

RE-VIEWING THE LIVES OF
OTHERS:
“NEW BIOGRAPHY” IN THE
EARLY TWENTY-FIRST
CENTURY

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Summary

Drawing on the insights of modern auto/biography studies, this thesis adapts the term “new biography” to identify and explore innovative examples of biographical representation in the early twenty-first century. Taking a comparative, interdisciplinary approach, I ask: How do biopics, creative nonfiction, graphic and online biographies provide insight into the politics and limits of biographical practice and representation in this “first-person”, technologically-saturated era?

I begin in chapter one by exploring a bestselling print form of biographical writing: the creative nonfiction biography. Conceptualising creative nonfiction as both a marketing label and a life writing methodology, I consider two prominent exemplars: Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* and Helen Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation*. I suggest how creative nonfiction biographies confront and make visible post-memoir boom questions of democratic representation and ethics, and how these biographical works reflect the cultural milieu of the first-person, digital era.

In chapter two, I move from print to a multimodal form of life narrative: the graphic biography. Via readings of Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón’s *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Biography* and Lauren Redniss’ *Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie: A Tale of Love and Fallout*, I explore how the comics form reconfigures the limits of biographical representation and practice. Graphic biographies literally illustrate how life narratives are constructed, authenticated and authorised. Blurring existing boundaries between

high and low art, graphic biographies amplify the social and cultural work of conventional biography, reframing iconic lives for new readers.

Chapter three moves to an examination of the Hollywood biopic. Focussing on Gus Van Sant's *Milk*, and Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*, I explore how biopics can be potent cultural and memorial sites that invite viewers to learn about individual lives and marginalised histories, or to engage with contemporary social concerns. Additionally, in a similar way to comics, these filmic life narratives make visible the epistemological limits of biography.

Chapter four is the first of two chapters considering some of the ways in which biography manifests online. Here, I consider Wikipedia biographies. As an example of popular, participatory life narrative, Wikipedia biographies indicate the potential of online spaces to replicate off-line traditional scripts and subjects, but also to function as dynamic spaces where the politics and ethics of biography are magnified, broadcast and challenged in unprecedented ways.

Finally, chapter five considers online death narratives – forms of biographical representation that emerge in the wake of an individual's death. I explore three examples: the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's crowdfunded project *In Memory Of...*, the Facebook memorial page of Hayley Okines, and Twitter responses to author Colleen McCullough's *The Australian* newspaper obituary. In doing so, I illustrate how these online spaces encourage the representation of a greater range of lives and deaths, but also how they can be vital tools for challenging the cultural politics of biography.

Ultimately, I argue that these examples of “new biography” work to make visible, revise and remake biographical politics, ethics and epistemologies. They

suggest biography's enduring significance as an overlooked, yet vital, complex and evolving practice and representational form in the early twenty-first century.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

Signed.....

Date.....

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**Introduction: “The Rumpled Bed of *Biography*” in the Early
Twenty-First Century**

To what extent does our theorizing itself need to be remade by contemporary practice at these ‘rumpled’ sites of the experimental, so that we may take account of changing autobiographer-audience relations, shifting limits of personal disclosure, and changing technologies of self that revise how we understand the autobiographical? (13).

– Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, “The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography”

The telling of life stories is the dominant narrative mode of our times. The popularity of Western biography has lasted for over two centuries, but in the last forty of fifty years – keeping pace with the relaxing of social conventions, increased social egalitarianism, the blurring of high and low art forms, and the cult of media celebrity – it has occupied new spaces (17).

– Hermione Lee, *Biography: A Very Short Introduction*

One nation under CCTV

--Banksy

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, in the English-speaking world, biographies pervade contemporary life. Biography appears in formal, constructed narratives across a range of media such as print, television, film and in the theatre. Biographical films – or biopics – are being produced, it seems, almost on a weekly basis, and are well-represented at major awards ceremonies. There is now an entire television channel – *Bio* – devoted to biography. Life writing in its myriad print forms remains popular, and “blockbuster” biographies – such as the recent *Steve Jobs* or *Charles Dickens* – are safe commercial bets for publishers (Issacson, Tomalin). In the theatre, documentary forms have recently witnessed a

revival, with individual lives being used as the subject of drama (Forsyth and Megson *Get Real: Documentary Theatre* 1).

In less constructed, more fragmented ways, biographies appear online, in museum exhibitions, and on reality television programs. One commentator recently observed:

In daily life, biography is everything. It is not only the stuff of reality television and gossip magazines and the global appeal of the Daily Mail's gluttonous website: it is also the colour in politicians' speeches and the come-on in popular science and it underlies the invention of the artist as art (Perkins).

For readerships and audiences apparently hungry for popular histories, biographies are often credited with bringing the past 'to life' through the lens of an individual's story.¹

This popular interest in biographical forms has also had an effect on the academy. In recent years, numerous biographical institutes and life writing centres have been established throughout the English-speaking world.² Keen to capitalise on the public interest in life narrative, many academic historians are choosing to take a biographical approach to their work (Caine 11, Curthoys 10, Banner 586). This is also not surprising given that biography is a central vehicle of cultural memory and national identity. (Saunders "Life Writing" 324, Caine 24, Benton 2). The genre is a barometer of what is acceptable to talk about and whose lives are worth remembering at any one time. Far from being politically benign

¹ For example, Australian historian, Ann Curthoys recent work examined the 'gaps' between academic and popular histories. She surveyed the 20 best-selling histories in Australia and discovered that most of the books on the list were histories featuring biographical stories that focussed on individuals rather than solely on collective social and political movements (Curthoys "Crossing Over" 10)

² The Oxford Centre for Life-Writing, was established in late 2011. This follows the emergence of a number of other centres in recent years, including Australian National University 's National Centre of Biography, which opened in June 2008. More established centres include The Center for Biographical Research at the University of Hawai'i (officially opened in 1988) and The Leon Levy Center for Biography at the City University of New York (opened 2004).

and stable, biography is a complex and shifting cultural site where contemporary concerns and values appear, and may be affirmed, resisted or contested.

Yet despite biography's popularity and significance, over the past thirty years or so – excepting a very recent wave of scholarship – the genre has received less critical attention than other forms of life writing, such as memoir or autobiography. In the wake of second-wave feminism and post-structuralism biography has been viewed as a paternalistic, hegemonic form, fixed and predictable (Tridgell “Biography” 102 – 104). In today's academic environment, “to take biography as one's subject” notes Max Saunders, “is to risk appearing conservative; and to be denying or ignoring gods of post-structuralism such as Roland Barthes...and Michel Foucault” (Saunders *Self Impression* 9). Occupying awkward ontological space between literature and history, biography has, for some time been marginalised by the two disciplines. As prominent biographer Michael Holroyd dramatically puts it, “between history and the novel stands biography, their unwanted offspring, which has brought a great deal of embarrassment to them both” (Holroyd *Works on Paper* 8). For some literary scholars, biography is not artful enough to be worthy of study. The genre's status as non-fiction, its apparent naïve realism, and its claims to objectivity are assumed to result in a dull and predictable genre, a throwback to the perceived conservatism of the nineteenth century. For some literary critics, as Holroyd points out, “biography is a substitute for genuine criticism, a substitute for thought, and the very enemy of literature” (Holroyd, *Works on Paper* 8).

Likewise, despite some historians mobilising the form to humanise their work and to meet a publishing marketplace hungry for life stories, many others are sceptical, arguing that biography places too much focus on the experience of a

particular, usually “significant” individual at the expense of the investigation of larger social movements (Holroyd, *Works on Paper* 8, Nasaw 574). Biography, for these scholars, is narrative, rather than analytical history, a form too easily engaged in propaganda, and one that undermines the practice of academic history (Banner “Biography as History” 580). As David Nasaw puts it, “biography remains” history’s “unloved stepchild, occasionally but grudgingly let in the door, more often shut outside with the riffraff” (Nasaw 573).

In this thesis I enter into this contested, unfashionable, yet productive and fascinating space to take contemporary biography as the subject of my enquiry. Taking an interdisciplinary approach and drawing on the insights of modern auto/biography studies, I co-opt and adapt the term “new biography” to identify and explore a selection of popular and innovative forms of biographical representation in the early twenty-first century. What can “creative nonfiction”, graphic, and online biographies, as well as biopics, tell us about how English-language biography is evolving now? What do these various forms reveal about the production, social functions and representative possibilities of the genre in this first-person, technologically-saturated era? In asking these questions, I aim not to provide a definitive overview of biography, but rather to provide a snapshot designed to provoke a re-configured contemporary discussion about previously overlooked examples of a genre that has been academically marginalised but which, in the digital era, is more culturally significant than ever before.

Why biography? Why now?

The initial motivation for undertaking this research derives from a 2009 special issue of *a/b: Auto/Biography Studies* on “new biography.” Edited by Elizabeth Podnieks, the issue is fresh and dynamic in that it considers forms of biography that often go unexamined in life narrative studies. As I outline below, biography is most often considered as a particular kind of print narrative, and so biographical texts beyond print – like biopics, comics and online forms – repeatedly fail to be considered *as* biography. What the special issue does is to implicitly highlight just how important and productive it can be to move beyond disciplinary boundaries and to think about these various overlooked non-print forms together as legitimate expressions of biography in the contemporary era.

To unify the special issue, Podnieks turns to the English literary Modernist conception of “new biography” (“Introduction: ‘New Biography’”). In particular, Podnieks highlights Woolf’s famous 1927 essay “The New Biography” in which the writer declared “the days of Victorian biography are over” (Woolf “The New Biography” 100). In its place, Woolf suggested – in contrast to what she described as the stolid tomes produced by most nineteenth century biographers – would emerge narratives that more accurately represented the complexity of lived experience. Woolf’s “new” biographies would be written by “that biographer whose art is subtle and bold enough to present that queer amalgamation of dream and reality, that perpetual marriage of granite and rainbow (“The New Biography” 100). For Woolf, the “new biography” would take its lead from texts that were a “mixture of biography and autobiography, of fact and fiction” (“The New Biography” 100).

Quoting from Woolf’s later essay, “The Art of Biography”, Podnieks draws attention to Woolf’s observations about the place and function of the

biographer during an era of great cultural and social change – especially with regards to new technologies and media: “We live in an age” declared Woolf, “when a thousand cameras are pointed, by newspapers, letters and diaries at every character from every angle, he must be prepared to admit contradictory versions of the same face. Biography will enlarge its scope by hanging up looking glasses at odd corners” (qtd in Elizabeth Podnieks “Introduction: ‘New Biography’”²). Podnieks then uses Woolf’s assertions about “new biography” as the basis for an inquiry into the genre in the early twenty-first century. “What is ‘new’ in our own millennial times” in relation to biography, asks Podnieks? (1). In positioning Woolf’s work next to questions about our “own millennial times”, Podnieks implicitly suggests that the two eras, roughly a century apart, have similar qualities. Both are eras of paradigm shift, where new technologies pervade, encouraging artists, writers and producers to find new ways to respond to, and represent rapid and dynamic social change. In an era of “big data”, Web 2.0, and “online lives”, where street artist, Banksy critiques increasingly pervasive surveillance technologies, where identity is an industry and the confessional is valuable, Podnieks’ question about biography is urgent and timely. While the 2009 special issue charted important territory, more work remains to be done, and this thesis aims to respond in a more extended way to the question of biography in our “own millennial times.”

Another motivation for this project is the dramatic way biography is changing in the twenty-first century. Traditional print forms of biography seem to be on the decline. It is difficult to find exact sales figures from a common source like Nielsen BookScan, partly because of the way biography is counted as a subtype of history, or nonfiction or alternatively, mixed in with autobiography and

memoir. However, there is substantial anecdotal evidence to support the notion of a decline. A 2010 article in *The Guardian* reported that “once-thriving serious genres such as political memoirs, literary biography and literary travel writing all appear to be ailing” (Thorpe n.p.). Accomplished English biographer, Victoria Glendinning “is being forced to self-finance the research for her next work as a result of the shrinking market for serious biography” (Thorpe n.p.). Publisher Andrew Kidd notes that in recent years, “there has been a change in the reference culture and big serious books” and that traditional print biography had resulted in “significant losses” for publishing houses (“Thorpe n.p.”). Meanwhile, in another 2009 piece, literary critic and academic, John Sutherland argued that “the fat years of the printed word are over. Even if books get dirt cheap, readers simply don’t have the time or motive to invest in them. The old cultivated readership is not as solid as it was. The safe library sale doesn’t exist anymore. There’s been a loss of authority in the serious book” (“Beckett n.p.”). Fewer and fewer traditional, extended print biographies now appear, and when they do, they tend to be of the blockbuster, great man, type: Walter Isaacson’s *Steve Jobs* or Jon Meacham’s Pulitzer Prize-winning *Thomas Jefferson*.³ Furthermore, in 2011, Michael Holroyd suggested that in his experience the marketability of traditional print biography has waned so much over the past decade that he would no longer write such books. “The trade winds are not behind biography” he announced, “the book with a single name on the title page is becoming less attractive to readers.” (Higgins n.p.).

³ My evidence here is drawn from US and British contexts. For instance, a 2013 list of British bestselling “biographies” since 2001, compiled from Nielsen Bookscan figures, lists nothing but autobiography (Chalabi). Another, more US-focussed list indicates only 3 biographical texts amongst the top-sellers for 2012 (Habash).

However, over the past decade, there have been numerous instances of publishers and biographers commenting on an evolution of print biography that appears to be taking place. In a 2008 public lecture, biographer Richard Holmes stated:

Clearly, something is happening at the cutting edge. There is a widespread questioning of the traditional forms and chronology, and a fascination with briefer and more experimental work. There is renewed interest in marginal and subversive subject matter. The 'monolithic' single Life is giving way to biographies of groups, of friendships, of love affairs, of 'spots of time' (microbiographies), or of collective movements in art, literature or science. ("Biography: The Past Has a Great Future" 31).

While in 2009, American historian, David Nasaw noted that:

Biography is no longer restricted to the lives of the rich, powerful, famous, and infamous. There are infinite stories to be told of unknown, inarticulate, unlettered men, women, and children, and, as feminist, labor, and social historians have discovered, telling them offers a fruitful approach to reexamining, and perhaps reconfiguring, the categories of class, gender, and ethnicity as they interact at the level of the individual (576).

While this commentary is by no means definitive, it suggests that biography is in the process of significant evolution. However, these shifts are generally not being addressed by academics and critics. Despite the fact that biography is becoming a vibrant, ubiquitous and popular cultural form, with the exception of a few notable critics including William Epstein, Alison Booth, Julie Rak and Paul Arthur, biography studies has generally not produced the same kinds of feminist, postmodernist and deconstructionist work that has emerged in response to autobiography. As Craig Howes recently observed, during the late 1970s,

post-structuralist, post-modernist, feminist and post-colonial theory, and ethnic, indigenous and cultural studies found memoir, captivity narrative and *testimonio* essential texts for exploring their own aesthetic and political concerns. While still published in huge numbers, biographies did not usually receive the same kind of attention. Biography's practices seemed somehow self-evident, and

except perhaps for its occasional forays into psychoanalysis, it largely remained the 400-plus-page tomes that Lytton Strachey deplored (“Review of *Victorian Lives*”, 225).

As I outline below, the majority of traditional biographical studies scholarship remains wedded to older, and often gendered, ideas of the individual and self. Moreover, the bulk of the work on biography remains focussed on print narratives, despite the increasing prevalence of screen-based and embodied forms of the genre. Therefore, this thesis builds on the dynamic and provocative work of the 2009 *a/b: Auto/biography Studies* special issue to ask: How is biography responding to social and cultural changes in the early twenty-first century? How can popular, non-literary, and experimental forms of biography reveal the current politics, practices and conventions of the genre?

In what follows, I argue that despite its relative neglect in contemporary auto/biography studies, biography is a significant type of life narrative. Biography has long functioned variously as a template for moral education, a form of ancestor and hero worship, and a memorial site, and, as I will show, despite the innovations of the digital era, these social functions largely endure. In memorialising and making visible some lives and not others, biography signals whose lives are worth remembering at any given time, and which kinds of behaviours are socially valued or, conversely, reviled. As the texts I examine in this thesis suggest, popular contemporary “new biographies” such as comics, biopics or online examples, can, because of their reach and their visual nature, perpetuate and amplify these common social functions of biography. Many of these popular forms can also reveal (both literally and figuratively) how biography is constructed and the politics of those constructions.

Therefore, biography deserves more attention, not just from more established and traditional critics of the genre, but also from contemporary auto/biography scholars who bring creative and interdisciplinary theoretical insights. Indeed, it is worth asking of biography the same question Smith and Watson ask of *autobiography* in the early twenty-first century. Conceiving of new, visual forms of first-person narrative as a “rumpled bed”, Smith and Watson ask: “To what extent does our theorizing itself need to be remade by contemporary practice at these ‘rumpled’ sites of the experimental, so that we may take account of changing autobiographer-audience relations, shifting limits of personal disclosure, and changing technologies of self that revise how we understand the autobiographical?” (13). I argue that this same question should be asked of biographical representations now, in order to contribute further to the theorising of this important, yet academically marginalised cultural form.

“Genre Matters”: Biography and New Biography ⁴

Biography

Biography is often assumed to be a particular kind of written text. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, currently defines biography as “an account of someone’s life, written by someone else,” while the host of a recent Australian Broadcasting Company radio program announced that biography is often thought

⁴ The phrase “Genre Matters” is borrowed from G Thomas Couser’s 2005 much-cited paper on life narrative genres. Following theorists like Carolyn Miller and in similar ways to other contemporary life narrative critics, such as Julie Rak, Laurie McNeill and Kylie Cardell, Couser argues that genre is not merely a category, but that genres also have social functions. This theorising of genre – one that pays attention to the utility and politics of life narrative – informs my work in this thesis.

of as “those big, fat books, with lots of research, and interesting diversions and wonderful detail about a person’s life” (“Biography”, “Australian Biography”). These two popular definitions reveal the dominant image of the genre – that is, a very long print narrative, footnoted to signal “lots of research.”

This popular image of the genre is also underpinned and perpetuated by scholarly thinking. Philip Furlong talks about the genre solely as a written narrative and observes that “the massive Victorian tome still haunts our notion of biography” (58). Moreover, for some academics, biography is conceptualised as an activity that professionals do. Smith and Watson, for instance, suggest that biography is a practice where “scholars of other people’s lives document and interpret those lives from a view external to the subject” (*Reading Autobiography*, 5). Similarly, Australian historian Jill Roe asserts that the genre is “not for the faint hearted” as it requires years of work (Roe 108). For a biographer, there is “no escape from sustained reading and research” (Roe 112). Therefore, from both a popular, and an academic perspective, the implication is that biography takes a particular form – a long print narrative – and that, as a practice, biography requires “sustained research” and the professional documentation of a life.

This concept, however, borne out of the eighteenth and nineteenth century European contexts and epistemologies, is limited and outdated. First, because it implicitly overlooks a much longer history of the genre – for instance, Classical Greek and Roman biographies by authors such as Plutarch, but also even earlier non-Eurocentric oral and visual forms (Gilles 11, Caine 8, Hamilton 11, Hoberman, *Modernizing Lives* 3) . Second, and more importantly for this study, this definition fails to reflect the dynamism and evolution of the genre in the digital age. As Paul Arthur and others have noted, in the contemporary era,

biography has moved “beyond writing” and is expanding and migrating into new media, prompting some critics to note a “democratisation” of the genre (“Digital Biography” 89, Hamilton, 2).⁵ Although because biography is usually thought to be a long, print narrative many of these newer, or everyday forms of the genre tend to go unexamined. Therefore, I agree with Nigel Hamilton who argues that biography must be reconceptualised to include popular and new media forms (Hamilton, 2). Biopics, biographical comics, online forms and other non-print examples of biography are increasingly prevalent, and so demand to be studied as important and influential life narratives.

Not only has biography moved into a variety of new media, prompting an expansion of what the genre is, but biographical authorship and practice have changed. Just as Smith and Watson have shown how autobiography can be an everyday practice that emerges in a variety of contexts and “formats”, (*Getting a Life*, 2) biography is increasingly something that non-professionals do.⁶ This shift has been facilitated mostly by the emergence of online spaces, and the growing prevalence of digitised, publically available archival materials. On family history sites, such as Ancestry.com, amateur biographers construct profiles of their ancestors, while Wikipedia, the popular online encyclopedia, is now a significant platform for life narrative, consisting of over 1.5 million biographical pages, which are continually constructed, updated and revised by dedicated volunteer biographers, as I outline in chapter four. Facebook, ostensibly a space

⁵ In his 2009 PhD thesis, Adrian Hale argued that the contemporary era has witnessed a “democratisation of biography” (Hale *Reading Biography* 4). Also, the Australian version of the *Bio* TV channel’s tagline is “Everybody Has a Story”, suggesting a more democratic, egalitarian attitude to the form (“About” Biochannel.com.au).

⁶ This is something highlighted by Paul Arthur who notes that, “Thousands of family history websites are fuelling an insatiable appetite for genealogical research and now even the most respected print-based reference works for the study of biography are available online, some without charge. Whereas once the historian or biographer had privileged access to information, now many base their research on web-based resources that, by and large, are available to all” (“Saving Lives” 56).

designed for auto or auto/biographical expression, is also fast evolving into a space for online memorials, where the user's page after death becomes a biographical space that functions in a number of ways – a topic I discuss in chapter five. Therefore, the idea that the biographer is only an academic researcher, dwelling in the paper archive – *a la* the protagonists in A.S. Byatt's *Possession* – is rapidly becoming a romantic image from another era.

Biographical authorship and practice is rapidly evolving in the early twenty-first century, and this in turn is modifying the both the authority of the scholar-biographer, and more traditional, long-form print biographies.

Yet while new forms of biography are emerging, and biographical authorship is changing, the genre remains wedded to a clear set of discursive conventions that in turn raise particular consumer expectations. Liz Stanley, for instance, argues that all biography is driven by “the motor of biographical realism” (11). With its origins in “high Victorian positivism” modern biography, according to Stanley, “is founded upon a realist fallacy...that depends on... a correspondence theory of the relationship between the written product of biographical research and the lives it investigates”(8). The text is designed to be “directly referential of the person” it purports to represent, proposing “that there is a coherent, essentially unchanging and unitary self which can be referentially captured by its methods” (8). While Stanley's comments might seem polemical in tone, they nonetheless articulate the enduring epistemological basis for biography as a genre. Arguably, one of the pleasures of biography – in all its forms – is that it presents a “true” story of an individual, supported by archival and documentary evidence. Consequently, when readers or audiences choose to consume a biography, they expect a realist narrative that presents an ordered and coherent

version of a life.⁷ These expectations and this implied contract, therefore, suggest why experimental biographies are often met with bewilderment or disappointment by consumers – as I show in chapters two and three – and why fewer innovative biographies are produced.⁸

Therefore, contemporary biography contains an intriguing tension between its dynamic proliferation into new contexts and forms, and its conservative, conventional heritage. This, plus the fact that biography is a diverse practice, form, and discourse, encompassing many different styles and modes – from scholarly, celebrity or even biographies of things, to everyday forms like Wikipedia, family histories, or professional biographical profiles – makes it a diverse and fascinating example of life narrative. It also makes the issue of definition challenging. In this thesis, while recognising the complexity of biography, I use Hermione Lee’s simple definition of the genre. Lee recognises biography’s “shape-shifting, contradictory, variable form...a mixed, unstable genre, whose rules keep coming undone” but she also understands the need to have some kind of defining idea as a starting point for discussion (18). Consequently, amending the popular Oxford English Dictionary definition, she suggests that biography is “the story of someone’s life told by someone else” (5). Viewing biography this way acknowledges not only the genre’s constructed

⁷⁷ This is a point reflected in recent comments by Australian historian and biographer Mark McKenna who argues “when the biographer recounts what happens in the subject’s life, more than memory alone must corroborate his story. What happened must be shown to have happened” (“After Manning Clark” 94).

⁸ For example, a catalogue, database and literature search for innovative biographies tends to result in the same few Modernist and Postmodernist canonical texts such as *Orlando*, *Quest for Corvo*, contemporary biofiction like Joyce Carol Oates’ *Blonde* and Edmund Morris’ *Dutch*, or postmodern biopics like Todd Haynes’ *I’m Not There* and Derek Jarman’s *Wittgenstein*. Even online, where innovation might be assumed to be a given, the most prominent biographical texts – Wikipedia or the various National Dictionaries of Biography – are also presented in a relatively conventional way.

nature (a “story”), but also recognises that it is a type of life narrative that can be oral, visual or multimodal. In other words, whilst being attentive to biography’s diversity and acknowledging its shifting, and amorphous nature, in this thesis I use the term biography to signal a distinct category, but also, following Julie Rak’s significant work on genre and memoir, I see biography as a practice, a discourse or an act (*Boom!* 23).

New biography

Smith and Watson point out that the term “new biography” is not in fact new. Rather, it is one that is “historically recurrent” and has been used in various ways over the past century (*Reading Autobiography* 2nd ed. 297). In what follows I provide an historical overview of how new biography has functioned as a theoretical concept – from the Modernists, to Leon Edel’s psychobiography, to second wave Feminist historians – before explaining how I employ new biography in this thesis.

1. **Modernist “new biography”**

Emerging in the early twenty-first century, the term “new biography” was initially used to refer to Modernist experiments with the genre (Hoberman, *Modernizing Lives*). Virginia Woolf and Lytton Strachey found late nineteenth century and early twentieth century biography inadequate to the tasks of representing a life in a dynamically changing era. The hefty, realist, cradle-to-grave books that were emblematic of the Victorian age seemed outdated in light of the rapid

development of media and communications technologies, along with ideas emerging from psychology, science and early feminism (Marcus, *Dreams of Modernity* 1 -12). As a result, in 1911, Strachey published his provocative and playful *Eminent Victorians*, where, in the preface, he proposed two key changes in biographical practice. First, he argued that “brevity...surely, is the first duty of the biographer” (6). For him, the long, tome-like volumes produced by Victorian-era biographers obscured, rather than adequately represented lives. Second, as Richard Altick observes, biography was considered to be a marker of high-Victorian culture, “a product faithful to the old era’s habit of misapplied and exaggerated hero-worship, with all its attendant hypocrisy and evasiveness” (Altick, 289). Strachey accordingly argued against these prevailing hagiographical, memorial portraits of “great men.” Instead, he contended, the biographer must “maintain his own freedom of spirit. It is not his business to be complimentary; it is his business to lay bare the facts of the case, as he understands them” (Strachey, 6).

Woolf, as the other key Modernist architect of “new biography” had similar reservations about Victorian-era life writing and – as discussed earlier – in 1927, she published her essay, “The New Biography.” Famously proposing that biography be a mixture of the “granite” of documentary facts and the “rainbow” of the subject’s personality, Woolf added that it would be through a “mixture of biography and autobiography, of fact and fiction” that a biographer would produce a work likely to provide a more representative view of an individual life (“The New Biography”, 100). Woolf also expressed interest in lives other than those which appeared in monumental Victorian biographies – lives of women and, as she put it “obscure lives” (Woolf “The Lives of the Obscure”).

Therefore, for the Modernists, “new biography” encompassed several elements. As Laura Marcus explains: “They included, or were held to include: a new equality between biographer and subject, by contrast with the hero-worship and hagiography of Victorian eulogistic biography; brevity, selection, and an attention to form and unity traditionally associated with fiction rather than history...and a focus on character rather than events” (“The Newness of New Biography”196). New biography in this sense acknowledged the insights of psychology by exploring inner lives, and it signalled a broader move towards biography as a more self-conscious literary and democratic art. In short, new biography came to be understood as a term that implied innovation and a break from the old – it represented “the radical ideological and cultural rupture between the Victorians and the moderns” (Marcus “The Newness of New Biography”117). The modernist conception of new biography became enormously influential, prompting critical responses like André Maurois’ *Aspects of Biography*, and George Bowerman’s *The New Biography*, biographical experiments such as Woolf’s *Orlando*, A.J.A. Symons’ *The Quest for Corvo*. It also laid the groundwork for two other concepts of new biography which would emerge in different ways in the latter part of the twentieth century: psychobiography and feminist historical biography.

2. Edel’s Psychobiography

In the latter twentieth century, Pulitzer-prize-winning biographer, and prominent critic, Leon Edel, responded to, and built upon the Modernist conception of new biography. His much-cited *Writing Lives* features an epigraph by Woolf, and

devotes the entire first half to a discussion of new biography, where he recommends that biographers in the late twentieth century should adhere to four principles. First, they should employ the insights of psychoanalysis in their interpretation of a life. Not only does this approach energise the work, but it also provides a way for biographers to identify “the postures, the self-delusions and self-deceptions” of the subject (*Writing Lives*, 28-29). The second point Edel makes is that a biographer must “learn to be a participant observer” who is engaged in the biographical process and aware of their own subject position, but who is nonetheless able to keep distance and objectivity (29). Biographers, says Edel, should avoid hero-worship and “must struggle constantly to not be taken over by their subjects, or to fall in love with them” (*Writing Lives*, 29). Third, biographers must uncover what he calls “the figure under the carpet” – the biographical subject’s private perception of him or herself which guides his or her public life (*Writing Lives*, 30). Finally, the biographer must pay attention to literary technique, and find the mode of storytelling most appropriate to the subject. “Every life takes its own form” suggests Edel, “and a biographer must find the ideal and unique literary form that will express it” (30). A biographer may use techniques commonly found in fiction, Edel advises, but at the same time must stay true to the verifiable facts (*Writing Lives*, 31).

Edel’s conception of new biography closely resembles Woolf and Strachey’s idea of the genre. Like Woolf and Strachey, Edel is concerned with further reconfiguring biographical practice and representation to include an attention to literary devices and an exploration of the interior life of the subject. In other words, like Woolf, Edel was strongly influenced by Freud and psychoanalysis and consequently was a leading proponent of psychobiography: an

approach that relied heavily on psychoanalysis as an interpretive tool.⁹ However unlike Woolf, Edel's idea of new biography was clearly gendered in favour of male public figures, rather than the "obscure lives" that interested Woolf. Edel's criticism speaks of a male biographer, and his biographies focus on male subjects. It was not until the 1970s that there was a renewed focus on the genre from feminist historians, who revisited the term new biography as a method for doing women's history.

3. Feminist Critics and New Biography

Although there was a general turn to feminist biography in the 1970s and 1980s, it was not until relatively recently that the term new biography was formally adopted in relation to such work. Gender historian, Lois Banner claims that "what is now called the 'new biography'" first appeared in the 1990s" (580). Framing the contemporary wave of "new biography" as a practice she explains that those who use the approach "have been especially influenced by feminist, postmodern and race theorists" (580). New biographers – suggests Banner – "stress the multifaceted nature of individual personality" and critique "unified categories of identity" such as gender or race (581).

Linda Wagner-Martin is one of the key theorists of this movement, and used the term "new biography" in her 1994 study of biography by and about women, *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography*. Wagner-Martin uses new

⁹ Psychoanalytical approaches were once an innovative kind of biography, but now, as Anthony Storr points out readers take it for granted that the biographer will explore the subject's interior life. "Ideas from psychology have been incorporated into and have influenced biography even though today a consideration of a subject's psychological state is expected in contemporary examples of the genre. The interior life of a subject is expected to be at least outlined in a biography, something that was not necessarily the case before the emergence of Freud and psychoanalysis in the early twentieth century" (73).

biography as a way of exploring the gendered power relations evident in the production and reception of the genre. Following in the footsteps of leading feminist biography studies critic, Carolyn Heilbrun, Wagner-Martin echoes Edel's idea that the biographer must find the mode of storytelling most appropriate to the subject. Women, argues Wagner-Martin, deserve their own kind of "new biography" that links their public to their private, domestic lives.

Even more recently, the collection of essays edited by Jo Burr Margadant – *The New Biography: Performing Femininity in Nineteenth-Century France* – uses the term new biography to re-examine historical women's lives. Consistent with Banner's observations, Margadant's idea of new biography is essentially one that is grounded in the postmodern and poststructuralist theories of the late twentieth century. Noting that historical studies has only recently re-embraced biography of a way of doing history, Margadant proposes that "new biography implies first and foremost, not a totalizing theory... but a method of analysis that recognizes the constructed nature of our conscious selves and views of others" (7). "The subject of biography is no longer the coherent self" says Margadant "but rather a self that is performed to create an impression of coherence" (7). New biography therefore draws attention to the construction of the biographical subject, and is a way to highlight the "contested nature" of the genre, particularly with regards to gender politics and whose lives are made visible in the public sphere. It has the potential, suggests Margadant, to challenge "historians' 'master narratives'" (9). Therefore, this most recent use of "new biography" refers to a "method of analysis" that derives from a feminist impulse as a way to enter formerly overlooked lives into the public sphere. It is at once a representative

mode, but also a practice that makes the politics and epistemology of biography visible.

In addition to feminist historians, auto/biography studies critics Smith and Watson suggest that “new biography signals many kinds of practices that exploit the boundaries between biography and fiction at particular moments and seeks innovative modes adequate to the complexity of narrating a life at various moments of paradigm shift” (*Reading Autobiography* 9). For Smith and Watson, who list texts such as Carolyn Steedman’s *Landscape for a Good Woman*, Edmund Morris’ *Dutch*, W.G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* as key examples of the approach, new biography is about the blurring of ontological categories, hearkening back to Woolf’s idea of blending of fictional and nonfictional modes. However, in conceiving of new biography not just as a type of representation, but also as a practice, Smith and Watson’s concept is also aligned with Margadant’s. From this perspective, new biography poses a challenge to received ideas of what biography is and does; who it can represent, and in what way. For Smith and Watson new biographies make “critical interventions” into “conventions of biographical narration” (*Reading Autobiography* 9). So, along with most obviously signalling innovation – or a break with the old – new biography is also a term that highlights the conventional and generic limits of biography, as well as being a methodology that highlights the cultural and gendered politics of the genre.

In this thesis, the major influence is the work of gender and feminist historians, and contemporary auto/biography studies critics. In particular, the idea of new biography presented in this thesis focuses on three themes or aspects. First, and perhaps most obviously, new biography refers to examples that are temporally

new, and that did not exist in a previous era, for example online biographies such as Wikipedia or digital obituaries. Second, new biography refers to the ways in which the genre is employed in a more democratic way, or to engage in counter-memorial politics. Texts such as the Gus Van Sant's biopic of Harvey Milk, Rebecca Skloot's creative nonfiction biography, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, and some of the online biographies are examples of new biography in this sense. Third, new biography refers to experimental texts, such as Todd Haynes' fragmented Bob Dylan biopic, *I'm Not There*, or Lauren Redniss' graphic biography of Marie Curie, *Radioactive*. The aesthetically innovative nature of these kinds of biographies helps to reveal the conventions, limits and epistemological basis of the genre. Taken together, these three aspects of new biography function as a theoretical lens to examine what biography is, and the politics and social functions of the genre in the contemporary era.

Theoretical Groundings: Biography Studies and Auto/biography Studies

Like the genre itself, the existing academic literature on English-language biography is vast.¹⁰ Translated critical works by Roman and Greek scholars are often cited as some of the earliest examples, and numerous anthologies and overviews, including James Clifford's 1962 *Biography as an Art: Selected Criticism, 1590 – 1960*, Carl Rollyson's *Biography: An Annotated Bibliography*, David Novarr's *The Lines of Life: Theories of Biography, 1880-1970*, as well as the useful entries on "Criticism and Theory" *Encyclopedia of Life Writing*, and *Biography* journal's list of "Annual Works" all show how plentiful and extensive

¹⁰ Even just the single, limited subject tag "biography as a literary form" returns over 3,000 hits on WorldCat.org. (August 2012).

is the history of critical works about biography. Much of this criticism, however, is outside the theoretical scope of this project. Rather, what is applicable is modern biography scholarship: works produced in the late twentieth and early twenty first century.

As I have already implied, biography scholarship has generally not progressed in the same dynamic way as work about first-person forms of life narrative. Writing in 1987, for instance, Ruth Hoberman observed that “until recently, biographical commentary has lacked the critical sophistication characteristic of...autobiographical studies. Book-length works on biography have tended to be either all-inclusive historical overviews or anecdotal discussions of problems faced by the biographer” (*Modernizing Lives* 15). By 1992, Liz Stanley made similar observations, arguing that while autobiography and memoir had absorbed the insights of the post-structural-era of literary criticism “writing on biography is stuck in a timewarp, protected from and resistant to the winds of change; its practitioners remain sealed off from taking seriously ideas and analyses drawn from theorising autobiography and [...] postmodernist theory” (126). Subsequently, in 2013, Craig Howes noted: “With a few notable exceptions, writing about biography for the past 100 years has ranged from the anecdotal to the bibliographical, benefiting little from the professionalisation of literary criticism and theory that transformed the study of poetry, drama and fiction” (“Review of *Victorian Lives*” 125).

An overview of the key works of modern biography studies criticism reveals a number of similar themes and approaches. Hoberman’s observation, for instance, that much of the scholarship consists of “anecdotal discussions of problems faced by the biographer” is correct. This is partly because a number of

the key critics of biography tend to also be biographers, and so works by authors like Edel, Richard Ellman, Carl Rollyson, Michael Holroyd and Richard Holmes all take this approach. While Edel and Rollyson's work is designed for academic readerships, they both rely more on personal experience and anecdote, rather than on political or philosophical ideas or theories. Rollyson's work is especially idiosyncratic, as he admits in the introduction to his *Biography: A User's Guide*. Likewise, Nigel Hamilton takes a similar approach with his *How to do Biography: A Primer* as does Catherine Drinker Bowen as she reflects on her practice in the 1968 *Biography: The Craft and the Calling*, and Paula Backscheider in her 1999 book, *Reflections on Biography*. Holroyd and Holmes also fit into this anecdotal approach. In their respective books, *Works on Paper* and *Footsteps*, each writes in a lively and compellingly personal way about their experience of writing biography. Academic and biographer Hermione Lee also relies heavily on anecdotes for her collection of 2005 essays: *Virginia Woolf's Nose: Essays on Biography* and her 2008 book, *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing*.

Hoberman's other observation, that many biography studies critics focus on historical overviews of the genre, also remains true. Catherine Parke's *Writing Lives*, A.J.O. Cockshut's *Truth to Life: The Art of Biography in the Nineteenth Century*, Richard Altick's *Lives and Letters: A History of Literary Biography in England and America*, Nigel Hamilton's recent *Biography: A Brief History* and Hermione Lee's *Biography: A Very Short Introduction* are all indicative of this approach. Hoberman's own, thorough study of Modernist Biography, *Modernizing Lives: Experiments in English Biography, 1918 – 1939* could also fit into this category.

