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### **‘The facts formed a line of buoys in the sea of my own imagination’: History, fiction and speculative biography**

#### Abstract:

Biographies that openly include conjecture and speculation have attracted virulent criticism for moving from a supposedly factual, historical mode of writing to a more imaginative and, therefore, (necessarily) non-historical approach. Profiling the most contentious of biographical sub-genres – the ‘speculative biography’, which proclaims the central role of authorial interpretation in biographical writing – this investigation uses a case study approach to focus on a number of rarely discussed works that illustrate varied aspects of the productive role of speculation in biographical writing. It also aims, by exploring how fiction and history can be framed and discussed in relation to biographical research and writing, to diffuse the limiting irreconcilability that is often mobilised when discussing these two terms as oppositional and antithetical tendencies, and instead suggests the rich potential of utilising the two as complementary writing strategies to produce biographies as rich, appealing and thought-provoking historically-informed narratives of real lives and experience. By referring to reviews, it also provides some contextualisation of how these biographies have been received by critics and reviewers. The focus is on international works.

#### Biographical note:

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## **Introduction: Biographical speculation**

Over forty years ago, as part of a renewed scholarly interest in biography, Richard Ellmann confidently proclaimed that biographies would ‘continue to be archival, but the best ones will offer speculations, conjectures, hypotheses’ (1973: 15). This assertion followed quite naturally from decades of discussion on the key role of what Virginia Woolf called ‘the biographer’s imagination’ – that faculty of narrative construction that she asserted was ‘always being stimulated to use the novelist’s art of arrangement, suggestion, dramatic effect to expound the private life’ (1927: 155) in biography. Woolf’s belief aligned with then-contemporary arguments from other commentators such as reviewer-turned-psychologist Charles K Trueblood (Skinner 1967), who insisted that attempting to describe a biographical subject’s thoughts and feelings was a valid component of the biographical task, even if these were not catalogued in primary or secondary source material. Describing this aspect of the biographer’s craft, Trueblood noted the resemblance between the biographer and writer of fiction:

The biographer as much as a dramatist or novelist, has the right so far as the facts permit, to consider himself the historian of thought and feeling in its conflicts, its life and death; and of individual character, not alone in its outlines, but in its causes, its growth, its battle, its decay (1927: 515).

Although Trueblood notes that this ‘right’ to be the ‘historian of thought and feeling’ is limited to the available ‘facts’, he is clearly aware that data does not, on its own, comprise a narrative and the biographer has to, as he describes, ‘infer and image forth the true spirit’ (1927: 515) of the subject from the data. Woolf was similarly careful to stress that there must be a balance of fact and speculation in biography – her quotation above continuing in relation to the biographer’s balancing act:

Yet if he carries the use of fiction too far, so that he disregards the truth, or can only introduce it with incongruity, he loses both worlds; he has neither the freedom of fiction nor the substance of fact (1927: 155).

Debate has pivoted ever since around these elements of fact, fiction, speculation/conjecture and the historical truth of the biographical narrative.

Hayden White’s work is arguably the best known in the area of setting out the similarities between what are often seen as different types of writing in this context: historical and literary (or fictional) writing. White proposes that both these forms of writing rely on narrative for their meaning and narrative devices to construct those stories (Doran 2013; see, for instance, White 1973, 1978, 1980) and that historical writing can, therefore, never approach any perfect state of pure objectivity. White has even gone so far as to write that ‘as verbal artifacts, histories and novels are indistinguishable from one another’ (1978: 122). Developing his argument, he states that this is because both aim ‘to provide a verbal image of “reality”’:

the novelist may present his notion of this reality indirectly, that is to say by figurative techniques, rather than directly, which is to say, but registering a series of propositions

which are supposed to correspond point by point to some extratextual domain of occurrence or happening, as the historian claims to do (122).

In a recent study of White's work, Herman Paul notes that White's significant oeuvre highlights 'the artificial, fictive and anti-realist nature of historical narrative' (10).

Following – and in agreement with – White, a number of writers assert that it is a foundational component of the biographer's role to be aware of the interpretative biases that he or she brings to this task. Biographer Michael Hicks expresses this in relation to writing the life of a highly contested figure, King Richard III, because of the way the supposedly 'raw' data of facts are already rich with meaning: 'our facts do not come to us unvarnished, but are loaded, slanted, and embedded in narratives' (1991: 69-70). Leon Edel (1985: xii), for instance, calls 'an inevitable amount of speculation – the stock in trade of all biographers'. Peter Ackroyd, agrees, noting that, in his experience, the act of biographical writing actually hinges around such speculation: 'I don't find any real sacrosanct quality about so-called facts and so-called truths ... as far as I am concerned, everything is available for recreation or manipulation' (cited in Onega 1996: 214). Phillip Herring calls this 'biographical license' (1989: 115) while Gelya Frank characterises the subjective empathy involved in biography as 'becoming the other' (1985: 189).

