



Born on 4th July

Prelude, Preamble, Precursor, Premonition

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ABSTRACT

This essay deliberates about theoretical and creative approaches to a work-in-progress. Using the conceit of visiting the author's birthday each year to depict an individual's relationship with world events, she aims to combine personal and collective history into an autohistory of the late twentieth century. Exploring methods for telling a unique story involves addressing problems of representation, accuracy and artistic expression. Considering the contribution from poststructuralist theory and literature unlocks a door towards experimentation in both expressing and uniting disparate themes. Creative techniques help to unravel the connections between strands of historiographic, feminist, post-colonialist and queer theory, leading to reflections on genre-bending and how to draw diverse meanings from sources and imagination. Reflecting on trends in oral history and 'history from below', the author conjures her own inventive autoethnographic journey through the genres of memoir, journal, autofiction and autobiography, and encounters problems in assessing the relative value of different primary and secondary sources. Furthermore, in writing about others as well as the self, issues arise regarding representation and the politics of giving voice to hidden stories. The essay concludes that using polyphonic voices and fictional devices within the nonfiction framework can provide a way to tell history through a personal artistic medium.

KEYWORDS

practice-based research, collective history, memoir, colonial legacy, queer theory, feminist theory, nonfiction, polyphonic voices.

INTRODUCTION

My work-in-progress, *Born on 4th July*, comprising year-by-year experiences and reflections from 1955 – 2005, is also a collective experience within the universe of past histories. As the planet heats up and the earth itself crumbles, I feel there's an urgency, a compelling need, to generate amongst a wide audience of today's young decision-makers a "thick understanding" of the recent past. This essay is a sort of beginning encompassing thesis, definitions, literature review and gut feeling. Utilizing literary techniques such as storytelling, poetry and experimentation with form and genre, the microscopic 'I' assembles a constellation overlooking 18,000 days of my life shared with millions of people: a galaxy of comprehension, shooting stars of impressions and thoughts erupting from authorial brainwaves reverberating in one person.

O giver of life
that is neither mistress nor master
tell me how to write the Past
in the Present
that speaks to the Future.

Born on 4th July will use a personal lens to narrate history – "a record or account, often chronological in approach, of past events" (Chambers). I chose Chambers dictionary simply for its accessibility – free online – matching the theme of openness which I'm trying to engender in my work. Depicting a series of twentieth-century events post-1945, I aim to burrow underneath the fallacy of Pax Europaea, which claims to have achieved peace in my lifetime, yet has been questioned by Bill Wirtz and others (Wirtz 2017). Since the great postmodern disruption in the twentieth century, historians such as Keith Jenkins (Jenkins 1995) and Hayden White (White 1990) tell us that history is no longer a linear narrative told by experts. My work treads in the footsteps of radical historian Raphael Samuel, who was "historicizing himself, turning his self into history" from middle age until his early death aged 61 (Morrison 2019). Convinced that we can only understand the present through an awareness of the past, I see a way to turn my self into history – an autohistory – beyond the shadow of the great historian's grave, with a female "take" on the lifetime that I uniquely led. In this way, I aim to help today's young adults to navigate through the legacy of previous generations.

I always sensed that there was a different way of telling history. In an earlier article, 'Juxtaposing and Jostling: The Art of Writing History?' (Somerset 2020), I explored the scope of life writing for

historiographical narrative. My message is a kind of "you can do it" in relating to history. By hooking readers and formulating readable chunks that speak to them, I'm creating an accessible route into the subject. Developing this theme, I looked for artistic devices for conveying the past to present-day readers. Thinking about how to scoop out and re-form my relationship with the past, a dialogue between my knowledge and my instinct led me to create a poetic essay questioning the concept of men making their own history:

I would like to revisit the notion that "**men make their own history,**"
even though some women like Ban Zhao
squeezed their noses in
and others like Sappho wrote history in poetry.
Because Herodotus - a poet - wrote about wars,
and Sappho portrayed society (love),
he was called a historian and she wasn't.
(Somerset 2021)