Another theme or preoccupation that runs through a great deal of modern biography studies scholarship is a focus on canonical or literary subjects. In fact, criticism on literary biography – stories about the lives of canonical authors – tends to dominate the critical terrain. A number of the books I have already outlined take this approach but there are many others too. Leon Edel’s much-cited 1957 monograph, *Literary Biography* is a key example, while two edited collections: Jeffrey Meyers’ 1985 *The Craft of Literary Biography* and John Batchelor’s, 1995 *The Art of Literary Biography*, both illustrate the prevalence of criticism about biographies of famous authors. More recently, Michael Benton’s *Literary Biography: An Introduction*, and Midge Gillies’ *Writing Lives: Literary Biography* both reveal how this preoccupation endures into the early twenty-first century. Even philosophically-driven scholarship – such as Susan Tridgell’s *Understanding Ourselves: The Dangerous Art of Biography*, and Ray Monk’s paper, “Life Without Theory” – similarly focuses on canonical literary or philosophical figures.

Most of this work – be it reflective and anecdotal, historical overviews or discussions of literary biography – tends to go over common ground and well-worn problems rather than offer theories of the genre. In fact, as one critic has noted, “it has become a truism to declare that biography has failed to establish any theoretical foundations upon which to build” (Benton *Literary Biography* 3). Therefore, as this thesis is most interested in the political and cultural aspects of biography, this more traditional scholarship, whilst useful in a foundational sense, is less influential to my approach in the coming chapters. Instead, as I have already implied with my use of the term new biography, my approach to this research derives from three interdisciplinary, but ideologically similar bodies of

work: contemporary auto/biography studies scholarship, feminist and postmodern discussions of historical representation and cultural memory, and feminist and postmodern theories and critiques of biography.

The work of prominent auto/biography studies scholars, especially Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, Julie Rak, Gillian Whitlock and Leigh Gilmore is foundational to the approach in this thesis. Smith and Watson's *Reading Autobiography*, and their work on theorising first-person forms beyond print encourages consideration of biography in relation to social and political contexts. Likewise, Julie Rak's work on popular forms – especially her paper on Canadian biographical television, and her monograph (*Boom!*) on the contemporary production of memoir – provides rigorous and critically-dynamic models for an investigation of non-traditional and popular biography. Works by Leigh Gilmore – including her *Autobiographics: A Feminist Theory of Women's Self-Representation* and the discussion of life narrative jurisdictions in *The Limits of Autobiography* are useful in thinking about the cultural work and limits of biography. Gillian Whitlock's *Soft Weapons* prompts reflection on the importance of material and political aspects of biographical production.

In addition to this general, foundational work, various form-specific scholarship underpins each chapter. Included here is Paul Arthur's work on digital biography and memorialisation, Laurie McNeill's work on Canadian death notices, and Elisabeth El Refaie and Hillary Chute's books on graphic life narratives.¹¹ Edited collections of scholarship have also been enormously useful in building my approach, and these include Anna Poletti and Julie Rak's *Identity*

¹¹ See for example, Arthur. "Memory and Commemoration in the Digital Present", "Digital Biography: Capturing Lives Online", McNeill. "Writing Lives in Death: Canadian Death Notices as Auto/biography", "Generic Subjects: Reading Canadian Death Notices as Life Writing." El Refaie. *Autobiographical Comics: Life Writing in Pictures*. Chute. *Graphic Women: Life Narrative and Contemporary Comics*.

Technologies and Michael Chaney's *Graphic Subjects*, Smith and Watson's *Getting a Life*, and Julie Rak's *Auto/biography in Canada*.

Complementing this theoretical work from auto/biography studies is scholarship by feminist and postmodern historians. In recent years, there has been a renewed focus on biography as a sub-genre of historical writing and those interested in feminist and postmodern approaches have emerged strongly and are especially relevant for this thesis. Although their work is not always explicitly theoretical, it nonetheless provokes thought about the practice and politics of biography. Barbara Caine's *Biography and History* has been influential, as have scholarly articles by historian-biographers, Jill Roe, Lois Banner, and Susan Magarey.¹² Similarly, the influential work of Hayden White, Alun Munslow, Beverley Southgate and Robert Rosenstone is useful for its challenging of received understandings of biography as a form of historical representation.¹³

Finally, returning to the field of biography studies, there are a number of feminist or postmodernist works that have informed this thesis. Much of this work appeared during the 1990s, and includes *The Seductions of Biography*, a 1996 collection of essays by prominent scholars such as Marita Sturken, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., as well as practicing biographers, such as Phyllis Rose, and *Contesting the Subject: Essays in the Postmodern Theory and Practice of Biography and Biographical Criticism*. Monographs that consider biography from a feminist perspective include Carolyn G. Heilbrun. *Writing a Woman's Life* (1988), Linda Wagner-Martin's *Telling Women's Lives: The New Biography*

¹² See, for example, Magarey with Guerin and Hamilton, eds. *Writing Lives: Feminist Biography and Autobiography*, Magarey. "Three Questions for Biographers: Public or Private? Individual or Society? Truth or Beauty?", Roe, "Biography Today: A Commentary", Banner. "Biography and History."

¹³ White. *The Content of the Form*, Southgate. *History Meets Fiction*. Rosenstone, ed. *Revisioning History*, Munslow. "Biography and History." All three scholars are also editors of and contributors to the Routledge journal, *Rethinking History*.

(1994) and Susanna Scarparo's *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction* (2005).

Chapter Summaries: Selecting and Reading "New Biography"

As shown earlier, the term biography connotes a wide range of practices and representational forms, and this diversity presents a considerable challenge when it comes to the scope of this project. Each of the different forms I study here justifies consideration on their own terms, and some forms have recently attracted specific academic attention – most notably biopics and comics.¹⁴ However, in putting these different forms together, my aim is to consider biography not as a purely literary phenomenon, but as a cultural practice and representational form, and so it is necessary to consider the most prominent sites where popular examples of the genre appear.

The texts that have been selected for consideration are ones that generally have not yet attracted much scholarly attention, but which emerge prominently in readings of trade publications and other materials, such as online booksellers and mainstream media reviews. These texts are contemporary (produced over the past decade, between 2004 and 2015), either popular (indicating their timeliness, social relevance and cultural prominence), or are discussed in review and critical material as innovative (indicating how such texts might challenge current understandings of biographical discourse). In a number of cases, the exemplar

¹⁴ See for instance, Bingham. *Whose Lives* on biopics, and Candida Rifkind's forthcoming monograph on graphic biography.

texts are both popular *and* innovative, and these particular examples reveal productive tensions in the expectations and reception of biographical work.

In order to overcome the methodological issues of the wide-ranging scope, the concept of new biography is used as a lens and theoretical tool to unify these various forms. With more stable media, print and film, for example, a comparative approach is used and two exemplars of each form are examined per chapter. Chapter one, for instance, begins by considering a popular contemporary print form – the creative nonfiction biography. While creative nonfiction is a contested and some argue an oxymoronic term, I show how it has nevertheless emerged in the past two decades as both a marketing term and a methodology for doing biography. Rebecca Skloot's *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010) and Helen Garner's *Joe Cinque's Consolation* (2004) are two bestselling examples of the form that show how biography is absorbing the shift in authorship and market expectations of confession and the personal. Contextualising these books as products of the post-memoir-boom era, I argue that in using a “creative nonfiction” methodology, these authors achieve a number of goals. They directly address enduring ethical issues that arise in biographical writing, they provide a way to write marginal subjects into the public sphere, they meet an interest in intimate and confessional voices, and so expand their market to include both readers of biography and memoir.

Chapter two also continues the comparative structure by examining two examples of contemporary graphic biography. Paying attention to form and memorial function, I examine Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón's book, *Anne Frank: The Anne Frank House Authorized Biography* (2010) and Lauren Redniss' *Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie: A Tale of Love and Fallout* (2010). I show

the ways in which the graphic form can prompt revision. Graphic biographies of iconic figures, like Marie Curie and Anne Frank, I argue not only reframe the lives of historical lives for a new generation of readers, but also make visible the mechanics of biography. In this way, comics form – while not entirely new in a temporal sense – can be considered “new biography”. Moreover, a text like *Radioactive* can demonstrate that even when biography attempts to innovate, certain expectations of the genre endure, laying bare the limits of biographical representation.

Chapter three builds on the work of the first chapters by moving into an even more prevalent visual mode: the Hollywood biopic. Continuing the comparative approach, via readings of Gus Van Sant’s *Milk*, and Todd Haynes’ *I’m Not There*, I argue that biopics are new biography in several ways. They can reframe existing iconic lives, enter marginal lives into cultural memory, and also, like comics, can highlight the constructed nature of biography. Additionally, as the discussion of *Milk* shows, biopics can also be a powerful and contested cultural site, where social and political concerns emerge and play out.

In chapter four, I move on to consider the first of two chapters dedicated to online biographical forms. I consider arguably the most popular and prevalent form of online biography: Wikipedia. As online media is less stable and more fragmented than print or film, in this chapter the comparative approach is less productive and does not fit the hypertextual nature of my case studies. Thus the comparative methodology is modified in the last two chapters in order to look at particular issues and examples that illuminate questions of changing practices and politics. I argue that as a prevalent and popular form of life narrative, Wikipedia biographies not only confirm the idea that biography is a contested cultural site,

but they also clearly show how biographical practices and expectations can limit the democratisation of the subject in the contemporary era.

Chapter five then considers online death narratives as biography, specifically the obituary. Through a reading of examples from Facebook, Twitter and the Australian Broadcasting Company's crowdsourced project *In Memory Of*, I explore how Web 2.0 is transforming this very particular and classical form of biography, democratising the cultural politics of the obituary. These various examples show the ways in which the obituary has absorbed confessional discourse and social media's capacity for satire and protest. At the same time, the online sphere potentially magnifies issues of biographical ethics, and this becomes apparent in these highly-charged examples.

In all of the chapters, I take a textual and paratextual approach – reading inside, but also around each text – to examine the biographical work in itself, as well as its existence within a social context. The focus that this thesis brings to a range of biographical representations and the media in which they are delivered, exposes the mechanics of the biographical process, the politics of biography, and how this impacts on the reception and circulation of these narratives. It is to that discussion I now turn.

Chapter One: The Personal is Ethical: Creative Nonfiction as New

Biography in Print

On the morning of 11th of September, 2001, just a mere 15 months into the new millennium, passenger aeroplanes, carrying hundreds of people, were hijacked and flown into the Twin Towers in New York City. The dramatic events were reported on television news and broadcast across the global Anglosphere to viewing audiences who attempted to comprehend the images that were filling their screens. As journalist and academic Dan Gillmor observes of that moment, viewers:

learned some of the *how* and *why* [of that morning] as print publications and thoughtful broadcasters worked to bring depth to events that defied mere words...But something else, something profound was happening: news was being produced by regular people who had something to say and show, and not solely by the ‘official’ news organisations that had traditionally decided how the first draft of history would look. The first draft of history was being written, in part, by the former audience...Via emails, mailing lists, chat groups, personal Web journals—all non-standard news sources—we received valuable context that the major American media couldn’t, or wouldn’t, provide. We were witnessing—and in many cases were part of—the future of news” (xx).

This development, Gillmor suggests “was possible—it was inevitable—because of the Internet” (xx). Gillmor’s observations about the astounding evolution of media reporting in the early twenty-first century may not immediately seem connected to the production of print biography. Yet what Gillmor identifies here—the shift from twentieth century news models, where TV and print audiences waited for journalists to report events, to “the future of news” where the audience would contribute in an unprecedented way to media stories – is

significant for biography. This change in journalistic practice acts as both a barometer of, and a catalyst for, evolving biographical practice and representation. It indicates how, while the third-party expert – the journalist, the historian or the biographer – was once an integral part of knowledge production, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is the ordinary individual who is foregrounded in such processes (Thornburn and Jenkins; Bruns). From YouTube’s motto, “broadcast yourself”, to Big Brother’s confessional “diary room”, to the 2006 arrival of Twitter and *Time Magazine*’s cover proclaiming that the 2006 person of the year is YOU!, the early twenty-first century has so far been marked by the personal and the immediate. Discourses, like journalism, history, and biography, which have traditionally relied on objectivity and distance for authority, are evolving to incorporate this shift.

One commentator, for instance, reviewing the October 2012 launch of online website, *Google Cultural Institute* said: “History can be seen as the sum of great stories, but it’s through personal tales that we feel the impact of historic events” (Gowan “Google Brings History to Life” n.p.). The message here is that affect is key to historical understanding, and that we only “feel the impact” of history when presented with individual first-person life stories. Prominent heritage scholar, David Lowenthal observes something similar:

History has become more personal, less communal; it’s what happened to you and me, not the collective community, more and more a search for individual identity, the dominance of “I.” A historical museum I went to in Stockholm had recently surveyed young people, asking them, “What is the most important event that has happened in the last thirty years?” The majority answer was, overwhelmingly – ‘I was born’ (qtd in Edwards and Wilson, 112).

In other words, modes of representation—such as history and journalism—which previously offered narratives in an impersonal manner and relied on an expert

authority, are now foregrounding personal identity and increasingly incorporating the “I” of autobiographical discourse. Of course, this is something that has also been noted by auto/biography scholars. Elaine Tyler May and Patricia Hempl, for instance, argue that in recent times readers and writers:

have narrowed the space between private and public, between the writing of history and the accounting of a personal life. Authority has shifted from facts to voice...the evermore pervasive use of the first-person voice in forms of nonfiction – journalism, history, even biography – that were once pristinely shrouded in distant (“omniscient”) third person narration held aloft by citations and sources, is no small cultural shift. *Who* tells the story can be as crucial as the story told. (4).

Similarly, in *The Limits of Autobiography*, Leigh Gilmore notes how the publishing climate for nonfiction has shifted over the past two decades. Noting the “boom” in first-person stories, Gilmore identifies four factors that have contributed to memoir’s ascendance in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. First, she suggests that the “the social and political movements of the past thirty years” have paved the way for a “broader range people to publish their life experiences. Women, people of color, gay men and lesbians, the disabled, and survivors of violence have all contributed to the expansion of self-representation” (17). Correspondingly, the traditional subject of autobiography has evolved from the “elder statesman” recounting his life in the public eye to the “ordinary” individual’s story of overcoming adversity. Second, she suggests that the prevalence of confessional culture feeds a hunger for first-person narratives. From celebrity tell-alls in magazines and books, to ordinary people appearing on chat shows to tell stories of survival, “confessional practices” argues Gilmore, “pervade, and arguably, define mass culture” (17). Third, she suggests that spaces where the objective, detached narrative voice dominated – such as academic work

and history – are now, increasingly including personal address. Categories such as “personal criticism: and ‘creative nonfiction’” argues Gilmore, indicate “the appearance of the autobiographical “I” in places it was not previously” (17). Finally, she notes how the “literary market” has influenced the increase in the publication of first-person stories, with new authors often encouraged to package novels as nonfiction (17).

In this chapter, I consider a form of print biography that reflects the shifts identified by these various critics: the creative nonfiction biography. As texts that self-consciously use techniques normally associated with literary fiction, foreground the personal voice of the author, and take non-traditional biographical subjects as their focus, creative nonfiction biographies are hybrid narratives that very much reflect the social conditions of the first decade of the twenty-first century. While they are a type of writing that began evolving before the present contemporary moment, they are, I propose, clear examples of “new biography” in the way they make visible the practice of biography. These texts represent non-traditional biographical subjects and so, in an era where there is a heightened awareness of human rights discourse, these books use a creative nonfiction methodology to address the ethical issues involved in representing the lives of less powerful, “ordinary” individuals (Smith and Schaffer 3). In what follows, I compare and contrast two biographical texts that have been considered as paradigmatic of the creative nonfiction approach in the post-memoir boom era: Helen Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* (2004) and Rebecca Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks* (2010).¹⁵ Featuring the proper name of their

¹⁵ Lee Gutkind, a major proponent of creative nonfiction, cites Skloot’s book as exemplifying the approach, and in *The Immortal Life* is frequently referred to as creative nonfiction in reviews and interviews. As an author, Garner is often described as the leading literary or creative nonfiction writer in Australia, and *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* is held up as a key Australian exemplar of the

biographical subject on the front cover, both of these texts have been positioned by critics and the marketplace as creative or literary nonfiction. While they emerge six years apart, from very different national contexts and focus on very different individuals, they both indicate one way in which print biography is evolving in terms of subjects, narrative form and methodology. As discussed in the introduction, traditional print biography appears to have fallen out of fashion with contemporary readerships. However, biographies that take a creative nonfiction approach – employing a personal voice and using techniques more generally associated with literary fiction – often make contemporary bestseller lists. In this chapter I argue that, for a contemporary biographer, creative nonfiction provides not only a neat marketing label for authors to distinguish their writing as more literary and innovative than conventional biography, but also how the hybrid nature of the creative nonfiction biography can assist authors to write about non-traditional biographical subjects in a way that acknowledges and confronts enduring ethical concerns. At the same time, what also emerges from a study of these texts is that while a creative nonfiction methodology can be useful for biographers, and can help them to write a type of new biography, the approach simultaneously and paradoxically raises its own set of ethical problems.

Creative nonfiction: A twenty-first century methodology for writing

biography

style. See, for instance: Suzanne Eggins. "Interview with Helen Garner." In a 2012 survey of Australian non-fiction in the *Creative Nonfiction* journal, Garner is listed as a "veteran." Lee Koffmann. "Surveying the Australian Literary Landscape."

Creative nonfiction has been defined variously as a genre, a movement, a manifesto and a marketing label.¹⁶ It is a term often used interchangeably with ‘literary nonfiction’, and also, as Australian journalist Malcolm Knox points out, “the popular synonyms... ‘narrative non-fiction’, ‘literary journalism’ and ‘New Journalism’” (n.p.). The label signals the ways in which an author writes a print narrative about a verifiably “true story” whilst also self-consciously using techniques normally associated with literary fiction, such as dialogue, figurative language and an attention to narrative voice. This labelling, therefore, functions to distinguish some types of non-fiction (those considered literary) from other types of non-fiction (those considered non-literary). This distinction – as life writing scholars have shown, and as I will discuss below – is simplistic, but it is nevertheless used in the literary marketplace to help sell non-fiction books. While some commentators, such as the so-called “godfather” of creative nonfiction, Lee Gutkind, suggest that the label refers to a genre, and that it is a new way of writing, this in fact is not the case. As Margot Singer and Nicole Walker point out,

the art of what we now call ‘creative nonfiction’ stretches back to the confessions of St Augustine, the letters of Lucius Seneca, the aphorisms of Francis Bacon, the meditations of Samuel Johnson and Michel de Montaigne. Its antecedents include Plutarch’s consolations, Kenko’s ‘Essays in Idleness,’ Jorge Luis Borges’ lectures, Virginia Woolf’s reveries, the ‘nonfiction novels’ of Truman Capote and Norman Mailer, the ‘new journalism’ of Joan Didion, Tom Wolfe, and Gay Talese (2).

¹⁶ Sue Joseph, in her essay “Australian Creative Non-Fiction: Perspectives and Opinions” calls it a genre, as do Margot Singer and Nicole Walker in their 2013 book on the topic. Lee Gutkind calls it a movement and a genre. (*You Can’t Make This Stuff Up* 8). Gutkind’s books are prominently positioned as creative writing manifestos.

Indeed, canonical twentieth century non-fiction texts like Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and George Orwell's *Down and Out in Paris and London*, which take factual stories and consciously apply various literary techniques to present documentary truths, have frequently been contextualised as creative nonfiction.¹⁷

Despite the fact that creative nonfiction is not new, in the early twenty-first century it has become an increasingly legitimate and popular way of writing and marketing nonfiction books, with the term gaining traction in the marketplace, the academy and other institutions. Gilmore's observation – that categories such as “personal criticism: and ‘creative nonfiction’ indicate the appearance of the autobiographical “I” in places it was not previously” – testifies to this shift (“The Limits of Autobiography” 17). Further evidence emerges from the literary marketplace itself. Publishers actively seek out literary nonfiction, leading to what some consider to be a commercial boom across the global Anglosphere (Singer and Walker 2; Gutkind “You Can’t Make” 10; Nixon 30; Brien, Giggs). Books such as Anna Funder's *Stasiland* (2002), Kate Summerscale's *The Suspicions of Mr Whicher, or, The Murder at Roadhill House* (2008), Dave Eggers' *Zeitoun* (2009), Laura Hilderbrand's *Unbroken* (2010), Katherine Boo's *Behind the Beautiful Forevers: Life and Death in a Mumbai Undercity* (2012) and Duncan Barrett and Nuala Calvi's *The Sugar Girls: Tales of Hardship, Love and Happiness in Tate & Lyle's East End* (2012) are all bestsellers that have attracted the creative nonfiction tag over the past decade or so. In recent years, numerous academic journals, both those that treat literary criticism, and those that focus on creative writing practice have devoted space to special issues on creative

¹⁷ Criticism and scholarly work on what is now called creative nonfiction is not new, either. Some late twentieth century precursors of Gutkind's writing manual include: Tom Wolfe's *The New Journalism* (1973); Ronald Weber. *The Literature of Fact: Literary Nonfiction in American Writing* (1980); Chris Anderson (ed). *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy* (1989).

nonfiction.¹⁸ Many universities now offer tertiary-level creative writing courses where students may write a works of creative nonfiction as part of their degree, and a key set text on many United States university syllabi, *The Norton Anthology of American Literature* contains a section dedicated to creative nonfiction.¹⁹ Furthermore, many national literature funding bodies also recognise ‘literary nonfiction’ as a type of writing eligible for government funding and prizes.²⁰ The intuitional recognition of the term authorises and legitimises it and makes it worth considering in relation to life writing practice and representation.

For the purposes of this discussion, I do not consider creative nonfiction to be a genre. Rather, what Gutkind and others describe is at once both a marketing label as well as a methodology. For some authors “creative nonfiction” is a way of ensuring that their books are marked as “literary”, with the connotations of good storytelling that tag might bring. According to Christopher Buchwald the term

¹⁸ For example: *TEXT*. 1 (2000); *College English*, Special Issue: Creative Nonfiction 65. 3, (2003); *Women’s Studies: An Interdisciplinary Journal*. 33.6 (2004); More recently, scholarly work on creative or literary nonfiction has emerged from Southern African contexts. See, for example, Duncan Brown and Antjie Krog “Creative Non-Fiction: A Conversation.”; Hedley Twidle. “‘In a Country Where You Couldn’t Make This Shit Up’: Literary Non-Fiction in South Africa; Rob Nixon. “Non-Fiction Booms, North and South: A Transatlantic Perspective.” See also the journal founded by Gutkind, *Creative Nonfiction*.

¹⁹ See Nina Baym and Robert S. Levine. *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*. Academic and how-to books include Gutkind’s many texts, such as *You Can’t Make This Stuff Up: The Complete Guide to Writing Creative Nonfiction, from Memoir to Literary Journalism and Everything in Between*. Boston: Da Capo Press, 2012; Margot Singer and Nicole Walker. eds. *Bending Genre: Essays on Creative Nonfiction*; Carolyn Forché and Philip Gerard, eds. Eileen Pollack, ed. *Writing Creative Nonfiction; Creative Nonfiction: A Guide To Form, Content, and Style, With Readings*. CNF is taught at the Universities of Iowa and East Anglia as well as Columbia and Brown Universities to name just a few.

²⁰ For example, in the US, the National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowships program has two categories for the funding of prose literature projects: fiction and creative nonfiction (“Grants: Creative Writing Fellowships”). Until changes to their program in 2015, the Australian Government’s, federal arts funding body, the Australia Council, had ‘literary non-fiction’ as a type of literature that it would fund. “The Literature Board supports writing in fiction, literary non-fiction, children’s and young adult writing, poetry, creative writing for performance and digital and new media with a literary focus” (“Australia Council Arts Funding Guide 2013”). England’s nationally funded Arts Council generally only funds works of fiction and poetry, but suggests that it: “can consider activities with innovative, creative approaches to non-fiction work (e.g. where the work engages creatively with experimenting with genre or form), where the project demonstrates strong literary merit. This applies to memoir, travelogue and biography, for example.” While the label creative or literary nonfiction has not been explicitly mentioned, there is an implication that only imaginative or creative factual work will be considered (“Literature Information Sheet”).

carries the implication that “literary non-fiction writers are the good and accessible ones; normal non-fiction writers are the dry ones, the B-league” (16). This harkens back to the idea – now out-dated in life writing and historical studies – that nonfiction writing is simply data rather than a narrative shaped by the author. As the foundational work of Smith and Watson, Eakin and others has established, texts like memoir are not simply stories that have been recalled by the author, but are rhetorical acts (*Reading Autobiography, How Our Lives Become Stories*). Likewise in historical studies, poststructuralist and second-wave feminist scholars like Hayden White and Carolyn Steedman have drawn attention to the way history writing is actively shaped by the historian: the past is narrated rather than simply recovered (*Metahistory; Dust*). So, while recognising the term’s apparent efficacy as a commercial category, it is also important to highlight its constructed nature.

In addition to the term being a useful marketing tool, creative nonfiction can be viewed as a methodology: a way of approaching factual stories that provides greater scope for innovation and hybridity. From this perspective, creative nonfiction texts very much reflect the social conditions of the first decade of the twenty-first century. Malcolm Knox, for instance, suggests that creative nonfiction books, such as Anna Funder’s *Stasiland*, both look back to conventional nonfiction forms, but also look forward to rapid changes in media authorship and production brought about by new technologies. He suggests that *Stasiland*, published in 2002, “anticipated journalism’s immediate, off-the-leash future” (“*Stasiland*” n.p.). Further, Singer and Walker suggest that because creative nonfiction is “hybrid, innovative, and unconventional” that it “is the preeminent expression of the blurry reality of our times” (1).

For a biographer, then, creative nonfiction has a number of advantages. First, in terms of marketing, the creative nonfiction label can signal innovation and hybridism, promising readers a ‘true’ story in a highly readable and entertaining form. Creative nonfiction presumably appeals to writers who see themselves as artistic yet who wish to write fact-based work. Biographies, as Richard Holmes acerbically puts it, “are understood to write themselves, self-generated (like methane clouds) by their dead subjects” (“The Proper Study” 12). While a fiction writer, poet or, to a lesser extent, a memoirist tends to be considered as literary, the biographer, as a cultural figure, does not hold much prestige or artistic capital. Biographers are often thought to be either hard-working utilitarian researchers, or voyeuristic “burglars” or “fiends” who colonise other people’s lives (Malcolm, 9).²¹ Either way, neither of these conceptions suggests that a biographer is artistic or creative. As writer and critic Philip Furia highlights, in his experience, aspiring writers say: “‘I want to be a poet...a novelist...a playwright,’ may even say ‘I want to write a memoir’, but seldom, ‘I want to be a biographer’” (67). In line with Holmes’ observations, Furia speculates that perhaps this is because “biography seems to offer little chance for self-expression” (67). Therefore, a constructed category like creative nonfiction, which draws on discourses of both art and documentary, provides a way for a writer to create an identity as a “literary” documenter of “real life”. In a literary marketplace, where the author is currently an important aspect of the marketing of a text, the creative nonfiction label is obviously an advantage (Douglas “Blurbing” 806; D’Amore 24).

²¹ For a list of the many colourful phrases used to condemn biography and biographers see Holroyd. *Works on Paper*. 3 – 5

Secondly, in terms of methodology, creative nonfiction can provide more artistic freedom, whilst still drawing on the conventions of the genre that provide it with documentary authority. In a conventional biography, for instance, the biographer must adhere to a methodological contract that permits certain liberties but denies others. A traditional biographer does not use dialogue, unless it can be transcribed from a verifiable source, such as an oral history or other documentary recording. Further, in conventional biography, in order to give the impression of omniscience and objectivity, the narrative voice is traditionally third-person. The biographer is meant to be absent from the work: his or her role is that of a guide, or as Holroyd puts it, a “messenger” who simply relates the ‘facts’ gleaned during the research process (*Works on Paper* 19). As Rachel Morley has articulated, biography continues to be wedded to “traditions of Western philosophy that compartmentalise reason and emotion, with emotion viewed as an impediment to intelligent thought and, subsequently, truth” (80). As a result, the apparently impartial, invisible biographer is an important way that traditional biography has established trust in the reader, while the biographer’s own emotions “are seen as antithetical to the biographical enterprise” (80).

Creative nonfiction, on the other hand, provides the contemporary biographer with more scope. As Donna Lee Brien contends, creative nonfiction:

is particularly suited to a focus on the personal, on human values and ethical issues, on a sense of the self in action, and on material which deals with emotional content in a way that texts which aim to be totally objective may not be able to. Creative nonfiction is thus the perfect vehicle for the writer who wishes to reveal the impossibility of any immaculate objectivity when it comes to writing nonfiction, and instead wants/needs to revel in a subjective approach. In creative nonfiction subjectivity is not hidden, but is rather one of the foundations of the approach (n.p.)

Creative nonfiction, then, could be considered a type of writing that responds to the current social climate, where readers are aware of “the impossibility of immaculate objectivity” and where first-person narratives are valuable commodities. A biographer who uses a creative nonfiction methodology writes to meet the conditions of the current paradigm shift and is therefore writing what could be read as new biography. One text that exemplifies these phenomena in action is Rebecca Skloot’s 2010 book, *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*.

Recovering lives, post-memoir boom style: *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*

The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks focuses on a thirty-one-year-old African-American woman who died in 1951 in the then racially-segregated John Hopkins hospital in Baltimore from a particularly aggressive form of cervical cancer. Before her death, without her or her family’s knowledge, doctors took some of Lacks’ cells and were astonished to discover that her cells replicated rapidly, and for the first time in history, human cells could be grown and replicated outside the body. After her death, Henrietta’s ‘immortal’ cells were marketed and became vital tools of medical research. The cells—later named HeLa—have helped scientists to develop treatments for a range of common diseases and viruses. Yet despite the important role Lacks’ cells have played in medical history, she has been overlooked in official histories and, ironically, given her unwitting contribution to science, her descendants remain without access to adequate healthcare.

Skloot's book is an attempt to address this historical deficit. Framing *The Immortal Life* with an epigraph from Elie Wiesel's *The Nazi Doctors and the Nuremberg Code*, Skloot positions her narrative in the tradition of human rights testimonies and histories, implicitly equating the injustice done to Lacks with the medical experiments conducted by the Nazis. While this comparison may be misleading and problematic, it is nonetheless an astute move on Skloot's part. Tapping into this discourse of justice and rights, and, by extension, public anxieties about informed consent and ownership of biological materials, *The Immortal Life* has become phenomenally successful. An international bestseller, it has won a plethora of literary and cultural awards, including the prestigious 2010 Wellcome Trust Prize, and it has been critically acclaimed, appearing on over 60 "book of the year" lists.²² It has also been enthusiastically adopted in school and university classrooms, particularly in the United States, where it appears on required reading lists for courses from bioethics to history as well as on general reading lists. In fact, in 2012, 2013 and 2014 it was the most recommended "common reading" book by US colleges (Thorne et al "Beach Books 2012/13", "Beach Books 2013/2014"). The popularity and critical success of *The Immortal Life*, then, suggests how it is a paradigmatic text of the early twenty-first century.²³

Given that the book is a recovery project – designed to write Lacks into the public sphere – as a biographer Skloot faces considerable methodological and ethical issues. In terms of method, writing about a marginal subject, such as

²² Including *The New York Times*, *Salon*, *The Financial Times*, *Publishers Weekly*, *New Scientist*, *Slate* and National Public Radio. The entire list can be found at Skloot's website: <http://rebeccaskloot.com/the-immortal-life/press/reviews/>

²³ This point has also been made by Thomas Couser, who suggests that because Skloot's book focuses not just on the life of Lacks and her family, but also on the afterlife of Lacks' cells, that is a new type of posthuman biography. ("A Personal Post(human)Script" 191)

Lacks, raises practical issues. Traditional biography is usually constructed from public and private archival material like letters, diaries and birth certificates. However, when it comes to more obscure subjects, such items are often not available. As Caine highlights such individuals “have left very few documents behind and their lives are often put together using traces and fragments...it is often hard to follow their life course from birth to death, as may be seen in more traditional biographies” (*Biography and History* 111). Therefore, a resourceful approach is required from the biographer in order to overcome the gaps in the record. A creative nonfiction method is a logical solution because, unlike traditional biographies, it provides scope for a more hybrid narrative. Gaps in the plot can be covered by other auto/biographical stories, as we will see in a moment.

Secondly, as a cursory survey of biographical studies literature shows, all biographies raise ethical issues.²⁴ How does a writer represent the life of another without doing harm to that individual? How much should a biographer reveal about a subject? These are common dilemmas for the biographer, but when it comes to a recovery project, like *The Immortal Life*, where the power relationship between the privileged biographer the underprivileged and marginalised subject is even more distinct, the stakes are even higher. “The most invisible person in a biography” remarks Paula Backscheider “is the most powerful—the author” (3). In a post-ethical-turn era, where readers are arguably more aware of issues of power and representation, the biographer is expected to consider these issues and take appropriate action (Jacklin “Critical Injuries” 56; Mansfield *Australian Patriography* 9; Eakin *The Ethics of Life Writing*; Couser *Vulnerable Subjects*). A creative nonfiction approach offers a neat solution to this. In contrast to traditional

²⁴ See Ray Monk’s helpful overview, for instance, where he shows how ethical considerations have been a preoccupation for biographers from at least the eighteenth century. (Monk. “Life Without Theory”)

biography, where the biographer is expected to be invisible, a creative nonfiction biography encourages the autobiographical presence of the author. Not only does this authorial presence address a contemporary hunger for confessional discourse, it is also thought to be a more truthful way of writing biography. Lynn Bloom argues that because “in creative nonfiction the author’s point of view and process of exploring the subject are identifiable, up close, and personal—rather than buried in academic anonymity and jargon—this mode of writing is more honest and therefore more ethical than writing that purports to be balanced and objective but in fact is not” (286). In *The Immortal Life*, Skloot clearly follows this logic, and in doing so is seemingly able to address issues of epistemology and ethics. By inserting her personal biographical-quest story into the text Skloot neatly confronts the complex ethics involved in a recovery-project biography.

For example, Skloot frames her narrative with a prologue, an afterword and an acknowledgements section. While these epitexts are not out of the ordinary in traditional biography, in creative nonfiction biographies, like *The Immortal Life*, they take on a more personal tone. Thus, far from being the conventional objective biographer, Skloot declares her personal interest from the very first pages of the book. In the prologue, Skloot tells of how she first heard the story of Henrietta Lacks in a high school biology class. She explains how her biology teacher told the class that Lack had died in 1951 from a “vicious case of cervical cancer...but before she died, a surgeon took samples of her tumour and put them in a Petri dish” (4). The teacher explained that while “scientists had been trying to keep human cells alive in culture for decades” none survived (4). However, “Henrietta’s were different: they reproduced an entire generation every twenty-four hours, and they never stopped. They became the most immortal cells grown

in a laboratory” (4). Skloot explains that Lacks’ cells became vital to developing treatments for common diseases and viruses. When Skloot queries her high school teacher about the identity of the woman who provided the immortal cells, the teacher provides scant information, other than “she was a black woman” but that “no one knows anything about her” (5).

It was at that moment, Skloot tells the reader, that she became obsessed with discovering more about Lacks. Driven presumably by a sense of injustice and curiosity, Skloot describes how she would feverishly scan biology textbooks, her parents’ encyclopaedias and dictionaries, continuing her research online after the arrival of the internet. Skloot explains: “As I worked my way through graduate school studying writing, I became fixated on the idea of someday telling Henritetta’s story [...] I had the idea that I’d write a book that was a biography of both the cells and the woman they came from – someone’s daughter, wife and mother” (6 – 7). This prologue functions in important ways and reveals the distinction between more traditional approaches and a creative nonfiction methodology. A conventional biographer would rarely include such a personal story in the text, let alone confess an obsession with the subject. Yet Skloot’s story of enduring determination in the face of the Lacks’ obscurity and anonymity constructs the biographer as a dedicated and thoughtful researcher, intent on humanising a woman who had been so important to science, but who was missing from the historical record. Skloot’s personal quest narrative plays a crucial role in creating intimacy and building trust with the reader. Rather than alienate readers from the problems and pitfalls of biographical practice, from the very first pages of the book, Skloot includes and involves them in the dilemmas she faces as a Lacks’ biographer. In doing so, Skloot seems more honest and ethical.

In the prologue, Skloot also engages a confessional tone to indicate how the process of writing the biography was more complicated than she had initially anticipated, and how, during the writing of the book, she formed a particular kind of relationship with Henrietta's (now deceased) adult daughter, Deborah. Skloot says:

Deborah and I came from very different cultures: I grew up white and agnostic in the Pacific Northwest, my roots half New York Jew and half Midwestern Protestant; Deborah was a deeply religious black Christian from the South [...] She grew up in a black neighbourhood that was one of the poorest and most dangerous in the country; I grew up in a safe, middle-class neighbourhood in a predominantly white city.' Skloot says: 'I was a science journalist who referred to all things supernatural as "woo woo stuff"; Deborah believed Henrietta's spirit lived on in her cells, controlling the life of anyone who crossed its path (8).

During the biographical process, Skloot explains "We'd form a deep personal bond, and slowly, without realising it, I'd become a character in her story, and she in mine" (7). Again, for a biographer to talk of "a deep personal bond" with her subject is entirely unconventional and breaches the generic conventions of traditional biography. However, because she is writing in a creative nonfiction mode, Skloot's revelation here seems entirely natural and functions to reveal as Brien puts it "the impossibility of immaculate objectivity" and the problems involved in biographical practice. By admitting her personal bond with Deborah and her obsession with Henrietta's story, Skloot immediately acknowledges her own position and thereby sidesteps questions of power and ethics.

As cases such as the one involving Augusten Burroughs (author of *Running with Scissors* and other memoirs) and the Turcotte family have highlighted, the representations offered by a skilled life writer can be extremely powerful and highly influential rhetorical acts (Douglas *Contesting Childhood*

133).²⁵ In the case of *The Immortal Life*, these issues are magnified by the fact that Skloot is an educated, highly literate, white American woman writing about subjects who are poor and black with less access to education and healthcare. The creative nonfiction approach provides a way for Skloot to acknowledge this fact. When Skloot deliberately highlights the cultural and social differences between Deborah and herself she indicates an awareness of her position and her power as a literate and educated white woman. Skloot uses self-deprecation to give the impression of a collaborative rather than authoritarian or exploitative biographer: one who simply takes and profits from her subjects' life stories. Rather than mock Deborah's spiritual beliefs, Skloot mocks herself. In revealing that before the project began, she "was a science journalist who referred to all things supernatural as 'woo woo stuff'", Skloot not only acknowledges issues of power, but also undermines her own authority as an objective reporter of facts. This constructs Skloot as a very contemporary type of biographer: one who speaks to the cultural climate when citizen-eyewitnesses are more valued than experts. With her confessional and self-deprecating tone, Skloot is positioning herself as equal to the reader. *Trust me*, she is suggesting to the reader, *I'm just like you*.