While these and other examples show that biography has long been the site of a productive liaison between Ellmann's biographical 'speculations, conjectures, [and] hypotheses' (1973: 15) and historical research, this association has also generated considerable negative comment. Lawrence Wright on Shakespeare biographers – who have limited factual material to reinterpret, and therefore, he finds, often engage in conjecture, posits for example that speculative biographies 'betray faith in a belated theoretical detritus lingering from discredited and incoherent post-structuralist thought' (2014: 158). Others, including Inga Clendinnen, have argued strongly against any use of fiction or speculation in historical writing – and the core (and important) differences between history, myth and fiction (see, for example, 2006).

### **Speculative biography**

Despite this long-lived discussion in the critosphere surrounding scholars, reviewers and writers, biography remains (as I have outlined in a recent article on experimental biography) largely understood by readers as telling 'straightforward, factual, historically accurate life stories' (see, Brien 2014). Yet, due to the (unavoidable) interpretive element involved in their creation, all biography can be posited to be speculative to some degree. Many contemporary biographers acknowledge this when they describe their narrative as one (possible) version, rather than the single definitive story, of their subject's life, displaying their understanding that the past can never be re-lived, revisited or recreated. All biographers locate and assimilate their biographic material, speculate and make assumptions, and then search for more evidence to support their suppositions, but overtly and openly 'speculative' biographers go further. These not only accept that all biographers mobilise this process of

interpretation in making sense of the documents and other evidence they base their work on, they also unabashedly proclaim the central role of authorial interpretation – including conjecture, intuition and even guesswork – in the process of creating their biographical narratives. Some even describe or subtitle their biographies with the speculative label, as in Steven Scobie’s *And forget my name: A speculative biography of Bob Dylan* (1999) and Duncan Hamilton’s *The unreliable life of Harry the valet: The great Victorian jewel thief* (2011) (noted in Brien 2014). While beginning with the historical evidence, the speculative biographer extends and supports the account generated from this evidence by (re)inserting into the narrative biographical elements without which the life story of the subject is incomplete. These elements can include the emotional responses, thoughts and motivations that so interested such writers as Woolf and Trueblood, but also information which is tangentially related to the life being explored but which assists in creating a richer and complete and, therefore, more ‘truthful’ life story.

Such speculation is not, however, baseless supposition. It is, rather, based on, and informed by, the same source material all biographers, historians and other authors of non-fiction use. Alongside archival primary evidence, such sources can include social, oral and local histories as well as works of art, literature and popular culture. This is, therefore, a quite different process from the ‘based on a true story’ fictional biographies that begin with an actual life or lives but then add fictional material (including events, plotlines and characters) to suit the novelists’ purposes of creating an engaging narrative. Fictional biographies are, indeed, more correctly described as a subset of historical fiction – which has been defined and addressed in a number of seminal studies (Williams 1973, Turner 1979, Shaw 1983, McHale 1987, Nagy 2014) – than a subset of biography. In the introduction to his edited book on what he calls the ‘biographical novel’, Michael Lackey describes these ‘truthful fictions’ as the ‘factualization of fiction’ (2014: 2), but fictions none-the-less.

### **Case study approach**

To profile the speculative biography, the below uses a case study approach (Verschuren 2003, Gerring 2004, 2006, Levy 2008, Stake 2005, Flyvbjerg 2006, Seawright and Gerring 2008, 2009, Yin 2009). This is used in order to present a survey of a small sample of works, each one of which explores an aspect (or aspects) of how the alliance between open speculation and biography has produced narratives that are not only interesting, but have also productively pushed the boundaries of the form. This approach is, following Merriam (2009), useful in this study as it allows a richer picture of an under-examined phenomenon to be constructed, and offers ‘a means of investigating complex social units consisting of multiple variables of potential importance in understanding the phenomenon’ (Merriam 2009: 50). In this manner, a case study approach although – as the sample size is small, not offering generalisable results – can assist in constructing a holistic account of a phenomenon (in this case, speculative biography). The case study is, moreover, especially suitable in this context, where the aim is to open up discussion of this form of biography for

future research in creative writing and by creative writers. It is also particularly appropriate for research into a sub-genre of creative writing that aims to be of use to readers, writers, students and researchers for, as Merriam states, ‘much can be learned from a particular case’ (51). She continues:

Readers can learn vicariously from an encounter with the case through the researcher's narrative description ... The colorful description in a case study can create an image ... [and, since] the general lies in the particular, what we learn in a particular case can be transferred to similar situations (51).

This resulting analysis, therefore, may be particularly useful for the practice-led creative writing researcher who utilises a ‘bowerbird’ (Brady 2000) or bricolage (Kincheloe 2001) methodology of picking and choosing the research that is useful to his or her particular project. This is because, in the case study, it is ‘the reader, not the researcher, who determines what can apply to his or her context’ (Merriam 2009: 51), and the question of speculation in biography, and life writing more generally, is certainly a subject of considerable interest and debate.