Feeling my way, I embarked on a process of auto-research which was encouraged by exposure to Robin Nelson's theory of 'practice as research' in the performing arts (Nelson 2013). This practice is informed by a poststructuralist awareness whereby numerous, if not infinite, approaches to scholarship and discovery are validated. Philippe Lejeune struggled with the question: "Is it possible to define autobiography?" (Lejeune 1988, 3). These ambiguities allowed me to conclude that drilling into my own existence is equally valid as examining any other person's life. Venturing along unknown paths, I encountered trails laid by Gloria Anzaldúa's *autohistoria* (Pitts 2016). Similar to her realization that she could only tell her story if it was located in the context of her Latina people, I found that my efforts to burrow into my life and times had to reference Birmingham, Manchester and Liverpool as backdrops for the larger story.

I couldn't ignore the coincidence of sharing my birthday with the birth of the United States of America. In reaching for ways to express my autohistory, I excavated reverberations of my birth date with the Declaration of Independence of 1776. By highlighting terms of subjugation and substituting the Founding Fathers' signatures with female names, and then with imagined names of slaves thrown overboard from the slave ship Zong in 1781 (NourbeSe-Philip 2008), I found I had re-created versions that illuminated female and black oppression, and a profound rush of emotion filled my lungs and lifted my chest. Using

a literary erasure technique, I deleted chunks of the Declaration and distilled common themes, echoing through subsequent centuries, between my life experience and that of the un-free colonized New World subjects. Words such as “evils,” “repeated injuries,” “harass our people,” “totally unworthy of a civilized nation,” “disavow these usurpations,” “full Power,” and “Independent States” became mental guides in my work as I commandeered the notion of independence from old white men and made it belong to me in the post-Second World War, post-colonial world. I decided on Born on 4th July as the title for my book.

RESEARCH WORK IN PROGRESS

Feminist theory has taught me how to weave a chronicle. Julia Kristeva’s concept of “women’s time” differs from linear time and conventional notions of space, and the “interweaving of history and geography” will lead me (and you) towards “future perfect” via the female subject (me). Since a female engagement with temporality involves “cycles, gestation, the eternal recurrence of a biological rhythm which [...is...] all-encompassing and infinite,” feminist weaving may warp widely accepted stories (Kristeva 1981:16). I can catch threads from forgotten time and unusual places to form a new weft that creates unseen images and links a childhood in industrial Birmingham with a source of the city’s raw materials in parts of Africa.

When you’re nine years old you can smell Cadbury’s chocolate wafting from the Bournville factory and on Sundays you go to Quaker meeting which they call Friends’ Meeting and learn about the cacao bean that made the Cadbury family rich. You don’t learn about the people who grow and pick the bean that becomes cocoa that turns into chocolate that melts in your mouth but if you knew about the ‘white man’ plundering African lands the ‘glass and a half of milk in every bar’ would turn sour. (Somerset 2021).

There are many layers to the reeking colonial onion, and “us” is a problematic word. My work must overturn the view that “we made the empire then granted independence” and show how the empire made “us” (History Extra 2019).

According to Alison Light (historian/memoirist) and Blake Morrison (poet/life writer/memoirist/novelist), this could be a memoir, “a collection of reminiscences about a period, series of events, etc, written from personal experience” (Chambers) as much as a history. Furthermore, Lejeune validates

my unfolding awareness of how this work might take shape:

The subject must be primarily individual life.....but the chronicle and social or political history can also be part of the narrative. (Lejeune1988:5).

Telling a story from the inside, like Light, invites “artistry” which Morrison asserts is essential to authenticity (Morrison 2019). Lejeune’s ‘autobiographical pact’ binds the reader to the author/narrator/protagonist, adding further depth to the scope offered by Kristeva and Anzaldúa whose ideas were explored in my previous article (Somerset 2020). My emerging polyphonic voices become ‘Rosetta stones of identity’ (Lejeune 1988:6-7), opening multiple communication channels between author and reader.