This "ordinary" identity is further reinforced when Skloot speaks of herself in the past tense and indicates what she has learned from the process of writing the Lacks biography. As Julie Rak points out, biography has long been an instrument of education. In the Victorian era, for example, the genre was "a way for ordinary readers to learn about worthy lives and learn *from* them too" (Rak "Bio-Power" 26). For readers, then, one of the attractions of biography is the way

²⁵ As Douglas outlines, Augusten Burroughs' is a highly-skilled writer whose "outrageous" and "comic" memoir of his childhood living with his mother's psychiatrist's family was commercially successful but was legally contested by the family (132 – 133). While Burroughs eventually lost the court case, his bestselling memoir nonetheless remains in circulation, indicating the power of compellingly-written, popular life narrative.

it offers an opportunity to learn moral and historical lessons. Therefore, when Skloot suggests that she *was* a closed-minded science writer, but that the biographical project has enlightened her, she is aligning herself with the reader, who has presumably come to *The Immortal Life* to learn about the Lacks' story and broader histories of medicine, gender and race. Skloot suggests to the reader *I'm on a quest to find out more, just like you*. This is a sophisticated rhetorical performance and one that is made possible because of the parameters of the creative nonfiction methodology. Skloot comes across as a democratic, egalitarian biographer who is seen to do everything in her power to 'do no harm' to the Lacks family.

The self-deprecation and confessional tone continue throughout the book. For instance, after a number of failed attempts to contact and meet with some of Henrietta's adult children, Skloot drives to the Baltimore town where Lacks once lived. Skloot tells us that "when Henrietta lived there in the forties, the town was booming" but that "the end of World War Two brought cutbacks...Baltimore Gas and Electric demolished three hundred homes to make room for a new power plant, leaving more than 1,300 homeless, most of them black" (80). Skloot goes on to explain that as time went on "more and more land was zoned for industrial use" and the population went into rapid decline. When Skloot arrives in the 2000s, the population "was about one thousand and falling steadily, because there were few jobs" (80). While "in Henrietta's day Turner Station was a town where you never locked your doors" now Skloot is confronted with "a housing project surrounded by a 13,000-foot-long brick-and-cement security wall", a place where "drug dealers, gangs and violence was on the rise" (80).

With this description, Skloot not only asks the reader to consider the contrast between the highly-valued commodity of the HeLa cells and the economically impoverished town, but she also sets the scene for her own arrival as an outsider. A page later Skloot describes how she drove “in circles” through the town, looking for the grocery store, where she believed there was a memorial plaque to Henrietta. As she passes Henrietta’s old church and house Skloot describes how children wave at her, and she says

I waved back at everyone and feigned surprise each time a group of children following me appeared on various streets grinning, but I didn’t stop and ask for help. I was too nervous. The people of Turner Station just watched me smiling and shaking their heads like, *What’s that young white girl doing driving around in circles?* (81).

Here, Skloot borrows from a well-worn journalistic tradition, in the vein of Wolfe or Capote, of the writer-as-anthropological-outsider. She constructs her biographer-self as one who is apparently self-aware and careful, the “young white girl” who on the one hand is “too nervous” to intrude into unfamiliar territory, but on the other driven to finding out more about Henrietta Lacks. Moreover, this construction is in clear distinction to other biographers who have attempted to contact the Lacks family. Earlier in the book Skloot includes anecdotes to show how the Lacks family had previously been exploited by journalists keen to tell Henrietta’s story. When Skloot contacts Lacks family members, for instance, they initially reject her advances (64). Skloot documents these obstacles via the reconstruction of phone conversations and other devices and in doing so constructs herself as a more ethical and thoughtful biographer who demonstrates humility rather than impertinence. Again, this would not be possible in a conventional biography, but a creative nonfiction approach – that allows for the inclusion of a biographical quest narrative – provides a way for Skloot to elevate

herself, her methodology and, by extension, her biography of Lacks, above those who have come before, thus engendering a greater level of trust in readers.

The biographical quest narrative that Skloot establishes in her prologue is essential to the book's commercial success, and therefore the circulation of Lacks' story and the broader memorial project. As one Amazon.com reviewer writes,

This is without question the best non-fiction book I've read in years. Skloot's debut is thrilling, original and refuses to be shoehorned into anything as trivial as a genre. Equal parts popular science, historical biography and detective novel, it reads as evocatively as any work of fiction. Skloot repeatedly appears as a character in her own book [and] her narration reveals the trials that the Lacks family have undergone since Henrietta's cells went global, and the sheer amount of trust it took to uncover the details of this story. This is really a book about three heroines - the two whose names grace the cover and Henrietta's daughter, Deborah Lacks. Skloot's personal mission to tell this story and Deborah's quest to know about her mother's life and legacy are central parts of Henrietta's story and they form some of the book's most compelling segments (E Fong "Deserves Immortal Status").

For some readers, in writing herself into the book, Skloot is a "heroine" whose biographical recovery quest makes the book compelling and saleable. In fact, Skloot's autobiographical performance as ethical biographer is so valuable that it also extends to the book's reception and publicity campaigns. In interviews, Skloot comes across as astute, well-connected and well aware of celebrity authorship and the mechanics of the publishing industry. She famously spearheaded her own publicity campaign and says that she is now

being held up as the poster child for self-publicity. I organized my own book tour...I knew there would be a lot of academic interest in this book. It touches on law, bioethics, African American studies, sociology. I'm asking schools to cover my travel expenses and offer whatever honorarium they can, and then organize local events in those areas. I knew from day one I wanted my excerpt to be in Oprah [magazine]. I started angling toward that years ago. Social networking was huge. I developed a big community on Facebook and Twitter.

Books just can't go out and become a phenomenon on their own (qtd in Alter "Recounting an Untold Story")

At the same time, reviews tell of the ten years of "meticulous research" Skloot did on the project and how she worked with three publishers and four editors before finding the right "team" to publish with (Torregrosa). In interviews, Skloot talks about how "important" and "big" the Lacks story is and how she has set up a charitable foundation to help the Lacks family's education costs, because she "didn't want to be another person that came along and did nothing" (Alter). This paratextual material gives the impression of a shrewd, yet determined and responsible writer who is doing everything she can to be accountable and ethical. Again, borrowing from a journalistic tradition, which has its own very clear ethical code, Skloot's authorial identity is a mix of the biographer and the investigative journalist. Skloot aligns herself with the public good, bringing her readers the exclusive, inside story.

Therefore, with a creative nonfiction biography, not only is the biographer present in the text but he or she is also highly visible in the marketing process, suggesting how important the personal is to the production and circulation of biographical narratives in the early twenty-first century (Holden 926).²⁶ Although, as we will now see, these autobiographical performances are not self-evidently ethical. As much as they help to make power relations and processes visible, they can also complicate the practice and reception of biography and can attract significant criticism for the creative nonfiction biographer.

Described in reviews as an "intimate biography", *The Immortal Life* shows how the personal aspects of the creative nonfiction biography have a number of

²⁶ "Foregrounding the narrator" is "a technique that has a long history but that has become more common in recent years" in biographical texts. (Philip Holden. "Literary Biography" 918).

advantages for the twenty-first century biographer (“Kirkus Review”). The inclusion of an autobiographical narrative provides an immediacy that cannot exist in more conventional biographies. It provides a neat way for a biographer to address ethical and methodological issues, as well as satiate the literary market’s demands for the author’s “backstory.” At the same time though, and paradoxically, this approach can itself raise significant ethical issues.

For instance, returning to Skloot’s construction of herself as an egalitarian rather than authoritarian biographer, it is worth noting that when Skloot addresses the reader, she is not speaking to the uneducated biographical subjects of her book. Instead, when Skloot implicitly suggests that she is like the reader, she is addressing someone who is similar to herself: middle-class and educated. Consequently, this means that both the author and reader are aligned in a position of power in comparison to the biographical subjects: Lacks and her family. This construction of Skloot as an “ordinary” biographer could ironically be considered elite, thereby undermining the ethical approach that Skloot labours so hard to make visible.

Moreover, the application of techniques more commonly associated with literary fiction, such as dialogue, or imaginative reconstruction of particular moments in the subject’s life can lead to accusations of misrepresentation or distortion of verifiable events. For instance, one critic of *The Immortal Life*, Rebecca Kumar, takes issue with some of Skloot’s literary choices. Kumar cites one particularly intimate scene where Skloot writes of how Lacks takes a bath and discovers the tumour. The passage reads:

Henrietta went to the bathroom and found blood spotting her underwear when it wasn’t her time of the month. She filled her bathtub, lowered herself into the warm water, and spread her legs. With the door closed to her children, husband, and cousins,

Henrietta slid a finger inside herself and rubbed it across her cervix until she found what she somehow knew she'd find: a hard lump, deep inside, as though someone had lodged a marble just to the left of the opening of her womb (15).

Kumar asks a reasonable question about the veracity and ethics of narrating such a private moment. She asks: "If nobody was in the bathroom with Henrietta, or even knew that she was in there, how can Skloot know that Henrietta 'spread her legs' and 'slid a finger inside herself'?" ("An Open Letter" n.p.). Kumar thus criticises Skloot's assumed intimacy and argues that because she takes such liberty with reimagining and narrating such a personal moment, Skloot has "control" over Lacks' body in a way "not completely unlike the doctors' who took her cells" (n.p.). For Kumar, the creative nonfiction approach Skloot takes is far from ethical. Rather it is an added violation of Lacks' life and body by yet another privileged white person.

However, Skloot argues that this narrative approach is not a matter of getting "creative with the facts by changing them or making things up...In Creative Nonfiction...the facts of the story are as journalistically accurate and verifiable as any other type of journalism, they're just presented in a way that reads like a narrative story rather than a just-the-facts news story" ("FAQ" n.p.). Skloot insists that she relied only on the evidence she collected from "more than a thousand hours of interviews with family and friends of Henrietta Lacks' as well as written archival material" (*The Immortal Life* xi). In this sense, Skloot aligns herself with more traditional biographical practice, where, as Edel suggests, a biographer is free to use imagination, but must "not imagine the materials", and must stick to the documentary evidence (*Writing Lives* 33). While this may be the case, and Skloot may have been working from diary or interview material for this

particular scene, for some readers, the reconstruction of such intimate moments is extremely problematic.²⁷

Likewise, Skloot's use of dialogue attracts criticism too. Skloot makes extensive use of dialogue and writes many of the characters' voices in what she calls "native dialect" (xi). As Skloot explains in the opening section of the book, "I've done my best to capture the language with which each person spoke and wrote...dialogue appears in native dialects; passages from diaries and other personal writings appear as written" (xi). While this might seem more honest and authentic, Kumar contends that in fact it results in a "larger-than-life, exoticized depiction of poor religious blackness" and that "all of Skloot's black subjects are caricatures" (n.p.). So, the very licence that creative nonfiction might afford a biographer a way to acknowledge and perform ethics, can, paradoxically, become an impediment, whether or not he or she is simply treating the archival and oral evidence creatively. As biography raises certain expectations in the reader, based on its implicit claims of objectivity and distance, this criticism is perhaps not surprising. As a "new biographer", whose creative nonfiction biography pushes at the boundaries of traditional biographical practice and representation, Skloot understandably comes up against readers resistant to her attempts to present Lacks' story in an innovative way.

Not only does the Skloot's literary choices and intimate style attract criticism, her overt authorial presence also irritates bothers some readers, thereby revealing the limitations of the biographical genre. For instance, one reviewer on the popular social reading site, Goodreads, acerbically writes,

²⁷ In fact, Skloot's inclusion of such intimate moments has also attracted calls for the biography to be banned on the basis that it is "pornographic." (Silman. "Tennessee Mom Wants "Pornographic" Henrietta Lacks Book Banned")

You know what I think is funny? This book is called *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*. That makes it sound pretty straightforward, doesn't it? Henrietta Lacks's name is in the title. Henrietta Lacks's picture is on the front cover. And yet this book has seemingly very little to do with Henrietta Lacks. In fact, I'd argue that this book is rather about Rebecca Skloot. Yup, it's the story of Rebecca Skloot doing a story about Henrietta Lacks, only forgetting to actually give us the story...Although I find it highly improbable, should Ms. Skloot ever choose to solicit my advice, I think I'd keep it fairly simple: please extricate yourself from your next biographical non-fiction work (unless it is autobiographical) because frankly, my dear, we just don't give a damn (Jason "Review of *The Immortal Life*")

Jason's snide advice—that Skloot should “extricate” herself from her “next biographical non-fiction work (unless it is autobiographical) because frankly, my dear, we just don't give a damn” indicates that the autobiographical affordances of a creative nonfiction approach do indeed push at the limits of genre. Lacks' proper name and photograph on the front page of the book establishes a biographical contract with the reader; a contract that Skloot's presence as biographer challenges and strains, thereby unsettling conventional understandings of biography.

This criticism of Skloot's autobiographical narrative also reveals another aspect of how a creative nonfiction approach functions as new biography. During the 1970s and 1980s, as highlighted in the introduction, the term “new biography” was applied to feminist biographical practice that aimed to shift biography away from its roots as a masculine form of life writing towards one that was more gender-inclusive. In creative nonfiction biographies like *The Immortal Life* and, as we will see in a moment, Helen Garner's *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, the blurring of the auto and biographical aspects of the text can be viewed as a way of challenging the gender connotations of these discourses. For instance, Australian

writer, Rebecca Giggs argues that female creative nonfiction writers, such as Garner, and by extension, Skloot:

so often engage in pursuing an inner narrative alongside an outer one throughout their books (an inheritance of New Journalism and so-called 'creative nonfiction'). They accept that an exploration of the unknown may fail to produce a consistent narrative path – that unity of self is in fact a limitation. These are writers who show us their shifting, inconsistent selves, not out of narcissism, but because not to do so would be inauthentic. They incur upon the narrative; they let the narrative trespass upon them. They use lyric, the language of poetry, and swear and slang with equal grace... In short, these are writers who use nonfiction to burn down the barriers between masculine and feminine discourse, inner and outer worlds, form and content ("Imagining Women" n.p.).

According to Giggs, when writers like Garner and Skloot write biography using a creative nonfiction methodology, they are in effect writing a form of new biography. That is, they are not only addressing issues of ethics, but, in engaging the personal experience of the biographer, they are also unsettling received ideas about the gendered assumptions that various modes of life writing carry.

Traditionally, biography connotes the public, the significant and the authoritative, while autobiographical writing has often been associated with the private, the inconsequential and the self-absorbed (Rak "Are Memoirs Autobiography" 486 – 494; Smith "A Poetics of Women's Autobiography" 3 – 19; Caine 104). It is not surprising, then, given that the blurring of these genre boundaries is a political act, that female creative nonfiction biographers would find themselves attracting accusations of narcissism. Indeed, Skloot seems to anticipate that her approach will attract criticism because she begins her text with the following statement: "This is a work of nonfiction. No names have been changed, no characters invented, no events fabricated" (xi). The defensive tone of this opening gambit suggests that on some level Skloot is aware that transgressing the conventions of

biography will result in censure. In using herself as a literary device in a biography of another, Skloot makes old questions of ethics visible: to adopt and co-opt Smith and Watson's term, Skloot "rumples" the "bed" of life writing. In doing so, she reveals the complexities and risks of practicing new biography, something that the work of Helen Garner magnifies even more urgently, as will now be shown.

"This is the story of how I got to know him": The Confessional Biographer in Joe Cinque's Consolation

Another author who consistently takes a literary or nonfiction approach is Australian writer, Helen Garner. Garner is a prominent literary figure in Australia who began her career by predominantly writing fiction, but is now best known for her nonfiction. Over the past twenty years, as Suzanne Eggins suggests, Garner "has become arguably Australia's leading exponent of what is variously referred to as 'creative nonfiction', 'new journalism', 'literary journalism' or 'narrative journalism'" ("Interview With Helen Garner" n.p.). Indeed, a 2012 edition of *Creative Nonfiction* journal described Garner as a "veteran" of the methodology; the "Australian Joan Didion" (Kofman). Garner has built a reputation as a writer who can turn documentary material into a compelling literary product, as evidenced from reviews of her work. For instance, one quote, from a newspaper review and printed on the back cover of *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, reads: "What might have been reduced to a couple of paragraphs in a newspaper becomes, in Garner's hands, a truly gripping drama. She reminds us all over again of the tangled complexity of being human."

Garner's previous work includes short and book-length nonfiction regarding various Australian court cases. One of her earlier nonfiction pieces regarded the death of a toddler at the hands of his stepfather, while her first extended narrative regarded a sexual harassment case at the University of Melbourne. In other words, Garner's raw materials are the lives and experiences of others. As she admits, "I like poking my nose into other people's lives...It's a terrific privilege to be able to see into somebody else's life" (Eggins "Interview With Helen Garner" n.p.). Yet, while her work has been the subject of academic analysis with regards to legal and ethical questions, it has received scant attention from life narrative scholars. Given Garner's status as a high-profile and influential literary figure in Australia her work is worth considering as life writing, and as I suggest, as creative nonfiction biography. Her 2004 book, *Joe Cinque's Consolation* is particularly relevant to the question of how biography is changing in the early twenty-first century because of how Garner chooses to represent the lives of the people she writes of in the book, and also how Garner, in a similar way to Skloot, includes her own personal experience in the narrative.

Published in 2004, *Joe Cinque's Consolation* was a critical and commercial success in Australia. It was nominated for a number of state and federal literary prizes and it became a national bestseller. The story focuses on Joe Cinque, a young engineer who died of a prescription drug overdose after a dinner party in 1997. Cinque's girlfriend, university Law student, Anu Singh and her friend Madhavi Rao were later charged with and found guilty of Cinque's murder, and the book follows their legal trials. While Garner initially attempts to "listen to both sides" of the case and write a balanced and objective narrative, as the project progresses, Garner admits that her aim is to write the book as a memorial for

Cinque (79). She explains that Cinque was strangely absent from the record and that she felt compelled to write for him. After surveying the evidence, she says:

Whatever the reason, I sided with Joe Cinque. I searched for him in all the documents. But every place where he should have been was blank, without scent or colour: a point where nothing resonated. His direct speech is rarely recorded. He is forever upstaged by Anu Singh. As the transcripts' tapestry of versions unfolds, she kills him again and again. Attention always swings back to her: why she did it, what sort of person she is, what will become of her. She gets bigger, louder, brighter, while he keeps fading. He blurs. He sinks into the shadows and leaks away, until all that is left of him is his name, and the frozen, saintly lineaments of a victim. (178)

While the book can be read as a true crime narrative about a court case, it is most fundamentally, like Skloot's book, a biographical text aimed at writing an "ordinary" individual public life. Cinque's name is emblazoned on the front cover of the book, and Garner's impulse, as implied here, is to fix Cinque's memory in words – to create a literary memorial to him that will bring him out of "the shadows" and commemorate his life. Yet how to write about an individual who is elusive in the archives and is overshadowed by his murderer? How to write in a way that does his memory justice? The memorial impulse in biography more generally is a fundamental one, as will be demonstrated throughout this thesis, and so in this sense, Garner's drive to remember Joe Cinque is not new. However, what makes a book like *Joe Cinque's Consolation* interesting as an example of new biography is the way that Garner, in a similar way to Skloot, uses a creative nonfiction methodology to foreground the problems and pitfalls of biographical representation. By writing her own personal narrative into *Joe Cinque's Consolation*, Garner directly confronts issues of epistemology and ethics in a way she could not in more traditional biography.

In a similar way to Skloot in *The Immortal Life*, Garner, at the very start of her book directly addresses the reader using a personal voice: “The first time I saw Joe Cinque among his friends and family, the first time I ever heard his voice, was in the living room of his parents’ house in Newcastle, in the winter of 1999. By then, of course, he had already been dead for nearly two years. This is the story of how I got to know him” (3). With this brief opening, Garner establishes the biographical quest storyline and with herself as the protagonist. In traditional biographies, an author’s prologue or note at the beginning of the text is now fairly standard. The biographer will use the pronoun “I” to briefly explain issues of methodology or terminology or to thank individuals who may have helped during the research process. Once the biography proper begins, however, the biographer remains invisible, save for his or her third-person narration. This is where creative nonfiction biographies differ. Like Skloot in *The Immortal Life*, throughout *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* Garner appears as a major character, grappling with how to write the lives of others.

Garner positions herself as an eyewitness to the courtroom trials, and she invites the reader to follow her. Like Skloot, Garner’s narrative voice is not that of the authoritative, assured biographer, but rather it is confessional, intimate and self-deprecating, and as such the reader is positioned as equal to the author. Everything is viewed through Garner’s subjectivity: Like the reader, Garner “gets to know” Joe Cinque as the book progresses, and we see her struggle with how to tell the story. On the one hand Garner seems aware of her obligation to perform a “detached biographer/journalist” identity, but on the other she acknowledges this impossibility of this premise. Towards the beginning of the book, Garner performs the role of objective biographer. She explains to Joe Cinque’s mother,

Maria “I can’t promise to write the book you want, Mrs Cinque’, I said. ‘I’d have to listen to both sides. I would never want to do anything that made you suffer more – but I can’t promise not to – because whatever anyone writes will hurt you” (79). Her identity here is a knowing and in-control writer, who is aware of the consequences and difficulties of biographical practice. With her statement about listening to “both sides” Garner is acting in accordance with traditional biographical practice. The implication here – as with many conventional print biographies – is that Garner is simply a conduit for facts.

However, as the book goes on, this carefully constructed persona begins to fracture. Increasingly, Garner constructs her biographer-self as disorientated and emotionally overwhelmed. For instance, Garner describes observing court proceedings and while she tries to remain objective, she remarks that her notes become incoherent and unclear. She explains how, when she took a break, she overheard prosecutors talking about Singh’s sentencing and how “it was a wrong decision” (142). Garner then admits that “by lunchtime I no longer had a handle on the rightness or wrongness of anything” (142). For a biographer to confess that he or she is disorientated by the evidence is unusual, but, like Skloot, the idea in this instance is that the acknowledgement of the biographer’s fallibility somehow makes the work more honest and ethical.

Indeed, in an even more direct way than Skloot, Garner directly addresses issues of biographical ethics. For instance, she includes a conversation she has with a family friend of one of the accused women, Madhavi Rao. The friend cautions Garner against writing the book. He asks: “if your daughter was mixed up in a thing like this, would *you* want a book to be written about it?” (136). This question is subsequently used by Garner as a way to reveal her thoughts. She asks

“what further hurt might I inflict? What right did I have? [...] How could I unpick the ethics of it?” (136) then on the next page she writes:

While I washed and stripped a bunch of spinach, I tried to think with purpose. I had a stubborn attachment to the story. I did not want to put it down. I wondered if I could find a way to fictionalise the events, to disguise the characters and their ethnic groups, to break the whole mess of it down into a series of short –
But wait. Hang on a minute.
Joe Cinque was murdered (137).

The biographer Garner offers us here is one who is at once an ordinary individual, washing spinach in the domestic domain of her kitchen, but someone who is also a dedicated and thoughtful writer, grappling with how best to represent the lives of others, and indeed is halted in mid-thought by the responsibility she feels to her murdered subject. Thus, in a similar way to Skloot, Garner’s autobiographical narrative provides a way to acknowledge ethical dilemmas and perform ethical practice.

Like Skloot, and consistent with the creative nonfiction approach, Garner also overtly uses literary techniques to create her narrative and to write a biographical text that is non-traditional. For instance, she clearly shapes the lives of others into definable, and some argue, archetypal characters (Maher, McCulloch and Pickering 233). Joe Cinque’s girlfriend and accused murderer, Anu Singh is depicted as a manipulative and corrupting force. Early in the book, Garner reprints a letter Singh wrote whilst in custody. In part of the letter, Singh writes “I watched him die. Didn’t save him. Then I thought, fuck, I don’t want to die...What a mess I have made of a potentially perfect life...” (17). Garner uses the letter as the basis to construct Singh as a self-absorbed woman, reinforcing this depiction with her own moralistic commentary. “The letter got under my skin, with its panicky tone, its angry shallow clichés” wrote Garner, finally concluding

that Singh was “the figure of what a woman most fears in herself - the damaged infant, vain, frantic, destructive, out of control (18).” In this instance, Garner does not use the biographical evidence of the letter to write Singh as a complex character, but instead Garner frames the evidence and editorialises in order to support her own interpretation of the story. Garner seems less interested in the possible contradictions and complexity of individual behaviour and more interested in constructing a memorial for Joe Cinque. Later in the story Garner is even more direct in her condemnatory portrait of Singh: “Anu Singh with her ‘promiscuity’, her frantic need to be found attractive by men, her ‘using up’ of men and ‘throwing them away’ ...her lack of empathy for others, her self-absorption, her narcissism: I was hanging out for judgement to be pronounced on *such a woman*’ (66). With this construction of Singh, and the hyperbolic use of italics, Garner is far from the objective biographer. She is openly judgemental and implicitly asks the reader to respond equally negatively.

Accordingly, Joe Cinque and his family are depicted in stark contrast to Singh. Joe is hagiographically framed as a one-dimensional victim. As Garner continuously reminds us “Joe Cinque is dead” and all we know of him comes from mediations – video or photos – and from what others say about him. Based on this, Garner depict him as “an innocent” who had, as she puts it “fallen into a nest of very complicated evil” (152). In the final section of the book, Garner describes his face “agreeable” and “fine and sensitive” (328), while his teenage girlfriend Rebecca, says that “Joe had good morals...He was *so* anti-drugs. He came from a solid background. There was a strength about him. He was an adorable guy” (322). Moreover, the only photograph in the book is a head-and-shoulders portrait of Joe Cinque. The photo’s position – on the very final page of

the book – surrounded by white space, further helps to frame the biography as a hagiographic memorial to Joe. Ultimately, for Garner, Joe is an overwhelmingly positive character whose only flaw was to innocently trust Singh.

Joe's mother, Maria Cinque, is also depicted as overwhelmingly good: strong, passionate, resilient and dignified. On page 131 for example, Garner says of Maria Cinque: "...such power dwelt in her that others shrivelled in her presence, became wispy, insubstantial. She never grandstanded or behaved falsely; yet as their suffering and outrage intensified, there rose from the depths of her a tremendous, unassailable archetype: the mother" (131). The character of Singh, then, is set in opposition to Joe and Maria Cinque, and this lends the narrative drama and tension. While all biographers impose narrative structure on their subject's life, foregrounding some aspects of his or her personality while downplaying others, Garner takes this interpretive act to its limit. Not only does she position these real lives as if she were writing a piece of fiction – for instance constructing clear protagonists and antagonists – she also directly comments on them. Thus, a creative nonfiction methodology assists Garner to write a biography that may read more like literary fiction than a conventional biography. In doing so, Garner expands the market for her book, ensuring that it potentially appeals to a broader readership than a traditional biography might. The overt employment of literary devices, combined with Garner's confessional biographer persona takes biographical representation to its very limit, and unsettles genre expectations. Consequently, like Skloot's text, *Joe Cinque's Consolation* has been the target of significant criticism.

Law academics, Jane Maree Maher, Jude McCulloch and Sharon Pickering argue that Gamer's book reduces a complex legal case to a "type of 'morality play'

which casts the evil and powerful offender of Singh against the good, weak victim” of Joe Cinque (233). They contend that Singh is positioned as “a powerful and dangerous woman by virtue of her sexual charisma” (233). To heighten the characterisation of Singh as evil archetype, they suggest, Garner contrasts Singh with women such as “honourable Tanya Z” (a witness to the murder), and Singh’s co-accused friend, Madhavi Rao, who are “shown as passive and submissive, at different times, to Singh’s will and often to the will of others around them” (236). In addition, they point out that evidence that contradicts a construction of Joe Cinque as wholly innocent and good, “such as the suggestion that he may have been physically violent in his relationship with Singh, is treated as highly suspect or, alternatively, as an understandable response to Singh’s overwhelmingly manipulative nature” (234). Effectively, then, for these critics, Garner has transgressed her role as biographer by openly manipulating the evidence to impose structure of the life of Joe Cinque and those around him. Maher, McCulloch and Pickering’s contentions may be fair, but they also reveal a dominant view of biography as a mere transposition of facts, rather than an interpretive act. All biographies are narratively shaped, it is just that, in writing new biography, Garner overtly constructs the story and makes no effort to pretend that she is an objective observer. In other words, what Maher, McCulloch and Pickering appear to be responding to here is an apparent breach of a biographical contract that new biography renegotiates and challenges.

They are not the only ones to react in this manner. Suzanne Eggins, for instance, is also wary of Garner’s creative nonfiction approach:

Narrativising real stories allows Garner to weave complex, even convoluted material, into an absorbing, moving, multi-vocal text. But the risk of using fictional strategies is that one will interpret real life in the simplifying archetypes of fiction. Garner does not always

avoid the temptation to interpret people as character-types, essentializing and homogenizing real differences (“Real Stories” 130).

The implications of these arguments, then, is that the literary technique of taking ‘real’ lives and shaping them into dramatised characters transgresses the laws of the biographical genre and renders Garner’s work ethically suspect. Given that Garner appears to take a creative nonfiction approach in order to confront issues of ethics, this is ironic. In her aim to memorialise and “write a lament to Joe Cinque”, Garner paradoxically undermines the project by using overt literary strategies and a personal voice, thereby transgressing biography’s limits. At one point in the book, Garner is warned about the way ‘villains’ are often more memorable than victims: “The person who’s murdered stays the same, or even gets better – becomes a martyr. But the person who’s killed someone goes on and on being speculated about” (137). In so compellingly constructing Singh and Cinque as binaristic archetypes of “good” and “evil”, Garner undermines her memorial project, with Singh ultimately emerging as a much more memorable ‘character’ than the book’s eponymous subject.

Conclusion

Just before the turn of the century, Stanley Fish penned an article for the *New York Times*, where he polemically criticised biography. “Biographers”, declared Fish, “can only be inauthentic, can only get it wrong, can only lie, can only substitute their own story for the story of their announced subject. (Biographers are all autobiographers, although the pretensions of their enterprise won’t allow them to admit it or even see it)” (“Just Published” n.p.). With this damning

statement, Fish highlighted a key criticism of biography: that while biographers might aim to be objective and keep their subject at a distance, in fact all biographers choose subjects whom they are fascinated by. Although a biography may give the impression of raw facts, in reality the biographer always imposes his or her own structure onto the life and arranges events and evidence to tell the life from a particular angle. As this chapter has demonstrated, a creative nonfiction methodology provides a way for a biographer to acknowledge this and put themselves into the work. While this approach clearly has a number of advantages, it also raises numerous other complications.

Both books discussed in this chapter are very different in terms of context and subject matter, but they both suggest how the hybridity afforded and implied by a creative nonfiction approach and label can help authors write biographical texts that will be commercially successful at a time when readers are accustomed to first person voices and are attentive to issues of ethics and appropriation. At a time when the confessional is valuable, and traditional structures of authorship and authority are eroding, creative nonfiction emerges as a type of new biography in print. The introduction of the personal, questing biographer's voice tests the limits of biography. It disrupts reader expectations that the biographer will be invisible, but also, in using personal experience, books like *The Immortal Life* and *Joe Cinque's Consolation* unsettle received ideas about the gendered aspects of biography.

Moreover, the creative nonfiction approach not only "meets the market" for first person immediacy, but it also provides a way to metaphorically re-view and confront more established questions of biographical ethics. As G. Thomas Couser suggests, when it comes to life writing ethics, there are no universal rules

(*Vulnerable Subjects* 33). Life writing should be thought of as being on a continuum, with solo autobiography at one end, and traditional biography at the other (*Vulnerable Subjects* 34-35). Different issues arise, argues Couser, depending where on the continuum a particular book is, and each case should be assessed on its merit and in context. Creative nonfiction biographies, that blend auto and biographical discourse, and occupy indeterminate middle ground, provide a potentially valuable way to confront the ethics of biography. In making visible their processes as biographers both Skloot and Garner attempt to highlight the complex power relations involved in telling the life story of another.

Yet at the same time, and paradoxically and ironically, this ethics of visibility afforded by creative nonfiction does not absolve either Skloot or Garner from accusations of appropriation and misuse. In fact, in constructing themselves as questing biographers who are attentive to ethical practice, both Skloot and Garner manage to come under greater scrutiny for making their dilemmas and the biographical process so visible. This issue is compounded when combined with a more overt use of literary technique, such as the employment of dialogue and character. As Craig Howes has noted, “Reporters, biographers, and researchers who work with human subjects are fond of representing themselves as scholar adventurers, literary detectives, or even big-game hunters” (“Asking Permission” 104). Yet this self-characterisation, says Howes, has been criticised as being far from ethical. In fact, his colonial-hunting imagery of the big game hunter is apt here, as this approach could be considered “inherently exploitative, even imperialist” (“Asking Permission” 104). Thus, the personal approach taken by both Skloot and Garner may be very much of this age, and may show how these books are examples of new biography, but it also suggests the ways in which

ethics is an enduring dilemma for biographers and biographical studies, especially in an era attentive to “vulnerable subjects” and human rights discourse (Couser, *Vulnerable Subjects* 17). Perhaps, had Skloot or Garner chosen more powerful, less marginal subjects, they may have attracted less condemnation. However, in writing about “ordinary” subjects – Lacks, Cinque and their families – these authors may feed a contemporary desire for recovery narratives, but they simultaneously raise the ethical stakes.

The next chapter moves to consider another way that contemporary biographical practice and representation is made visible via form. In light of the “visual turn” of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and more recently the dominance of screen cultures, the next part of the discussion moves from a print example of new biography to the more visual multimodal form of the comic. We will see how, in slightly different ways, comics biographies make visible the mechanisms of biographical practice, interrogating a number of assumptions and limitations of the genre.

Chapter Two: ‘Breaking the frame’?: Contemporary Graphic

Biographies as New Biography

In the 2008 revision of his seminal *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, prominent comics theorist, Will Eisner declared, “Reading in a purely textual sense was mugged on its way to the twenty-first century by the electronic and digital media” (xvi). In this new landscape, contends Eisner, printed text has “lost its monopoly” as screen-based texts have become more and more prevalent (xvi). Therefore, print, whilst remaining a “viable and necessary medium...responds to the challenge of electronic media by merger” and “a partnership of words with imagery” in the form of comics “becomes the logical permutation” (xvii). Eisner provides no concrete evidence for his pronouncements but as suggested in the previous chapter, there is little doubt that electronic and digital media are having an impact on which kinds of stories are produced and valued in the early twenty-first century. When it comes to biography, as the previous chapter suggested, electronic and digital media can encourage the immediacy and intimacy of first-person narrative and this, by extension, has influenced how some biographers use the print form to write the lives of others.

In this chapter I move from print to explore how biography in comics form – also referred to as graphic biography – can be considered a type of life narrative that reflects the ways in which screen cultures are influencing biographical practice and representation now. While comics texts are “a medium in their own right” and have “their own grammar, syntax and punctuation” they nonetheless – as the placement of this thesis chapter, and Eisner’s speculative assertion suggests – sit between the dominance of print and the (re) ascendance of the visual image

that is being driven at least in part by the prevalence of screen cultures (Sabin, *Adult Comics* 9). Indeed, over the past twenty years – particularly since the publication of Art Spiegelman’s ground-breaking and critically acclaimed auto/biographical text, *Maus* – comics and graphic narratives have become increasingly prevalent and sophisticated in terms of both form and content. As Eisner suggests, the comics form has developed over the past sixty years from “pre-published newspaper strips” to “complete original stories” to, in the 1980s and 90s, “graphic novels” (xv). Where once comics were associated with lowbrow culture and juvenilia, Eisner notes that the late twentieth century marked a “maturation of the medium” (xv). Comics began to include “literary content...The graphic novel that addressed ‘adult’ subjects proliferated. The average age of readers rose” (xvii). Following this evolution of the form, over the past decade, as Jared Gardner contends, graphic narratives have become “increasingly visible in mainstream bookstores, in college classrooms, and on the ‘year’s best’ lists” (Gardner, “Graphic Novel”). Furthermore, as Ariela Freedman outlines in her useful 2011 review of the field, comics are now considered as important cultural artefacts, featuring in museum and gallery exhibitions, inspiring in-depth reviews in the columns of mainstream newspapers, and attracting coveted and prestigious literary awards (“Comics, Graphic Novels”). In short, comics have, in the past twenty years “evolved from a renegade facet of pop culture to a revolutionary art form” that now attracts more cultural authority and academic attention (McDonald n.p.).

Consequently, there is a dynamic and ever-growing body of scholarship on comics and graphic narratives. Adding to seminal, late twentieth century works by Joseph Witek, Roger Sabin, Scott McCloud and Will Eisner, in recent years new

peer-reviewed journals dedicated to comics scholarship have been established and a dynamic variety of books and edited collections have been published.²⁸ Much of this work is on graphic novels, but over the past ten years or so, auto/biography studies scholars have also become increasingly interested in the comics form. From the 2006 *Biography* special issue, edited by Gillian Whitlock and Anna Poletti, to the book-length studies by Hilary Chute and Elisabeth El Refaie and edited essay collections, such as 2011's *Graphic Subjects* (Chaney) and 2013's *Drawing From Life* (Tolmie), there is now a wave of critical mass of work on comics life narrative.²⁹ This academic focus has coincided with, as Jared Gardner puts it, a "steady progression of autobiographical memoirs" published in comics form over the past fifteen years. Gardner suggests that while the early 1970s was "a watershed moment for autobiographical comics" as the artists of the North American comix movement used the form for self-expression, exploring previously forbidden or censored topics, "the first decade of the twenty-first century is another momentous moment in the life story of this peculiar form" ("Autography's Biography" 1). Thanks to the critical attention that graphic memoirs have received, texts like Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home* (2006), Marjane Satrapi's *Persepolis* (2003), and Lynda Barry's *One Hundred Demons* (2002) could now be considered as canonical graphic life narratives.

²⁸ One of the key overview texts of the past decade includes *A Comics Studies Reader*, edited by Jeet Heer and Kent Worcester. There are currently eight English-language academic comics journals, including *ImageText: Interdisciplinary Comics Studies* (an open source academic journal, based at the University of Florida and established in 2004), *Studies in Comics* (established 2010 and published by Intellect), *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* (Taylor and Francis, 2010), and *The Comics Grid: Journal of Comics Scholarship* (established in 2015, and published by the London-based open access academic publisher, Ubiquity Press.)

²⁹ See also Sarah Lightman (ed.). *Graphic Details*, and the book chapters "Autobiography as Authenticity". *Unpopular Culture*. Ed. Bart Beaty; "Irony and Self-reflexivity in Autobiographical Comics" *Alternative Comics*. Ed. Charles Hatfield; The second edition of Smith and Watson's *Reading Autobiography* devotes a section to graphic memoir, "Visual-Verbal-Virtual Contexts."

However, this fervent academic interest in graphic life narrative has been restricted to first-person stories: graphic memoirs and autobiographies, on which the bulk of the existing scholarship focuses. Graphic biographies – narratives that focus on the life of an individual other than the author/artist – have been almost entirely overlooked by life narrative scholars. Apart from Candida Rifkind’s insightful work that is just emerging now, what little scholarship does exist tends to consider graphic biographies as a type of historical narrative, rather than as a type of life narrative.³⁰ This is despite that fact that, in parallel with the early twenty-first century boom in *autobiographical* comics, graphic biographies are an increasingly ubiquitous way of representing lives.³¹ For example, a brief survey of online bookseller Bookdepository.com shows that between 2002 and 2014, a

Figure 1 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 1: A Selection of Contemporary Graphic Biographies

³⁰ For example, almost all of the books featured in the non-fiction chapter of D. Aviva Rothschild’s *Graphic Novels: A Bibliographic Guide to Book-Length Comics* are autobiographical or journalistic works. Very few are biographical. The graphic biography that has attracted most attention is Chester Brown’s *Louis Riel*. Scholars have considered its interventions into Canadian historiography. See for instance, Lesk. “Redrawing nationalism”. Other work on graphic biography includes: James Scorer. “Man, Myth and Sacrifice: Graphic Biographies of Ernesto ‘Che’ Guevara.” Candida Rifkind’s forthcoming monograph promises to be first full-length study of graphic biographies as life narrative. See also Rifkind’s 2015 paper on the graphic biographies of Robert Oppenheimer: Candida Rifkind. “The Seeing Eye of Scientific Graphic Biography.” *Biography: An Interdisciplinary Quarterly*. 38. 1 (Winter 2015): 1 -22.