### **Biographical speculation: The microhistory**

Despite some relatively recent scholarship that perceives more difference than similarity between biography and history – that is, biography concentrates on the individual while history addresses the wider culture (see, for instance, Lepore 2001), and history provides a panoramic view of the past while biography offers commentary on events from an individual’s vantage point (Hanley 2005) – many biographers attest to using historical methodologies and/or being significantly influenced by various schools of historical writing. A formative, although little remarked influence on biographical writing is the historical sub-genre known as microhistory<sup>1</sup> (for an exception, see Lepore 2001). Although a number of definitions are in circulation, these all largely agree that a microhistory is a detailed historically-based investigation of a small-scale subject or topic – such as a single event, community, family or person. What makes this different, however, from a case study of the topic is that microhistory uses these ‘small places’ to ask ‘large questions’ (Joyner 1999: 1). Emerging in c.1960, the form came to prominence in the 1970s and its biographical focus is clear in the following statement by Sigurður Gylfi Magnússon, the chair of the Center for Microhistorical Research at the Reykjavik Academy:

Microhistorians tend to focus on outliers rather than looking for the average individual as found by the application of quantitative research methods. Instead, they scrutinize those individuals who did not follow the paths of their average fellow countryman, thus making them their focal point (2006).

While not commonly discussed as biographical texts, recent studies promoting ‘the intricate connections’ and ‘important methodological intersections’ (Renders and de Hann 2014: xv, 4) between biographical and microhistorical research and writing

include those by Magnússon and István M Szijártó (2013) and Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (2014). This biographical strand within microhistory, as well as the microhistorian's distinctive and unashamed use of speculation and fictional techniques and passages to produce compelling narratives – also often called 'storytelling' in commentaries on this topic (for discussion and further citations, see Maza 1996) – clearly aligns microhistory with the speculative biography.

Ellen Wilson's microhistorical recreation of artist Mary Cassatt's emotional life in her *American painter in Paris* (1971) is a clear example. This text reflected the interests of Eric Hobsbawm's 'history from below' movement and the second wave feminist women's history project – both of which aimed to resurrect those who had not attracted sustained historical or biographical enquiry and insert these individuals and groups 'back' into the historical record. This insertion could be most successful if the biographical portrait was more well-rounded than the often limited data suggests. Wilson's speculation on the personal aspects of Cassatt's life otherwise left unexplored in biographies (and histories) also reflected a feminist theoretical position that asserted that biographical narratives can be as fragmentary, ambivalent and self-contradictory as lives as they are lived, and are distinctively subjective (see, Zinsser 2009).

Carlo Ginzburg's work is often cited as one of the key moments of the return to narrative in history writing, and his microhistory *The cheese and the worms: The cosmos of a sixteenth century miller* (1976/1980), a slim volume of just over 100 pages, is often cited as the study that introduced the concept of narratively-focused microhistory to English-speaking historians. Described in 1987 as 'one of the most interesting and widely discussed works of history of the past decade' (Megill and McCloskey 1987: 226), *The cheese and the worms* was published in Italy in 1976 but became most influential in terms of history writing in English once it was translated and published by John Hopkins University Press in 1980. This work is often described as 'novelistic' (see, for instance, Megill and McCloskey 1987: 226) and in such terms as 'enthraling reading' (Hill 1980: 3) due to Ginzburg's rejection of a purely quantitative method. While quoting extensively from the Inquisition records that were his main resource, it seems that Ginzburg's attempt to create a coherent and fully rounded biography for Domenico Scandella, known as Menocchio – the Venetian miller of the title (including his feelings and responses to events) – led to the study being described in such fiction-related terms.

Pioneering social and cultural historian Natalie Zemon Davis' *The return of Martin Guerre* (1983) is an extremely approachable biography of two sixteenth century figures – Bertrande of Artigat and the charismatic pretender who claimed to be her long-gone husband, and lived with her for some years, but was then revealed to be an imposter and executed when the real Guerre reappeared. Davis stated in *The return of Martin Guerre* that 'a remarkable dispute can sometimes uncover motivations and values that are lost in the welter of the everyday' (1983: 4), but her reading of the (largely) legal evidence was criticised for ascribing motivations and emotions to her protagonists. Robert Finlay, for instance, objected that as 'interesting, subtle, and

complex as these characters are, it is doubtful that they have anything to do with the actual story' (1988: 570-71). In a celebrated rebuttal,<sup>2</sup> Davis described how she had used the trial records and why she made the choices she did (Davis 1988). In this revealing exegetical reflection on her writing processes, Davis argued that the 'historian's common practice' was that of 'conjecturing from evidence on the basis of assumptions about psychological process' (597), in the process also prefiguring the psychobiography's concern with its subject's psychology (Runyan 1982, Schultz 2005), which is itself also contested (Stannard 1980, Elms 1994, Kóváry 2011). The readership for *The return of Martin Guerre* that was attracted to this aspect of Davis' writing, was also boosted by the long lived popularity of the celebrated French film on which Davis was a consultant, *Le retour de Martin Guerre* (Vigne 1982) starring Gerard Depardieu and Nathalie Baye.<sup>3</sup>