There’s a world beyond myself – the “world-beyond-the-text” (Lejeune 1988:11) – and a great debt is owed to post-colonial writers. I’m enormously appreciative to Edward Said for challenging the worldview and orientalism of my era (Said 2003). My liberal Quaker upbringing showed “good works” being done to others by the likes of me, which obscured actual misery and poverty. Writers from the global South, notes Meena Kandasamy, have been marginalized, and are found interesting by Western publishers only for being “from a place where horrible things happen” (Morrison 2019). These are some of the lies which my autohistory must uncover, against the tide of turned backs and averted eyes of media, influencers, authors, rulers and censors.

EMERGING PROBLEMS

There’s a problem with using 4th July as my reference point, as I discover that for black US Americans it’s not a day of celebration. Frederick Douglass, a former slave, asked a mainly white audience in 1852, thirteen years before Emancipation:

What, to the American slave, is your 4th of July? [It is] a day that reveals to him, more than all other days in the year, the gross injustice and cruelty to which he is the constant victim.....I am not included within the pale of this glorious anniversary! ... The sunlight that brought life and healing to you, has brought stripes and death to me. This Fourth [of] July is yours not mine. (Douglass 1852).

I can’t pursue my autohistory without acknowledging the debt and legacy of the slave trade, so I turn to current practice, to Scottish Makar Jackie Kay

performing “Flag Up Scotland, Jamaica,”

Here’s the redress that’s long been owed,
Here’s the first step on the road... (Kay 2019).

which marks a Memorandum of Understanding between the Universities of the West Indies and Glasgow.

In a world turned upside down by coronavirus and Black Lives Matter, I continue scanning the stratosphere for rays of revelation. Suddenly, the urgency to understand the recent historical roots of geopolitics has flared up. “How do you know who you are or where you are going if you don’t know where you are from?” asks Mandla Rae in her poem “as british as a watermelon” performed at Greater Manchester LGBTQ+ Cultural Arts Network Conference in January 2020. Just as her refugee tale makes self-knowledge spatial as well as temporal, I address my younger self in an attempt to conceptualize history that unites space and time, comparing my Birmingham childhood with the ‘other Birmingham’ in Alabama, USA:

You blow out your candles with nine-year old lungs unclogged by nasty smog
unlike your counterparts in Birmingham, Alabama – nicknamed ‘Bombingham’ – where the iron and steel works aren’t the only things that light up the sky,
....and while your mum was birthday-buying in your Birmingham...
the Ku Klux Klan’s death threats were driving African Americans out of town
and the US President was signing the Civil Rights Act....
So as your nine candles are snuffed into smoky silhouettes,
a 13-year old boy got a haircut, which your mother’s Guardian newspaper describes as ‘Negro Boy tests Civil Rights Law’
and the bully/protector of that other Birmingham encourages white folks to attack black protestors
because the hatred from slavery never totally dissipated. (Somerset 2021)

Problems tend to unravel when they’re written down. Methinks I am deliberating too much and just need to get on and do it. The learning will be in the doing, the doing will also be an unfolding. In writing, the doing always entails unfolding, unfurling, blinking eyes unused to the light. So, less pondering, more planning, less nerve-wracking agonising, more

writing, less fact-collecting and reading, more committing to the page and fattening the computer folder.

GENRE-BENDING

But this is too neat. Hearing Kazim Ali’s exhortation to transcend and bend polarities (Ali 2013), I incorporate spatial disruption into my auto-historical research-cum-narration, obeying autoethnographers’ call ‘to disrupt the binary of science and art’ (Ellis et al 2010). While my autohistory is not autofiction, like Kandasamy voicing her experience in *When I Hit You* (2017), I adapt the technique of factual marginalia that she uses in her subsequent novel *Exquisite Cadavers* (2019). Marginal writing in my history juxtaposes between ‘I’ and ‘you’ alongside a factual commentary exploring how gender boundaries were transcended then and now. I distance myself from a story in which I am immersed, creating a dual voice:

Dear Jay,

I was a tomboy.

I played with my brother & was the only girl in cops’n’robbers on bikes.

You’re telling my childhood story except it’s 40 years later and it’s not mine, it’s yours. In grown-up words you describe how your three-year old self realised about gender restrictions, backed off and said, “I’m good.” It wasn’t for you.