³¹ This is not to suggest that biographical comics are an entirely new form of life narrative. In the North American tradition at least, lives in comics form have existed in since at least the 1940s. However, these earlier iterations – which focussed on prominent military figures, presidents, or Hollywood stars – were much shorter and less sophisticated than their contemporary equivalents, and were often produced for children, rather than adults. My assertions here are based on Cord Scott’s work, *Comics and Conflict*, but also on an analysis of the useful online archive of nonfiction comics, Comic Plus. <http://comicbookplus.com/?cbplus=nonfiction>

plethora of graphic biographies were published. Che Guevara, Nelson Mandela, Russian-American anarchist, Emma Goldman, and Nobel-prize winning Physicist, Richard Feynman are just a few of the subjects to receive biographical representation (see figure 1). Likewise, a search of the term “graphic biography” on WorldCat returns just over 119 hits, with the majority of texts produced between 1960 and 2014, and a spike in production between 2008 – 2011.³²

In this chapter I consider texts that have attracted the label graphic biography. I consider how such life narratives might be read as “new biography”

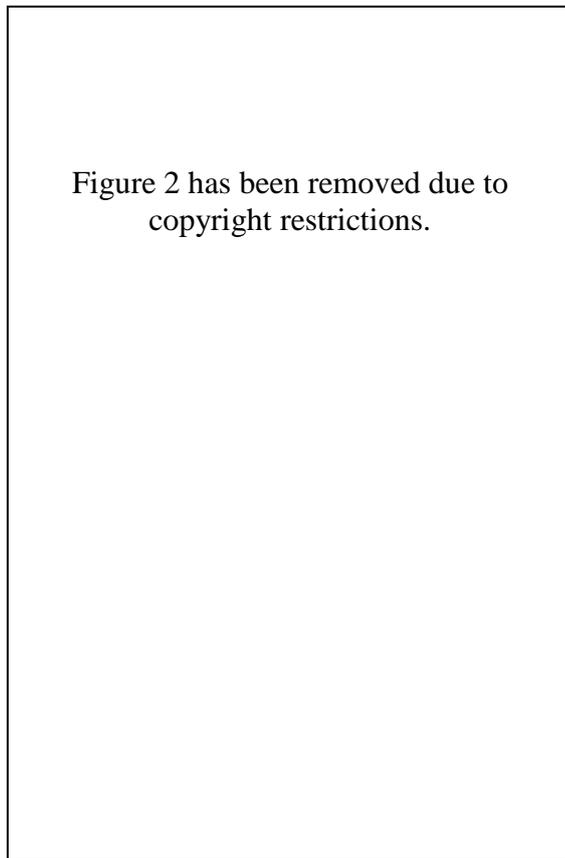


Figure 2: The Cover of *Anne Frank*

and in doing so I aim to theorise this overlooked, yet increasingly popular form. How do graphic biographies make visible biographical practice and representation, as well as the limits of the genre? How do form and content work together to reframe existing lives for particular purposes in the contemporary era? Published in 2010 by North American comics veterans Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón, whose

³² This database search was conducted in August 2014, and of course is just a sample. The search uses the term “graphic biography” – a relatively new label - and it also doesn’t account for texts that do not identify as biographical and that there is frequently a mixing of autobiographical texts into the ‘biographical’ label. Still, it provides some indication of the early twenty-first century interest in graphic narratives more generally as a way of narrating lives.

other works include the *New York Times* bestselling adaptation of a public document: *The 9/11 Report: A Graphic Adaptation*, *Anne Frank* is a prime example of how graphic biography is being used to reframe iconic individuals in the early twenty-first century. Commissioned by the Anne Frank House, Museum, Amsterdam, *Anne Frank* is marketed as “the first authorized graphic biography” of the World War II icon (Jacobson and Colón). The second example I consider is Lauren Redniss’ *Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie: A Tale of Love and Fallout* (2010). Described in one review as a “sumptuously illustrated visual

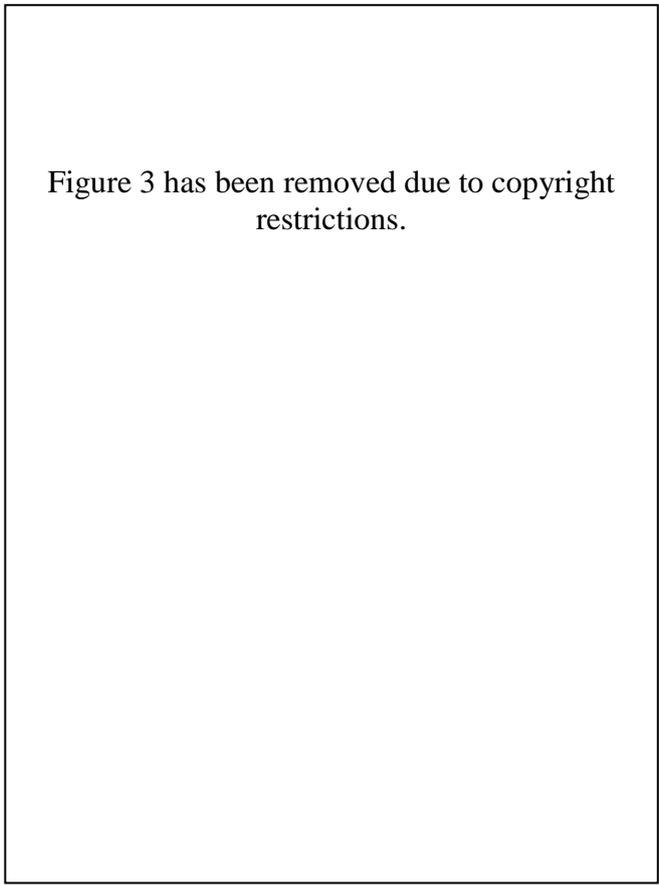


Figure 3: The Cover of *Radioactive*

biography” the book is a dual biography of Marie and Pierre Curie and has been nominated for a number of literary and trade awards (O’Grady). As I discuss in a moment, while *Anne Frank* uses a photorealist graphic style, *Radioactive* opts for abstraction, making it a rich case study in relation to the question of new biography, and the limits of the genre.

As there is currently little scholarship on graphic biographies, and so limited tools for reading these texts, I draw on and adapt existing criticism about graphic memoir and autobiography. The work of Hillary Chute and Gillian Whitlock

particularly underpins my discussion. In different ways, Chute and Whitlock are attentive to the social and political potential of the graphic form to raise awareness of new subjectivities and bring previously overlooked stories to the public sphere in a powerfully new way. In her work on women's graphic memoir, Chute argues that comics provides a way to "make a political intervention into mainstream representation" especially regarding narratives of trauma (*Graphic Women* 4). Comics are a way of making visible the production, ethics and politics of memoir, in terms of what can or cannot be said at any given time (*Graphic Women* 3). Moreover, Chute argues that comics are especially productive for women artists (*Graphic Women* 4). These ideas are especially provocative when considering comics as "new biography", both in terms of how the form can potentially prompt a re-vision of biography as a representational practice as well as the way in which comics have the potential to unsettle and challenge the limits and gendered aspects of biographical production.

For Whitlock, the visual-verbal nature of comics, and the form's unique "grammar" of frames and gutters can prompt readers into "affective engagements and recognition across cultures" (*Autographics* 978). Whitlock's notion of "autographics" to think about the limits and jurisdictions of autobiographical comics can also be applied to graphic biography as "biographics" to highlight the ways in which graphics biographies are being used to represent lives, the various social uses of biography in comics form and the tensions that are unique to this type of life narrative (*Autographics* 966).

Informed by these ideas, then, I argue that, on the one hand, graphic biographies tend to be relatively conventional. To varying degrees, in terms of narrative structure and rhetorical conventions *Anne Frank* and *Radioactive* read

like traditional biographies. Yet on the other hand I contend that the comics form provides a way for these texts to reconfigure the limits of biographical representation and practice. Like their autobiographical counterparts, graphic biographies literally illustrate how life narratives are constructed. The combination of the verbal and the visual planes in these texts highlight the gaps and problems in narrating a life; in particular how biography is authenticated and authorised. Furthermore, with reference to selected memory studies scholarship, I argue that graphic biographies amplify the social and cultural work of conventional biography because of the way these texts blur existing boundaries between high and low art, reaching audiences who may not read conventional print biographies. Graphic biographies, then, have a unique potential to reframe existing biographical icons in a way not possible in print biography.

Graphic Biography as a Lens for Historical Memory: Reframing Anne Frank

An example that clearly indicates the way graphic biographies both confirm and destabilise traditional understandings of the genre is Sid Jacobson and Ernie Colón's representation of Holocaust icon, Anne Frank. Published in 2010, this particular text is not the first comics biography of Anne Frank – approximately 15 other representations exist, some of which are sold in the Museum's shop.³³ However this text was commissioned – as the first “authorized” graphic biography – with the aim of carefully reframing and memorialising Frank's life for a new generation who may not be familiar with Holocaust histories. As Hans Westra, Director of the Anne Frank House Museum says: “it is the mission of the Museum

³³ When I visited the Museum in January 2012, there were seven different graphic biographies on sale in the gift shop alongside a number of print biographies and diary adaptations. For a full list of Anne Frank graphic biographies see Ribbens. “War Comics Beyond the Battlefield.”

to tell Anne Frank's life story to as many people as possible" and that the visual verbal nature of the graphics form offered a timely opportunity to reach a wider audience ("Authors Talk").

Given these aims, the choice of Jacobson and Colón as authors is significant. Firstly, Jacobson and Colón are two key figures in the field of North American comics, both having held key management positions at Marvel and DC Comics respectively. They have a long track record in producing best-selling and popular comics such as *Richie Rich*. Therefore, in commercial terms, these authors carry considerable cultural might. Secondly, in addition to their commercial influence, in recent years Jacobson and Colón have built a reputation for producing significant non-fiction comics work, most notably the 2006 graphic adaptation of the US government document, the 9/11 report, where Jacobson wrote the prose text, and Colón worked on the drawings. Not only do these authors hold considerable authority as experienced comics writers of traditional superhero and fictional comics, but their previous work on the 9/11 report marks them out as authors who can also produce bestselling non-fiction graphics. For a biography that aims to "tell Anne Frank's story to as many people as possible" these two aspects of Jacobson and Colón's authorial identity are important, and help make the biography both commercially appealing whilst reinforcing its status as a sober, nonfiction narrative.

In some ways, *Anne Frank* is a relatively conventional biography. Structurally, it is a straightforward chronological story. Comprising of ten chapters, the biography begins with the lives of Anne Frank's parents, Otto and Edith. The first page is a single frame of Otto and Edith at their wedding in 1925. The next few pages detail Otto and Edith's life before Anne's birth, including

Otto's World War One war service, and Anne's sister Margot's birth in 1926. From this beginning the book proceeds conventionally, from Anne's birth in 1929 through her childhood at school, and later her life in the annex, to her death in Bergen-Belsen in 1945. The final chapter focuses on the years after Anne's death and the publication of her diary. I will discuss this structure in more detail in a moment, but for now the point is that the traditional chronological narrative that Anne Frank presents initially seems to be more in line with convention than innovation.

Methodologically, the book also resembles a traditional biography. Jacobson and Colón perform as 'good' biographers and *Anne Frank* features the standard rhetorical devices expected of a conventional biography, such as footnotes, and a list of source material. Jacobson and Colón include actual photographs and documents and a list of authoritative sources for further reading. These devices signal the author's apparent objectivist methodologies, and testify to the verifiable nature of the narrative. In following the archives so closely, not only are the authors imbuing their text with authenticity and authority, they are mimicking the key methodological features of traditional print biography.³⁴ This conventional approach also appears to extend to the biography's visual style. Jacobson has suggested that the intensity of the subject matter of this project was unlike previous biographies he and Colón had worked on. Telling Anne Frank's life in such a visible way, states Colón (who was responsible for the drawn images), demanded a "straightforward approach" which ultimately led to a conservative visual style ("Drawn In").

³⁴ The publisher's stamp also reinforces the seriousness of the text. Hill & Wang is a publishing house with a reputation for publishing 'serious' works of history and politics. In recent years they have established an imprint, Novel Graphics, dedicated to the publication of high-quality non-fiction graphic books.

This is not surprising, given the subject matter he is dealing with, and the ethical dilemmas involved in biographical work. Representing yourself in narrative form is one thing, however representing another person comes with a weighty responsibility. When that representation goes from print form to comics form, the stakes are raised. As Charles Hatfield reminds us “comics...with their hybrid, verbal-visual nature pose an immediate and obvious challenge to the idea of ‘non-fiction’” (112). The visual-verbal power of comics to communicate in a direct way, coupled with the fact that comics have historically carried connotations of frivolity, appears to encourage many graphic biographers to stay on safe ground, and take fewer aesthetic and narrative risks. This is evident from *inside* the text of the Anne Frank biography, as well as *outside* the text. For example, in interviews, when Jacobson and Colón talk about constructing the biography, they speak about how they were anxious to ‘get it right’ to represent Frank’s life in what they considered to be an appropriate way. Furthermore, in this case, Jacobson and Colón are not only doing biographical work, but they are also representing the Holocaust: a highly-politicised subject that brings another layer of responsibility.

Nevertheless, this responsibility results in a graphic biography that on first glance seems relatively traditional. In terms of methodology, the book’s blurb and contextual material announces that Jacobson and Colón rely heavily on The Anne Frank House archives, including photos, letters, documents, oral histories and of course the eponymous diary in order to construct the biography. Not only does this methodology serve to authorise the graphic biography, by associating it so closely with the official archive, but it also impacts on the book’s overall appearance. As we will see in more detail later in this discussion, the graphic

biography's overarching visual style is a colourful, yet muted, cartoon photorealism. Jacobson and Colón take few aesthetic risks with the subject matter and stay relatively close to the photographic archive.

In addition, throughout the biography, frames are not erratically arranged on the page, but rather are ordered and neat, and at no point does the action break out of the frames, or bleed into the gutter. Some pages even feature “democratic” frames – panels all of the exactly the same size. These choices communicate a sense of unification and mastery of the unruliness of a real life. As Jerome de Groot notes, “the biographical form is something which fundamentally contains a life, attempts to explain, account for and map it out” (38). Comics takes this metaphor further and provides a way to literally “map out” a life via the structuring frameworks and grammar of panels and gutters. In the case of *Anne Frank*, this “mapping out” results in a neat, contained story.

All of these qualities – the chronological structure, the realist visual style and the neat and ordered arrangement of frames – suggest that *Anne Frank* is a traditional biography simply transposed to comics form. Indeed, Art Spiegelman, author of the ground-breaking *Maus*, has criticised comics such as *Anne Frank* for being too literal, earnest and sentimental in their depiction of lives and Holocaust histories. He suggests that comics such as Jacobson and Colón's are a kind of response to the messiness and complexity of *Maus*: that *Anne Frank* is an attempt to “smooth down” the “rough edges” of history and memory that *Maus* attempts to authentically depict (*MetaMaus* 127). Spiegelman may be correct in suggesting that a graphic biography like *Anne Frank* is ultimately a conservative representation, and as I will show later in this discussion, there are clear reasons for Jacobson and Colón's conformist choices. However, I also argue that a closer

reading of *Anne Frank* reveals the ways in which the graphic biography form can, as is claimed of nonfiction comics more generally, help readers to see individual lives and public histories in a new way (Whitlock “Autographics”, Chute “Comics Form and Narrating Lives”, Lander). In the case of Jacobson and Colón’s text, Anne Frank’s life is literally reframed in order to become a lens for broader public histories of the Nazi occupation of Western Europe and the Holocaust. Therefore, although *Anne Frank* initially appears relatively conventional, it is in fact a form of “new biography” whose style and structure makes the process and politics of biography visible.

One aspect of its newness lies in the very fact that it is a comic and is able to present a life in ways other forms cannot – a point I will return to later – but also in its provision for education. As Hans Westra’s earlier comments reveal, the driving force behind *Anne Frank* is a didactic one; an impulse that is also an enduring social function of biography more generally (Lee 16-17) Westra’s assumption that comics has the potential to do ‘new’ memory work – reaching and educating new readerships – is correct. Comics are often thought to be useful educational tools, with the ability to circulate in ways that other types of media cannot. Firstly, the drawn cartoon images of comics carry connotations of juvenilia and the fantastic and this aspect can make biography in comics form attractive to readers who may not normally read such texts in prose (Yang 187).³⁵ This is thought to be particularly the case for younger readers who may be resistant to traditional forms – comics can offer an alternative that seems more entertaining (Schwarz, Novak).

³⁵ Yang offers the following reasons why graphic texts are a useful pedagogical tool: “Graphic novels are visual and our students love visual media. After all, they’re immersed in it” (187). The “rate of information transfer is firmly” in control of the reader (188). Comics are like giving a student a “remote control” to read at his or her pace. (189). See also similar discussions in the collection: Stephen E. Tabachnick’s collection, *Teaching the Graphic Novel*.

Secondly, the drawn images of comics work in an interestingly paradoxical way in that they both distance the reader from the narrative on the page, but also create intimacy. As Hillary Chute argues, “comics shapes stories into a series of framed moments, and this manifest contouring creates a striking aesthetic distance. Yet this distance is counterbalanced by the act of reading and looking at a text that is entirely handwritten, which creates an intriguing aesthetic intimacy” (Chute *Graphic Women* 6). Therefore, as Chute and others have suggested, comics has the potential to represent lives and histories that might otherwise be difficult to discuss and show (*Graphic Women* 4, Watson “Autographic Disclosures” 124). This is significant when it comes to Jacobson and Colón’s text, which represents a life ended prematurely by the Holocaust. The drawn images of *Anne Frank* render the trauma of the biographical narrative more accessible, and arguably less confronting, than a documentary mode like photographs would. Particularly when it comes to the lives of subjects who experienced violence and suffering, a biography in comics form really can offer readers alternative access to that life, and by extension, the historical context in which that life was lived.

This logic is clearly the impulse behind Jacobson and Colón’s biography, which promises to tell “the full story of Anne Frank in a clear and accessible way” and is consistently positioned as educational in paratextual material, such as publicity material and reviews (Anne Frank House Online Store). For instance, the publisher, Hill and Wang, provides teacher’s notes in which it is suggested that while Anne Frank is a well-known global icon, many readers are confronted by the immediacy and intimacy of Frank’s eponymous diary. The guide suggests that “successfully teaching the diary to today’s students, however—leading them

into Anne Frank's world and then getting them to regard it in full—can be difficult" (Pitock 1). On the other hand, the guide contends that with biography in graphic form, "the significance of Anne Frank's life will register and resonate with more readers" (Pitock 2). Rendering Frank's life in comics form, then, is thought to provide readers with unique way to access Frank's experience. The "book is therefore an ideal companion for contemporary students exploring Anne's life and times, her legacy and history" (Pitock 2).

The textual material around the Anne Frank biography positions the ideal reader as a student of not only Frank's life but also the historical context in which she lived and her continuing legacy. From its very outset, the book works to hail this implied reader. On the front cover, a redrawn photograph of Anne Frank, sitting at her desk, pen in hand, gazes out (see figure 2). Anne appears to be disrupted from writing her famous diary: her head is turned away from her work and outwards towards the reader. Her gaze is not looking upwards from the desk, but directly at the level of the desk, suggesting that the person she is greeting is approximately her height. This choice is significant: it establishes the implied reader as Anne's equal, and reveals at whom this biography is aimed. *Anne Frank* is published by Hill and Wang – a company with a reputation for high-quality non-fiction work for adult readers, including Elie Wiesel's *Night* and Roland Barthes' *Camera Lucida*. So, although the publisher's stamp suggests that the book is for an adult readership, the front cover indicates that it is aimed at representing Frank's life to younger readers.

As well as addressing a younger demographic, the biography is designed to travel beyond the Western European context of the Anne Frank House archives, and, in choosing Jacobson and Colón, the organisation clearly aimed to circulate

this story throughout North America. Indeed, the version of Anne’s life that is narrated in the graphic biography also suggests this. Some historians have noted the myriad ways in which Frank’s life has been represented. She has been “widely invoked” as a “figure for an array of paradigms: as an archetypal Jew, Holocaust victim, human rights champion, girl, adolescent writer, diarist, or feminist voice.” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Shandler 17). However, in Jacobson and Colón’s interpretation, Frank is constructed initially as a lovable child, then later as a stereotypical teenager. Representing Frank’s life in these terms builds a universal figure that can appeal to a broad readership across the English-speaking world. For instance, in one sequence, Anne is shown toddler-aged, in a high-chair (figure 4). She throws food around until it covers her face and hands, the high-chair and the walls, as her mother Edith looks on laughing “Anne, you’re a mess—a delightful mess!” (16). Meanwhile the biographer’s voice tells us “As Anne grew

Figure 4 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 4: The hagiographical construction of a universal Anne Frank

older, her smiles and her charm became more evident” (16). In the next frame, which fills the top part of the adjoining page, Anne is shown with her father, Otto. The visual image dynamically depicts Otto as he swings toddler Anne over his

head and then brings her close to him and us, as viewers of the narrative. Otto says “Anne, when you smile or laugh or look at me like that it all becomes sunshine” (17). Again, to reinforce the visual biographical construction, the biographer’s voice, in prose, speaks over the top of the scene, telling the reader that “toddler Anne was gifted with a winning smile and lovely eyes” (17). The representation of Anne Frank in such a hagiographical way is not unique to comics – as a number of critics have highlighted, she has consistently been portrayed in this way over the years. David Wertheim observes that an aspect of “Anne Frank’s remembrance has been her sanctification...[and she] has sometimes literally been described as a saint” (157). However, in this instance, the comics form provides a unique medium through which to do this. In these two short scenes described here, the visual narrative, showing the smiling, charming Anne, works with two verbal lines of narrative – the speech of her doting parents, and the biographer’s commentary – to persuade the reader that Anne was a child who could do no wrong. These three layers of narration, then, in a way that is unavailable in other media, function to re-sanctify Anne and establish her early in the biography as an exemplary individual.

That Anne Frank would be represented in this way is not surprising. Her diary is often the first contact readers have with the Holocaust, and her life is, as one critic has observed, a symbol of “universalized optimism” (Sion 184). In short, Frank “serves as a metonym, the ‘face’ of a mass phenomenon.” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Shandler 15). While Kirshenblatt-Gimblett and Shandler are referring to Anne’s ‘face’ metaphorically here, the comics form provides an opportunity for this metonymic function to play out in a visual, and therefore literal, sense. The reader not only reads about how wonderful Anne was,

but *sees* it as well, and these two modes – the visual and the verbal – work together to construct a unique cross-discursive hagiographical portrait.

Once the graphic biography has established Anne as a likable child, it moves on to represent her as a stereotypical teenager. This part of Anne's biographical construction, like the hagiographical aspect, is important and it assists the graphic biography to travel beyond a European context, across the global Anglosphere and particularly to North America. In her life before the Annex, 13-year-old Anne is shown, for instance, spending time and having fun with her friends, being told off by a teacher for talking too much in class, and dreaming of becoming an expert ice-skater (58-59). Later, when the family are forced to move to the Annex, Anne pastes postcard portraits of famous American film stars on her bedroom wall. In the frame which depicts this episode, Anne is shown in a sparse and austere furnished room, kneeling on the bed as she pins the cards to the wall. In contrast to the muted greens and beige of the room, the brightly-coloured celebrity portraits of "Norma Shearer, Ginger Rogers, Ray Milland and many other stars of the moment" as the biographer tells us, are conspicuous. These figures of Hollywood celebrity literally brighten the scene, and indeed Anne declares, via a speech bubble, "That's much more cheerful" (75). The fact that Anne is idolising these individuals, Hollywood film stars, who are symbolic of US culture, is significant. It links Frank's biography to the United States, and it also works to construct Anne as a universal girl who, presumably, like the implied young reader of the biography, is interested in contemporary global Anglophonic celebrity culture.

Figure 5 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 5: Anne as an apparently typical teenage girl

Anne's universal construction is also made visible in other ways. Despite the extraordinary circumstances in which Anne and her family find themselves, she behaves as a stereotypical teenager by repeatedly fighting with her mother (96) and fantasising about a boy she dated in her pre-Annex life (75). The latter episode is narrated via two noticeably different frames, which feature delicately

curved corners, evoking old printed paper photographs. This subtle choice marks this moment as significant, but also as a moment of memory blended with fantasy. In one of the very few flashback moments in the book, Anne remembers her boyfriend, Peter, whom she dated before her family hid in the annex. The biographer tells us that Anne "reminisced about their walking hand in hand through their neighbourhood" as the drawn image shows Anne and Peter smartly and colourfully dressed strolling down an ordinary, pre Nazi-occupation street in Amsterdam (figure 5). In the next frame the biographer says that "she [Anne] imagined them together in the annex" and that "she felt she loved him with all her heart" (100). At the same time, the image in the frame is – in contrast to the mundane day-to-day life in the annex – dramatic and angst-ridden. The colour

scheme departs from the biography's usual muted tones and features saturated colours, including a bright pink background, against which Anne and Peter feature in close up, heads together, with anguished looks on their faces. Resembling a 1960s Roy Lichtenstein pop-art print, with its exaggerated, melodramatic cartoonesque vignettes of American characters, this frame is clearly designed to show Anne as a "typical", heteronormative teenage girl whose memories and fantasies are informed by US popular culture. Also, while Jacobson and Colón presumably work from Anne's diary in order to represent her apparent inner life, the very construction of "teenage" girl here is based on a mid to late twentieth century North American concept, one that the authors use to interpret Anne's life. Thus, these authorial and stylistic choices reinforce the idea that this graphic biography is designed to circulate across the global Anglosphere, and particularly in North America.³⁶

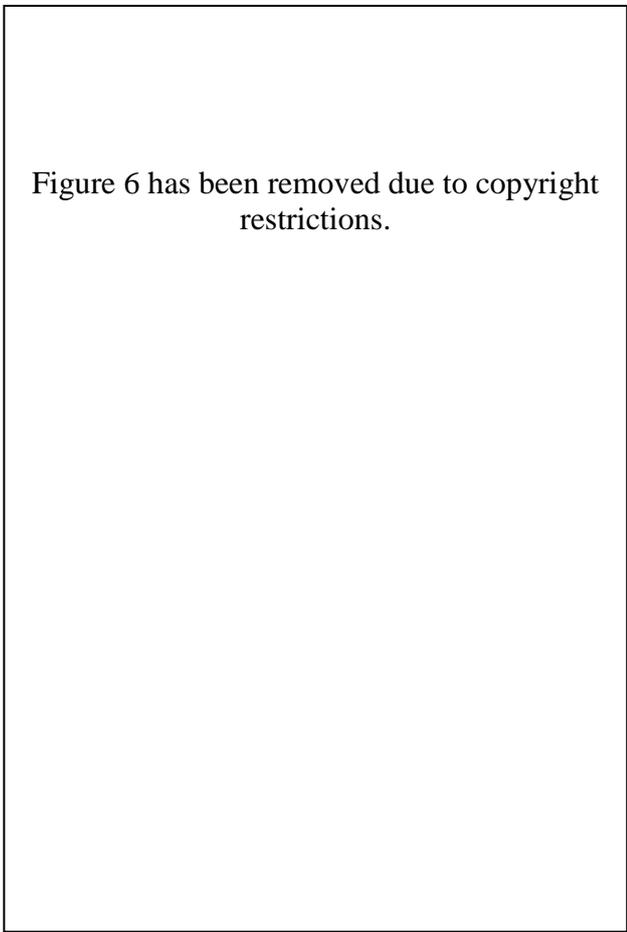
Furthermore, the comic amends particular historical details in subtle ways in order to render them intelligible to readers unfamiliar with Western European history. One frame, for instance, early in the biography, depicts Hitler at a microphone, speaking as the leader of "a small political party, the NSDAP" (11). European readers, or those familiar with twentieth century history will presumably know that the acronym NSDAP stands for *Nationalsozialistische Deutsche Arbeiterpartei* or, in English, the National Socialist German Workers' Party, which was later to become the Nazi Party. However, Jacobson, as the writer of the biography's prose, qualifies the acronym with a short phrase: the NSDAP is explained as the "(National Socialist Party)" (11). This act of cultural translation,

³⁶ Daniel Magilow and Lisa Silverman note how intimate or uncomfortable aspects of the original diary were edited out in order for it to travel widely and be acceptable for use as an educational tool, especially in the United States. This editing process, argue Magilow and Silverman, helped to construct a sanitised version of Frank that endures today ("The Diary of Anne Frank").

while admittedly small, further suggests how *Anne Frank* is designed to travel and educate readers beyond contemporary Western Europe. Indeed, as Bridgitte Sion has argued of other contexts, Frank is often presented as a “universal symbol of hope and tolerance.” (184). For instance, at the Boise, Idaho memorial commemorating Frank’s life, her Jewish identity is played down in order to appeal to a wider group of visitors. The story presented at the Idaho memorial, like the one Jacobson and Colón present, stresses Frank as a typical teenager. This narrative, argues Sion, “encourages members of the public to empathize with her, irrespective of their own experience” (184). Frank’s life, then, is represented in a way that aids the graphic biography’s social and cultural aims. In line with those aims, the text also considers narratives surrounding and beyond Frank’s life.

Jacobson and Colón’s biography widens the lens to include Frank’s family, and so in this sense is a heavily relational narrative. Though such relational narratives are not new – there is a long tradition of family memoirs and biographies, particularly with regards to the Holocaust – the graphics form provides a way to make family networks and relationships highly visible in an unprecedented way. For example, although the narrative is strictly chronological, it is not purely a classic cradle-to-grave story that focuses on a single subject. Anne’s biography begins and ends with that of her family and parents. Her life is literally framed by the lives of others. The first page of the biography is a drawn reproduction of Anne’s parents, Otto and Edith’s wedding photograph, on “May 12, 1925 in Aachen, Germany” (3). Appearing under the chapter 1 heading, “A Hopeful Beginning” Otto and Edith, dressed in their wedding attire, gaze directly out at the reader (figure 6). This choice of first image is important. Not only does it frame Anne’s biographical narrative, but it establishes an intimacy with the reader, and positions

him or her to receive not only Anne’s life story, but also those relational to her. In other words, this opening signals that this book will be a story about a network of people who lived through significant historical events, rather than a narrative that exclusively focuses on the life of the famous child diarist. Anne does initially appear on page two, in a very small frame in the top corner of the page. Mirroring the front-cover image, Anne is pictured at her desk, pen in hand as if writing her diary. She asks: “Have I ever told you about our family?”(4). Anne’s picture here is relatively small compared to the other two large panels that cover the page



(figure 7). She is, therefore, in this early section of the book, an implicit guide for her family history, and by extension, many other families who were affected by the Holocaust. Indeed, her parents, rather than Anne are the focus of these initial pages. On page two, the top panel, which covers one half of the page indicating its significance, shows Otto’s life as a young man. Otto is

Figure 6: Anne’s life is frames by her parents’ lives

pictured, dressed in a formal suit, in the middle of an opulent ballroom. A small orchestra accompanies people dancing and sipping drinks, while Otto asks a young woman to dance. As well as the visual information, the prose narrative relays biographical information about Otto, and this text is dialogic: it is related in

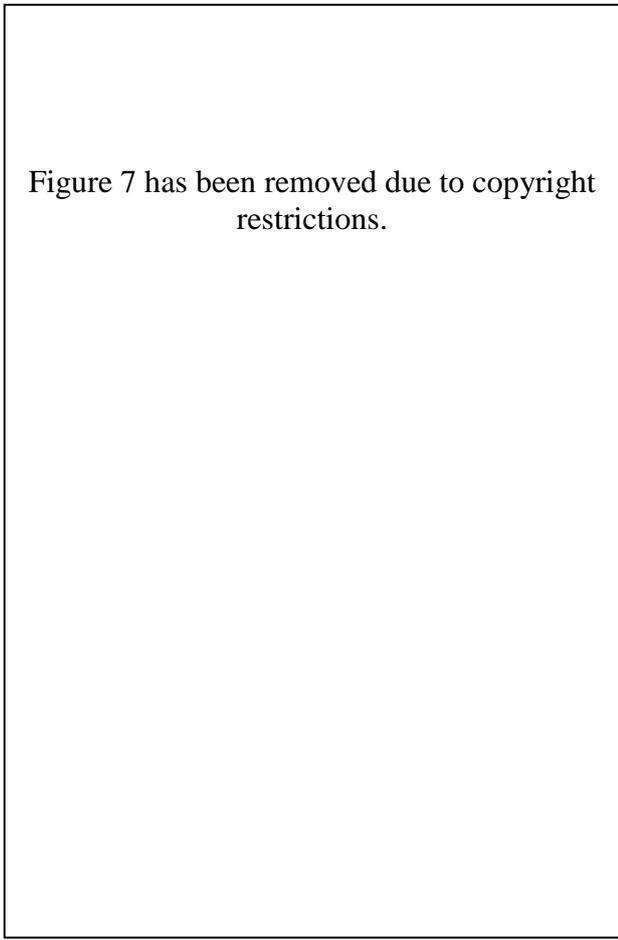


Figure 7: Relational family narratives made visible

Anne’s diarist voice, and it is also communicated via the voice of the omniscient biographer. Anne tells us that her father was “born on May 12, 1889” in Frankfurt Am Main, and that she says he “lived the life of a rich man’s son”(4), while the biographer fills in the gaps and reinforces Anne’s perspective. The biographer tells us that Otto and his family “certainly did live privileged lives, so long as the Michael Frank

Bank...prospered” (4). This first panel both invokes the authority of Anne’s diary as a testimonial artefact, but also uses it to authorise the biographer’s voice. In doing so the reader is positioned to trust the biographer and to bear witness – in a visual-verbal way – to broader family histories.

Whereas Otto features along the top half of the page, the bottom half is then dedicated to introducing Anne’s mother Edith’s family context.

Complementing Otto's ballroom scene, Edith is shown as a young woman arriving at a formal family dinner. Again, the scene is opulent: family members are dressed in fine clothing, art lines the walls of the room, and servants dish out food from silverware. At this point, the biographer goes from complementing Anne's diaristic voice to using it to reinforce his own narrative: "about her Mother's family, Anne wrote: 'we've listened open-mouthed to stories of private balls, dinner and engagement parties with 250 guests'" (4). The biographer then adds details about the family's migration from Holland to Germany "in the 18th century...(thus their name Holländer)" and that "the Holländers were observant Jews, unlike the more liberal Franks" (4).

These two frames, then, coupled with the opening wedding photograph function in two ways. Firstly, they serve to literally frame Anne's life with the lives of those around her. The individual biographical subject of this comic is not the autonomous self, but a relational one, whose life story is part of a broader constellation of individuals and histories. From this perspective, the comics form works to expose and challenge the idea of the sovereign subject that sits squarely at the centre of so many traditional biographies. Secondly, the comics form provides a unique way to literally show the privileged lives of the Frank and Holländer families before the event of World Wars I and II. In doing so, these initial panels serve as a reminder of the broader Holocaust histories of families whose lives were destroyed by the Nazi occupation of Europe. In this way, too, the *Anne Frank* biography not only relates intertextually with the famous diary, but also an entire canon of family memoir about the Holocaust.³⁷ The comics form shows that individual lives are not lived in isolation – an impression that

³⁷ Two recent prominent examples of Holocaust family memoir are de Waal. *The Hare with the Amber Eyes* (2010) and Mouillot *A Fifty-Year Silence* (2015).

conventional biographies can often give – but rather single lives and life narratives fit within a complex network of other people and other mediations.

To reinforce the idea that Frank lived not a single autonomous life, but a relational one, the entirety of page five of the biography includes a drawn image of the Frank and Holländer family trees (figure 8). Each family member is represented via a sketched photo – presumably based on the family’s private archive – and this literally maps Anne’s place in her family. In one

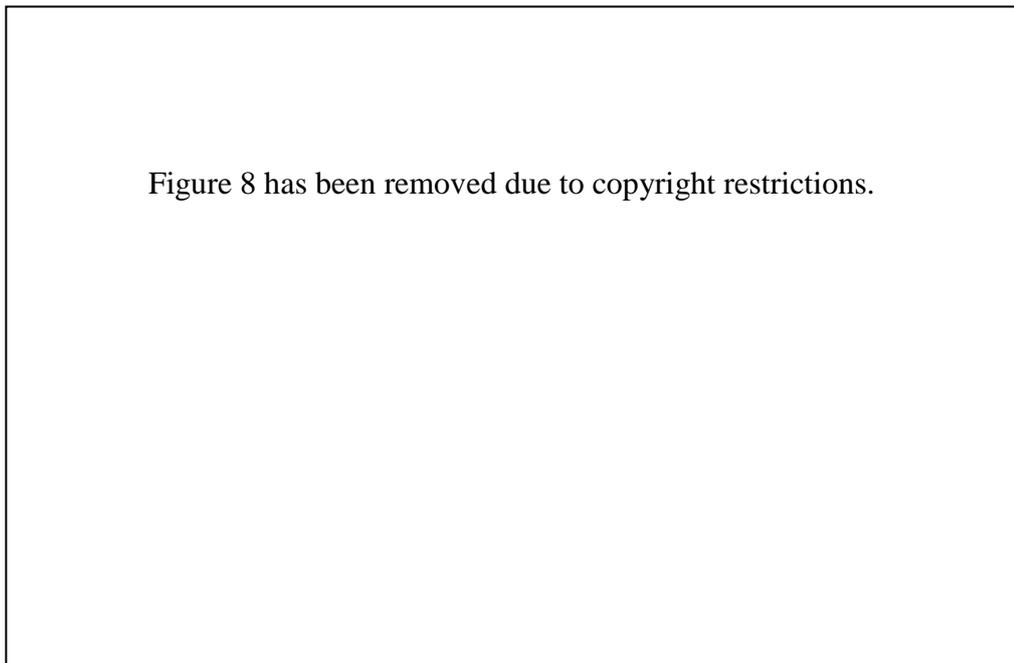


Figure 8: The Architecture of the Family Made Visible in *Anne Frank*

sense, this device is a way of orienting the reader, and introducing the key ‘characters’ but it also stresses the relational nature of Anne’s biography and renders the family archive visible on the page. Even though print biographies often feature family trees, the drawn nature of this image functions to remind readers of how the geography and very architecture of these families was destroyed by the Holocaust. This is especially driven home by the fact that the photograph of one family member, Bettina Holländer, is missing. Her portrait is thus left blank, and an asterisk refers us to a single biographer’s note that reads:

“*No photograph available” (5), subtly foreshadowing the destruction that will be represented later in the narrative. These devices – the focus on Otto and Edith’s lives, along with the family tree – function to place Anne’s life in a broader network of individuals in a highly visual way.