Other biographical works by Davis also include such historically informed speculations as those that so successfully animated *The return of Martin Guerre*. These include *Women on the margins* (1995), a group biography of three seventeenth-century women framed by a comparative discussion of the importance of religion in their lives, and *Trickster travels* (2006), about sixteenth-century Moroccan Muslim diplomat al-Hasan al-Wazzan, who lived in Italy as the Christian Leo Africanus and wrote the first European geography of Africa of this period alongside a number of other influential works. In the introduction to *Trickster travels*, Davis acknowledges the sparseness of the available data on her subject, writing that she constructed her narrative 'from additional sources about ... what he would have been likely to see or hear or read or do' (13). In terms of process, she describes how she would

start with the persons, places and texts that good evidence affirms or suggests he knew, and build from additional sources about them what he would have been likely to see or hear or read or do. Throughout I have had to make use of the conditional – 'would have', 'may have', 'was likely to have' – and the speculative 'perhaps', 'maybe'. These are my invitations to the reader to follow a plausible life story from materials of the time (13).

Yet, despite this openness and some very positive reception, this approach was also criticised by others who felt such speculation undermined the biographical project's basis in historical accuracy.<sup>4</sup>

Davis has, however, consistently used this research and writing strategy. Regarding her *Fiction in the archives: Pardon tales and their tellers in 16th-century France* (1987), Davis observed of the documents her biographical studies were based on – French sixteenth century letters of remission (presented to the King to plea for pardon from a homicide charge) – that 'the artifice of fiction did not necessarily lend falsity to an account; it might well bring verisimilitude or a moral truth' (1987: 4). Far from annihilating the connection to the individual's actual past that gives biography its very meaning and purpose, such speculation – as informed interpretation – can, in Davis' terms, tell significant human and moral truths about the lives it aims to represent. In an article titled 'Stories and the hunger to know' (1992), Davis further argued for the roles of both locating evidence and its interpretation as key to the

historical and by extension, biographical, endeavour. And, although criticised, Davis' groundbreaking approach has also been recognised with a series of prestigious awards in Europe, Canada and the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Following these groundbreaking microhistorical biographies, others such as Judith C Brown's *Immodest acts: The life of a lesbian nun in Renaissance Italy* (1986), Gene Brucker's *Giovanni and Lusanna: Love and marriage in Renaissance Florence* (1986) and Laurel Thatcher Ulrich's *A midwife's tale: The life of Martha Ballard* (1990), continued the work of using historical records to write necessarily (at least in part) speculative biographical studies of 'ordinary' people. Although these and other such texts made it clear that compelling storytelling had become a substantial feature of such narratives, many historians still understood this narrative function as a distraction – or, at best, an adjunct – to their 'real' fact-based, quantitative work which was based on an objective approach.<sup>6</sup> When historian Jonathan Spence interleaved entire texts of seventeenth century fictional stories by Qing Dynasty Chinese writer P'u Sung-ling into his historical account of life in the T'ang-ch'eng province of China to create *The death of Woman Wang* (1978), he noted the power these stories had to 'conjure up from the past the lives of the poor and forgotten' (xii), but kept separate what he asserted were two different types of narrative (fiction and biography/history). In doing so, he argued that while the historical incidents he described could be verified using period diaries and legal documents, the stories he used to elucidate these events were, as he acknowledged, although based on reality, filtered through P'u Sung-ling's imagination (26-7). Despite this, Spence himself poetically affirmed fiction's power to describe the past when he wrote in the book's introduction:

My reactions to *Woman Wang* have been ambiguous and profound. She has been to me like one of those stones that one sees shimmering through the water at low tide and picks up from the waves almost with regret, knowing that in a few moments the colours suffusing the stone will fade and disappear as the stone dries in the sun. But in this case the colours and veins did not fade; rather they grew sharper as they lay in my hand, and now and again I knew it was the stone itself that was passing on warmth to the living flesh that held it (xv).

Such interpretation can also be described as the biographer's subjectivity, with key texts in this area Janet Malcolm's *The journalist and the murderer* (1990) and, especially, *The silent woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (1994), in which Malcolm openly acknowledges her own subjectivity as biographer and, therefore, the biographical and narrative choices and judgments she is making in constructing her texts.