You were an only child, with a father you were never close to (and didn’t know after age 8) and a mother diagnosed as bi-polar. Your friends were your Grandad, tinkering with car engines in his garage, and your cousin George. (Somerset 2021)

Creative devices such as time-travelling characters, imagined dialogue and dramatic invention enable tangled stories to unravel. However, I’m terrified of boring the reader. Kazim Ali’s question: “is language adequate to define experience?” leads to a cul-de-sac until I absorb his encouragement to copy the fluidity of genderqueer identity and free literature from its “generic binaries.” Through genre-bending I can mould language, dissolve boundaries and introduce poetic intonations into my prose “not merely for the promise of pleasure but [for] planetary importance” (Ali 2013:35 and 38).

I thought this was going to be difficult, but maybe it’s ok to queer the story, to dot around within a linear framework, to hop back and forth and pop

into spaces from “now” time. Like Dr Who’s sidekick entering the Tardis, readers will never quite know where and when they’ll land. On 4th July 1989, I wrote a letter to the baby who didn’t yet exist.

Dear Baby,

Sue and I tried to make you again tonight. If it works, you’ll be conceived in a hectic time, with us applying for jobs and Sue having her driving test. Out in the world, strange things are happening. In China there’s a massive students’ pro-democracy revolt which is being bloodily crushed by the military.

Do you really want to know this, baby?.....

If you’re going to happen, let me welcome you now.

(Somerset 2021)

The word ‘queer’ in my youth was an abusive term reclaimed by Gay Liberation Front, but it left a violent, nasty taste. Only now do I give it a place in my work. Previously focused on normalizing lesbian and gay representation, queer theory’s shift to “destabilize and hopefully dissolve the line” between normal and deviant gives me permission to approach topics and events from oblique angles and to imagine what lies at the bottom of muddy potholes where exact contours cannot be seen (Jennings 2013:5). Although obvious to today’s young people, to be perfectly fine about being gay, to tell stories of self-insemination, coming out to parents and workmates still makes my generation gasp with delight. To roll the concept of gender-fluid around my tongue and speculate on its strange flavour. To dare.

Queering is easier when following a trend initiated by others, so I turned to the Oulipo movement’s constraints which subvert and re-orientate literary conventions. Diving into poststructuralist theory and surfacing with a fistful of playthings, I revel in experimenting with forward-and-back poems, hybrid verse drama, slenderizing and/or re-contextualizing existing texts. I manage to convey the pain of my partner’s struggles with a disabling world by re-creating the conflict in a fictionalized playscript.

These techniques do not just apply to the personal sphere. The only way I can understand the brutal ten-year conflict between Bosnia, Serbia and Croatia is to explore it creatively.

My hold on history is in tatters. I can’t understand what’s happening in what was Yugoslavia..... All I can do is try to connect through my craft, and a poem erupts from my guts. (Somerset 2021).

Finally I navigate through the savagery by generating two pages of verse entitled ‘Siege of Srebrenica 18 April 1992 – 11 July 1995.’

Re-writing, dramatizing and creating new meanings are ideal for this collage project. More importantly, it’s how my creativity wants to erupt. I muse:

If this project were an object,
it’s less a jigsaw – pieces fitting neatly –
more a collage with messy overlaps and
awkward spaces.

Or a tapestry, soft and tough, warm and stiff,
patterns and pictures popping up repeatedly.

Tapestries, like the Bayeux Tapestry and the UK Quaker Tapestry (1996), are ways in which women have told history. I suspect Kristeva would love the fact that they aren’t actually tapestries, but embroideries: women subverting not only the grand narrative by telling history in pictures but also their medium. Both artefacts give Kristeva’s “intertextuality” a new texture, layers of cloth and actual threads combining with interplay between texts. Based on its more famous Norman counterpart, the Quaker tapestry depicting 300 years of Quaker history resides at Kendal Friends’ Meeting House in northern England, its panels created between 1981-96 by four thousand women, children and men in fifteen countries. This alternative history, rooted in my heritage, both clarifies and multiplies the meanings that can emanate from my work.