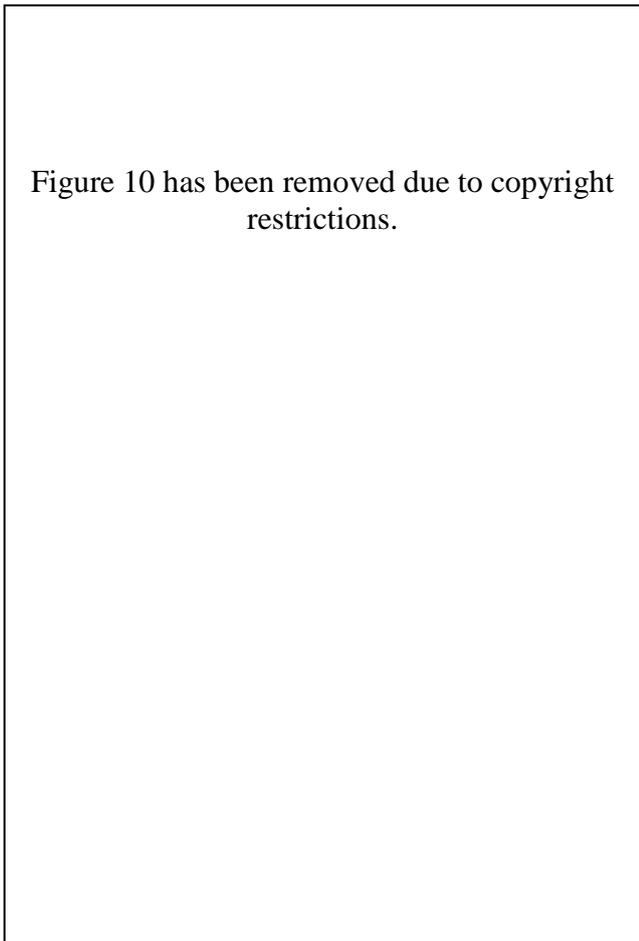
Figure 9 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Likewise, the very last chapter of *Anne Frank* focuses on the lives of others after her death in Bergen-Belsen. Titled “The Story Lives On”, the final chapter returns to a focus on Otto – the only survivor of the Frank family. A black and white photorealist sketch of Otto fills the chapter’s title page (figure 9). He is shown as an older man, dressed in semi-formal attire of trousers, a shirt, tie, and waistcoat. He sits in a chair, against a black background, with his shirt sleeve raised to reveal his Auschwitz

Figure 9: The final chapter framing Anne’s life

identification number tattooed on his forearm. The image evokes a kind of silent testimony and sets the tone for the final chapter. Indeed, over the page, the narrative goes back in time: Otto is pictured in Auschwitz as the Russian forces liberate the camp (132). He is then shown returning to the Netherlands to search for his family who, he discovers, have perished. When he is given Anne’s diary – which had been kept safely during the war by a friend – Otto decides to publish it, and that process is shown. Like the opening section, this final chapter works to

contrast with the family’s life before the war, but the chapter also serves to frame Anne’s biographical life narrative. Ultimately what is presented – in a mirroring of the “Hopeful Beginnings” of chapter one – is a narrative of optimism: that despite her demise in Bergen Belsen, Anne “lives on” in a textual sense via her testimonial diary.



Indeed, the final two pages of the graphic biography show Otto reading the diary, and, significantly, a group of present-day young people visiting the Anne Frank House Museum (figure 10). This final frame comes full circle from the book’s cover and embodies, or mirrors, the graphic biography’s implied readers.

The fact that these individuals

are viewing Frank’s diary and

her living space, complete with objects owned by her and her family, connects the graphic biography to the museum and archive space in a way that authenticates

it.³⁸ It also reinforces the idea that Frank’s life is a contemporary site of memory

³⁸ For more on biographical museums, see Alison Booth’s work. Booth argues that biographical house museums exist “to reveal an intimate narrative about the subject. By viewing the building and domestic objects that once belonged to the subject, we get a new perspective on the person, and we feel we have a more intimate understanding of him or her.” Biographical house museums are, Booth suggests “a kind of virtual reality” from the biographical subjects’ “focal position” (“Houses and Things” 234).

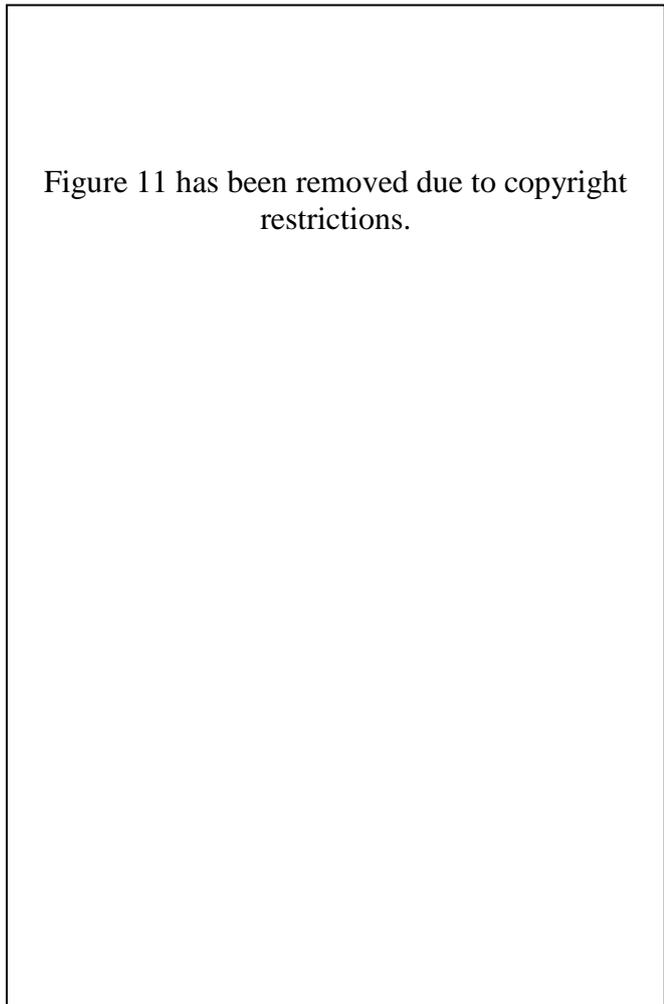
and a cultural space that can be mobilised to educate readers about contemporary social justice and human rights issues.³⁹ Anne's life, then, is not only put in familial and relational context but in historical context too, indicating the didactic potential of graphic biography.

This is perhaps not surprising. One of the enduring appeals of biography is the way that an individual life can provide a moral and historical education (Caine 23). However, biography in graphic form has the unique ability to magnify this more traditional element of biography and re-present histories and memorialise lives in a new way. As Joseph Witek has highlighted, comics have the unique ability to “keep previous scenes physically before the reader after the narrative has moved on” (43).” In other words the reader can view and re-view multiple storylines on the one page. For biography, this means that the life and “the times” of the subject can be visible at the same time, offering a very twenty-first century presentation. As has been suggested so far, this is certainly the case with *Anne Frank*. In this text, three narrative threads run concurrently: Anne's life, her family's experience and the public, historical events. At times throughout the book, we see all three of these stories on the one page. Throughout Jacobson and Colón's text, the comics form provides a way to show how the public history of the increasing Nazi presence, first in Germany and then in the Netherlands, invades and affects the lives of Anne and her family. One key episode depicts newborn Anne and her mother Edith being driven from Frankfurt to visit Edith's family in the German spa town of Aachen (figure 11). On the left-hand side of the page, two medium-sized rectangular frames show Edith and Anne in the car and

³⁹ When I visited the House Museum in 2012, the final gallery was devoted to a cautionary narrative about racism in contemporary Europe. The gallery consisted of lots of testimonies from young people about their experiences of racism in contemporary Netherlands. In the biographical museum, then, Frank's life becomes a kind of embodied morality tale that functions in a similar way to the graphic biography.

then their arrival at the Holländer family home. The biographer explains that “Anne was warmly greeted by her grandmother”, while the visual image shows Edith happily watching as Grandmother Holländer holds Anne out in front of her and smiles as she says “I see your mother in you!” (15). The episode is a positive one and takes place in the domestic setting of the Holländer family home.

However, alongside this scene of family and domestic contentment, runs an almost full-page vertical frame showing Hitler at the Nuremburg Rally. The biographer explains that “more than 30,000 people attended” the event, while the visual narrative is a full body image of Hitler, dressed in Nazi uniform, marching



out in front of the crowd. His hand is raised in salute and a serrated speech bubble reads “HEIL!” (15). In this instance, the menacing public history of the rise of the Nazi party is literally shown as developing in parallel to the lives of the Frank and Holländer families. The comics form provides a way to show the contrasting tone of the domestic happiness of the family with the fervour and aggression of the public

Figure 11: Public and family history on a single page

events. Therefore, this indicative episode efficiently and simultaneously drives

Figure 12 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Anne’s biographical narrative, the family’s story and the public history in a way simply unavailable in other modes.

This device is used throughout the story. For instance in a later episode, we see frames showing Anne progressing well at school, while another frame, showing Nazi soldiers marching down the street, and singing anti-Semitic songs, fills a

Figure 12: Making visible Anne’s life and historical context

horizontal section at the

bottom of the page (figure 12). Alongside that frame is another smaller one showing Otto and Edith watching the soldiers from a second-story window of the house. The room in which Otto and Edith stand is darkened, to suggest they are attempting to remain out of sight, and their bodies and faces convey anxiety at the changing political climate. This scene is reinforced by dialogue, as Otto says to Edith “Sweetheart, we need to leave Germany. Business is bad and the Nazis...”(22). Edith responds “But how are we going to live? And where?” (22). Again, there are three separate narratives on this page – Anne’s, her parents’, and the public – and the comics form provides a way for all three to be read

simultaneously. The effect of this is that we not only re-view Anne's life but also her family's experiences and the broader histories all at once. This is a function that simply does not exist in other, more traditional media.

In addition, the gutter space around the frames works in important ways too. On the one hand, it provides room for the reader to contemplate the connection between outside events and the domestic feeling of the Frank home. On the other, the gutter also gives the reader time to consider how the story is constructed. In her book chapter, "Commemorating the Past, Anticipating the Future", Elisabeth El Refaie shows how comics – with its grammar of frames and gutters – "follow patterns that reflect the way memory itself works." (95). The very grammar of the comics form – as evidenced in these indicative episodes – prompts the reader to consider what has been included in each frame (and thus remembered), and what has been omitted (or forgotten). While El Refaie is talking about autobiographical comics and individual memory here, her observation can also be extrapolated out to apply to biographical narratives and cultural memory. In *Anne Frank*, the frame can only hold so much, and so we are left to consider where the marching soldiers, for instance, went after Otto and Edith saw them from their upstairs window. What violence did they commit outside the frame? Consequently, the lives of others in graphic form reminds us of how biography is always a version of a life, rather than a definitive account, and that a biographer can never include everything in the frame.

The constructed nature of biography is further emphasised via the drawn prose and images in comics. As El Refaie notes, "unlike photography, cartooning does not generally claim to offer a direct, mimetic representation of the world but rather an interpretation of events as they are experienced by the artist, with aspects

that are often deliberately exaggerated, adapted, or invented (165).” The presence of the biographer’s drawn lines on each and every page, reminds the reader that the graphic biography is an interpretive act. The hand that draws the lines and writes the prose belongs to an author who has made decisions about how to frame the subject’s life. This is significant because it destabilises the generic law of the invisible biographer and in doing so challenges convention. For instance, the interpretation for a graphic biography like *Anne Frank* involves redrawing archival materials. Jacobson and Colón go to great lengths to position the text as an authentic and authoritative historical narrative, including maps and timelines. As a result, many reviewers read the text as ‘serious’ and educational.

The reviewer in *Booklist* magazine describes the text as “well-documented and insightful biography of history’s most famous child diarist” (Goldsmith 36). Another reviewer says that the text is “as visually and historically accurate as possible -- down to the clothing worn by the Franks, the military uniforms of the Nazis, the furniture and layout of the Franks’ secret apartment, and Bergen-Belsen, the camp where Anne died in March 1945 at age 15” (Memmott 11). However, while these elements may indeed authorise the text as an ‘authentic’ history, they also illustrate the ways in which Jacobson and Colón have interpreted and re-drawn this archive. The sketches of Nazi propaganda that feature throughout the book, for example, remind the reader of the ways biographers select, drawn on and interpret and arrange various archival fragments in order to impose order and sequence on a life. Comics therefore provides a way for us to see this mechanism in action.

This historicity of biography is further reinforced by the occasional use of real photographs. David Bathrick, discussing Charles Sanders Peirce’s idea of the

index suggests that the photograph “is connected to the object that is its referent in a material, physical way...Rather than a resemblance of something, an indexical sign is like a ‘fragment torn away from the object.’” (2) Photography, then, “participated in a tradition of nineteenth century mechanically-produced mimesis, which in the spirit of scientific positivism, claimed the legitimacy of documentary, empirical verisimilitude.” (2) Photographs have often been taken to “provide unquestioned factual corroboration of a truth that spoke for itself.” (2) ⁴⁰ This is despite the fact that such images can be altered. As Marianne Hirsch autocritically notes, “as much as I remind myself that photographs are as essentially constructed as any other representation form, that every part of the image can be manipulated and even fabricated, especially with ever more sophisticated digital technologies, I return to Barthes’s basic “ça a été” (“this has been”) and an unassailable belief in reference and a notion of truth in the picture” (Hirsch, 6).⁴¹

The use of photographs in graphic biographies like *Anne Frank*, and as will be shown in a moment, *Radioactive*, is predicated on these enduring indexical and testimonial elements. A photograph “authenticates the reality of the past and provides a material connection to it” (6). This is why photographs and other indexical documentary apparatus have a long history of being included in print biography. In basing their narrative on the public and private photographic archives, Colón and Jacobson simultaneously authenticate their biography and

⁴⁰ Barthes puts this more poetically: “The photograph is literally an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photography of the missing being, as Sontag says, will touch me like the delayed rays of a star” (*Camera Lucida* 80 – 81).

⁴¹ On the topic of photographs and autobiography also see Linda Haverty Rugg who argues that like autobiography, photography operates “in a system of signs that we have learned to read – at one level – as highly indeterminate and unreliable. Below that level of doubt rests, in some persons, the desire to accept the image or the text as a readable reference to a (once-)living person” (*Picturing Ourselves* 13).

provide a “material connection” to Anne’s life in ways a purely print narrative could not. As Hirsch outlines, photographs attest to “having-been-there”. In relation to the Holocaust specifically this is particularly significant because photographs are thought to “remove doubt, they can be held up as proof to the

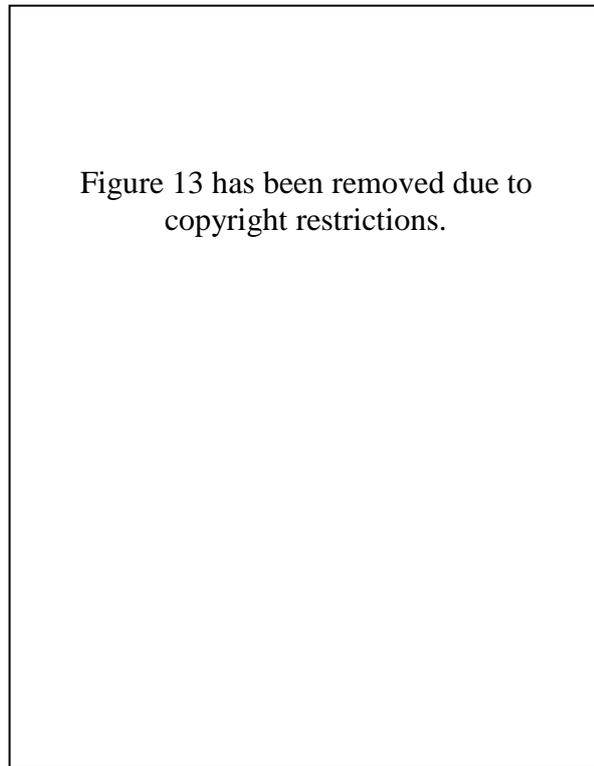


Figure 13: The diary as testimonial archival object

revisionists” (Hirsch 24). In *Anne Frank* then, when a photograph suddenly appears amongst the mostly drawn narrative, the result is jarring. The reader is disrupted from the constructed world of the story, and is prompted to consider the reality of the life he or she is reading about. There are a couple of examples that particularly illustrate this.

Firstly, approximately half way through the biography, as the title page for chapter six, a full-page, colour photograph of Frank’s diary appears. Anne’s inky cursive handwriting is visible on yellowing pages, alongside a black and white family photo of the author at her desk, with a book in front of her (figure 13). The sudden appearance of the authentic testimonial object, complete with the small photographic portrait and the handwriting, reminds the reader that the only trace left of the 14-year-old is the diary. In this case, the photograph defers to Frank’s power as eyewitness, and in doing so works to destabilise biographical distance as the ultimate and definitive authority.

The second example of how photographs work to highlight the graphic biography's historicity comes towards the end of the book. In the last chapter,

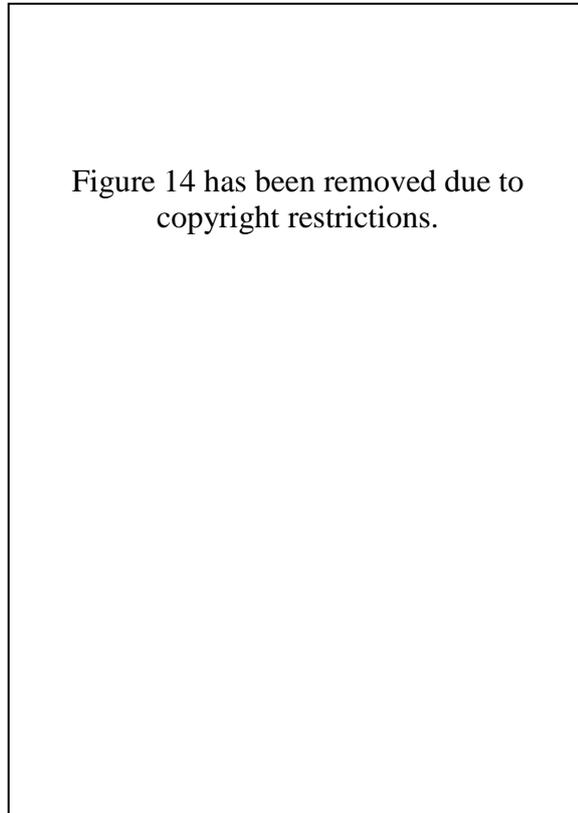


Figure 14: Cover-page author photographs: the (re) mediated nature of biography

after Otto has published the diary, we see a frame that features a variety of different versions of the diary (figure 14). The frame is mostly drawn, but significantly, the covers of the books depicted and piled up in layers and Frank's famous smiling photography jumps out from each cover. Here, the photograph works as a reminder that Frank's life is less about the

depiction of the youthful subject, and more about her life as a

palimpsestic site of memory that is continuously mediated and remediated. While this remediation process is not new – biographies of iconic individuals have long functioned like this – the comics form makes this process visible in a fresh way. In reproducing a photographic portrait of Frank, this frame, therefore, acts as a meta-moment, reminding the reader of the myriad cultural and social functions Frank's life, and by extension, of biography.

Photographs can remind the reader of the constructed nature of biography, but, as I have suggested because of their testimonial properties, photographs can be much more confronting than the drawn image. This is especially the case in the

context of the Holocaust. Hirsch says that on viewing photographs of “the vanished world of Eastern European Jewish life” she finds herself confronted by the fact that we know that the people in the images “will *all* die (have all died), that their world will be (has been) destroyed, and that the future’s (our) only access to it will be (is) through those pictures and through the stories they have left behind” (20). This returns to the earlier point about the educational aims of *Anne Frank*. Had Jacobson and Colón constructed their text solely using photographs, rather than a comics form, the biography may not have been particularly successful. As previously suggested, where photographs function as a direct form of visual testimony, the drawn images of the comics mode work to provide distance from the reality of the narrative. This means that a violent and traumatic life story, like Frank’s, can be told in a way that provides the reader with space to receive the narrative.

For example, the final chapter of the book at once shows but also protects the reader from confronting archival images of Bergen-Belsen, where Frank died. Emaciated bodies litter the frame, yet the drawn, and slightly abstracted cartoon image provides a way for readers to re-view this history without being directly confronted in the way a photograph might (126, figure 15). Thus, while comics may be considered by some to be an inappropriate mode to represent historical trauma, it can nonetheless be a useful way of circumventing the inevitable horror with which such histories confront the reader.⁴² Furthermore, in this scene at least, the grammar of comics allows for three different text boxes, all carrying the biographer’s prose narrative, to mostly obscure the shocking scene. This drawn and interpreted view of the camp therefore simultaneously reveals and conceals,

⁴² Although in a post-*Maus* era comics has been shown to be an apt form for depicting historical and personal trauma, as the reviews and author interviews around *Anne Frank* suggest, the prevailing public image of the medium remains tied to its connotations of juvenilia and flippancy.

protecting the reader from the reality of the horror they are viewing. Therefore, although it may be assumed by many readers that comics is an inappropriate form for representing a biographical story that features historical suffering, in this case, the distance provided by the apparently juvenile, drawn images helps to re-present Frank's life and death in way that would not be possible in other visual representational modes, such as photographs.

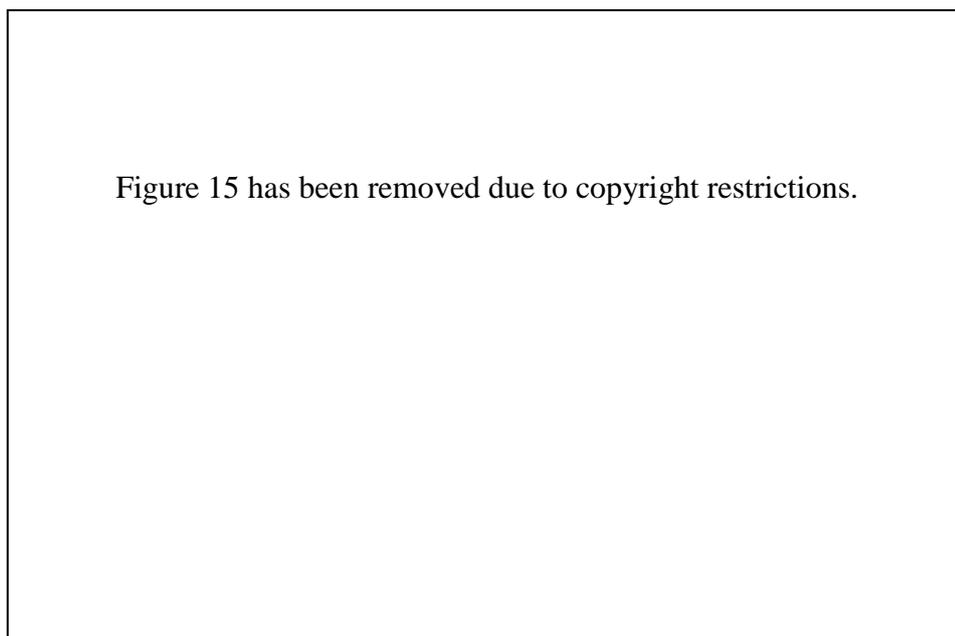


Figure 15: Hand-drawn images both reveal and conceal individual and historical trauma

Consequently, and combined with the construction of Anne Frank as a universal “teenager”, Jacobson and Colón’s book, is a pertinent example of a graphic biography designed to travel and circulate to the widest possible readership. Jacobson and Colón’s text shows the distinctive way that – via a relatively traditional use of comics grammar – graphic biographies are a popular, mass-media form that can so visibly situate the individual life within broader familial and historical contexts. In doing so, *Anne Frank* suggests how these kinds of comics life narratives constitute “new biography”, enabling readers to see lives and histories in a way and making visible the biographical process.

Fragmented and Abstracted Lives: Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie: A Tale of Love and Fallout.

In his seminal 1989 work, *Comic Books as History*, Joseph Witek argued that non-fictional comics commonly rely on a photorealist style to help authenticate their status as “true stories” (82). As has already been established, *Anne Frank* follows this logic. Nevertheless, not all non-fiction comics comply with the assumption that realism equals ‘truth.’ When it comes to graphic autobiographies and memoirs, for instance, authors often explicitly work against the idea that photorealism is the only way to authenticate their work. As Elisabeth El Rifaie observes,

the visual style of graphic memoirists often draws its power less from its iconic resemblance to reality than from the indexical clues it seems to offer about the artist’s genuine characteristics and intentions...many ‘alternative’ comics artists ‘infuse their work with a sense of the handmade and personal that deliberately evokes the ‘subartistic’ and ‘amateurish’ as a means of endowing an aura of the authentic and personal to the image and to the narrative voice of the comic.’ (“Visual Authentication” n.p.)⁴³

Although, as indicated by *Anne Frank*, graphic biographies often take a conventional approach in terms of style and strive for realism rather than abstraction, there are nonetheless a few exceptional cases. Some graphic biographers experiment with style in order to represent iconic lives in a new way, and one text that exemplifies this stylistic experimentation is Lauren Redniss’ 2011 graphic biography, *Radioactive: Marie and Pierre Curie, a Tale of Love and Fallout*.

Like *Anne Frank*, Marie Curie is a global icon. She is a significant figure in the history of science and, in a similar way to Frank, her life has been used to

⁴³ El Rifaie refers here to Scott Carney’s paper, “The Ear of the Eye.”

symbolise or stand for various narratives. She is amongst a handful of well-known scientists, and as such has become an historical celebrity, with her life used to popularise science. Along with “Galileo, Newton, Darwin, Einstein”, Curie is a “superhero celebrity” of science (Nye 323). The websites of nobel.com, the Bio Television Channel, and the American Institute of Physics all have biographical pages devoted to Curie’s life story and the online museum, Google Cultural Institute features an extensive timeline of her life (“Marie Curie –Biographical”; “Marie Curie”). Her celebrity status is reinforced in the webcomic, *xkcd*, in which Curie becomes a metonym for “great scientist”, with the comic’s protagonist explaining “My teacher always told me that if I applied myself I could become the next Marie Curie” (Munroe n.p.). Curie’s life has also been mobilised in feminist histories of the twentieth century. In a history dominated by ‘great men’ of science, Curie, as the first woman to win a Nobel Prize for her work on radioactivity, the only woman to win the prize twice, and the first woman to hold a professorship at the Sorbonne, Curie is an iconic feminist figure. As one critic argues “for years, Marie Curie was “the only woman scientist anyone could name” (Rossiter xi). Curie’s life has been represented in myriad English-language iterations: from the 1937 biography by Curie’s daughter, Eve, to more recent print biographies and biographical films and documentaries (Curie *Madame Curie*, Quinn *Marie Curie*, Goldsmith *Obsessive Genius, Madame Curie*).⁴⁴ Numerous institutions and organisations carry Curie’s name, including a British cancer charity, and a Parisian museum, the Musée Curie. Therefore, as in the case of *Anne Frank*, part of the work of a comics biography such as *Radioactive*, is to re-

⁴⁴ In 2015, it was announced that a new biopic of Curie’s life is to be produced (Child). See also the 2013 BBC documentary, *The Genius of Marie Curie: The Woman Who Lit up the World*.

frame Curie’s life anew, for circulation within a network of existing representations.

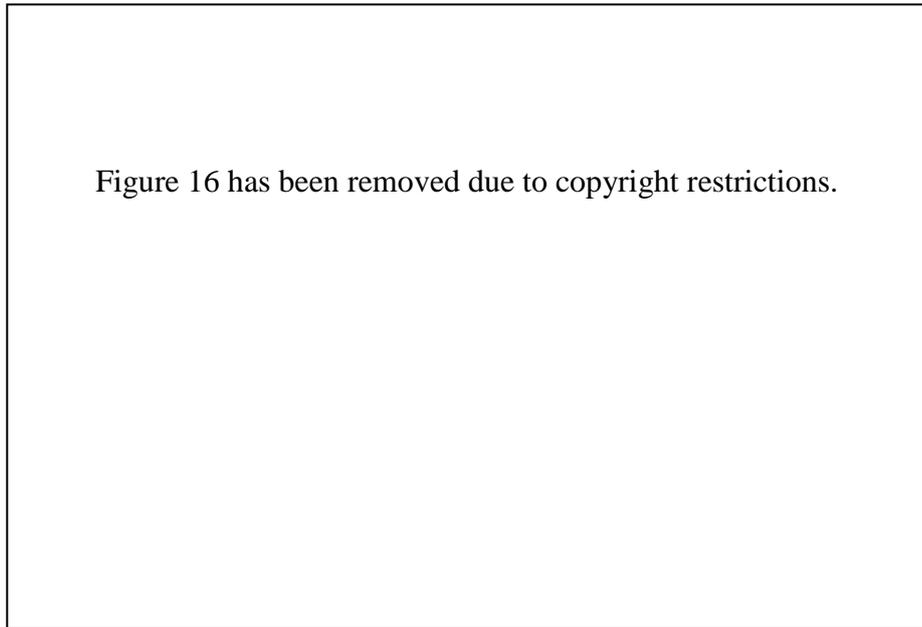


Figure 16: *Radioactive’s* abstracted style

In stark contrast to the literal photorealism of *Anne Frank*, *Radioactive* adopts a flowing, collage-style visual mode. Redniss eschews the traditional frames and gutters of the comics form in place of full-page panels that bleed colourfully to the edge of each page (figure 16). Her text plays with the tension between art and documentary – or “granite and rainbow” to use Woolf’s analogy – which is present in much biographical representation, and especially in “new biography” (“The New Biography” 100). As will be shown in a moment, on the one hand, like the graphic memoirists El Rifaie discusses, Redniss constructs a text that appears “amateurish” and handmade. The graphic biography features many rudimentary and often abstract sketches that contain little visual detail about Marie Curie’s physicality. Images and photos are overlaid, giving the impression of a crafted and glued patchwork of found material. On the other hand, the biography riffs on, and alludes to, works of high art – from Modernist paintings to ancient Greek ceramics – as well as relying on the usual documentary forms of

evidence, such as photos and archival materials, for authentication. Furthermore, Redniss eschews the traditional frames and gutters of the comics form in place of full-page panels that bleed colourfully to the edge of each page.

By placing the emphasis so squarely on a visual style that draws on a number of existing traditions and discourses, Redniss' text is positioned as innovative. Indeed, Redniss, as a visual arts lecturer, the author of an earlier 2006 graphic biography, and numerous op-art pieces for *The New York Times*, has, in recent years, built a reputation as an author of ground-breaking life narratives. In fact, her earlier work was deemed so revolutionary that publishers were not convinced that it would sell in the increasingly competitive literary marketplace. Redniss explains,

my first book was rejected by just about every publisher in New York. The reaction I got was, in short: We've never seen something like this before, so we don't want anything to do with it. I had an agent who would not call me back. Then one night I was having dinner at a friend's house, I met a publisher and described to her what I was working on. Her reaction was the exact opposite of everyone else's that had seen the proposal. She said, I've never seen anything like that before, which is exactly why I want to publish it. Once there was the precedent of the first book, things got easier (qtd in Shields).

Redniss' reputation for originality is also evident in reviews, with one critic suggesting that with her 2006 biography, *Century Girl: 100 Years in the Life of Doris Eaton Travis*, Redniss had "invented a subgenre of biography" to which she further contributed with *Radioactive* (O'Grady). Consequently, in terms of new biography, *Radioactive* is a highly relevant case study, but also a prime example of what might be called biographics.

In her work on autobiographical comics, Gillian Whitlock draws on Leigh Gilmore's seminal work on "the shifting jurisdictions and limits of [print] autobiography." Whitlock coins the term *autographics* to "draw attention to the

specific conjunctions of visual and verbal text [in comics] and also the subject positions that narrators negotiate in and through” the form (“Autographics” 966). For Whitlock, autographics is about highlighting what comics does differently, and it “introduces a way of thinking about life narrative that focuses on the changing discourses of truth and identity that feature in autobiographical representations of selfhood” (966). Applied to graphic biography, and adopted as *biographics*, the term becomes a way to consider how the visual-verbal mode of comics can be used to highlight the mechanisms and politics of biographical representation and practice. As has been shown with *Anne Frank*, the comics form has the potential to make biographical methodologies visible in a distinctive way. *Radioactive* is another example of this, but because of its clear positioning as a highly innovative life narrative, it is a more pertinent example of biographics – comics biography that operates at the limits of genre.

Like *Anne Frank*, *Radioactive*’s structure is relatively conventional. The book consists of two narrative strands: one that deals with the historical legacies and uses of polonium and radium, and one that tells the life story of Marie Curie and those closest to her. While the historical narrative moves back and forth in time – a point I will come to later – Curie’s biographical story begins with her birth and ends with her death and legacy in the contemporary era. So, like *Anne Frank*, *Radioactive*’s life narrative proceeds chronologically, and in doing so presents as a traditional biography. In addition, Redniss’ text relies on all the usual “authenticating devices” of both graphic life narratives forms and traditional biography (El Refaie 158). With its inclusion of photographs and documents, *Radioactive* clearly signals its reliance on the archive and thus verifiable “facts.” The book also includes apparatus commonly found in traditional print biography:

an extensive list of footnotes and sources as well as biographer's notes, which outline issues and obstacles regarding methodology. To a certain extent, then, *Radioactive* adheres to tradition.

Where the text does innovate most obviously is through its use of visual style and its emphasis on materiality. In contrast to *Anne Frank*, where the stress is on education, *Radioactive* is positioned not as comics but as art. The very scale and feel of the book, which is hardcover, uses quality heavyweight paper and measures 8 x 11" (21 x 30cm) – large for a graphic text – signals that this is a material artefact that should not be confused with the apparently disposable comics form. In reviews – both profession and amateur – the book is frequently described as “beautiful.” Writer and memoirist, Elizabeth Gilbert remarks, “this is one of the most beautiful books-as-object that I’ve ever seen. The cover even glows, very softly, in the dark!” (n.p.) In terms of new biography, *Radioactive*'s materiality is significant for two reasons.

Firstly it signals that Redniss' text is aesthetically valuable, and in doing so sets *Radioactive* apart from traditional biography, which tends to be associated with utility and information, rather than art and style. As critic and biographer, P.N. Furbank, has argued, biography is usually crafted to *do* certain things, rather than as an aesthetic or poetic exercise. As Furbank insists:

people come to biography as they might to a car or a teapot, expecting certain things and are likely to be disgruntled if they do not find them. A car is expected to have a steering wheel and a lighting system, a teapot is expected to pour, and these demands limit the freedom of their makers...Similarly, a biography is expected to supply dates, information about family trees and about birth, marriage, and death; a chronological progression; and various other practicalities (18).

For Furbank, biography is a functional rather than artistic mode of life narrative, and so for Redniss to construct such a self-consciously artistic text is not only

tests genre boundaries and reader expectations, but also marks her graphic biography as novel and highly original.

Radioactive's materiality is significant in another key way. In the early twenty-first century, when screen cultures dominate, where many everyday social transactions have little or no material basis (money, scanned e-documents, emails and even television programs are stored as electrical pulses) and more established forms of material memory, such as photographs, are an increasingly virtual phenomenon, the book-as-object becomes symbolic of something tactile and real. *Radioactive*, then, with its emphasis on an object to collect and keep, taps into nostalgia for a pre-digital era. Caroline Hamilton, for instance, talks of how a renewed interest in the materiality of the book in the digital era is a kind of "pre-emptive nostalgia" (n.p.). Citing Simon Reynolds' book, *Retromania*, Hamilton argues: "We live in the digital future, but we're mesmerised by our analogue past. From the fad for collecting manual typewriters to the desire to own a shelf full of vintage Penguin paperbacks, something about the present dematerialisation of our literary culture is turning us into pre-emptive nostalgics..." (n.p). Not only does *Radioactive* provide the apparent safety of print as opposed to the unstable dynamism of online media, but it is also a genuine artefact – a way to engage in pre-emptive nostalgia. In other words, *Radioactive* is not only new in the sense of its artistry, but its emphasised materiality is also new as it meets a deficit in an increasingly digital and virtual world.

Figure 17 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 17: Redniss outlines her methodology

Radioactive's status as an art object is also reinforced inside the text. Redniss goes to great lengths to describe her visual methodology. Towards the end of the book, she dedicates an entire double-page spread to an explanation of the cyanotype method she uses to create the unique visual style of the biography (figure 17). Cyanotype printing is a 19th century technique where chemically-soaked paper turns vivid blue when exposed to UV light (Snible n.p.). Redniss explains the elaborate process involved in making each page, indicating it with a series of frames: from sketching the image through to making a transparency, printing the cyanotype and then hand-colouring it. She also provides a rationale as to why she chose this particular method "using this process to create the images in the book" says Redniss "made sense...for a number of reasons" (199). The negative images created by the cyanotype, explains Redniss, "gives an impression of an internal light, a sense of glowing that I felt captured what Marie Curie called radium's 'spontaneous luminosity'" (199). Also, "as photographic imaging was

central to the discovery of both X-rays and of radioactivity”, the cyanotype method, with its dependence on exposure, “seemed fitting” (199).

Figure 18 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 18: Redniss explains her choice of typeface

This long and involved discussion of her visual method is significant, and is further reinforced over the page, where Redniss details how she designed a special typeface for the biography (figure 18). *Radioactive*, she explains, is “set in Eusapia LR, a typeface I created based on the title pages of manuscripts at the New York Public Library. It is named after Eusapia Palladino, the Italian Spiritualist medium whose séances the Curies attended” (201). These paratextual elements are an important marker of the text as new biography. They help to construct Redniss both as an artist as well as a writer of authoritative documentary work. On the one hand Redniss-the-artist, with her references to historical photographic techniques, high-art, and a bespoke font, is focussed on style and how to get the right visual look. On the other hand, Redniss-the-biographer draws on the archive to consider how best to represent her biographical subject. The rationale is literary and poetic, linked to Marie Curie’s comments about the

radiant nature of the materials she worked with. The very fact that Redniss provides a rationale for her choices, and references historical documents, such as the Palladino manuscripts, highlights how any biography that experiments with style must also nonetheless remain tethered to a verifiable story and a biographical method that relies on certain kinds of evidence. In providing these behind-the-scenes details about her book, and in similar ways to graphic memoirist, Alison Bechdel, Redniss is authenticating her dual identity as artist-biographer and, by extension, is offering her work as a novel kind of life narrative.