The negative response to one of Simon Schama's early books, the cleverly titled *Dead certainties (unwarranted speculations)* (1991), reveals the harshness of the rebuke that could follow when a biographer was suspected of (speculatively) attributing motives to his subjects. In this work, Schama produced a series of interconnected speculative biographies beginning with the death of James Wolfe at the Battle of Quebec in 1759 and concluding with the murder, almost a century later,

of Boston historian George Parkman, whose nephew would write Wolfe's biography. By proposing motivations for his characters' actions, Schama drew attention to the fact that biographers cannot do anything but make assumptions about why people acted as they did (Samuels 1995: 30), but this elision of historical fact with interpretive speculations about what those facts revealed, or suggested, about his subjects' inner lives ignited a fiery debate among historians and critics. The *New York Times* reviewer, for instance, found *Dead certainties* the product of a culture that was increasingly unable to separate fact from fiction, but would be better if it could (Wood 1991). Others felt Schama had committed an unforgivable sin by trying to blur the borders between researched scholarship and imagination, especially as this led to an easily read narrative which, thereby, lacked the gravitas to which historical biography should aspire. Clive Emsley's review for *History Today*, for instance, took Schama to task for 'seem[ing] to want to take us back to a history ... which can be substituted for novels as bedtime reading' (1991: 48). Novelist AS Byatt – who is, herself, now much regarded for her fact-based fiction about writing biography (see, *Possession: A romance*, 1990 and *The biographer's tale*, 2000) – noted rather archly that Schama 'mixed his own inventions and speculations into the historical facts' (2000b: 10). Schama's publishers (the leading imprint, Vintage) disagreed, pointedly classifying the work as 'history/non-fiction' and forthrightly providing the data on the Cataloguing-In-Publication (CIP) page in biographical and non-fiction terms:

1. Boston (Mass.) – Biography. 2. Wolfe, James, 1729-1759 – Death and Burial. 3. Parkman, Francis, 1823-1893 – Death and Burial. 4. Parkman, George, 1790-1849 – Death and Burial. 5. Death – Social aspects – Massachusetts – Boston – History (Schama 1991: CIP page).

Schama's point is, however, not to scorn what he himself identifies in the book's Afterword as 'the boundary between fact and fiction'. He instead reveals how the historian's imagination always had to have full play across the evidence as the gap between lived events as they occur and the later narration of those events meant that there can never be any such thing as total historical certainty. Such certainty would be, moreover, in terms of the double entendre of book's title, 'dead' and, therefore, lacking in interest. Schama clearly stated that his purpose was, indeed, to unashamedly address historians' inability to 'ever to reconstruct a dead world in its completeness, however thorough or revealing [our] documentation' (1992: 320). Writing two decades later, on the book's re-publication, Schama revealed his surprise at the vehemence of the criticism:

Did I see it coming, the storm of righteous indignation which, more than 20 years ago, broke over my little black book? No, I didn't ... [see that it would be regarded] as a betrayal of History; an outrage against the profession and its code of conduct; a manifesto of ultra-relativism; the Enemy against whom a Stand Had to be Taken (2013).

This criticism was not revisited with the book's re-publication – perhaps due to increasing visibility of historical microfiction and speculative biography, and/or Schama's current public profile.

Yale-based John Demos expressed his almost illicit pleasure in succumbing to what he called ‘the literary side’ of his nature in the introduction to his award-winning group biography *The unredeemed captive: A family story from early America* (1994):

As a child in school, I had been drawn to history by the stories. Yet my subsequent training (and practice) followed a different track. Narrative history was in deep eclipse during the time of my professional coming-of-age then in mid-life old loyalties, old pleasures, reasserted themselves ... Realising at last the strength of my wish, I resolved to yield to it fully (xi).

In this Indian captivity narrative set in colonial Massachusetts, Demos refers to his desire to produce a satisfyingly coherent and readable narrative in the opening lines of both his preface – ‘Most of all, I wanted to write a story’ (xi) – and the first chapter in which he writes: ‘Where does the story begin?’ (3). In this carefully researched narrative where the biographies of the main figures take central place, Demos includes speculative passages similar to those in *Dead certainties* but carefully uses the word ‘perhaps’ and other such tentative terms – as described by Davis above (2007: 13) – to signpost these musings. When Demos constructs, for example, an interior monologue for his heroine, he prefaces this with ‘We can only speculate – only imagine – but that much, at least, we must try’ (108), a strategy which is both honest but, at the same time, due to his skill as a prose writer, does not undercut the biographical or descriptive power of the narrative which follows.

Similarly, in his biographically-based *Alleged sex and threatened violence: Doctor Russel, Bishop Vladimir, and the Russians in San Francisco, 1887-1892* (1997), Terence Emmons structures ‘a narrative in which the protagonists are allowed to speak for themselves ... but in which the authorial voice is nevertheless present’ (xii). Such a structure allows his biographical portraits to be built, *Rashomon*-style, from not only the two antagonists’ points of view, but also from that of a number of third parties, which are presented in dialogue with what Emmons describes as his ‘typically omniscient’ (xii) commentary. This mosaic-like structure helps make this work a clear example of a speculative biographer attempting to reveal in the text how he, as author, is engaging in speculation but also melding the evidence and its interpretation.