MULTIPLE VOICES

I started out wanting to advance the “untold stories” school of history, building on Alison Light and Raphael Samuel’s innovative “history from below” (Gentry 2013) and Margaretta Jolly’s oral history of the women’s liberation movement (Jolly 2019). Intertextuality appeals to me as a new star in the galaxy of my autohistory, giving me permission to seek collaboration not just from texts and pictures but also from people’s spoken experiences. A series of interviews with Jay result in the dual-voiced piece on transgender issues quoted above. Standing on the shoulders of previous historians, I apply a feminist bent: braiding, connecting, pulling out fibres and looking round corners for these stories. I’ve understood how actualité changes when viewed through different lenses.

In my search for a voice and a wordscape to clarify the muddle, I wade through further poststructuralist critiques to realize the complexity of my task. I’m still not sure I understand the full meaning of

Ferdinand de Saussure's semiotics theory, but as it's about signs that impart meaning, it must form part of my intricate work (de Saussure 1959). Many truths must be heard for untold stories to be articulated, for history from below to surface, for the silenced to speak and obliterated pasts to reappear. If Mikhail Bakhtin were still alive, I would ask him how these truths and their echoes can fuel polyphonic voices in my collage-history (Robinson 2011).

Placing these explorations of critical theory into the research arena, I'm attracted by the iterative model of practice-based research which re-visits a core problem several times to create a "layered account." Through these visitations, research and practice meld into one process, enhanced by interviews and collaborations with external contributors. In seeking to portray a "thick understanding" of the past half-century, however, I need to remember (thank you, postmodern historians) that the wider meaning – comprehension of twentieth century history – is contingent upon how readers view the facts that I place in front of them. In depicting 1980s Liverpool, I consider whether to interweave my work in tenement housing estates with verbatim reports from the Toxteth riots and contemporary reggae lyrics. Readers need to see Liverpool, not just me.

Transcending cultural space, a meteor named #ownvoices hurtles towards my exploring starship. I boldly enter the fray of cultural appropriation, encouraged by authors of colour to write beyond my own reference point, to listen carefully and write sensitively. "It's not 'write what you know' but 'write what you want to understand,'" said Aminatta Forna at a Manchester writers' event in January 2020, explaining how she foraged for the tale of her father's political life and execution in *The Devil That Danced on the Water* (2002). This is indeed thin ice, but crossing boundaries, speaking about others, pulling up unspoken experiences – these are the life-blood which my autohistory dares to liberate: making art tell true stories that are also a version of the universal narrative.

Bakhtin and Lejeune might advise me to write in pluralities. I'm trying to portray the connectedness and contradictions of different viewpoints that are often incompatible. Juxtaposing reportage between black Liverpoolians, police constables and Margaret Thatcher may allow the reader to begin to piece together a greater story. Multiplicity of viewpoints should run as a thread through the narrative, de-centering the writer (myself) whilst at the same time writing from my own experience. In

my first drafts I am, at different times, a bystander, witness, observer or participant, sometimes several roles at once. Denoted by reported first person statements, the witness' testimony is supplemented by verbatim reportage. The observer, using second person narrative from a twenty-first century self to her younger version allows an omniscient and retrospective perspective to ignore ignorance. My favorite role – participant – is written in close first-person realist memoir and sometimes, to deal with the pain of excavating the past, in third person retrospective. Finally, the dramatic voice in verse and theatre script speaks for the bystander.

This approach is exemplified in dealing with the disabled people's movement of the 1990s. Sometimes, after excavating personal experience, the only thing to do is to elevate. In the same way that Superman's powers are sapped when he unearths a nugget of kryptonite, I can only crawl away from the eerie green glow of my experiences with disability. In our weakened state, the caped crusader and I drag ourselves to a safe distance to regain our strength, waiting for our faculties to return, until Superman can fly once again, and I have enough wits to visit my story. Flights of fancy become the mediator by which I tell my tale. Soaring above grim reaper-ish reality, reaching for a symbol that tells all whilst protecting writer and reader from pain, I write an ironic comedy sketch. I don't want to prod and poke the vulnerable bits of living with impairments that are made into disability. By making up a cast, a setting and a series of actions, I've found a way to recount the heroic bits, the "Wow!" of dealing powerfully with conflict that leaves out the grinding undermining that accompanied valiant activism. I want to say 'brave' but can't because that word has been twisted against disabled people to justify their oppression. Valiant is better.