Redniss' discussion of her methodology continues outside the text and this also reinforces *Radioactive*'s novelty. In interviews she further elaborates on her rationale for the book's visual style, as well as discussing her aesthetic influences, which range from the rudimentary two-dimensional figures on Greek vases, to images from 1930s cigarette cards and book jackets, to Goya etchings and Modernist abstract paintings (Shields). As well as aligning her work with touchstones of high art, Redniss also talks about the craft of constructing the graphic biography. In one interview, for instance, she explains how she put together the first draft of the text: "Once I had a general lay of the land—a sense of the narrative's direction—I hand-sewed together 208 pages into a book. Then I began literally cutting and pasting things onto the pages of the book. That helped me structure the book so I could turn through the pages to see how the narrative was unfolding" (Stout). Returning to El Refaie's discussion of the ways in which comics life narrators cultivate a sense of authenticity by referring to the handmade, or amateurish aspects of their work, the paratextual and contextual material surrounding *Radioactive* helps to authenticate it. The image that Redniss creates here of a handmade, carefully constructed object, imbues her work with

value and signals her dedication to her biographical subject and to the creation of a thoughtful life narrative.

Radioactive then, in contrast to *Anne Frank*, is a graphic biography that gets much of its authority from its overt aesthetics rather than verisimilitude. The collage-style of Redniss' book, with its flowing impressionistic-style images, rudimentary drawings of its biographical subject, and archival documents that appear to be glued-in as if in a scrap book, resemble a fragmented Modernist model of print biography, rather than a traditional model based on naive realism. For instance, in place of photorealism, we get either flowing Modernist, abstract-style renderings of Curie, in the style of a Marc Chagall painting, or Curie is represented via rudimentary, almost child-like amateurish sketches. An example of the latter occurs from the very start of the biography. The opening chapter of the book consists of a series of double-page spreads that outline the birth, childhood and adolescence of Marie and Pierre Curie (figure 19).

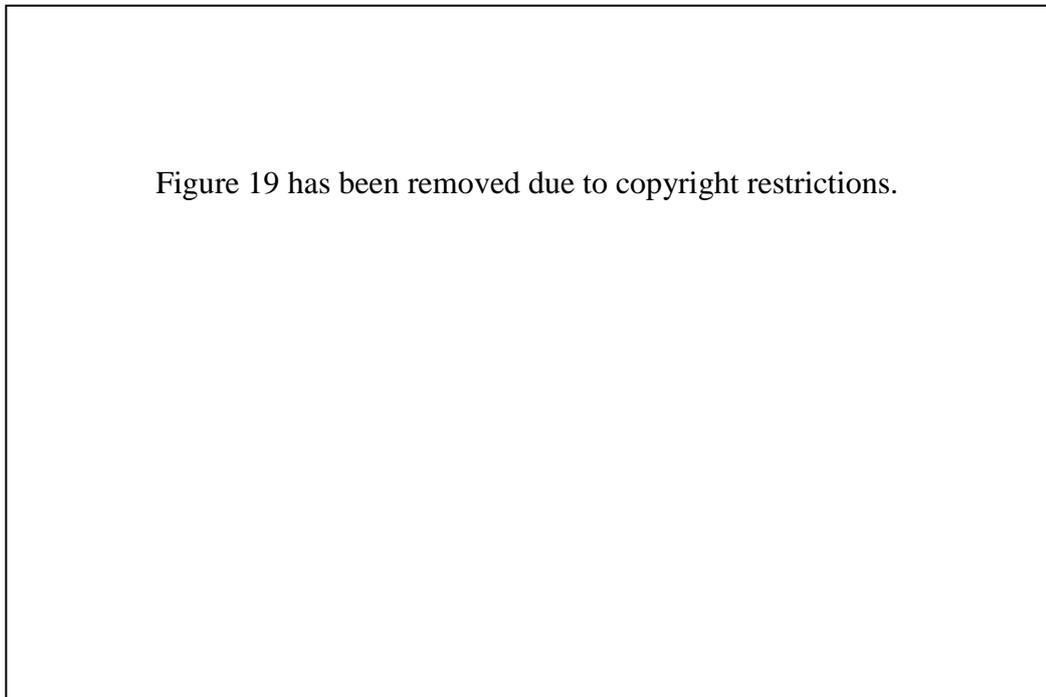


Figure 19: Pages from the opening chapter of *Radioactive*

Running in parallel, with Pierre's story on the left-hand page and Marie's on the right, this initial chapter introduces the reader to the text's unique aesthetic style. In contrast to the vivid colour promised by the book's bright-yellow cover, the initial pages are plain white, and feature black-pen sketched portraits of Pierre and Marie Curie as young people. At the same time, each page features short sections of prose, written in the special Eusapia LR typeface. The prose on the left-hand first page, regarding Pierre, reads: "Catastrophism, a geological theory championed by zoologist, Georges Cuvier, holds that time lurches forward in sudden disasters. In Paris, there is a street named after Cuvier. It rolls downhill towards the Seine alongside a garden. On the Rue Cuvier on May 15, 1859, Pierre Curie was born" (14). The prose is contained in a hand-drawn margin – rather than a clearly defined frame – to the left, while the bulk of the page is taken up with a rudimentary, abstracted black-pen sketch of a young man sitting at a table holding what appears to be a dandelion flower. The portrait, presumably of Pierre Curie, resembles a combination of the elongated paintings of Modigliani, as well as a child's sketch of his or her parents. The sketch does not reveal detail about the man's clothing, nor the room he appears to be sitting in. The prose works to position Pierre in a broader historical frame of European science, and provide factual information about his date of birth, the image, which dominates the page, provides almost no biographical information for the reader. The sketch is ahistorical, and the usual markers of identity, including clothing, physical shape and appearance, living or working environment are entirely missing. As such, the reader is prompted to bring his or her own knowledge of Pierre Curie's appearance to the reading.

Similarly, on the right-hand side of the page, which is devoted to Marie, the reader gets scant visual information about the biographical subject. The page is dominated by a sketched portrait of a young woman, pen and notebook in hand, sitting at what appears to be a table. She gazes warily out at the reader, but otherwise, no other visual detail is supplied. In order to get a sense of the biographical narrative, the reader must rely on the short prose segment, running along the bottom of the page, which reads: “Three times before her death, Marya Sklodowska would find, and then swiftly lose, a cherished lover. The gray-eyed girl was born in Warsaw on November 7, 1867, the year chemist and orchid cultivator Alfred Nobel patented dynamite. She would become famous as Marie Curie, twice winning the prize Nobel established with his explosives fortune” (15).

In an act of symmetry with Pierre’s life, Marie’s birth is connected to Alfred Nobel and the broader history of European science. In contrast to Pierre, however, the reader is provided with further information about Marie: there is a snippet of information about her physical appearance – “the gray-eyed girl” - the tragedies that will befall Marie over the course of her life, as well as the professional recognition she will receive.

In these opening pages, the written prose narrative does much of the work of carrying the biographical narrative, while the rudimentary visual style functions as a supplement, and a space onto which the reader may project his or her own ideas about Marie and Pierre’s physicality. This abstracted style continues throughout the biography. In a later chapter, after Pierre and Marie meet, the visual aesthetic changes. Redniss moves from plain black and white sketches to hand-coloured, vivid, flowing cyanotype images (figure 20). In a scene that

depicts Marie and Pierre's first meeting as lovers, the subjects are represented again as elongated, abstracted bodies, but this time they are coloured vivid blue, while the room around them glows orange and lime green (28, 29). Colour-pencil lines are visible across the page, bringing to mind a child's colouring-in book. Unlike the first chapter of the book, the double-page image here provides

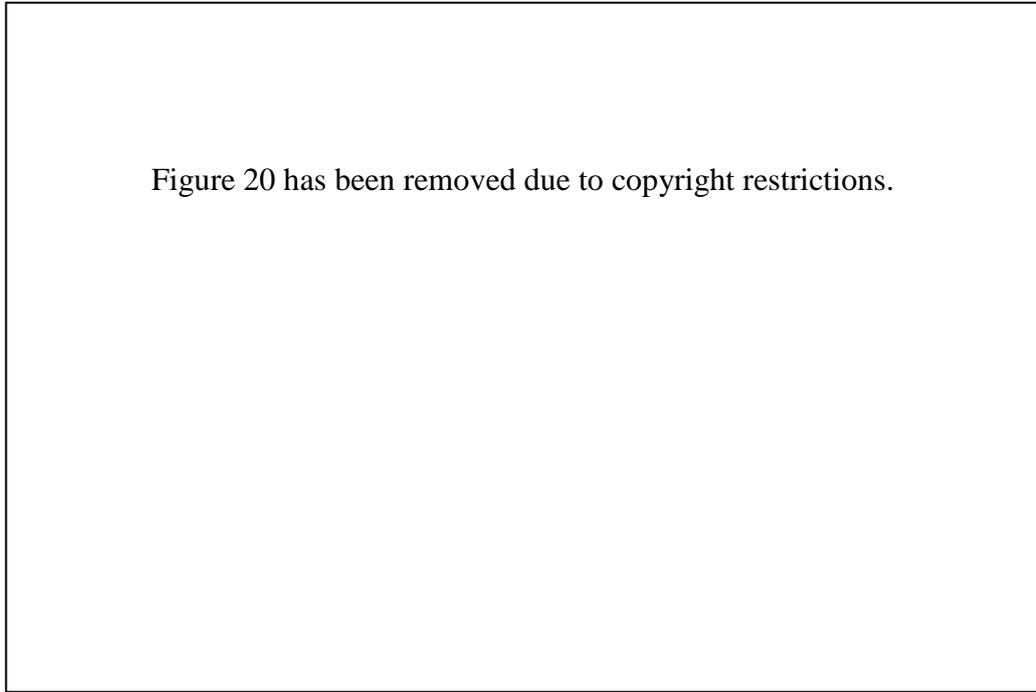


Figure 20: Abstracted Biographical Subjects

slightly more detail, albeit in an abstracted way. Dining chairs and a doorway are barely visible, suggesting an interior location, and Marie and Pierre are positioned as if moving towards an embrace. Despite the abstracted nature of the image, Pierre and Marie's clothing is also more comprehensible in this scene, with Marie in an early twentieth-century-style dress, and Pierre wearing a shirt, waistcoat and tie. There is also an absence of written text.

These two examples, then, show how, by opting for a highly-abstract, Modernist style, *Radioactive* attempts to innovate traditional readings of biography and re-view the life of Marie Curie. In the opening chapter, the basic images function as a way to signal the biography's "handmade" status, but also as

a place where the reader can form his or her own view of Marie and Pierre Curie. In the later, more colourful interlude, the abstracted image and saturated colour of the cyanotype helps to convey the emotional status of the moment. Because there is no prose text to accompany the scene, the reader is positioned almost as a silent observer to the Curie's initial moment of intimacy. Contemporary print and film biography often functions like this – one of the key criticisms of biography is that it is voyeuristic. A biographer, and by extension the reader is one who, to use Janet Malcolm's well-worn analogy "peeps through the keyhole" at the biographical subject (*The Silent Woman* 9). Yet, just as graphic biography makes its historicity visible, it also has the potential – as suggested here – to dramatically highlight the genre's voyeuristic qualities, something which is anticipated by Redniss' use of an epigraph that reads "With apologies to Marie Curie, who said, 'There is no connection between my scientific work and the facts of my private life'" (5). With its stylistic blending of modernism and amateurish sketches, not only does *Radioactive* reconfigure graphic biography, but it also works to bring to light how biography is read.

In addition, the colourful, dreamlike cyanotype images that represent much of Marie Curie's adulthood also function to remind readers that the biographical (like the historical) past is not something that sits, waiting to be retrieved. Past events are gone and only fragments remain of Curie's life: her children's and friends' memories, and material objects, such as the locations she inhabited, the lab equipment she used, as well as letters, diaries and photographs. The collage, dream-like visual style available to Redniss in the graphic biography form therefore provides a way to acknowledge this deficit. It reminds readers that a biography is a dream, an illusion, a construct; not a thing in and of itself. A

biographer imposes order and narrative on a life by assembling biographical fragments. In this sense, biography as a genre is relatively conservative – it functions to give the impression of order, as distinct from the messiness of life, and to conserve the public memory of the biographical subject. As *Radioactive* shows, graphic biography has the potential to both perpetuate and challenge this inherent conservatism of the genre. Indeed, the idea that biography is an assemblage of memories and fragments that are sequenced into a narrative is also made visible in the way Redniss uses archival material. At times throughout the biography, photographs and official documents punctuate the narrative. While, as mentioned earlier, these insertions work to authorise the biography as a verifiable nonfiction narrative, they also function to acknowledge the veneer of order on which the genre is predicated. For instance, one scene in the book features a famous photograph of a meeting of famous scientists at the Solvay Conference in Belgium in 1911 (134-135). Curie is pictured at the meeting alongside 23 other scientists, including Albert Einstein, Max Planck, and Paul Langevin, who, as

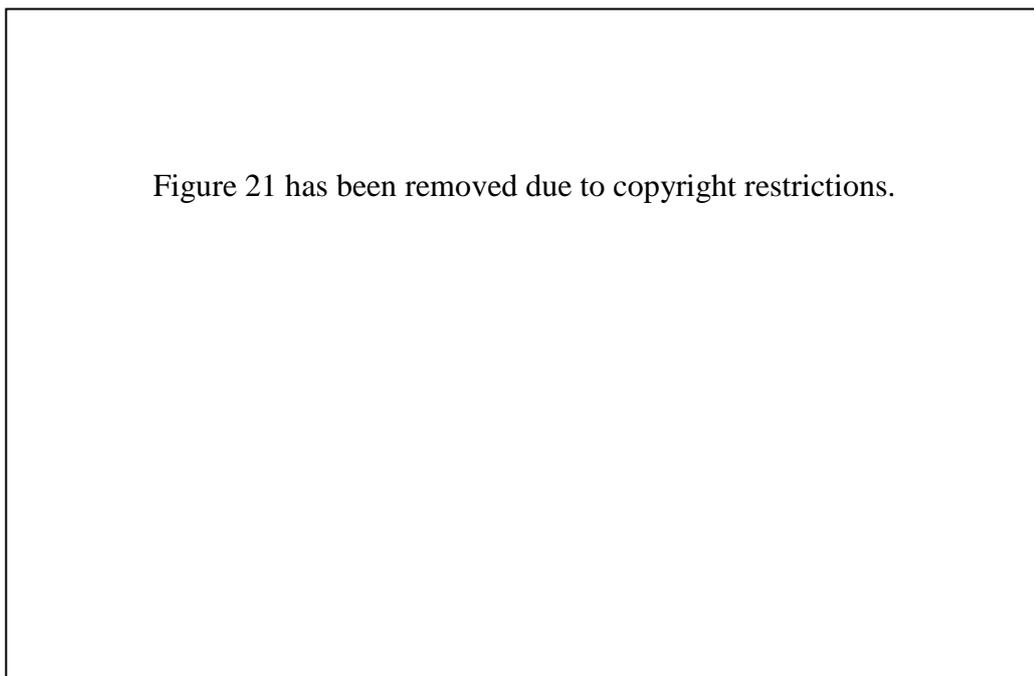


Figure 21 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 21: Biography as Collage: The 1911 Solvay Conference

Radioactive tells us, was to become her lover, after Pierre Curie's death that year (figure 21). The photograph occupies a double-page spread in the book, and is not reproduced as-is. Rather, the black and white photograph appears to be cut, cropped, and obviously placed on the white page so that the 24 individual figures appear to be standing in a blank space. At the same time, the prose narrative – which is a long quote from a letter from Einstein to Curie about the public scandal relating to her affair with Langevin – cascades down from the top of the page. The bottom of the quote almost appears to emerge from Einstein's mouth, giving the appearance of an absurd and informal speech bubble. The effect, then, is of a scrapbook or collage. The biographer's interpretation and editing of the archival photograph is made evident, thereby highlighting the way biography is a narrative consisting of assembled items and fragments. The overlaying of the prose narrative – of Einstein's voice advising Marie Curie to disregard the "rabble" and the interest in her private life – almost resembles a Monty Python collage and further reinforces the ways in which biography is a crafted narrative, where archival material is framed in particular ways in order to tell particular stories (135).

Collage, then, draws attention to the biographer, and it also makes Redniss appear more authentic and apparently honest. The implication is that she is not trying to create a narrative that is seamless and entirely ordered, and she invites the reader to see the constructed nature of the text. Moreover, in other moments in the biography, Redniss presents what appear to be photocopies of actual archival documents. In a momentary jump away from Curie's biographical narrative and towards the historical legacy of Curie's work, Redniss tells the story of US scientist, Irving Lowen, who worked on the Manhattan Project in the 1940s.

Although he worked on the Manhattan Project, Lowen was concerned about the United States' plans to build a nuclear weapon. He voiced his concern to President Roosevelt and as a result was surveilled by the FBI. To demonstrate the "fallout" from the discovery of radium and polonium, Redniss presents Lowen's FBI report (79, figure 22). The report is a photocopy and is presented without comment –

Figure 22 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 22: Biography as Collage: Lowen's FBI report

again, the reader is positioned as a silent observer to the story. However, in this instance, the reader is invited to read the document as the biographical text –rather than simply as a piece of evidence – and to judge the situation for him or herself. The document is covered in numerous inky bureaucratic stamps and black smudges, but Redniss makes no attempt to alter the document to make it easier to comprehend. Instead, this presentation suggests that the reader is privy to an unmediated moment in the story, where Redniss invites the reader to do the work of biographical interpretation. While it is true that a document like this might be presented in a print biography, the graphics form makes this process more visible

– especially given the larger scale of Redniss’ book – and makes the biographer appear more honest and authentic.

As El Rafaie highlights with respect to graphic memoir, and as suggested also by *Radioactive* and the *Anne Frank* biography example, “by filtering documentary evidence through their own unique vision, these [comics life narrative] artists thus draw attention to their own interpretative practices” (“Visual Authentication n.p.). El Rafaie argues that this “performance of authenticity” where the reader gets to glimpse the behind the scenes life narrative methodologies, “may strike the reader as *more* rather than *less* authentic, because it suggests that the graphic memoirist has nothing to hide and is willing to be completely open and honest” (“Visual Authentication n.p.). In *Radioactive*, then, Redniss’ choice to use collage and an abstracted style, positions her and her work as more “open and honest”, thereby challenging more traditional types of biography that attempt an illusion of order and unity.

At the same time, the stylistic choices Redniss makes, and the experimental nature of *Radioactive* – its status as a biographic – clearly highlights the limits of genre. As has been suggested, the abstracted images of Redniss’ graphic biography provide no hook for the reader to form a clear image of Curie, nor of her “significant others.” Pierre, for instance, is described in words as having “auburn hair”, but at no point does Redniss make that physical attribute visible. Similarly, the Etsy-like, hand-drawn images of Curie bear little resemblance to her physically. All we come to know of her relates from the occasional photograph and the fragmented prose narrative – which as a special typeface is challenging to read. By the time the reader has finished *Radioactive*,

he or she has a vague, impressionistic image of Curie, based on hearing her voice in the reproduced letters and diaries that are quoted in Redniss' text.

In addition, the lack of traditional comics grammar, while innovating the graphic biography form, further challenges the limits of biography. Panels are what comics scholar Will Eisner calls "sequenced segments" that "capture events" (40). Eisner argues that for the author of a graphic narrative, they are a medium of control. According to Eisner, panels "secure the reader's attention and dictate the sequence in which the reader will follow the narrative" (*Comics and Sequential Art* 40). Rather than relying on a sequence of panels, as has been shown, Redniss' book features whole pages where the visual and verbal are overlaid. While, as I have suggested, this has its advantages, it also makes reading *Radioactive* more challenging. On each page, the reader is presented with an overwhelming array of choices about where to begin and how the images and prose might work together to create meaning. Given that biography is a genre that tends to prescribe meaning and order to a life, this aspect of Redniss' biography presents a clear challenge to the genre.

As historian Jill Roe argues, one of the key attractions of biography is its educational value: "we expect to learn from it, and think that it should be reliable, convey the available contextual knowledge, and be complete...No matter how you do it, it has to have somewhere a beginning, a middle, and some sort of an end, even biographies of the living. It also has to be based on evidence. Style is not enough" (116). These constraints and reader expectations suggest "that biography is in fact a quite conservative genre," something that emerges from some of the readers reviews of *Radioactive* (Roe 116) For instance, while lots of reviews

praise the book's innovative style, numerous other reviewers criticise it. One reader says:

I was very disappointed in the book. It was neither scientific enough for a scientist nor interesting enough for the layman. It may have been produced very artistically, with special hand calligraphy and printing methods, but the content was vague and superficial. The connection of the Curies' discoveries with the atom bomb was the ONE thing I learned (Reader "Disappointing").

For this reader, the book's focus on aesthetic detail detracted from its educational function and so failed to meet generic expectations. Even more critical is another review that warns:

Anyone purchasing this travesty in the hope of finding a scientific biography of the Curies will be hideously disappointed for this volume is nothing more than a collection of silly, garish cartoons vainly posing as art. The few scraps of text scattered among the pictures are disconnected and childishly written, and the information is frequently inaccurate. One could learn much more from a Wikipedia article and the writing would be far superior. Avoid like a chunk of radium! (Franklin "An Ugly Joke").

Again, the idea that the book's experimental structure and style overshadows its educational value emerges strongly here. The fact that this reviewer argues that he could "learn more from a Wikipedia article" suggests that while some readers are willing to engage with innovative biographies, others hold a much more conservative view that a primary function of biography is, above all else, education. Therefore, if biography is about showing the subject – giving an impression of who he or she *really* is or was – and educating the reader, then *Radioactive* fails. As an example of biographics, *Radioactive* reveals the limitations of biography, and what can happen when a biographer strays too far into experiment and art rather than information and linear narrative.

Conclusion

As this chapter has shown, graphic biographies may not be new in a temporal sense, but they can be considered “new biography” for the ways in which they prompt us to re-view biographical practice and representation. Biography in comics form helps us to see the subject in his or her historical context in a way not possible in print and to re-view iconic lives.

In the case of Frank, her life is re-constructed and re-circulated for a new readership and a new generation. In viewing her life in comics form, readers not only learn about Anne, but also about her family and aspects of World War II and Holocaust histories. Furthermore, in contrast to photographs, which function as a direct form of visual testimony, the drawn images of the comics mode work to provide distance from the reality of the narrative. A violent and traumatic life story, like Frank’s, can be told in a way that provides the reader with space to receive the narrative. Here comics both literally and metaphorically offers readers space to receive and review traumatic biographical narratives.

This discussion has also highlighted the ways in which comics also draw attention to biography’s historicity. The hand drawn nature of comics works to remind the reader of the ways that biographers select, drawn on and interpret and arrange various archival fragments in order to impose order and sequence on a life. The presentation of actual archival documents and photographs in graphic biography makes the epistemology of biography more visible – and can also make the biographer appear more honest and authentic. Comics therefore provide a way for us to see biographical practice in action.

An abstract comic like *Radioactive* shows how comics can challenge existing assumptions about biographical practice and representation: how they can clear examples of biographics – comics biography that operates at the limits of genre. *Radioactive*'s emphasised materiality as an art object meets a deficit in an increasingly digital and virtual world. In this sense it could be dismissed as nostalgia. However, its status as an art object challenges the assumption that biography is not a creative enterprise, that it is merely a matter of recording rather than constructing. With its stylistic blending of modernism and amateurish sketches, not only does *Radioactive* reconfigure graphic biography, but it also works to bring to light how biography is read and received. Redniss blurs the lines between high and low art, and challenges the assumption that biography is a dry, documentary enterprise. These two graphic biographies are very different, but they nonetheless indicate the potential of the comics form to make visible the practice and genre of biography in the contemporary era. This idea is one that is explored further in the next chapter, when the discussion turns to the Hollywood biopic as new biography.

Chapter Three: Visibility and Critique: Contemporary Hollywood

Biopics as New Biography

In October 2013, the biopic, *The Fifth Estate*, about the exiled activist, Julian Assange, premiered in UK cinemas. Produced by Hollywood-based company, Dreamworks, and starring popular actor, Benedict Cumberbatch as Assange, the biopic was based on a memoir by one of Assange's ex-associates. In the days surrounding the film's release, an email, dated January 2012 appeared in the mainstream press. The email, written by Assange to Cumberbatch, explained why the activist had not responded to Cumberbatch's earlier requests to meet him, and it outlined why Assange would not be supporting the film. In the polemic missive, Assange wrote:

Feature films are the most powerful and insidious shapers of public perception, because they fly under the radar of conscious exclusion. This film is going to bury good people doing good work, at exactly the time that the state is coming down on their heads. It is going to smother the truthful version of events, at a time when the truth is most in demand. As justification it will claim to be fiction, but it is not fiction. It is distorted truth about living people doing battle with titanic opponents...The studio that is producing the film is not a vulnerable or weak party. Dreamworks' free speech rights are not in jeopardy – ours are. Dreamworks is an extremely wealthy organisation, with ties to powerful interests in the US government (qtd in Oldham).

Printed in full in the trade magazine, *Variety*, the email provides an insight into the mechanics of the biopic process and the power that a Hollywood production company has in making a cultural product about an individual's life. In this case, despite clear opposition from the subject himself. As well as revealing the contested nature of biographical narratives more generally, the email also highlights the shaky ontological ground the biopic occupies. As a very particular

type of biography – a dramatised feature film “that depicts the life of a historical person, past or present”, the biopic simultaneously offers fact and imagination (Custen *Bio/pics* 5). It is precisely this tension that makes the biopic a compelling form of life narrative, especially when it comes to the concept of new biography. Continuing on from the previous chapter’s discussion about comics as new biography, this chapter turns to the contemporary Hollywood biopic. The biopic is yet another prominent, popular culture form that makes visible what biography is and what it does, yet like comics and creative nonfiction, as I explain below, the biopic has largely been overlooked as a legitimate form of biography. Though, because of its potential reach, and enduring popularity, the biopic demands to be considered as a culturally significant form of life narrative.

In this chapter, then, I consider the ways in which contemporary Hollywood biopics might be considered new biography. How might such films highlight biography’s generic limits, prompt consideration of how biography is constructed, and the genre’s politics of representation? To explore this question, I turn to two high-profile contemporary biopics: Gus Van Sant’s 2008 *Milk*, of United States civil rights figure, Harvey Milk, and Todd Haynes’ 2007 biopic of pop culture icon, Bob Dylan, *I’m Not There*. Van Sant’s film tells the life story of Harvey Milk – his development from a conservative, closeted insurance executive in 1970s New York, to his move to San Francisco and his subsequent career as a progressive, openly gay city councillor, and finally his assassination by his disgruntled colleague, Dan White. Packaged as a classical “great man” Hollywood biopic, but with a relatively new type of subject – an openly gay public figure – *Milk* indicates the biopic’s potential for political and memory work in the present. In Van Sant’s film, Harvey Milk’s life becomes a symbolic and

cultural site for revising and writing back to the historical record, but also for intervening in contemporary debates about gay rights and marriage equality. This use of biography, where an “exceptional life” is brought to public attention and is implicated in current social debates is not new, but is especially apparent in the contemporary biopic form because of its visual nature and status as a popular type of film.

Contrasting with *Milk*'s classical biopic structure, Todd Haynes' highly unconventional, fragmented and experimental film uses not one, but six very different actors to play Bob Dylan, and consequently shows how a contemporary Hollywood-produced biopic has the potential to challenge the epistemological foundations and generic limits of biography. Haynes' avant-garde approach prompted a range of bewildered and negative responses from viewers, revealing consumers' expectations of biography: what the genre is expected to be and do.

In considering these case studies, I underpin my analysis with the work of postmodern and feminist film and history scholars. This is partly because of the paucity of biopic scholarship in modern auto/biography studies, but also because, as biopic scholar Penny Spirou has discovered: “fundamentally, the study of the biopic involves interdisciplinary work. It engages with film studies/theory, cultural studies, historical studies and biographical studies (to name a few relevant disciplines)” (Spirou “New Scholarly Study” 4). Following Spirou's observation, and given the nature of the questions I am asking of the biopic, I take an interdisciplinary approach in this chapter. I rely on the work of critics and scholars who work across the boundaries of historical studies, biography studies and film studies, and whose criticism attends to the politics and material aspects of biopic production as well as aesthetics and form.

Before I move to looking at the two case studies, though, it is worth contextualising the biopic as new biography. On first glance, it might be argued that biopics are not new in any sense of the word. After all, as Robert Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu, remind us, film is a “medium of last century” which “no longer belongs in the avant-garde of historical representation”(7). Yet when it first appeared the dawn of the twentieth century, film was revolutionary. Urban societies in the United States and Europe were familiar with still photography, but moving images were new and astonishing (Custen, *Bio/pics* 6). From the very beginning, cinema was especially preoccupied with capturing and projecting lives. As Hamilton has highlighted, “Biograph and Vitagraph, two of the most successful early production companies in America, had incorporated the notion of *life* into their very names; likewise Bioscope, an early projector, and biopticon, a camera/projector” (171). It is not surprising, then, as pioneering biopic scholar, George Custen observes, that biopics “were some of the earliest genres of the cinema” (*Bio/pics* 5). Early examples of biography on film include the 18-second *The Execution of Mary Queen of Scots* (1895), George Melies’ *Jeanne D’Arc* (1899), Cecil B. De Mille’s *Joan the Woman* (1916), Sarah Bernhardt in *Queen Elizabeth* (1912) and Abel Gance’s innovative epic, *Napoleon* (1927) (Custen, *Bio/pics* 5; Bingham, *Whose Lives* 21; Hamilton 173). Viewing these films offered audiences the opportunity to see (and later hear) dramatised embodiments of real lives projected onto the large screens of the cinema (Custen, *Bio/pics* 6). In other words, the emergence of the biopic in the early twentieth century signalled a dramatic new medium of biographical representation.

Accordingly, over the past century, the biopic has been an enduring and bankable form of Hollywood filmmaking. Prominent film and history scholar,

Robert Burgoyne suggests that the biopic is “perhaps the most familiar form of cinematic historiography: it is by far the largest genre of historical filmmaking” (16). In his foundational 1992 study of the Hollywood biopic, Custen cites over 291 biopics that were made in between 1927 and 1960, and his 2000 *Biography* paper cites a further 105 that were made from 1961 until 1980 (Custen *Bio/pics*; “The Mechanical Life”). Dennis Bingham, in his comprehensive 2010 monograph *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, indicates how popular the form remains in the contemporary era by the sheer number of case studies he considers. Indeed, the biopic – with its story of an “exceptional” individual and often inspirational storyline – is enormously popular and visible at the present moment. Every week a new biopic opens in cinemas across the global Anglosphere – to the extent that one reviewer talks of “biopic fatigue” – and commentary of the form features prominently in review spaces of chief media outlets, like *The New York Times* and *The Guardian* (Ebiri, Hoad).⁴⁵ In addition, biopics dominate all the major industry award ceremonies. As Belén Vidal points out, between 2000 and 2009, 12 of the 20 Academy Awards for best actor and actress were given to individuals “playing real-life figures in high-profile films including *Ray* (Jamie Foxx), *Milk* (Sean Penn), *Walk the Line* (Reece Witherspoon), *Boys Don’t Cry* (Hillary Swank), *Capote* (Philip Seymour Hoffman) and *La Vie en Rose* (Marion Cotillard)” (2). Similarly, in a January 2014 article in *The Guardian*, critic Phil Hoad estimates that “fourteen out of 26 principal acting Oscars since 2000 have gone to people playing real-life figures” (n.p.).

⁴⁵ New York critic, Bilge Ebiri observes: “Biopics are endemic to Hollywood. But now they’ve become epidemic. It’s hard to sort out the biopics opening in a given week, let alone a year.” Guardian critic, Phil Hoad goes as far as to suggest that we are currently in the midst of a “biopic boom.” He attributes this to “an insecurity about the present moment – whether our political, cultural and sporting figures can live up their predecessors. The implicit logic in Hoad’s claims is that the biopic is a fundamentally safe, and fixed genre at a time when there is a sense of “insecurity” about the present.

However, despite, or perhaps because of the biopic's overwhelming popularity and commercial success, it is a type of biography that has been continually overlooked by critics. As Alana Bell's thorough 1999 *Biography* bibliography shows, the form has had sporadic attention over the years, especially from scholars in history and film studies, but, with the exception of Custen's groundbreaking 1992 monograph, biopics have generally been an "underappreciated genre" in the academy, and have suffered from a "lack of critical respect" ("Biopic Bibliography"; Anderson and Lupo 51; Burgoyne 40). This is partly related to the form's status as a type of biography: as Bronwyn Polaschek correctly observes, the biopic's neglect "reflects a broader reluctance to theorise biography within the humanities and popular culture" (41). Nevertheless, at an historical moment where print endures as the preeminent form of expression, the biopic's neglect also relates to its status as a form of visual representation. As Nigel Hamilton observes, when it comes to biographical representation, there is an implicit hierarchy, "descending from scholarly, multi-volume works at the top, down through radio and television documentaries, to garish dramatization on TV and (the lowest of the low) dramatization on the big screen" (258). Consequently, as Steven Neale rightly notes, "the biopic has lacked critical – rather than industrial – esteem. The target of historians and of film critics and theorists alike, it has been the butt of jokes rather more often than it has been the focus of serious analysis" (54). This explains why it is only relatively recently that scholars have seriously begun to consider the biopic as worthy of study, and a number of collections and monographs about the form have appeared in the last few years.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ See for instance, Bingham's ambitious *Whose Lives Are They Anyway?*, Tom Brown and Belén Vidal 2014 provocative edited collection, *The Biopic in Contemporary Film Culture*, and Bronwyn Polaschek's gendered 2013 study, *The Post-Feminist Biopic: Narrating the Lives of Plath, Kahlo, Woolf and Austen*. The revitalised focus on the biopic in the past decade or so has also prompted a

The biopic has not only been marginalised in the academy, it also has a poor public image amongst many film critics. In reviews and commentary, the biopic is often described as “tedious, pedestrian and fraudulent” and some reviewers are blatantly hostile towards the genre (Bingham, *Whose Lives* 11). B. Ruby Rich suggests why this might be with her comments about the form: “the dramatic biopic is one of the most conservative genres in cinema, tied to the fabled exceptionalism of the single heroic (or pathological) individual” (7). It has been a genre associated with “lowbrow” culture rather than “high art”, thought to provide celebrity stories rather than tackling complex philosophical or political questions (Burgoyne 40; Hollinger 158). As critic John Hazelton has suggested “it is not hard to see why biopics have become a cinema staple. The genre has obvious appeal for producers and distributors: the stories are ready-made, the subjects are often well known, and the finished product has, in theory at least, a built-in audience” (qtd in Cheshire 6). The inference here is a one that afflicts many genres of life narrative: that the biopic is a paint-by-numbers product; that all a filmmaker has to do is simply recount the life of the subject, rather than creatively interpret and construct the narrative.⁴⁷ Thus, it is assumed that the biopic is a safe commercial bet for producers and investors—an assumption that is perpetuated by the form’s nickname as “Oscar bait” (Hoad n.p.).

As a result, Bingham says, until recently, “there was no quicker way to pan a film than to brand it a ‘biopic’” and indeed some filmmakers distance

number of academic journal special issues including in *Biography* (2000), *The Journal of Popular Film and Television* (2008), and an issue on the biopic and national identity in *a/b: Autobiography Studies* (2011). There are also discernible sub-types of the biopic that have attracted distinctive criticism. For instance, artists’ biopics and the musical biopic to name just two. See Marshall & Kongsgaard. “Representing Popular Music Stardom;” Spirou. *The Musical Biopic*; Babington and Evans. “Jolson I and II (1946/49).” On artists biopics see Berger. *Projected Art History*; Codell. “Nationalizing Abject American Artists;” Jacobs. “Vasari and Hollywood: Artist’s Biopics.”

⁴⁷ Julie Rak, for instance, has noted similar disparaging assumptions being made of memoir (*Boom!* 14).

themselves from the label (*Whose Lives* 10). “Nobody” remarks Bingham “wants to be caught making a biopic” (“The Life and Times” 237). Vidal suggests that amongst directors, there is the sense the biopic is an “old-fashioned” form: “a sort of heavy armour that constrains filmmakers’ creative movements” (2). In Cannes in 2009, Jane Campion argued that her film *Bright Star* was a love story rather than a biographical film about Romantic poet, John Keats and his lover Fanny Brawne. While Vidal notes how, when interviewed about his 2012 *Lincoln*, Stephen Spielberg “refused” the biopic tag (2). Spielberg reportedly claimed of his film: “I never saw it as a biopic”, instead preferring to describe the movie in quasi-artistic terms as a “portrait” (2). Again, it bears repeating that these comments contribute to the idea that plagues biography more generally – that the genre is conservative, artless and predictable – and with this reputation, it is difficult to see how biopics could be revolutionary, or examples of new biography.

However, these assumptions about biopics are unsophisticated and fail to look beyond common misconceptions. As the current boom in biopic scholarship has shown, the idea that the contemporary biopic is a monolithically conservative genre is not entirely correct (Bingham, Polaschek, Rosenstone). While many biopics share recognisable features and conventions, some of which I will discuss in a moment, it is nonetheless a diverse and shifting type of film. To talk about “film biographies”, as Robert Rosenstone has pointed out, is to call forward an overwhelming mass of texts across a range of languages and historical eras (“In Praise of the Biopic” 15). Indeed, English-language biopics in the early twenty-first century are a varied form of film biography, with numerous sub-types. There are literary biopics, such as *Capote*, *Sylvia*, *Iris* and *The Hours*; political biopics

like *W*, *The Iron Lady* and *Frost/Nixon*; musical biopics like *Ray*, *Walk the Line*, *Control* and *Nowhere Boy*, royal biopics such as *The Queen* and *The King's Speech*, and artist biopics like *Frida* or *Basquiat*. These few films alone demonstrate how diverse the form is in terms of subject matter, narrative style, and production size.

Bingham argues that contemporary biopics are “now are frequently experimental and formally adventurous” and that they “give off an aura of auteurism and artistic ambition” (*Whose Lives* 20). Many directors now make film biographies that “interrogate, deconstruct, reinvent and reinvigorate the genre” (*Whose Lives* 21). As will be shown in a moment, this is certainly the case. Furthermore, Robert Rosenstone and Constantin Parvulescu argue that historical films, such as biopics, have the potential to challenge “hegemonic representations of the past” (7). They suggest that such films are,

at the same time education and entertainment, document and fiction, an address of reason and emotion, scholarship and art, a public and a commercial enterprise. It is precisely this hybridity, or the multiple teleology of film, that prevents it from ever occupying a hegemonic discursive position and thus preserves its counter-hegemonic effect (2).

Along similar lines, Hila Shachar argues that contemporary literary biopics—films about the lives of literary authors—can be considered a “new form of biography” (200). Shachar shows how biopics like *Bright Star* (about Romantic poet, John Keats) and *The Hours* (featuring Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf) use “ideologies of western selfhood only to subvert them through a postmodern self-consciousness of the cultural specificity of identity construction” (200). Consequently, for Shachar, such films “point to a new form of biography, in which, in his/her historical setting, the individual is a self-conscious example of the ‘fictionality’ of the notion of a linear and stable identity and history” (200).

