive, we turn to art’. Bring on the Bayeux tapestry, the Peterloo graphic novel, my still-to-be-written book.*

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Why write history? I want the book to interest the reader as well as illuminate, and agree with Margot Singer:

We accept the conventions of narrative realism as indicative of the truthfulness of a piece of writing, when in fact they’re what makes it art (Singer, 2013, 142).

In *Names for the Sea* (2012), Sarah Moss’ lyrical representation of navigating Icelandic terrain is indeed artful and indicates how I might apply a similar style to historiography. As the *Horrible History* series used art to make history accessible to children (Deary and Tonge, 1993 onwards), I can use literary techniques to communicate history to a young adult audience.

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*Why history?*

*I bumped into the past around every corner during a visit to Berlin in September 2013. Gestapo dungeons, Hitler’s bunker, bullet holes, Allied bombs’ annihilation, the Wall. A trip through half a century’s lifetime similarly brushes arbitrarily against seminal moments in world history, from British domestic events to the collapse of colonial regimes. Images of struggle, conflict, suffering and triumph entered our childish heads through television (napalm in Vietnam), as well as religious fundraising (starving children in Biafra), tales of Holocaust survivors and Resistance fighters, our parents’ stance against fascism in Spain and apartheid in South Africa. Turning*



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*the corners of new school years, you unwittingly encountered the past clothed in the present. Nuclear missiles pointed across boundaries drawn at Yalta in 1945. Unraveling the secret of our link with the past is fascinating and satisfying, and essential for living successfully in the present.*

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Dramatists writing against the grain of the Grand Narrative explore the dialogue between literature and history. Stephen M. Hornby uses playwriting as a ‘historiographical tool’, suggesting that those concerned with history ‘out the past’ and assume queerness, since gay people certainly existed but their page is almost totally blank (Hornby, 2019b). I’m uncomfortable about inscribing a blank page with imagined events, yet there are times when writers suck truth out from nowhere using this technique. For example, Toni Morrison ‘remembered’ the story of *Beloved* (1987), drawing on ‘a confluence of voices of earlier and current generations’ to reconstruct the past.

This gives pointers about how to weave in and out of Stephen Hawking’s ‘arrow of time’. I will speak back across the generations to my child self and construct a story whereby she and my present self speak to future readers. Applying Freud’s *Nachträglichkeit*, which explains multiple versions of the past according to which ‘present’ the writer occupies, sits comfortably with how Hornby ‘queered time’, compressing, truncating and juxtaposing, to create the story.

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*I can make out a grassy headland, the grey shape has transformed to include patches of green. I’m nearer. This thinking malarkey is working. Ferret, rabbit, hound, I’ll need to be them all. And wily fox to solve the clues.*

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Turning to biography, Rodge Glass’ exhortation for ‘More Lies Please’ plunges me back into the doubting abyss. He says writers should ‘capture the flavour’, ‘stop pretending to know everything’ and imagine the reader saying: “Lie to me in order to show me meaning” (Glass, 2015, 59, 66). I don’t like the lies, but from my reading of Young, I see that I am more ignorant than knowledgeable, which hardens my resolve to write in ways that enable people to ‘become the subjects of their own histories’ (Young, 2004, 31), to aim for a form of emancipatory writing practice.

## MORE PROBLEMS WITH TRUTH

### Fifth clue. Listen more and read more.

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*This is starting to thrill me. I’m still swimming, definitely not drowning – but haven’t ventured yet into the library stacks. I’ve got a new identity: Jo-Lass the treasure-seeker,*

*and there are clues out there to help me find my- my-my- what-is-it? My modus vivendi, modus operandum, my oeuvre, my pièce de résistance, my Meisterstück? My literary id?*

As a history student, postmodernists disturbed my search for meaning, for rooting knowledge in facts which define, illustrate and illuminate the truth. I wanted to follow Leopold Ranke's dictum to tell the story 'how it really was', as explained by John Arnold (Arnold, 2000, 36). So I told it how I saw it, and consequently my partial story told a postmodern truth. However, still tussling with postmodern blurriness, I find a glimmer of hope when Barbara Foley quotes E.L. Doctorow wishing for a time when 'there is only narrative' (Foley, 1986, 9), and the 'distinction' between fiction and nonfiction has dissolved. Maybe I can stop worrying about how my *auto/history* will represent truth.

But I do worry. I want readers to be clear that my writing won't be the whole truth, or even the most important truth. What I omit could say almost as much as what I choose to include, but it is definitely not fiction. I'm grateful to Hilary Mantel for saying this in a Reith lecture:

The reason you must stick by the truth is that it is better, stranger, stronger, than anything you can make up (Mantel, 2017).

I accept the postmodern dictum that there are endless versions, but I find it difficult – a problem – to accept a blurring of what is real and what is not in relating my personal history juxtaposed against world events. The quality of truths inherent in YA fiction are a template for me in relating actual stories of the late twentieth-century globalised world. In addition to the description of apartheid South Africa in *Journey to Jo'burg* (Naidoo, 1985), Benjamin Zephaniah's *Refugee Boy* (2001) portrays an Eritrean/Ethiopian migrant experience, and the film *Billy Elliot* (2000) brings to life the UK's economic turning point caused by the miners' strike in 1984–85 (Daldry, 1998). Although I'm drawn to Hazel Smith's definition of 'open' writing involving an ongoing discourse with multiple ambiguities about truth and reality, I disagree with her conclusion that historical writing is better located as a 'writerly' (as opposed to 'readerly') text (Hazel Smith, 2005, 107–108). I feel a duty to guide the reader through the interpretation of meaning rather than leave them to work it out for themselves.