Recovered, Superman is back to saving people from burning buildings. Narrated, my disabled people pull off superhuman feats in their battle against the inhuman culture of UK social services departments in the 1990s. Using the medium of comic drama, the deadly nugget has been excavated, and the story has become elevated.

USING DIARIES

A key source document that shoots sparks up into this project's solar system is the diary: in my own handwriting, and in others', both real and fictional. Reading *The Diary of Samuel Pepys* (1887), I recognize an element of sense-making that is

achieved from committing words to paper: thought materialized brings a level of clarity. However, for all their richness, diaries present dilemmas in the writing process. Lejeune frames the problem: “the diary is a social outcast, of no fixed theoretical address.” (McNeill 2010). According to Dorothy Sheridan, editor of Naomi Mitchison’s *World War Two diary*, “no diary has a monopoly on the truth” (Sheridan 2021:52). This personal account of events can be unreliable, constricted by the single perspective of the eyewitness. Recording it – translating the experience into words – omits more than it commits to paper, and is further hampered by the writer’s own outlook, prejudices and emotional baggage. Is my scribbling about getting pregnant by donor insemination all there is to tell about lesbians taking control of reproduction in the 1980s? Of course not. To give a rounded commentary I need to use the diary as a launch-pad, not the whole story.

Regarding other people’s diaries, there are further notes of caution. In *How to Read a Diary* (2019), Desirée Henderson describes a “gender paradox” which defines diaries’ usefulness according to sexist/patriarchal notions of what is important: world events, political developments, movements, royalty and famous people. While on the one hand diaries are belittled as a feminine pastime, and on the other hand lauded if written by a famous person (read: famous Western man), diaries are beginning to have their moment, particularly in telling untold stories of “little” people whose lives are deemed unimportant. Here’s my opportunity.

Looking back from the present is another hurdle to overcome. Dorothy Sheridan found:

For Naomi, re-reading her own words of forty years ago, the challenge was to try to make sense of her past accounts in relation to her present identity. (Sheridan 2021:59).

For myself, reading about my young teenage obsession with boys from the perspective of an older lesbian demands deep breaths and much intense thinking about how this came about. I’m embarrassed by my youthful outpourings; they have no artistic merit. Note to self: cut self-pity and keep detail. Logan Mountstuart, protagonist/diarist of *Any Human Heart* by William Boyd reflects on a friend’s words: “We don’t want to know that ‘Hitler invaded Poland’ - we’re more curious about what you had for breakfast. Unless you happened to be there, of course, when Hitler invaded Poland and your breakfast was interrupted’ (Boyd 2002:376).

However much I’d like my diary to reveal historical narrative in parallel with my personal life, in reality, like Alison Light, it was “a companion” in hard times and written “in the name of understanding what cannot be understood.” (Light 2019). So I must conclude that the diaries have a limited place in formulating my story for external digestion as they were scrawled for myself, addressed to the Universal Empathizer. Apart from anything else, they are stuck in old time, only fit for plucking facts or contemporaneous feelings to patch into the present narrative about the past.

LEARNING FROM FICTION ABOUT HOW TO REVEAL HISTORY

Sometimes, in relating the self to the world’s collective history, I’ve strayed into realms of speculation and make-believe. Once again, Lejeune is useful in advocating loose adherence to verifiable truth. “Telling the truth about the self, constituting the self as complete subject – it is a fantasy.” (Lejeune 1989:132). In addition, Joan Didion, mistress of both nonfiction and fiction, imparts her wisdom in transferring novelistic techniques into nonfiction. She never had the discipline to keep a diary, but advised keeping a notebook to capture scenes, impressions and moments rather than “factual record” (Didion 1968).