Most of the reviews of Paul E Johnson and Sean Wilentz’s group speculative biographical study of a cult leader and his followers, *The Kingdom of Matthias: A story of sex and salvation in 19th-century America* (1994), mention its literary style and fiction-like effects. Reviews in *Publishers Weekly* called it ‘fluid ... and dramatically detailed’ (1994) and the *Library Journal* ‘highly readable’ (1994), while *Kirkus Reviews* noted that the authors ‘recreate the fascinating tale’ utilising ‘rare narrative skills’ (1994). The *Ingram’s Review* reviewer simply stated that the work was written ‘with the force of a novel’ (1994). These reviewers found most literary the way the authors wound the compelling narrative around the personal biographies and relationships between the vivid central characters: the misogynist prophet Matthias, his mistress Anne Folger, her wealthy, cuckolded husband and the ex-slave Isabella Van Wagenen. The publishers obviously believed these qualities would attract readers, as the only quoted reviews on the book’s cover point to these aspects

of the work. Like Demos and Eammons, the authors of this text strive to make clearly apparent throughout their text what is known, proven or verifiable fact and what is biographical conjecture on their part but the result is that the reader reads ‘across’ these disclaimers to complete well-rounded biographical portraits of these characters. In a discursive section discussing the methodology they used for dealing with source materials, Johnson and Wilentz also acknowledge what they have omitted from their story (see, 183). Despite the positive reviews and being published almost two decades after the first influential experiments with so-called new ‘narrative’ history writing, there were still critics who believed such an emphasis on the literary – that is, on producing a compelling narrative – threatened history writing as a profession, although others posited that the best of such writing was, in its very embrace of narrative trends, revitalising a flagging discipline and attracting a new audience (see, for example, Bush 1997).

### **The shift to candid speculation**

James Goodman’s *Stories of Scottsboro* (1994) furthered these trends in his utilisation of increasingly imaginative narrative techniques which either implicitly, or explicitly, involve active biographical speculation on the infamous Scottsboro rape case. In this case, nine black youths were falsely accused of raping two white women on an Alabama freight train in 1931. In the six-year legal battle that followed, a series of juries found the accused guilty even after the US Supreme Court twice reversed the verdict and one of the women withdrew her charge. Goodman took a (group) biographical approach to this task, and reconstructed the case from the multiple points of view of these involved individuals. Working from an extensive range of primary source material, Goodman reconstructed the various characters’ thoughts, opinions and feelings alongside the facts of the case – an innovation which the *Washington Post Book World* reviewer identified as resulting in a history as ‘taut and suspenseful ... as good fiction’, not least because Goodman focused on ‘what people felt as well as what they thought’ (Nicholson 1994: C3). So groundbreaking in this regard was *Stories of Scottsboro* that respected American Civil War historian James M McPherson claimed Goodman had invented ‘a new way of writing history’, the multiple biographical narratives in his text working together ‘like a kaleidoscope ... causing new patterns to emerge until they take a form we can call truth’ (Goodman 1994: cover). Southern historian Robert Ingalls, writing in the *American Historical Review*, went so far as to urge other historians ‘to consider Goodman’s study as a model for how to construct their own stories’ (1995: 1322). Interestingly, this work attracted little negative criticism, perhaps due – at least in part – to the social importance of the story being thus told.

This shift in acceptability can also, however, be seen in the reception of a series of other texts published in the 1990s, whose writers have fashioned dramatic narratives that could be classified as biographies or biographical microhistories from the data found in trial transcripts or other legal records, all of which have not only involved speculation on this evidence, but have candidly acknowledged this conjecture. These

include Edward Berenson's *The trial of Madame Caillaux* (1992), John Berendt's *Midnight in the garden of good and evil* (1993), Michael Grossberg's *A judgment for Solomon: The d'Hauteville case and legal experience in antebellum America* (1996) and Patricia Cline Cohen's *The murder of Helen Jewett: The life and death of a prostitute in nineteenth century New York* (1998). These texts could be classed as that less-than-prestigious sub-genre of non-fiction writing – 'true crime' – but are, due to their approach to research and narrative strategies, instead perceived as thoughtful biographical texts with a contribution to make to the historical record, published by serious university presses and largely positively reviewed. In one such narrative, *Indiana gothic: A true story of love, betrayal and murder in the American Midwest* (1999), author Pope Brock reflects on how many (then) contemporary biographers were acknowledging this movement between data and making sense of it. Writing in his prefatory 'Note to the reader' that his book is the biographical story of the murder of his great-grandfather which had been concealed by his family for some eight decades, Brock describes uncovering the 'trove' of media coverage of the scandal and how he 'immersed' himself 'in research on the time and place' although much relevant documentation had been lost. This led, he describes, to a narrative that is 'a true story, reconstructed'. It was 'true', he wrote, as 'no plot points have been jiggered to make it a better tale', however, imaginative reconstruction was necessary as 'much of the record was fragmentary ... or missing altogether' (viii). His image of his act of interpretation is both descriptive and poetic: 'the facts formed a line of buoys in the sea of my own imagination' (viii). It is the distance between those buoys, and how that distance is traversed, that seems the lightning rod for anxiety around speculation in biography.