## NARRATING THE PAST

I believe in narrative, in telling the story. Whilst all narratives are fabrication, I question Hornby's view that 'dramatising the past changes the past' as this would undermine my ability to narrate my (hi)story (Hornby, 2019a). But accuracy is vulnerable in portraying the past, especially from a child's

point of view. Blake Morrison's depiction of the Cuban missile crisis from his twelve-year old boy's perspective necessarily leaves many gaps (Morrison, 1993, 71–79). To counter this vulnerability requires me to revisit the (my) self and give an account that makes sense of the past that benefits from comprehensive knowledge of the retrospective viewpoint. In constructing the narrative while reconstructing the past, I will make it cogent and persuasive to avoid 'historical *flâneurisme*', a term coined by Hayden White and cited by Keith Jenkins (Jenkins, 1995, 42). Liz Stanley helps me articulate that, as a creative historian, I should add to the academy to produce 'knowledge which is accountable by being capable of being interrogated' (Stanley, 2016, 5). To echo Robert Poole, my task is to impart knowledge 'in the best possible way that is closest to what actually happened' (Poole, 2019).

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*What's the problem? intones a passing walrus.*

*Am I in Wonderland now? Am I Alice rather than Jo-Lass? WHAT'S THE PROBLEM? The problem is that history is too often written in a dry, unappealing tone that is not widely accessible. I'm hunting for a voice so I can tell history in a new, alternative way; a new 'take' on the tradition of telling history through stories.*

*The walrus has huge white tusks and droopy eyes, and the sharp hairs of its moustache bristle at me.*

*And then, I say, trying to keep the wobble out of my voice, there's the goodenough problem.*

*The hooded eyes open wider.*

*Will my work be smashed to pieces by readers? Will hybrid history ever be good enough?*

*A grunt, and the seascape is empty. My island looms green. Sharp rocks rise up to my right and a mass of tangled seaweed lurks straight ahead. I'm a left-hander, I think, like James Baldwin, who did something different and was treated like a stranger in a strange land.*

*My feet touch sand.*

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## EXAMINING HYBRIDITY

### Sixth clue. Work out what the question is.

Does hybrid provide a hint? Combining 'auto' and 'history' brings the personal to the universal, creating a historical version of the feminist concept that 'the personal is political'. W.G. Sebald's *Austerlitz* combines

‘elements of biography, autobiography, memoir, travelogue, and even of mystery novel’ (Wolff, 2014, 61), a method also employed by John Schad, although *Someone Called Derrida* is ostensibly a work of nonfiction with imaginative gap-filling. I must signal imagined gap-filling to the reader so they can distinguish between fact and invention.

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#### 4 July 1955

*My mother gave birth in Granny’s bedroom in the middle of a heatwave. Where was Granny? She must have vacated – graciously or ungraciously. I rarely entered Granny’s room, with its petite bureau and jewellery box and gas fire with toasting fork. Sometimes I snuck into her wardrobe and marvelled at the mottled brown ocelot fur coat – so unlike my mother’s grey squirrel. (Really? Squirrel?)*

*I knew none of this as my mother laboured and pushed and my father ran up and down stairs with kettles in response to Nurse Baines’ frequent cries of “more hot water!” As I noisily announced my presence in the world, I had no idea that just seven years previously a kind, clever man called Nye Bevan had given birth to an invention called the National Health Service.*

*Because of this I would be visited regularly by a health visitor, my mother would take me to be weighed at a clinic, I would drink free orange juice and, later, free milk in school, and in time the doctor would feed me a sugar lump on which he dripped precious polio vaccine.*

*The polio epidemic was in full swing in 1955. While I was literally sucking up life from my mother’s tit (regulated every four hours following Dr Spock’s regime), the partner I would find in my late twenties was fighting for her own life, iron lung on standby as the virus invaded her muscles and nervous system.*

---

I taste life beyond postmodernism and enjoy the oscillations of Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker’s *metamodernism*. In my bid to juxtapose a small life with the big world, the twenty-first century’s hurricanes of change buffet me between being ‘informed naïf’, ‘pragmatic idealist’ and ‘modern fanatic’ (Vermeulen and van den Akker, 2010). At different times I am one and all of these.

## CONCLUSION

### Seventh clue. Try out what you have to say.

Using my writerly practice, I have discovered the art of writing history, deploying practice-based research to illuminate, and then populate,

incomplete stories. Writing history that emanates from my personal story will bring the past alive for young adult readers in a world where context is often sacrificed, and knowledge is supposedly acquired through soundbites and three-minute reads. Through undertaking a creative quest, I found a way to juxtapose the self against the wider world. Listening to others who wrote against the grain, I had to face sticky issues of how to fill blank spaces in the existing record. In concluding that unreliable sources, such as memory and imagination, are legitimate ways to fill such voids, I nevertheless suggest that veracity is central to the task.

As a storyteller, I will continue the trend towards diverse voices and ‘history from below’ by writing creatively in the life writer’s first person about the late twentieth century. Standing on the shoulders of experimental life writers, poets, novelists and historians, my *auto/history* will relate the life and times of this period whereby the collective past is accessed through the individual. I will endeavour to fill gaps in my Western-dominated knowledge, borrowing techniques from fiction, memoir, autobiography and historiography to create a space between literature and history for my version of the hybrid genre of *auto/history*. By jostling facts and voices, juxtaposing views, events and visions, my work aims to lay a vapour trail demonstrating how to tell history through an artistic medium. As a historian, I will add my narrative of history through personal story to the body of historiography and debate.

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