From the extensive list of novels which tell history, I pick out a favourite: Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Reflecting in 2021 on its significance, Rushdie is quite clear that it’s

a history novel, looking for an answer to the great question history asks us: what is the relationship between society and the individual, between the macrocosm and the microcosm? (Rushdie 2021).

Whilst his protagonist, Saleem Sinai, undergoes massive tribulations during the birth and maturation of independent India that are far removed from my own upbringing, I share his sentiment that we are “handcuffed to history” and have a responsibility towards it. “After all, if it’s not ours, then whose is it?” reflects Rushdie. However, not everyone agrees. Sarah Moss’ character Adam Goldschmidt in *The Tidal Zone* regards fiction, with its preoccupation with order and structure, as “the enemy of history” since in reality historical events are characterized by “disorder and harm” (Moss 2016:144). In debating with these fictional protagonists, I end up in the ‘responsibility’ camp and am challenged to emulate

Rushdie in telling a compelling story.

BENDING CREATIVE NONFICTION TOWARDS AUTOHISTORY

Searching for forms which illustrate my autohistory's themes, has Christine Brooke-Rose got there before me in *Next*? As an inveterate alphabetizer, I'm delighted but annoyed to see my 'war' theme presented by her in *The Penguin Book of Oulipo* as:

The century's alphabète [...] A for Auschwitz, B for Belsen, C for Cambodia. D for Dresden. For Deportation. E for Ethiopia, for Ethnic Cleansing....F for, what's F? Famine....Mao's Great Leap into, 1959. Stalin's ditto, Ukraine 1933. Fundamentalism. There's usually more than one horror for each letter. F for Fire! Cease! Fire! Cease! Fire!' (Brooke-Rose 2019)

My literature review continues its turn for the worse. Kate Charlesworth also got there before me with her graphic memoir *Sensible Footwear* (Charlesworth 2019), placing her life alongside LGBTQ+ history in the same time period as my project, dammit! However, she's graphic, I'm wordy, she's talking gay, I'm on power and conflict. Our stars might collide but maybe there's enough room in the universe for both works.

I find Günter Grass aiming to build an understanding of German twentieth-century history in *My Century*, but notwithstanding his stature as an author, I find his 100 stories merely reflect belligerence and beastly behaviour. It doesn't hang together: too microscopic, too much assumption of the reader's foreknowledge, the shift from fiction to memoir too opaque (Grass 1999). As none of these fill my gap, maybe I'll get away with it – the British focus, twenty-first century viewpoint, only fifty years after the events.

If my young adult reader is paramount, any genre-bending needs to be accessible. Bringing fictional approaches into creative nonfiction must make clear where fiction (fantasy) starts and finishes. This is even truer for blending the self-story with geohistory in both temporal and spatial planes. Polyphonic voices and obvious fictional or autobiographical diversions should illustrate hard-to-understand episodes of the last decades of the twentieth century. In other words, I must assemble all the tools of artistry that I can muster to clarify the confusion and blank spaces of those fifty years.

CONCLUSION

Following a process of research containing elements of autoethnography, empirical investigation and narratives, I am re-visiting and re-learning history. Using creative techniques to explore disparate strands, the resulting fusion of centred and distanced viewpoints of the twentieth century in my completed work will comprise my attempt to cultivate a chronicle that's sustainable, believable and authentic for future generations. By jostling facts and voices, juxtaposing views, events and visions, my embarkation to infinity and beyond will endeavour to lay a vapour trail showing how to tell a wider history through a personal and artistic medium.

This autohistory will weave between artistry, anecdote, and actual historical record to inform about the past and contribute intelligence to the present. I want to put the record straight about whose sweat and blood made Birmingham and Britain "great." I am writing to honour the ghosts of my mother and all women convinced they were stupider than men; my father, and all the terrified combatants scarred by wartime; my partner Sue and disabled people everywhere who had to fight so hard that fighting became an automatic reflex even in our relationship; my teachers, lecturers and bosses into whose boxes I wouldn't fit; and my activist friends who fell foul of AIDS, asbestos-induced cancer, or just died too young because that's part of being human. But most of all it's for my beloved millennials who I spawned and nurtured, and who I desperately want to help make sense of the world they've inherited.

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