### **Renewed confidence in speculation**

The new millennium appears to have brought a renewed confidence among biographers in relation to open speculation. David Ellis acknowledges his *Death and the author: How DH Lawrence died, and was remembered* (2008) is an 'experiment in biography' (2008: xii). As the author of *DH Lawrence: Dying game 1922-30* (1998), Ellis is an expert on this subject (see, Brien 2014), yet has expanded his biographical process into open musing in this later volume, which deals with a briefer period of time in more detail. The result is a lyrical account of Lawrence's dying days, his death, and what happened to his body, work, family, grave and legacy following his demise. Ellis speculates around this historical record, passages which range from reflections on death and dying more generally to a wide range of related issues including, for instance, what happens when someone dies intestate. Ellis is sometimes tentatively hypothetical, as when writing of Lawrence's poem 'The ship of death' and what Ellis reads as the author's yearning for oblivion as a welcome release from pain:

It *could be said* that this definition represents a calm acceptance of future extinction, of death as the final elimination of all hopes and fears; *but it seems more likely that* Lawrence regards oblivion as a state analogous to sleep whereas, as has often been

pointed out, a chief characteristic of death in the sense of non-existence is that it is the end, the negation of all states (71-2, emphasis added).

At times, however, his speculation is more stridently confident:

The difficult formula of being ‘faithless and faithful together’ points towards the recognition that dead loved ones are necessarily betrayed by all those who want to go on living (as Dora Carrington *must have felt* when she committed suicide rather than live on after the death of Lytton Strachey) (150, emphasis added).

Ellis also includes many personal thoughts on the biographical process – a feature which has been common in experimental biographies since AJA Symons’ *The quest for Corvo: An experimental biography* (1935) detailed the biographer’s labour alongside the account of its subject. Ellis goes further, however, to add contemplative comments on how speculation is a valid component of the biographical process. He even includes his own speculations on when speculation is unwarranted, as for instance when he states: ‘It is foolish to speculate about how Lawrence would have responded to *Son of Woman* ... but a rational approach to its reconstruction would be to ask how Lawrence responded to hostile commentary while he was still alive’ (210). Alongside his openly speculative passages, readers thus learn that Ellis is also definite about what he sees as biographers’ relationship to the truth of their subjects’ lives:

Truth in biography may often prove an impossible ideal but when biographers cease to live by it, forgetting or ignoring what can be known in order to achieve a moral purpose, that purpose is devalued (xi).

This text was positively reviewed (see, for example, Glendinning 2008, Poole 2008), Peter Balbert describing it as ‘nothing less than a masterpiece’ (2009: 375).

The speculation in Frances Wilson’s *The ballad of Dorothy Wordsworth: A life*, published the same year as Ellis’ biography (2008) was similarly well received, with Adam Sisman writing in *The Irish Times*, for example, ‘Wilson is a good scholar and her judgment is sound; moreover, she is not afraid to use her imagination to carefully explore what cannot be verified’ (2008). Biographical speculation is here linked to the sources Wilson bases her biography on, the journals Dorothy Wordsworth kept while living in Grasmere with her brother William. Wilson describes her work in terms of relaying the narrative these journals tell: ‘the story of the four small notebooks ... which have come to be known as the Grasmere Journals’ (2008: 5), making it clear that, while using a wide range of other sources as evidence, her main inspiration and focus comes from the contents of these journals.

Despite this seemingly more acceptant attitude, however, other recent speculative biographies have been more lukewarmly received. Kate Kellaway, writing in *The Guardian*, for instance, described Julia Blackburn’s *Old man Goya* (2002) – where Blackburn imaginatively retells the story of Goya’s old age including his responses to going deaf – as ‘a curious undertaking ... neither straightforward biography nor fiction’, and denigrated it in literary terms by identifying it as inhabiting that ‘fashionable limbo where imagination and fact overlap’ (2002). Andrew Graham-

Dixon found *Old man Goya* ‘unconventional’ due to its hybridity – ‘part biography, part travelogue and part personal memoir’ – finding that it was ‘a work in which historical research, detailed art criticism and the author’s deep-seated personal fascination with her subject have been allowed freely, *if eccentrically*, to coexist’ (emphasis added). He further added that these various approaches ‘sometimes make for uneasy bedfellows’ (2002). Other works have attracted even more strident criticism that is in line with the disapproval of decades earlier. A good example is Pat Shipman’s *The stolen woman* (2004), which traces the life of Hungarian Florence Stasz in the mid-nineteenth century. Having been kidnapped and raised by Armenians to be sold as a harem slave, the teenaged Florence then accompanied her rescuer, Samuel Baker, to Africa for five years on the quest to find the Nile’s source. With few source materials available, Shipman draws on the accessible resources: Samuel Baker’s autobiography *Albert Nyanza: Great basin of the Nile* (1866), published soon after the couple’s return to England as a source for her biography, alongside Richard Hall’s *Lovers on the Nile* (1980). *The Times* reviewer found that Shipman’s use of historical conjecture and inference from these sources affected the legitimacy of the work as it ‘often crosses the line into fiction and here, unfortunately, she lessens the “impact” and credibility of her biography’ (Ondaatje 2004). Stephanie Johnson similarly notes that Shipman’s speculations ‘introduce a reason to doubt the biography’s veracity’ (2004), while Frances Wilson here rejects the result of the speculative strategy entirely, writing Shipman had ‘turned a quite extraordinary epic into a fiction of utter banality’ (2004). These and other such criticisms show that while some speculation is accepted by some critics, others continue to find this aspect of biographical practice both undesirable and objectionable.

## Conclusion

As long ago as 1901, Henry James’ noted the importance of speculation for writers attempting to imagine past lives for their characters:

You may multiply the little facts that can be got from pictures and documents, relics and prints as much as you like – *the real thing is almost impossible to do ... the representation of the old consciousness, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals* (cited in Edel 1985: 202-3, original emphasis).

While he was writing reflectively about the author representing characters in fiction, James’ remarks are applicable to illustrating the ‘consciousness, the soul, the sense, the horizon, the vision of individuals’ in life writing. Speculative biography, by suggesting possibility (an informed idea of what *may well* have happened) instead of asserting certainty (what *must* have happened) in some aspects of the biographical narrative, further exposes the potential of investigating and revealing the subjectivity, creativity and fallibility of the biographer in his or her task of narrative construction alongside the more human aspects of the biographical subject.

Although the recognition of subjectivity remains a contested issue among historians, speculative biographers assert that, by basing subjective empathy and imaginings in

the documented facts (and making clear when this is not thus grounded), biographers can speculate but still ensure their texts are classified as non-fiction life writing. Such work, indeed, often continues a meticulous reliance on the historical archives that underpins biography while, at the same time, is informed by post-structuralist and feminist theories of the essentially constructive power of language. In this manner, such non-omnipotent biographical practice can utilise and amalgamate into the resulting narrative evidence which is fragmentary, ambiguous and contradictory, allowing the speculative biographer to relay not only how uncertain, contradictory and confusing real lives are, but also to reflect on the nature of the biographical enterprise itself as a holistic mixture of the archival and the creative. Although, moreover, in form and content, the biographies discussed above openly acknowledge that they present only one of the many possible readings, interpretations and re-imaginings of the available evidence, it is clear that the life stories such texts offer up are the version that their biographers believe in – the version these writers have confidence most coherently and completely explains the existing evidence about those lives. In this way, each speculative biographical narrative aims to diffuse the limiting irreconcilability that is often mobilised when discussing ‘history’ and ‘fiction’ as oppositional and antithetical tendencies and, instead, suggests the rich potential of utilising the two in tandem to produce biographies as rich, appealing and thought-provoking historically-informed narratives of real lives and experience.

## Endnotes

1. The term ‘microhistory’ is very rarely used in Australia. There is, for instance, no Australian publication classified as such in the catalogue of the National Library of Australia (NLA 2014) and Stuart McIntyre’s authoritative survey of the Australian discipline of ‘History’ for the Australian Academy of the Humanities report, *Knowing ourselves and others: The humanities in Australia into the 21st century* (1998), only mentions the term once – in describing how, in Australia, ‘local history has metamorphosed into microhistory’ (1998) (see Brien 2011).
2. These extended articles by Finlay and Davis formed a 1998 American Historical Association forum titled ‘The return of Martin Guerre’ published in the *American Historical Review*.
3. The film was released outside France with English subtitles as *The return of Martin Guerre* (1982) and editions of the book were published in association with the film. This adaptation closely reflected the content and spirit of Davis’ book (and her archival research).
4. See, for instance, James Buchan (2007) in *The Guardian* who wrote: ‘For this reader, the book is a source of deep misgiving, at best a monument to misapplied learning ... Davis’s last chapter, which imagines a meeting between Leo Africanus and the French writer Rabelais, in Rome, undermines her enterprise ... That is the great fault of postmodernist historiography: it cannot distinguish past from present or future’.
5. These awards include the Holberg International Memorial Prize in 2010 (4.5 million kroner, then worth almost three quarters of a million Australian dollars). At that time, Davis was

described as ‘one of the most creative historians writing today’, whose writing showed ‘how particular events can be narrated and analyzed so as to reveal deeper historical tendencies and underlying patterns of thought and action’ (Holberg Prisen 2010). Davis was also awarded the 2012 National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama for ‘her insights into the study of history and her exacting eloquence in bringing the past into focus’ (White House 2013).

6. An entire volume of the American Historical Association’s *American Historical Review* in 1991 was devoted to discussing Peter Novick’s *That noble dream: The objectivity question and the American historical profession* (1988).

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