Viewed in these ways, the biopic is not simply a monolithically conservative, “tedious” form of biographical expression, but an inherently provocative and resistant one. Their hybridism and their status as a popular, rather than officially sanctioned form, makes biopics important examples of contemporary “new biography” that have the potential to challenge existing conventions and politics of the genre.

Furthermore, as A. Mary Murphy has highlighted, “the choice of subject for a biographical film assigns value to that subject and that subject’s way of being” (n.p.). Therefore, suggests Murphy, “the genre potentially has power to situate a historically-neglected individual in the public consciousness, to reassess the facts of a very public career, and to reconsider the devaluation of a way of being in the world” (n.p.). Similarly, Shachar contends that “part of the important historical work that such films perform is making hidden histories visible, providing the cinematic language to represent and talk about issues that have been marginalized in mainstream culture” (201). From this perspective, not only do biopics lay bare some of the assumptions and foundations of biography, but they also have the potential to make marginalised histories and individuals visible in a unique way. Even though such films are made by powerful studios, biopics can be a democratic type of life narrative and historical representation. As the poetic expression, and compression, of a life into a 2-hour drama, the biopic offers a powerful combination of drama and fact, education and entertainment in a sensory, affective package. Private aspects of public lives are imaginatively projected on screen and embodied by glamorous actors. Via cinematic accoutrements such as costumes, makeup, sets, lighting and sound, the biopic not only reconstructs the subject’s life, but also his or her historical context. In other

words, biopics provide a way to view and re-view lives in a manner that is not available in more traditional forms, such as printed prose.

With that context informing my analysis, I will now move on to a discussion of the two case study texts: *Milk* and *I'm Not There*. On the one hand, as a highly-acclaimed, Academy Award-winning film, *Milk* has been received as a highly-conventional, classical biopic: a notable contemporary exemplar of the form (Bingham *Whose Lives* 18, Erhart 156). I will discuss this in more detail below, but in a number of ways Van Sant's film mimics the conventions of the Hollywood biopics of the 1930s and 1940s, essentially relying on a familiar "great man" template to tell Harvey Milk's life story. Yet, on the other hand, in representing Harvey Milk, an openly gay public figure, Van Sant's film works against convention to represent a non-traditional biopic subject: an individual whose life would not have been the focus of a major Hollywood film in previous eras. It is this tension – between tradition and innovation – that makes *Milk* a rich case study for a discussion of new biography. As I have suggested, and as William Epstein points out, biographical narratives, be they on film or otherwise, have "traditionally been an ally of dominant structures of socio-economic authority" ("Introduction: Biopics" 1). Biographies tend to maintain rather than challenge the status quo, and it is only relatively recently – in the wake of late twentieth century, second-wave feminism and a corresponding turn to social history – that biography has been a form that has been mobilised to revise established histories and hierarchies. *Milk*, as a product of this era, is emblematic of this shift.

Milk mobilises the conventions of "great man" biography in order to canonise a previously overlooked individual, but also to engage in other kinds of political and memorial work. The film canonises Harvey Milk as a significant

historical figure, and at the same time it also brings an aspect of the history of US civil rights to a broader audience across the global Anglosphere. It reminds viewers, as B. Ruby Rich explains, that “being gay” in Harvey Milk’s lifetime was a “blood and guts battle for existence and recognition”, a battle that had the potential to result in death, as Milk’s assassination proves (257).

Though beyond this key function, *Milk* also reveals how biopics are not just about the past, nor are they always just about the life of an individual. Soon after its release in 2007, *Milk* was co-opted into public campaigns to raise awareness of the various legal battles for same-sex marriage equality in the US and elsewhere. When the film won a number of Academy Awards, *Milk*’s star, Sean Penn and screenwriter, Dustin Lance Black, used their acceptance speeches to draw attention to contemporary gay rights. Harvey Milk’s life took on additional political symbolism and resonance as the film’s timing and its use of a classical, familiar biopic template saw it become a “soft weapon” in modern-day rights movements (Whitlock).⁴⁸ *Milk* therefore shows the ways in which a contemporary biopic can not only “make hidden histories visible” in influential and distinctive ways, but how a Hollywood-produced biographical feature film can be a powerful cultural and memorial site in the early twenty-first century.⁴⁹

The second case study, *I’m Not There* is also a pertinent example for a discussion of contemporary new biography, albeit for different reasons. Ostensibly about the life of music icon, Bob Dylan, the film has been framed as innovative, and indeed has already been marked as “new biography” by prominent

⁴⁸ This point is also evidenced by the fact that the biopic was later selected for school and university syllabi to teach courses on the history and contemporary politics of gay rights.

⁴⁹ While I use Vidal’s term “hidden histories” here as the catalyst for my discussion, it is worth pointing out that the history that *Milk* presents was well-known to those familiar with US civil rights movements. Therefore, it was not “hidden”; rather it had been overlooked in more official public narratives.

life narrative scholars Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (*Reading Autobiography* 9). In fact, *I'm Not There* appears to be so unconventional that it has also been described as an “anti-biopic” (Lisi “Enough With the Biopic”). Where *Milk* employs a classical Hollywood biopic structure and approach, *I'm Not There* defiantly refutes it. Subverting the convention of the Hollywood biopic as a “star vehicle” for a single performer, Haynes cast six actors – of varying age, gender and ethnicity – to play various aspects of Bob Dylan’s life. In doing so, *I'm Not There* resists the idea of the unified, singular identity of the traditional biographical subject. The film’s casting also critiques the well-worn genre of the celebrity biography, and the assumption that audiences and fans can ever know “the authentic” or “real” Bob Dylan. *I'm Not There* suggests that biography is an illusion, and that the subject of biography, especially if that subject is an iconic celebrity, will never “be there” in the text. As well as highlighting the epistemological basis on which biography is predicated, this aesthetic experimentation also pushes at the limit of genre. The subsequent audience reactions – especially those that express confusion or irritation – bring into sharp relief the social function and generic expectations of biography: that it is generally expected to be a representational form where readers and viewers can learn about an individual’s life and historical context. In other words, *I'm Not There* clearly indicates how an experimental biopic has the potential to prompt consideration of biography’s epistemology and the implicit contract biographical stories make with their consumers.

Gus Van Sant’s *Milk* as New Biography: Convention and Visibility

Like the *Anne Frank* comic of the previous chapter, *Milk* initially appears to be a highly conventional film. In his influential study of the form, George Custen identifies a number of attributes of classical Hollywood biopics of the 1930s and 40s. Classical biopics, Custen argues, tend to begin not with the subject's birth, but *in medias res*, in the moment just before he or she becomes publically notable. Such films begin with an assertion of "the truth" and use several devices that help to compress time, including voiceovers, title cards and flashbacks. These devices explain the subject's notability, fill in narrative gaps, place the film in historical context and mark the film as a "true story" (*Bio/pics* 50). Furthermore, the hero must rebel against the establishment, or the society's dominant beliefs. "A central conflict of the biopic" says Custen "is the hero's antagonistic relations with members of a given community" and the process by which he or she attempts "to reformulate the boundaries" of that community. (*Bio/pics* 71, 72). To assist the hero, biopics usually feature a "close friend" or "sidekick" who acts a "moral gyroscope, reminding the great one of the non-professional values like modesty, honesty, family and above all else, love" (*Bio/pics* 163). *Milk* displays all of these characteristics.

The film is indeed authorised as a "true story" from the very beginning by its liberal use of archival and documentary materials. The first two and a half minutes is a montage of black-and-white actuality footage, of police raids on gay bars and clubs in various US cities. Lines of men are escorted from bars, and then the men are handcuffed and bundled into waiting vans by police officers (figure 23). A number of the men shield their faces from the camera. This footage is interspersed with shots from old Miami and Los Angeles newspaper headlines that read "Homosexuals and police clash", "Tavern Charges Police Brutality" and

“Police Start Crackdown of Homosexual Bars; Arrest 6.” No sound of these “clashes” is provided, replaced instead with Danny Elfman’s minimalist soundtrack of contemplative piano and cello to quietly accompany the visual information. The viewer is therefore provided space to consider the idea that while *Milk* may be a Hollywood drama, it is nonetheless one that will attempt to represent a verifiable life and history.

Figure 23 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 23: From the opening scenes, the film is authorised as a verifiable story

The conventional truth claims of the biopic are advanced in the next shots, which cut from the archival footage to a title card – simple white letters, reading “1978”, over a mid-shot of Sean Penn as Harvey Milk, sitting alone, at his kitchen table late at night (figure 24). Milk is shown dressed in a suit, quietly reading into a tape recorder. He begins “This is Harvey Milk speaking on Friday November 18. This is only to be played in the event of my death by assassination.” Milk’s lines here are taken directly from the actual tape-recorded will and testament he made shortly before his assassination, reinforcing the truth claims that the initial montage established. Moreover, via a series of contrasts, this sequence creates a clear link between the public history and the private life of the biographical

subject. While the actuality footage shows the public setting of the bars and street, with the chaos and violence of the police raids, the opening scene with

Figure 24 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 24: Linking the public and private histories

Milk is notable in its stillness. It shows a quiet, seemingly ordinary, domestic setting, with the focus is on a single individual, rather than a crowd. These contrasts, then, invite the viewer to make a link between the scenes of violent public history and the interior, dramatised private life of the biographical subject, thus positioning the proceeding biography as a “true story.” This link is further reinforced by the immediate use of flashbacks that show Milk, presumably in the years prior to 1978, with megaphone in hand, addressing a crowd on the street. He is depicted as an inspiring and witty aspiring community politician, whose

Figure 25 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 25: Use of flashback to rapidly establish the significance of the biopic subject

catchphrase, “My name is Harvey Milk, and I want to recruit you”, charms the crowd (figure 25). He is also seen in a community hall, addressing a group of blue collar, male workers. Milk quips, “I know I’m not what you expected, but I left my high-heels at home.” These flashbacks very quickly establish Milk as an adaptable “man of the people” and an astute politician, who is able to address and influence diverse groups.

Returning to Milk’s kitchen in 1978, he continues reading into the tape recorder: “I fully realise that a person who stands for what I stand for – an activist, a gay activist – becomes the target or potential target for a person who is insecure, terrified, afraid or very disturbed themselves...” The sequence then jumps ahead in time to archival footage of news reports of Harvey’s assassination (by fellow city councillor, Dan White), showing the street outside the San Francisco City Hall, while police and ambulance sirens blare. At this point, Milk’s 1978 recording provides the voiceover to the public reporting of his own death, and significantly, in this sequence, the original soundtrack of the chaos of the town hall – shouting voices and police radios – is included, along with a layer of Elfman’s soundtrack. We see more archival news footage of a police officers and



Figure 26: Archival news footage of Feinstein announcing Milk’s death

workers running down the corridors of the city hall building and of city councillor, Diane Feinstein, announcing, to a pack of waiting journalists, that Milk and Mayor George Moscone have “been shot and killed”, to which shocked gasps can be heard (figure 26). Another title card then appears: “Milk” in simple white lettering on a black background. Taken together, this opening montage works as a frame for the film, but it also demonstrates how *Milk* follows convention by stressing the importance of the biopic subject, establishing a link between the private and public realms, and communicating a great deal of biographical information quickly and efficiently.

The film’s conventional status is furthered by the fact that, like a classical biopic, the narrative begins *in medias res*. After the opening sequence that works to frame the narrative, the story begins on Milk’s fortieth birthday, shortly before he becomes a political figure. A title card announces “1970” and Milk is shown at night in a New York subway meeting a younger man – Scott Smith – with whom he will shortly begin a relationship. At this early point in the film, Milk is dressed conservatively in a suit and works as an insurance executive. He also – significantly – is discreetly, rather than openly gay, warning Scott, who has recently arrived in New York, to be cautious about his sexual activities. “The New York Police are the toughest” warns Milk “they’re arrogant and they’re everywhere.” However, meeting Scott, and beginning a relationship with him, proves to be a catalyst for Milk to change his life. The pair move from New York to San Francisco’s Castro area, where they open a photography store, Castro Camera. The geographical shift – from east to west coast – also signifies Harvey’s personal development, and his metaphorical “birth” as the subject of the biopic. His appearance changes: Milk eschews his crisp business suit for jeans, waistcoat,

boots and long hair. More importantly, he also goes from being relatively discreet – in terms of his sexuality – to being openly gay. In the language of biopic convention, this shift is an important way that Milk is positioned as being an outsider in 1970s San Francisco.

In one key scene shortly after their arrival in the Castro, Harvey and Scott meet a neighbouring business owner of a liquor store, McConnell, who comes to introduce himself (figure 27). The scene is shot from inside the Castro Camera shop, and shows Harvey and Scott adjusting the sign in the window in preparation for the first day of trading. Harvey and Scott then move outside to admire the window from the street and as they do, they embrace and kiss. At the same time as McConnell approaches. His body language is detached and after Milk introduces himself and warmly shakes his hand, McConnell pulls away, tensely bringing out a handkerchief and to wipe his hand clean. When Milk explains that he would like to join the local merchants association – joking that he’s “not an interloper. A Jew, perhaps, but I hope you’ll forgive that” – McConnell tersely advises Milk that that will not be possible. “If you open those doors [of Castro Camera]” warns McConnell, “the merchant’s association will have the police pull your

Figure 27 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

licence...there's man's law and there's God's law, and San Francisco police are happy to enforce either." McConnell walks away, back to his liquor store, leaving Harvey and Scott shocked and defiant. This scene, then, as per convention, positions Harvey outside of the social "boundaries" of the neighbourhood community. With his self-deprecating line about being an "interloper", Harvey attempts to warmly greet his new neighbour, yet is directly rebuffed. This rebuttal is reinforced by Van Sant's choice to film from inside the Castro Camera shop, though the window, while Harvey and Scott are outside in the street. This framing sends the message that Harvey and Scott are very much outsiders – both in the literal and metaphorical sense.

The next shot furthers this idea, as Harvey and Scott are pictured kissing passionately outside their camera store (figure 28). This time, the camera is placed across the street – as if from McConnell's liquor store – looking back at Harvey and Scott, sitting on the front door step of Castro Camera. As if to make the point about Harvey's identity transformation, and the way that his sexuality makes him



Figure 28 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 28: Milk is positioned as an outsider, ready to "reformulate the social boundaries" of his community

an outsider in his newly adopted community, Scott and Harvey kiss passionately, upstaged by the shop sign that playfully reads “yes...we are open.” The scene is filmed in slow motion and the camera lingers on the lovers before the frame expands outwards to a wide shot of the street.

In conjunction with the previous scene, this moment is important in marking the film as a conventional biopic. It establishes Milk’s public sexual identity as the “central conflict of the biopic”, to use Custen’s phrase. As the first crane shot of the film – where the camera moves up and away from the two principal characters, to show an elevated view of their new street – this moment is designed to imply that Harvey and Scott’s open display of sexuality as the trigger that establishes “antagonistic relations” their community. While the camera’s placement – from McConnell’s perspective – is designed to further establish the obstacle of the film in the shape of the homophobic attitudes of some members of the local community. In order for Milk to overcome this obstacle, he will have “to reformulate the boundaries” of conservative San Francisco, including its police force. Furthermore, this sequence – with its mention of the police – harkens back to the documentary images of the opening, and emphasises the biopic narrative’s truth claims.

An additional way *Milk* reads as a classical biopic is through the representation of Harvey’s lover, Scott. In the film, Scott fulfils the conventional biopic role of “sidekick”, who acts as a “moral gyroscope, reminding the great one of the non-professional values like modesty, honesty, family and above all else, love” (*Bio/pics* 163). Over the course of the narrative Scott is shown supporting and assisting on Milk’s political campaigns – there are three in all – and he is shown as being initially obliging when their private home is continually

used for evening campaign meetings. However, later in the film, when Harvey's political work overwhelms his home life, Scott reminds him – as per convention – to restore the balance between the professional and the personal. Ultimately Harvey's relationship with Scott ends; it is sacrificed for the “public good” so that Harvey can eventually “reformulate the boundaries” of conservative San Francisco. Nonetheless, Scott's role as “moral gyroscope” continues even after he and Harvey separate, and in one illustrative scene at the end of the film, the morning before Harvey's assassination, the two are depicted in an intimate telephone conversation. After attending the opera and being up all night, Harvey calls Scott and wakes him.

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Figure 29 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 29: Adhering to biopic convention: Scott as Milk's “sidekick”

The sequence moves between showing two dimly-lit spaces: Harvey's living room, and Scott in his bed (figure 29). After a quiet conversation, Scott tells Harvey "I want you to know that I'm proud of you". Harvey is shown reacting to Scott's statement by silently smiling and weeping, before the film cuts away to Harvey arriving at city hall moment before his assassination. As one of the last scenes of the film, and contrasting in its private intimacy with the public space of the city hall, this moment is designed to underscore Scott's enduring role as moral gyroscope, reminding Milk of the importance of family and love.

True to the narrative arc of the conventional biopic, where the subject "reformulates the boundaries" of a given community and overcome a particular obstacle and prove his or her "greatness", *Milk's* climax shows Harvey and his supporters triumphing over the introduction of anti-gay laws in California (Custen, *Bio/pics* 50). A large proportion of the final section of the film focuses on Harvey's ideological battle with anti-gay campaigners, such as the Christian conservative, Anita Bryant. Milk is shown in public debates, furiously opposing Proposition 6, a Californian state initiative, which would introduce laws banning gay and lesbian people from teaching in schools. The focus on this particular political campaign is designed to build towards the climax of the film, which it does. To again reiterate *Milk's* status as a kind of public history, old television footage of Anita Bryant is edited in with footage of President Jimmy Carter speaking at a public rally asking "everybody to vote against Proposition 6." The film then cuts back to the dramatised narrative to show Milk in the buzzing campaign office as the Proposition 6 votes are tallied. Milk and his political staffers wait to hear the results, which are eventually declared as a defeat for Proposition 6 and a win for Milk and the gay community. The campaign office

erupts and the scene is filmed as a mid-shot, with Milk cheering and embracing those around him. Elfman’s soundtrack provides a stirring a soaring musical accompaniment designed to work with the images to communicate triumph. The next shot is Milk, accompanied by a celebratory brass band and enthusiastic cheering, ascending the stage at campaign headquarters to give a victory speech (figure 30). To signal immediacy and to build the drama, the scene is filmed from the perspective of the crowd. Harvey is then pictured on the stage, hand in air acknowledging the cheers, before taking the microphone to speak. This scene, then, is the high point of the film and is designed to signal Milk’s successful “reformulation of the community.”

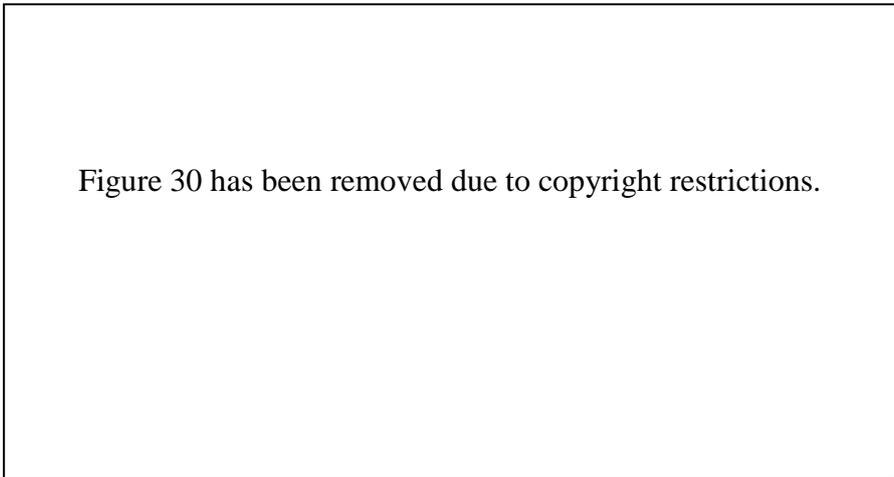


Figure 30 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 30: From Outsider to Biopic Hero: “Reformulation of Community”

This idea is further underscored when the scene abruptly cuts to a different perspective. Moving from the campaign headquarters, Milk’s speech is subsequently viewed via the television screen in Dan White’s living room (figure 31). Milk declares “tonight, it has become clear to everyone out there that they do know one of us, and now that they do, they can see that we are not sick. They can feel that we are not wrong. And they know that there must be, that there should be

a place for us in this great country, in this great world.” As Milk speaks the camera pans around from the television screen to Dan White, sitting in an armchair, watching the broadcast. This scene furthers the triumphal climax of the biopic and reaffirms Milk’s triumph over adversity. Milk (as Penn) appearing on the television suggests his that his transformation to public figure has occurred, while the inclusion of his speech triumphantly moves Milk – and by association – the gay communities in San Francisco and beyond, into the centre of the frame. In this scene Milk’s biopic journey, from self-identified “interloper” to triumphant public figure, is complete.

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Figure 31 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 31: Dan White watches Milk’s triumphant, televised Proposition 6 speech

As these examples show, *Milk* appears to be a conventional biopic. Indeed, numerous reviewers have expressed disappointment at the film's adherence to tradition. Alex Tunzelmann calls it the "crème-de-la-crème of faithful biopics" while *Salon* critic, Andrew O'Hehir refers to it as "a solid, respectful, by-the-numbers" film (n.p.). In a more uncomplimentary review, Hilton Als derides the film for its conventional approach, dismissively remarking that Milk "pretty much follows the standard biopic formula: subject grapples with self, finds self, becomes a public self, weathers controversy, triumphs personally and/or professionally, and then dies" (n.p.). Meanwhile, Peter Bradshaw bemoans the fact that *Milk* is a "celebratory portrait...a slightly staid film" and that "its liberal-inspirational gestures" are "calculated for the awards and prestige" (n.p.). So the film's structure, and use of conventional biopic characteristics, as well as its reception suggest that it is anything but new biography.

Yet this interpretation overlooks the social and political function of *Milk* and more generally, the biopic form. As Dennis Bingham highlights, "the biopic has its foundations in popular forms that range from the lives of saints, national myths and legends to melodramas and reviews" (*Whose Lives* 31). The biopic's purpose "is to enter the biographical subject into the pantheon of cultural mythology, one way or another, and show why he or she belongs there" (*Whose Lives* 10). With this in mind, and given Van Sant's history as an innovative cinematic auteur, his decision to make a "by-the-numbers" film that follows the "biopic formula" is significant. As an openly gay man, Harvey Milk is a relatively non-traditional biopic subject, and one who would arguably not have been the focus of a major studio filmic biography until very recently. Consequently, in

order to ensure Milk's place in the "pantheon of cultural mythology", Van Sant uses a narrative template that is well-established and highly recognisable to Anglophone film audiences. He makes what Bingham has identified as "a minority appropriation" biopic: a film that appropriates the classical 1930s and 40s Hollywood biopic template in order to tell the life of a non-traditional subject (18). In doing so, even though the biopic subject is new and non-traditional, the classical biopic template, as a mainstay of Hollywood film production since the 1930s, is recognisable to many. As a result, the film is more likely to translate across the global Anglosphere, and Milk's life, and associated public history, becomes visible in a new and influential way. *Milk* indicates, then, how biopics can play a social justice role that is more readily associated with first-person life narrative forms, such as testimony and memoir.

A brief consideration of existing representations of Milk's life suggests that the biopic did indeed work to "write back" to the official record and – as Murphy puts it – "situate a historically-neglected individual in the public consciousness" (n.p.). Prior to the biopic's release in 2008, Milk had been memorialised most prominently in Randy Shilts' 1982 print biography, *The Mayor of Castro Street*, and Rob Epstein's 1984 Academy-Award winning documentary, *The Times of Harvey Milk*. Additionally, Milk's name adorned numerous public spaces in San Francisco and elsewhere in the United States, such as schools, libraries and subway stops. The Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgender (GLBT) Museum in San Francisco kept a collection of his personal items – including the suit he was wearing when he was killed – and in 2003 his life was the focus of an exhibition at that institution ("Saint Harvey"; Jones "A Martyr in the Archive"). However, despite this network of life narratives, Milk was not

well-known beyond the San Francisco community of which he had been a part. As activist Cleve Jones says of Epstein's documentary, for instance, "as beautifully done as it was, it simply wasn't seen by enough people" ("Interview" *The Times of Harvey Milk*). Along similar lines, actor James Franco explains how he believed that "one of the important things" about making the biopic was to get Milk's "story out there" (Hanson n.p.). Franco says that the existing representations, including Shilts' biography and Epstein's documentary simply "didn't reach" his generation (Hanson n.p.). The implication here is that when it comes to making lives and histories visible – getting stories "out there" and circulating widely – the biopic is the most influential and effective form.

Indeed, in the wake of Van Sant's biopic, various state bodies officially recognised Milk for the first time ever. California established a Harvey Milk Memorial Day, which is marked on his birthday each year, and his life was also commemorated on a national level, with a US Presidential Medal of Freedom ("President Obama Honors"; "Democratic Leader Pelosi"). This official memorialisation, argues Ron Eyeran, was prompted "as much because of this narrative [the familiar biopic template] as the pressure brought to bear by interested parties" (413). These few examples suggest how the traditional presentation of Milk's life functions to circulate his story much further than a more apparently innovative, avant-garde narrative would have. Van Sant's film shows how a seemingly formulaic Hollywood biopic can become a type of biography with real social potential. By appropriating a classical template, *Milk* not only canonises a formerly overlooked individual, but it also influences contemporary memorial politics and state policy about who gets remembered in an official way.

The biopic's capacity for social engagement then, relies in large part on the film's director – his or her choices and style. This is especially so in the present era, as the biopic moves from a producer's to a "director's medium", (Bingham, *Whose Lives* 19). The director's identity and artistic brand is leveraged in publicity materials for the biopic, particularly in auteur films, such as *Milk* and *I'm Not There*, where the biopic is framed as "A film by [director's name]" In this sense, there are parallels here with blockbuster print biographers – such as Andrew Motion, Kitty Kelley or Walter Isaacson – whose style is a brand in and of itself, and whose name on the cover can be equally as important as the subject whose life is told. Van Sant's vision and choices for telling Milk's life story using a classical template then, and his "take" on Harvey Milk's life, is central to the success of the film's counter-memorial work.

In addition to the film's status as counter-memory, there are a number of additional ways *Milk* can be considered new biography. In his seminal book *History on Film/Film on History*, Rosenstone argues that "film has given us tools to see reality in a new way – including the realities of a past which has long since vanished from our sight" (158). Alison Landsburg adds that the "power of the cinema derives precisely from its tactile, haptic, sensuous quality—from the fact that it addresses the body of the spectator, making her or him feel, and then think about, things he or she might not otherwise encounter (14)." The biopic, then, has the potential to not only make new subjects highly visible, but it also invites the audience to review lives in their associated historical contexts in a sensory, affective way. In *Milk*, this is primarily done via the reconstruction of Harvey Milk's physical environment. The time and place in which he lived – the Castro neighbourhood of the 1970s – is painstakingly recreated. Screenwriter, Dustin

Lance Black, and the production team undertook extensive research and used archival materials, such photographs, political campaign posters, television footage, popular music and oral histories to inform their narrative (Gordon). Costumes, hair and makeup, the film sets, lighting and even the camera equipment and film stock was specially chosen in order to authentically reconstruct Harvey Milk's life in Rankean terms: *as it really was*. (Oppenheimer; von Ranke qtd in Hughes-Warrington 259). As one reviewer who grew up in San Francisco during that era notes, "the detailed sense of time so effortlessly captured by the mise-en-scene of the film" is remarkable (Sher). Meanwhile, another reviewer says of the costumes in particular, from "tight jeans to variety of long and/or Afro hair, we really feel like we are with all these people of a different time in San Francisco" (Roscoe). The film's scrupulous attention to the reconstruction of the time and place provides an immersive, affective experience for the viewer who is invited to "feel like" he or she is amongst the 1970s San Francisco community.

Adding additional resonance to this is the fact that the film was shot in the same physical locations that Harvey Milk inhabited, including the Castro Camera store on Castro Street, which functioned as campaign headquarters for Milk's political campaigns (Oppenheimer). Working from archival materials, Van Sant and the film crew transformed the neighbourhood streets to resemble the earlier era. Walking around the Castro during the filming of *Milk*, B. Ruby Rich said that she was,

mesmerised by a 1970s version of my own city. Real estate offices advertised houses for sale for \$40,000. Gas prices were laughable. An Aquarius Record Store packed its windows with vinyl records and acid-rock posters. The Castro cinema marquee, restored to full-colour brilliance, touted *The Poseidon Adventure*. And Harvey Milk's fabled Castro Camera shop was there again, popping up in the middle of the block like an apparition (243).

The biopic, then, is a unique type of biography: one which promises to offer viewers a glimpse at a life in an earlier time and place. At the same time, as Rich points out, with her description of the transformation as “apparition”, the biopic is not simply a direct copy of “real life” or the past. Like any historical film, including documentaries – the biopic is a “construction of a simulated past” and in this sense it is a type of biography that is designed to work on a metaphorical or allegorical level (Rosenstone “History on Film” 158).

In presenting an authentic-looking, “simulated past” *Milk* invites viewers to not only view the biopic subject in what appears to be his historical context but also prompts a consideration of how that past relates to the present. This point is something that prominent biopic scriptwriter, Peter Morgan has noted. Morgan argued that the historical distance of some biopics, means that such films “can work as an analogy or parable, rather than its literal narrative...People can watch the Frost/Nixon interviews and make associations that aren’t just about Richard Nixon and David Frost. Because time has passed, the film can have an additional resonance through metaphor” (qtd in Hoad n.p.). Accordingly, Van Sant’s film not only prompts the viewing or re-viewing of Harvey Milk’s life and the Castro of the 1970s, but it also has the potential to function as allegory, prompting contemporary audiences to make associations with the present.

Indeed, Rich suggests that the apparent historical authenticity of the film did just that. In particular, she proposes that Van Sant’s use of documentary footage in an otherwise dramatised narrative was astute. For Rich,

it facilitated the audience’s identification of the story with the stuff of history. Its most emotional scenes, for me, were the imported dragnet footage of police busting up gay bars in the 1950s and 1960s, shining spotlights onto the faces of clean-cut men rounded up by the vice squad simply for patronizing a bar, thrown into a police van for having a drink with their kind, criminalized merely for seeking

community...*Look back, remember, don't forget*, the footage seemed to signal. *Not all of this is over, you aren't home free yet* (257).

From this perspective, Milk's life becomes a reminder that the struggle for civil rights is not simply something that happened in the past, but it is an ongoing issue that resonates and demands attention in the present. The biopic subject's life becomes both a memorial to him or her, but also a more general "lieu de mémoire" – a site of memory where viewers can reflect on contemporary concerns (Nora).

Consistent with this, Julia Erhart notes that in the months after its release, *Milk* became implicated in marriage equality debates. The passage of California's Proposition 8 law, in November 2008, effectively outlawed same-sex marriage by defining the institution as a "union between a man and a woman", prompting most critics to see the film "as amplifying the cause for gay rights, crediting it with raising awareness and inspiring a new generation of activists" (Erhart 166). The drama and triumph of Harvey Milk leading the defeat of Proposition 6 in 1978 is co-opted to parallel with contemporary campaigns for marriage equality. Thus, when Sean Penn as Milk utters his trademark line "I'm Harvey Milk, and I'm here to recruit you" he is not only speaking to the characters in the biopic, but his words seem to directly address viewers of the film. Milk's life becomes politically symbolic: a catalyst for the revision of the past as well as social action in the present.

Aside from making the subject and his or her history visible, and acting as a metaphorical space where contemporary concerns surface, the biopic also works as metatext, reminding viewer of the constructed nature of biographical narratives more generally. As Glenn Man reminds us, like other types of biography, the biopic is a "representation, a fictionalized or interpretive treatment" (iv). In *Milk*,

this fact is made visible in the biopic in two key ways. The first is through the insertion of archival materials such as actuality footage, first-person filmic and tape-recorded testimonies, newspaper and television reports, and other public documents. As mentioned earlier, in order to authorise his film as a kind of public history, Van Sant frames the biopic with actuality footage of police raids on gay bars, but he also uses other archival footage throughout the film. For instance, at one moment in the biopic, found footage, historical colour film and still photographs of men on the streets of the Castro is shown while Penn-as-Milk reads his tape-recorded will. He explains how in the 1970s “the Castro became destination number one...hundreds of gay men were coming every week from all over the world. It was our area. Our own neighbourhood.” Here, the jump between the historical footage and the dramatised narrative disrupts the idea that we are viewing Milk’s life *as it really was*. Rather, we are reminded that Milk’s life – as presented in this film – is, like all biography or history, an interpretation and a re-mixing of archival sources.

At another point in the film this idea is brought into ever sharper view when Van Sant splices eyewitness testimony into the drama. In the dramatised



Figure 32 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 32: The dramatised narrative – a police raid on a Castro bar

narrative, we see a young man run into Castro Camera to announce that the police are raiding bars along the street. Harvey, Scott, and their friends rush out of the shop, and the next frame shows a brawl between police and community members (figure 32). When Scott and Harvey attempt to intervene, Scott gets wounded. The drama is then punctuated by an archival television report in which a man who personally experienced a police raid, provides eyewitness testimony (figure 33).



Figure 33 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 33: Archival testimony spliced into the dramatised narrative

Clearly shaken, the man speaks into a news reporter's microphone, describing the moment the raid began: "there was just an explosion of police charging in here. I ran into the bathroom to hide with some other people. All we could here was the screaming and crunching and smashing. It was, frankly the most terrifying experience I've had in my life." After the dramatic and compelling testimony, the biopic then cuts to a scene in Scott and Harvey's apartment. In a close up, from Harvey's point of view, we see him tend to cuts on Scott's head (Figure 34). The editing in this sequence serves to remind the viewer that they are watching a verifiable story, but it also helps to link the imaginative reconstruction of Harvey's personal home life with broader public events. The depiction of a "real" witness testimony alongside Penn and Franco's dramatic performances works to

draw attention to the fact that the biopic is a play, a show, and simply one version of a complex life and history.

Figure 34 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 34: Film editing – the biopic is an imaginative reconstruction of a life

The second way a biopic works as a metatext is via the casting of a prominent Hollywood actor to play the biographical subject. An important element of a biopic is the casting and performance of the lead actor. Part of the pleasure of biopics comes from watching a well-known star transform into a “real” individual. In his much-cited 1978 article “Historical Fiction: A Body Too Much”, Jean-Louis Comolli observed that in any feature film there are always two bodies on screen at any one time: the body of the real-life individual being impersonated, and the body of the actor doing the impersonation. “The historical character, filmed, has at least two bodies, that of the imagery and that of the actor who represents him for us. There are at least two bodies in competition, one body too much” (44). In other words, as Belén Vidal points out, “there is an inherent tension between actors and characters in the biopics, evident in the recurrent critical speculation about their suitability in the role” (184). Indeed, much of the commentary on biopics focuses on the performance of the actor. Consider, for

instance, the discussion – both laudatory and mocking – around Nicole Kidman as Virginia Woolf in *The Hours*.⁵⁰

In a biopic, then, the gap between the “real life” subject and the actor’s performance, as Carolyn Anderson notes, “highlights the artifice of the biographic project” (333). “The actor’s presence” contends Laura Mason, “serves the same purpose as the interweaving of fictional re-enactments with more traditional documentary footage: it calls attention to the constructed nature of the biography” (335). Mason continues “no matter how subtle or provocative, [the actor’s] performance can only be an imitation, just as our efforts to understand [the biographical subject] are only approximations of who and what he was” (335).

Penn’s performance in *Milk* has certainly been reviewed as transformative. Commentary on the film remarks on the actor’s preparation for the role and the lengths the he went to in order to be convincing.⁵¹ Penn was reported to have spent months researching and practicing so that he could believably embody Milk, wearing prosthetics and styling his hair the same as the eponymous subject. Yet, while Penn does appear to resemble Harvey Milk as seen in documentary footage and photographs, his performance is only an approximation. In fact, the actor’s performance in a biopic is simply a jolting reminder of the real-life individual’s absence: Harvey Milk is long gone and any biography of his life can only speculate on “who and what he was.” Thus, the actor’s performance in a biopic – regardless of how authentic it aims to be – reveals the life narrative’s seams and

⁵⁰ See, for instance, mainstream media commentary in *The New York Times*, *The Guardian* and *The Telegraph* (Cohen “The Nose Was the Final Straw”; Haskell “It’s Kidman by a Nose”; Grice “Why I Love Nicole’s Nose”).

⁵¹ For instance, *Variety* critic Bartlett Sher remarks on Penn’s “incredible (indelible) performance” while *Rolling Stone* journalist, Mark Binelli lauds Penn’s “utter transformation into Milk” as “remarkable.”

joints. A biopic, like any other biography, is a selection of moments and angles on the subject's life, and the medium of film makes this fact especially apparent.

The casting of a well-known Hollywood star also provides an important resonance to the biopic. The cultural baggage a biopic star carries: his or her political affiliations, own biography and previous work all contributes to the construction of the biopic subject. As Custen argues, "movie biographies present a double level of fame" and this creates "what Richard Dyer perceptively refers to as the polysemic star image...The moviegoer is drawn to resonant aspects of the impersonator as well as the life impersonated" (68). The lead actor in a biopic functions as an important intertextual reference, adding another layer of meaning to the film biography. Penn's reputation as a formidable and political actor informs and authorises *Milk*, a fact reinforced when Penn won the Academy Award for the performance and used his acceptance speech to draw attention to contemporary gay rights. Additionally, Penn is an actor with a reputation for being surly and serious, which made his transformation into the bright, playful Harvey Milk apparently even more impressive and authentic.⁵² The biopic star, then, is an important element of the form's status as new biography.⁵³ His or her presence and the baggage he or she brings to the film "highlights the artifice of the biographic project", as Anderson puts it. Even a biopic that relies on a

⁵² At the New York Film Critic Circle awards dinner in 2009, before Penn won the Oscar, Josh Brolin, who plays Harvey Milk's assassin, Dan White, gave the following acerbically mocking speech: "Quite an actor, Sean Penn, quite an actor [...] Amazing actor. I've loved you in *Milk*, I thought what you did with that role was incredible. We've known you as an actor who doesn't smile very much. And the fact that you smiled as much as you did in this film is amazing. Truly incredible. You are an amazing actor. You are going to get the Oscar. Because you smiled so much" (qtd in Chattaway n.p.).

⁵³ The authenticity and intertextual resonance that a performer brings to a biopic extends to other actors in the film too. In *Milk*, for instance, the cast features a number of Harvey Milk's contemporaries from 1970s San Francisco. Union leader, Allan Baird appears as himself, as does Tom Ammanno, a gay rights activist and school teacher. Milk's friends, Danny Nicoletta has a cameo, as does fellow activist Cleve Jones. The use of these real (historical figures) lends a poignant authenticity to the dramatised biography.

conventional template, as *Milk* does, nevertheless works to reveal the constructed nature of biography. In the next section, I will turn to *I'm Not There*, a film that in many ways is antithetical to *Milk*. Where *Milk* focusses on a new kind of biopic subject, but does so via a traditional script, *I'm Not There* looks at a well-known, celebrity life in a highly unconventional way. Although, despite their differences, as we will now see, like *Milk*, *I'm Not There* also functions to reveal biography's constructed nature, and its status as a social artefact.

Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*: The Digital Era Biopic Subject as Allusive, Metatextual "Avatar/s"

When *I'm Not There* appeared in cinemas in 2007, Bob Dylan had long been established as a cultural icon in the English-speaking world. As a key figure associated with the social changes that occurred in the 1960s, Dylan's life and work had been the inspiration for a plethora of representations – print biographies, biographical documentaries, websites, and blogs – from journalism to fan writing, to academic work.⁵⁴ In fact, by the end of the twentieth century, Dylan was such a cultural icon that in 1999 he was marked as one of *Time* magazine's "100 Most Important People of the Century"(n.p.). "No other figure from the world of American popular music" announces Kevin Dettmar in the eponymous

⁵⁴ A search for the term "Bob Dylan" in WorldCat returns over 2,500 items, over 600 of which are biographical books. Some of the most well-known print biographies are: Robert Shelton's *No Direction Home: The Life and Music of Bob Dylan* (1986); Anthony Scaduto. *Bob Dylan*. (1971); Daniel Kramer. *Bob Dylan*. (1967); Richard Williams. *Dylan: A Man Called Alias*. (1992). Greil Marcus. *Like a Rolling Stone: Bob Dylan at the Crossroads*. (2005). Ian Bell. *Once Upon a Time: The Lives of Bob Dylan*. (2013). Two of the most prominent biographical documentaries are: D.A. Pennebaker's *Dont Look Back*. (1967) and Martin Scorsese's *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*. (2005). There is also a dedicated Bob Dylan YouTube channel and an extensive Wikipedia biography. This is in addition to Dylan's own autobiographical representations: his website and memoir, *Chronicles*. A significant archival collection, which indicates the network of mediations that his life has inspired is "The Life and Work of Bob Dylan Collection" at La Salle University's Connelly Library, which contains over 700 items including books, papers and ephemera.

Cambridge Introduction “has attracted the volume of critical attention...that Bob Dylan has” (i). Haynes biopic, then, emerges into this existing network of biographical material on Dylan. As such, *I’m Not There* is driven not by the conventional biopic impulse to enter the subject into the “pantheon of mythology.” As Bingham notes, the film “breaks one of the hidden assumptions of the genre: it feels no need to prove Dylan’s worth or to establish his mythology” (*Whose Lives* 382). Rather, Haynes’ film works both with and against the biopic genre to actively critique the biographical construction of celebrity and the practice of representing the life of another.

Via stylistic and casting choices, Haynes creates an unconventional, metatextual cinematic biography. In reviews, *I’m Not There* has been described as an “unapologetically experimental film” and “biography as collage”, and its fragmented and allusive style interrogates the myth-making function of celebrity biography and the idea that a musical artist, and, by extension any biographical subject, can ever be knowable through representation (O’Hagan; Ebert). Haynes’ film, as Jesse Schlotterbeck argues, “portrays the process of representing a life as elusive and provisional” (229). More specifically, *I’m Not There* “defamiliarises the pop-star story and implicates the audience as part of a devouring public that wishes to consume another’s identity” (Schlotterbeck 228). Therefore, *I’m Not There* is a film less concerned with biographical facts, and a correspondence version of truth, and is more focussed on the act of biography, and more broadly, the consumption of life narratives. The film is interested in exploring the many different identities and myths of Dylan, rather than representing a singular, essential Dylan—*who he really was*. In other words, *I’m Not There* functions as

“new biography” in the way that it destabilises received generic assumptions and expectations.

In order to do this, Haynes subverts a particular kind of biopic—that of the musical star. The first decade of the early twenty first century brought with it what some critics have called a “musical biopic boom”, with more traditional, “standard” musical biopics such as *Ray* and *Walk the Line*, being exemplars of the subgenre (Spirou 116; Lee Marshall and Isabel Kongsgaard 349; Muldoon 55).⁵⁵ A standard musical biopic, as one critic dismissively puts it, “takes a musician and shows his ups and downs, with the happy music in good times, the sad music in bad...and locks him into an identity” (Sullivan). Although Haynes’ film is about a musical star, the filmmaker resists this familiar narrative arc, and refuses to “lock” Dylan into a single identity. “I wasn’t that interested in [...] taking the straight biopic approach” Haynes clarifies, “I wanted to track Dylan’s creative imagination and where it took him and how his life mirrored that imagination, or propelled it, or followed it. [The film is] essentially my take on those moments in Dylan’s development where his music and the events of his life intersected” (qtd in O’Hagan). From the very outset, *I’m Not There* was designed to reframe and review Dylan’s life, rather than conform to a prescribed template.

The avant-garde aesthetic and structural choices Haynes makes in *I’m Not There* are ironically apt for a narrative of Dylan’s life. As numerous commentators have suggested, Bob Dylan, the pop culture icon, is a construct – a “collage” of identities. As the neat, chronological timeline in *The Cambridge*

⁵⁵ Penny Spirou argues that along with films such as *Nowhere Boy* (Sam Taylor–Wood, 2009), and *Notorious* (George Tillman Jr., 2009), *I’m Not There* is “part of the musical biopic boom of the early twenty first century” (Spirou “*I’m Not There*” 116). Marshall and Kongsgaard also note that “the popular music biopic has experienced something of a renaissance in recent years, with fifteen such films being released between 2004 and 2010” (346). According to these scholars, films such as *Ray* (Taylor Hackford, 2004) and *Walk the Line* (James Mangold, 2005) “are representative of the genre” (349). Also, see David Muldoon, who argues that “the actor playing the performer is the single most popular kind of biopic there is” (55).

Companion to Bob Dylan announces, Dylan was born “Robert Allen Zimmerman, son of Abram and Beatrice (“Beatty”) Stone” on May 24 1941 in Duluth, Minnesota (Dettmar xii). Later, as a young, emerging artist in 1950s New York, and inspired by the poet, Dylan Thomas, middle-class Jewish boy, Zimmerman famously reinvented himself as the folk singer, Bob Dylan. Therefore, as the dominant story goes, Dylan is a chameleon who adapts and changes identities as required. The opening of Robert Shelton’s influential print biography of the icon exemplifies this narrative:

The quest of Bob Dylan is riddled with ironies and contradictions, shadowed with seven types of ambiguity...Dylan wore a score of masks, assumed a legion of personas, invented a galaxy of characters we recognize as friends and foes. ‘There’s so many sides to Dylan, he’s round’ said a Woodstock friend. ‘He’s a dozen different people’ said Kris Kristofferson. ‘Just let me be me’ Dylan wrote in 1964, ‘Human me/ruthless me/wild me/gentle me/all kinds of me’” (13).

For Shelton, then, Dylan is a “riddle”, an ever-shifting, illusive individual who wears metaphorical masks and assumes personas, and this is the Dylan that Haynes transfers to the screen in *I’m Not There*. In fact, Shelton’s representation of Dylan in these sentences actually reads as a blueprint for Haynes’ unconventional biopic. Haynes’ Dylan is literally “a legion of personas.” Unlike in *Milk*, where a single Hollywood star plays the biopic subject, in *I’m Not There*, Haynes uses six actors to be what one reviewer suggests are Dylan “avatars”: “Six actors play Dylan. Is that right? Not quite. Since none are explicitly identified as Dylan, a different designation is required. Call them avatars, in honor of our era of Internet gaming” (Gross). Thus, from the very outset, in its use of “avatars” that allude to, rather than “play” or directly index Dylan, Haynes’ film can be received as both unconventional, and utterly of this early-twenty-first-century moment of online personas.

A brief overview of the cast and biopic subjects in *I'm Not There* shows how Haynes presents Dylan as an assemblage of different identities (figure 35). The first Dylan “avatar” is a 12-year-old African American boy, who travels across the countryside on trains in 1959, calling himself “Woody” and singing 1930s Dustbowl-era folk songs. Played by actor, Marcus Carl Franklin this first avatar is an allusion to Dylan as a young man, and his obsession with his heroic musical and ideological hero Woody Guthrie. In fact, in order to reinforce Guthrie’s influence on Dylan, 12-year-old “Woody” travels around armed with

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Figure 35: The Six Dylan "Avatars" (Image: The Weinstein Company)

Guthrie’s famous guitar case, which featured the message scrawled on the side, “this machine kills fascists.” Like Dylan, “Woody” tells exaggerated and fantastical stories about himself, honing his folk-singer identity as he does. In other words, “Woody” symbolically represents nineteen year old Dylan, and his famous relocation from Minnesota to Greenwich Village in the 1950s; his morphing from Robert Zimmerman, a young, provincial Jewish boy into Bob Dylan the artist. The second Dylan is “Arthur”, played by Ben Wishaw. Dressed in late-nineteenth-century attire, and functioning as a narrator for the early part of the film, “Arthur” is an allusion to libertine poet, Arthur Rimbaud, whose work influenced Dylan. Depicted in the film as being on trial, and addressing

interrogatory questions, “Arthur” is Dylan-as-anti-establishment-wordsmith and artist. The third Dylan, played by Christian Bale, is denim-clad rebel, “Jack Rollins”, as one reviewer puts it, “the socially engaged folk singer of 1962-64” (Feinstein). Resembling the Dylan from the 1964 cover of *The Times They are a-Changin’*, “Jack” is announced in the film as “the voice of a generation” who later goes into to exile to escape the burden of public life. The fourth Dylan is “Robbie Clark”, played by Heath Ledger. In a meta-biographical choice, Robbie is a hyper-masculine, womanising, self-absorbed Method actor who plays the famous “Jack Rollins” in an early 1970s biopic of the star’s life. Robbie’s storyline features his relationship with Claire, a French artist, whom he later marries and has three children with. Robbie is the only character whose domestic and personal life is depicted in *I’m Not There*. Aspects of his story loosely represent elements of Dylan’s own life, especially the relationships with Suze Rotolo and Sara Lownds, to whom Dylan was married from 1965 to 1977.

Cate Blanchett plays the fifth Dylan, and, ironically, given the fact that she is a woman, is arguably the most physically recognisable version of the icon. In fact, it is Blanchett’s interpretation of Dylan that is used most prominently in publicity material, attracts the most attention in reviews, and was nominated for an Academy Award (Bingham 386). Blanchett’s Dylan is “Jude Quinn”, a thin, androgynous ray-ban-wearing rock-and-roll star, touring Britain in the mid-1960s, the version of the icon profiled in the 1967 D.A. Pennebaker documentary *Dont Look Back*.⁵⁶ Jude frolics with The Beatles, discusses religion with Allen Ginsburg, and overindulges in psychedelic drugs to the point of hallucination. In a play on his relationship with The Beatles, along with Dylan’s apparent betrayal of

⁵⁶ The “Dont” of the film’s title deliberately omits the apostrophe.

acoustic folk for amplified music at the Newport Festival in 1965, “Jude” is the Judas of the folk scene, and the overworked and media-hounded jet-setting rock star Dylan. The sixth Dylan is “Billy the Kid”, an aging, exiled outlaw hiding out in a cabin in the woods near a town called Riddle. Played by Richard Gere, “Billy” roughly corresponds to Dylan of the mid-1970s: the Dylan who retreated to live on his property near Woodstock. Gere’s Billy is also an intertextual reference to Dylan’s performance as the character Alias, alongside Kris Kristofferson (as another incarnation of Billy the Kid) in Sam Peckinpah’s 1973 revisionist Western, *Pat Garrett and Billy the Kid*. Finally, the seventh Dylan sees the return of Christian Bale as “Pastor John” a reference to Dylan’s late 1970s experience of becoming a born-again Christian.

As suggested by this brief explanation of the numerous characters and actors who constitute Dylan in *I’m Not There*, Haynes uses fragmentation, playful layers of allusions and puns to construct an impressionistic, figurative life narrative. This choice both works with and subverts the convention of the biopic star—a convention which is so clearly followed in *Milk*. Each Dylan avatar has been carefully chosen for their physical and vocal qualities. Casting a twelve year old African American boy as a youthful Dylan, for instance, is an obvious example of the way the traditional biopic star is unsettled in this film. In no way does Franklin resemble Dylan in appearance, thwarting viewer expectations of a neat and stable biopic subject. Instead the focus is on Franklin’s performance and the characteristics of “Woody.” As a result, the viewer cannot easily and passively consume the story. He or she is invited to make his or her own links between the audacious, precocious, 12-year-old impersonating Woody Guthrie, and Dylan’s own performance of identity when he arrived in Greenwich Village

in the 1950s. Additionally, in using an African American actor to represent Dylan, the viewer is further invited to consider how Dylan was also heavily influenced by the music of black American musicians such as Huddie William Leadbetter and Odetta Holmes.⁵⁷ Similarly, Heath Ledger, as the Robbie incarnation of Dylan does not physically resemble the icon. Ledger's presence as Dylan brings overt masculinity and a sense of the artist's self-absorption that indirectly prompts the viewer to consider those same qualities in Dylan. Not only do these different Dylans confound received ideas about the biopic subject, but they also demand that the viewer play a more active role in the construction of the life on film.

The convention of the biopic star is further complicated by the intertextual references each actor brings to the film. Ledger's masculine Dylan takes on extra resonance thanks to the actor's own personal and professional history. Arguably, Ledger's most critically acclaimed role was as cowboy, Ennis Del Mar, in *Brokeback Mountain*, a role which sees his character perform a heterosexual identity in order to conceal his homosexual relationship with another man in the conservative social climate of 1960s rural America. Ledger's fabled performance of Ennis, and the fact that Ennis himself was performing a particular self, resonates in *I'm Not There*, prompting consideration of how identity is not a singular, fixed thing, but is shifting and performative. Additionally, Ledger's presence in the film brings another layer of meaning. Ledger died in January 2008, and *I'm Not There* was the last film released before his death. His appearance in *I'm Not There* serves to remind the viewer of the mortality of public figures, despite their iconic status. Cate Blanchett also lends intertextual meaning to *I'm Not There*. As Bingham points out, Cate Blanchett is an actor who has a

⁵⁷ In Scorsese's documentary, *No Direction Home*, Dylan speaks of how he was so excited when he first heard Odetta's music that he bought the record and learned all the songs and so her style greatly influenced the construction of his early performer-self.

history of “portraying queenly, indomitable legends” such as Queen Elizabeth I in the eponymous 1998 and 2007 biopics, as well as film star, Katherine Hepburn in the *The Aviator* (2004), and Irish journalist, Veronica Guerin in the 2003 film of the same name (*Whose Lives* 386). Blanchett’s appearance as Dylan, then, not only makes a cinematic argument for gender identity as a fluid concept, but it also playfully reminds viewers that the biopic star itself is a constructed product, designed to present a neat and accessible version of an individual life.

Furthermore, Haynes uses another device that functions to interrogate and complicate assumptions about biography. Not only is each Dylan avatar different in terms of physicality and intertextual history, but Haynes makes particular aesthetic choices that further demarcate the various identities and inform the biographical story. Rather than have one overarching cinematic style for *I’m Not There*, Haynes mimics the look of a variety of existing films and television shows.



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Figure 36: Dylan re-enacted: The documentary-style of the Jack Rollins section of *I’m Not There*

For example, the scenes with the Christian Bale as Jack Rollins are shot in a style that mimics Martin Scorsese’s 2007 observational biographical documentary, *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan*. In the faux documentary in *I’m Not There*, Jack is proclaimed by the narrator as the “voice of a generation”, the “troubadour of conscience” and is shown in reproduced photos and posters, as well as in old

interview footage—all based on actual archival materials which depict Dylan (figure 36). In one “archival” interview – which is a re-enactment of Dylan’s appearance on the Steve Allen Show in 1964 – Jack is depicted struggling to express himself as a songwriter concerned with political ideas, and responding to the social climate of civil-rights era America. Meanwhile, a subsequent scene involves the mimicking of the documentary device of the talking-head interview. While Scorsese’s actual documentary features folk singer, Joan Baez as a commentator on Dylan’s life and legacy, Haynes’ film-within-film uses Julianne Moore to play fictional as folk singer Alice Fabian, who testifies to Jack’s presence and personality. “He saw what was going on in the world and he had the ability to distil it into a song...he was speaking for me, and everyone who wants a better world” Alice tells the off-camera interviewer (figure 37). As Alice

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Figure 37: The Film-within-a-film highlights the myth-making in biography

discusses Jack, photographs re-enacting famous early 1960s pictures of Baez and Dylan on stage together flash across the screen.

Haynes choice, then, to use a biographical-film-within-a-film device works in two ways. First, it provides the style for the Jack Rollins section, distinguishing it as a particular phase in Dylan’s life, when Dylan was hyperbolically constructed as symbolic of his generation. Second, Haynes’ choice

to visually refer to Scorsese's earlier biographical documentary functions metatextually to draw attention to the canonising and myth-making role of filmic celebrity biography, especially those like *No Direction Home*, that rely on archival materials and peer-testimonies to authorise a particular version of an individual's life. As Michael Brendan Baker reveals, Scorsese's documentary was hugely popular: "Originally produced for the PBS series *American Masters* and BBC Two's *Arena*, *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan* was such a critical and popular success that repertory screenings of the three-and-a-half hour compilation project became common in theaters across North America" (242). *No Direction Home*, then, is a biographical representation that reveals the power of filmic biography to shape public perception of prominent individuals, such as Dylan. As Baker contends, Scorsese "invests in myth, and thus renders Dylan larger than life, larger than rock itself. *No Direction Home* ultimately provided audiences with the most compelling audiovisual portrait of Bob Dylan as a young artist yet available" (243). Therefore, Haynes choice to mimic Scorsese's "rockumentary" style for the Jack Rollins section of *I'm Not There*, makes a clear point about the biographical construction of public figures and invites the viewer to consider how filmic biography mythologises its subject.

The stylistic choice Haynes makes in the Jack section is reinforced by the content and how Jack is represented. As the "documentary" continues, Jack is shown rebelling against his imposed identity as "the voice of a generation." As he becomes more and more famous as a protest singer, known for his hit song, *The Times They Are a Changin'*, and so emblematic of a social shift towards civil rights, Jack is shown to be collapsing under the pressure of his obligatory public persona. He makes a drunken, shambolic speech at an official dinner, and then, as

he leaves the venue, he tells reporters that people are “trying to use me for something, you know? They want me to carry a picket sign and have my picture taken...All they want from me is finger-pointing songs” (figure 38).

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Figure 38: Rebellling against biographical myth-making

The Jack Rollins section, then, is cleverly constructed to do two key things. First, the use of a faux documentary style mimics and subverts the ideal of verisimilitude in biography, highlighting how, in all biographical texts, aesthetic choices function rhetorically to frame and authorise the subject in various ways. Secondly, the Jack Rollins section interrogates the mythical status of Bob Dylan, prompting viewers to consider their own expectations of public figures and the stories that are told about such individuals.

This idea is furthered by the next Dylan avatar, Cate Blanchett as Jude Quinn. The Jude section is styled on the work of Federico Fellini, a filmmaker who is famous for his break with the post-war Italian Neorealism, in favour of “a more subjective approach to moviemaking” (Silberg n.p.). As Cinematographer, Edward Lachman explains, the Jude Quinn segment “was chiefly inspired by Fellini’s surreal, autobiographical *8½* [...] in which Marcello Mastroianni portrays an internationally renowned movie director who must look inward as fans, journalists and associates make increasingly stressful demands on him...In our portrayal, we show Jude trapped in a similar situation” (qtd in Silberg n.p.).

Indeed, both the action of the plot, but also via stylistic allusions to Fellini, *I'm Not There* depicts Jude/Dylan being doggedly pursued by critics and fans. Jude Quinn is initially shown performing at what an on-stage banner announces is the “New England Jazz & Folk Festival.” In a clear reference to Dylan’s notorious appearance at the 1965 Newport Festival, where the crowd purportedly heckled the star – calling him “Judas” for his choice to play with an amplified band – Jude Quinn is also booed as he plays a non-acoustic version of the song *Maggie’s Farm* (figure 39).

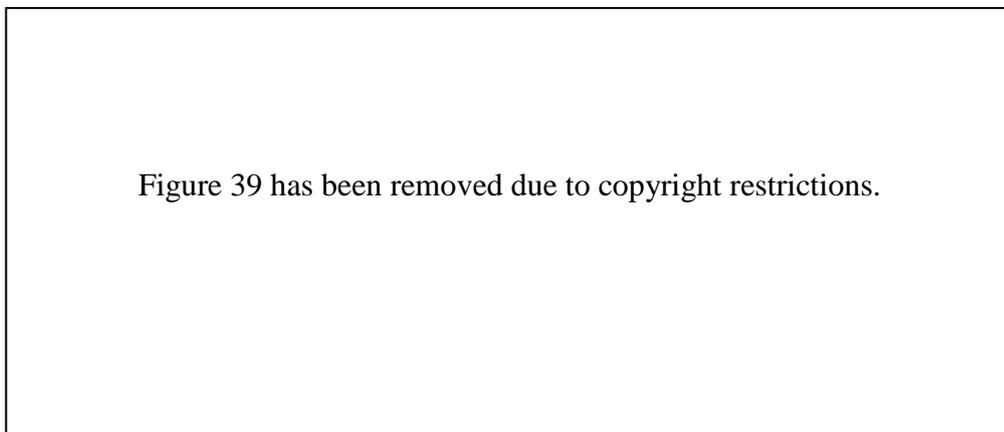


Figure 39: Jude Quinn: “Judas”, the rock ‘n’ roll star betraying Dylan’s image as a folk hero

Post-performance, the film cuts to audience members, who reflect on what they have just seen (figure 40). “It’s like he’s trying to conform to some sort of popular taste...He’s just prostituting himself! He’s just changed completely” says one disgruntled fan. Another complains, “he’s changed from what he was. He’s not the same as he was at first.”⁵⁸ Building on the idea that defines the Jack section – of the star-as-consumable-story – this wry introduction to Jude shows how Dylan has been idealised as a “folk hero”, and how fans have very particular

⁵⁸ This last statement in particular not only shows how Dylan has been idealised as a “folk hero”, and how fans have very particular expectations of the star, but the statement also plays on the construction of Dylan in Haynes’ film. For the viewer, at this point in the film, Dylan has not *been* any one thing. He has been a collection of avatars, and so he certainly is not “the same as he was at first” (A 12-year-old African American child, or the Christian Bale incarnation, “Jack Rollins”). Dylan is now, playfully, Jude Quinn, a female actor in drag.

expectations who he is and what he should be. For these fans, Bob Dylan is meant to be the acoustic musician and folk icon embodied by the previous identity, Jack Rollins (Christian Bale). Dylan is not permitted to grow and change. He is not allowed to become a rock and roll star, and is heckled when he transgresses their expectations of Dylan-as-folk-hero.

Figure 40 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 40: Disgruntled fans after Jude Quinn/Dylan's performance at the "New England Festival"

The next few scenes of the Quinn storyline further reinforce this idea. As "rock star" Jude boards a private jet, the voice of the "real" Bob Dylan sings the 1965 song *Positively 4th Street*. "You've got a lot of nerve, to say you are my friend" sings Dylan "when I was down, you just stood there grinning..." The music here acts as narration and commentary – as if the real Dylan is commenting on fans' attempts to trap him in the authentic folk singer identity. In this moment, Dylan's voice authenticates and authorises the biopic, acting as a droll commentary on the construction of his own biographical life narrative.

Figure 41 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 41: Jude arrives at Heathrow Airport

To further reinforce Jude's hounding by the public, when the plane lands in London, he disembarks to a media scrum who excitedly greets him as he walks to a waiting limousine (figure 41). As one journalist animatedly tells his viewing audience, "It's not folk, it's not rock, but a brand-new way of telling it like it is! And Jude Quinn is definitely what's happening. Here he comes now!" The journalist pushes through the pack to ask Jude suitably banal questions. Consistent with Fellini's subjective, black and white filmic style, the next shot is from Jude's point of view, as he sits behind a long trestle table in a hotel banquet room in front of yet another frenzied pack of journalists and photographers (figure 42). As flashbulbs light up the room, Jude is scrutinised by journalists and we see him practice and perform his new self, one that is more about being a "rock star celebrity" and less about being the Woodie-Guthrie-inspired child of the first avatar, or the socially-engaged, frustrated Jack Rollins.

Figure 42 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 42: The London press conference: "Mr Quinn, Mr Quinn, is it true you no longer sing protest songs?"

Therefore, in *I'm Not There*, it is not about the verifiable facts that make the biography, but the links the biopic makes with a network of other texts and mediations of Dylan's life. For this reason, *I'm Not There* has been described as very much a film of the networked and technology saturated twenty-first century.

Critic Larry Gross argues that *I'm Not There* is “cinema made with an entirely new post-Internet awareness of the permeability and fragility of all narrative structures; movies that in different ways scan information, in the modes of sampling and remixing. All of these portend an entirely new digital culture as yet impossible to envisage” (Gross). Indeed, *I'm Not There* is a fragmented, hyperlinked kind of biography that is emblematic of the early twenty first century social conditions and in this sense is “new biography” as per the Modernist conception. Unlike *Milk* that presents a stable, easily-consumable biographical narrative and subject, *I'm Not There* sends the viewer off in an overwhelming number of directions looking for some kind of essential Bob Dylan. The use of avatars encourages the viewer to piece together the biopic, and to be more actively complicit in the biographical construction than would be the case in more traditional biopics. The viewer is prompted to question which aspects of the film relate to the verifiable facts of Dylan’s life and which are outright fictional. This is especially the case in the Robbie Clark (Heath Ledger) scenes, because they are the closest the film gets to revealing anything about Dylan’s private life. The Robbie section focuses on Dylan’s intimate relationships with women, and his domestic life. Shot in the style of a 1960s Jean-Luc Goddard film, with its low-

Figure 43 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 43: Private life? The Robbie section of the film

key colour scheme and mix of interior wide shots and intimate close-ups of hands and domestic objects, the Robbie section invites viewers to consider Dylan away from the public gaze. The introduction to Robbie's life, shows a young woman, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbough), in the open-plan kitchen of a house, preparing breakfast for her three young children (figure 43). The television blares in the living room, showing news coverage of the end of the Vietnam War and locating the scene in 1973. Claire attempts to call Robbie, who is working in Europe, while he plays the lead role in a Jack Rollins biopic. As the phone rings continuously, Robbie is pictured emerging from the shower in a Paris hotel room, while his female lover urges him to answer the phone (figure 44). Thus, from the outset of this section, Robbie/Dylan is represented as a womaniser, and as the scene continues it becomes clear that he has failed at being a husband and a father. The film then flashes back to 1963, and charts the beginning of Robbie and Claire's relationship, moving through to their marriage before returning to 1973.

Figure 44 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 44: Robbie's private life

As Australian biographers, Susan Magarey and Kerrie Round have noted, one of the key attractions of biography is the promise of a glimpse into the subject's private life (152). This opening interlude of the Robbie section – one that makes visible a story of domesticity and intimacy – plays with this expectation. On the one hand, the viewer is aware that he or she is watching a film about Dylan's

life, and so is encouraged to connect the womanising Robbie avatar with Dylan. Yet on the other hand, the information on-screen never quite matches the facts of Dylan's life. Of course Dylan was not an actor in a biopic, and he was never married to a woman named Claire. So, because of its ever-shifting quality, *I'm Not There* prompts the viewer to question and to go beyond the film to cross-reference and to find out what is true and what is fiction. In an analogue era, that would have involved consulting print or film biographies, but in the digital age viewers are arguably more likely to initially turn to the internet. A quick check of Dylan's Wikipedia page, for instance, would suggest to the viewer that the character of Claire actually appears to be a blend of two real women: Dylan's wife, Sara Lownds and one of his girlfriends, Suze Rotolo, who appears on the album cover of *The Freewheelin' Bob Dylan*, a scene which is alluded to in the Robbie section of the film (figure 45). In short, because of its continual "sampling and remixing" as Larry Gross puts it, *I'm Not There* demands more of the viewer than a conventional biopic. It encourages the viewer to become an unusually active participant in the building of Dylan's biographical story. In

Figure 45 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 45: Robbie and Claire

simply offering allusive clues, rather than a pre-packaged, unified story, *I'm Not There* co-opts the viewer, as if to suggest that if he or she wants to know about Dylan's private life, then he or she must be a complicit voyeur, who must

participate in the biographical construction of the subject. Therefore *I'm Not There* is not only a postmodern, fragmentary re-viewing of Dylan's life, but it is also a participatory biopic, emblematic of the digital, do-it-yourself climate of the early twenty-first century.

In presenting Dylan in such an unconventional way, Haynes' film takes the audience to the limits of genre. There is no neat biography on offer in this film, and so *I'm Not There* tests the biographical pact. On the one hand, the film's contextual materials – interviews and advertising – frame *I'm Not There* as a biopic, as do the opening credits that announce the story is “inspired by the life and works of Bob Dylan.” On the other hand, in straying so far from convention, *I'm Not There* confounds audience expectations of biography as a linear, contained narrative from which we can learn something about the subject's life. This expectation is confirmed on blog posts and viewer reviews reacting to the film. For instance, one prominent Australian review site – the Australian Broadcasting Company's *At the Movies* program – shows a range of viewer responses. While many were positive, there were also numerous perplexed and even frustrated ones. One contributor, Kieran, says:

I can't remember the last time I was so bored with a movie. Not knowing too much about Dylan, I hoped to get some insight into the man. Using this many actors, and chopping and changing throughout the movie, I was confused from the start about what Todd Haynes was trying to achieve. In the end, I didn't care, and I really struggled to finish watching it (Kieran “Your Rating”).

For this viewer, as a biography, *I'm Not There* fails in its promise to educate—to provide “some insight into the man.”⁵⁹

Other reviewers responded similarly, bemoaning the lack of consistent biopic subject. “I too am baffled over the meaning, direction and points of this

⁵⁹ This is not helped by the fact that the *At the Movies* site clearly lists *I'm Not There* as “Genre: Biography”

film” said reviewer, Leigh. “I watched this not knowing anything about the life or work of Bob Dylan and wanted to know about him. I was under the impression that the six actors would portray him...Not six different faces or aspects of him which for me just made it confusing and hard to understand (Leigh “Your Rating”). While another viewer says that the film “was a very arty, self-promoting and ultimately an uninformative and unsatisfying biopic” (Skeet “Your Rating”). For these viewers, in abandoning traditional representation, *I’m Not There* falls short of the conventional biopic promise to “inform” the audience of Dylan’s life and is therefore an “unsatisfying” experience. Although these reactions are just a very small sample of viewer responses, they nonetheless indicate how an unconventional biopic like *I’m Not There* not only interrogates biography’s enduring reliance on a unified, autonomous subject, but also how it can test the limits of the genre. Biography is supposed to inform and provide insight into a life and a time. This is especially so with the biography of a celebrity, to which consumers and fans turn to learn more about the private life of the public figure. In failing to deliver this key function of biography, then, for many viewers *I’m Not There* breached the implicit contract that all biography makes with its consumers, revealing the common expectations of the genre.

Conclusion

As this discussion has shown, while biopics may be assumed to be “old” media, and in a form that is formulaic and predictable, they can in fact be considered as examples of new biography. Van Sant’s *Milk* uses a conventional template, and at first might not be an obvious example of new biography. However, its subject, Harvey Milk, is relatively new. He is of this era – when audiences are arguably

more aware of rights discourse and more democratic representation in life narrative. In choosing to use a classical biopic template to tell Milk's life story, Van Sant potentially broadens the audience, and so the film may more easily engage in political and cultural work. *Milk* shows the possibility for a biopic to make a previously overlooked individual, and his or her associated historical context, visible in a powerful way.

Beyond this aspect of new biography – the political “writing back” to the historical record, and mythologising and canonising a previously marginalised individual – *Milk* also reveals the allegorical power of Hollywood film biography. Van Sant's film not only memorialised Milk, but the biopic also functioned as an important tool in contemporary gay rights activism. *Milk's* drafting into public campaigns to raise awareness of the various legal battles for same-sex marriage equality in the US and elsewhere shows the ways in which the biopic can emerge as an important cultural site, or “soft weapon” that becomes implicated in modern-day debates and concerns (Whitlock). In this sense, *Milk* is less about the individual life of its eponymous subject, and more about the political utility of biography for particular local and national communities.

A second way to think of *Milk* as new biography is in terms of how it makes visible biographical practice and methodology. Van Sant's film shows how, as a hybrid form, drawing on discourses of drama and documentary, the biopic occupies a unique cultural space where the constructed nature of biography is evident via the use of archival materials and the form's reliance on a well-known movie star. This particular aspect of the film's status as new biography is one that is also evident, and is taken further in Todd Haynes' *I'm Not There*.

Haynes film vividly contrasts with *Milk* in its clear resistance to convention. While *Milk* is a traditional, great man biopic with a new subject, *I'm Not There* is a highly unconventional biopic with a prominent musical celebrity subject. These two films, then, would seem to be worlds apart. Yet, like *Milk*, *I'm Not There* also draws attention to the ways in which biographical representation is practiced, albeit via different means. Rather than attempt to present a singular, coherent biopic subject, Haynes opts to construct Dylan as a cluster of very different personas. In doing so, *I'm Not There* contests the unified, singular identity of the traditional biographical subject, and destabilising the very foundations of the biographical genre. The film also critiques the celebrity biography, and the assumption that audiences and fans can ever know “the authentic” or “real” Bob Dylan. As an example of new biography, *I'm Not There* suggests that biography is an illusion, and that the subject of biography, especially if that subject is an iconic celebrity, will never “be there” in the text.

While *Milk* provides a neat, accessible story, *I'm Not There* provokes and demands that its viewers engage in a kind of do-it-yourself biographical construction. Haynes provides no easily consumable, singular narrative of Dylan, but instead leaves a trail of allusive clues for the viewer to follow if he or she so desires. This means that *I'm Not There*, with its six “avatars” and its refusal to provide a single identity for its subject, challenges viewers not only to consider who Dylan is, but also what biography is as a genre and social form. The numerous frustrated reactions to the film reveal how biography is not meant to muddle the subject, but is meant to offer a “take-home” biographical subject, “to give some insight” into a particular individual’s life and times. In transgressing this expectation, *I'm Not There* takes us to the limits of the biographical genre,

prompting consideration of biography's epistemology and the implicit contract biographical stories make with their consumers. These generic limits are tested even more in a digital age, and online, a context to which the next chapter now turns.

Chapter Four: Online Lives as New Biography – The Case of

Wikipedia

On the 15th of January 2001, Jimmy Wales, an up-and-coming technology entrepreneur, and Larry Sanger, a Philosophy PhD student, established an online encyclopedia project called Wikipedia.com. Unlike previous print and digital encyclopedias, which relied on contributions from academic experts, Wikipedia was open to volunteers: anyone could create and edit pages on the site. To initiate the project, Wales and Sanger placed notices on internet forums inviting contributions, and were pleased when, by the end of January, Wikipedia featured over six hundred articles. Sanger is recorded as saying “Wikipedia has definitely taken on a life of its own; new people are arriving every day and the project seems to be getting only more popular. Long live Wikipedia! . . . I predict 1000 articles by February 15” (Lih 67). By February 12 this target had been met, and Wikipedia began to grow in popularity.

More than a decade on from these much-mythologised beginnings, Wikipedia is vast in scale. In 2008, Axel Bruns noted that in the English-language version alone, Wikipedia contained “some two million articles” (107). Six years later that number stands at over 4.5 million articles, illustrating how quickly the project has grown in a relatively short period of time.⁶⁰ Wikipedia has also gone from being relatively unknown to one of the most accessed websites in the world. In 2013, for instance, it ranked as the sixth most visited in the world after Google, Facebook, YouTube, Yahoo, and the Chinese-based search engine Baidu (“The Top 500 Sites”).

⁶⁰ In June 2014, the exact number of English Language articles stood at 4,540,426.

Wikipedia's growth has been remarkable, but its open, participatory model of knowledge construction attracts criticism by some who see the site as a source of misinformation. In educational contexts, Wikipedia is often considered a destructive force—a “digital tsunami,” intellectual junk food—and indeed many schools and universities discourage their students from using the site (Reagle, “The Argument Engine” 14).⁶¹ Wikipedia has also been the subject of mockery in media reports, with one 2007 headline from the satirical website *The Onion* proclaiming: “Wikipedia celebrates 750 years of American independence” (Farley 252). Despite its detractors, Wikipedia's sheer popularity means that it is increasingly influential. Although many institutional bodies, such as art galleries and museums, were initially sceptical of the site, and in some cases even hostile towards it, many now acknowledge that Wikipedia is a powerful cultural force that requires engagement (Kiss). In fact, some libraries and museums, especially in the United States and Europe, now employ professional “Wikipedians” to maintain their public profiles.⁶²

While Wikipedia is an influential source of general “information,” it is also a growing source of information about people's lives. A significant number of Wikipedia entries—approximately a quarter of the 4.5 million English-language pages—are biographical: narratives about the life of a subject other than the author. Indeed, the largest category on the site is that of “living persons.”⁶³ Wikipedia biographies, therefore, constitute a highly visible and culturally

⁶¹ For instance, many universities and schools—Harvard and the Australian National University are just two examples—warn their students to use Wikipedia with caution. One widely reported case was that of Vermont's Middlebury College, which in 2007 went even further and banned its students' use of Wikipedia altogether (Cohen)

⁶² In 2012, for example, a UK public organization, the Arts and Humanities Council funded a one-year post for a Wikipedian in Residence at the British Library (“Case Studies”), and in the US, in 2013 Harvard University's Special Collections Library advertised a similar position (Garber).

⁶³ According to its own records, of the 4,591,312 articles on the site on 28 August 2014, 1,189,123 were articles about individual persons (“Wikipedia:Wikipedia records”).

significant form of digital life narrative, and although scholars from media and historical studies have focused on various aspects of the platform itself, Wikipedia biography is yet to be considered in any detail as a form of life narrative. Two of the more general monographs on Wikipedia are Bruns's widely cited 2008 book and Andrew Lih's narrative history of the project, neither of which spend much time specifically considering biographical entries on the site. Roy Rosenzweig and other historians such as Richard Jensen mention Wikipedia biographies in passing, but the focus has been on the site as history, rather than on a literary and cultural analysis of the biographical articles as biographical practice and representation. In auto/biography studies, digital biographies have been almost entirely overlooked. Paul Arthur and Alison Booth's provocative and dynamic work aside, most digital life writing scholarship has focused on *auto* or auto/biographical rather than *biographical* representation. Seminal works such as the 2003 *Biography* special issue "Online Lives," and the recent *Identity Technologies* collection have tended to focus mainly on self-representational modes such as diaries, blogs, or other examples of auto/biography, such as Facebook.

This focus on first-person narratives is perhaps not surprising, given biography's marginal position in literary studies and the broader academy, coupled with Wikipedia's reputation as "intellectual junk food". However, with the advent of new technologies, as Paul Arthur has argued, it is worth reconsidering biographical practice and representation (67). This is especially so in light of Web 2.0—a 2005 term that refers to a faster, more collaborative phase of the web's evolution—which is thought to have shifted social dynamics and removed the gatekeepers present in the production of more established forms,

leading to what some scholars suggest is a democratisation of life narrative (Morrison 112; McNeill, “Life Bytes” 146). As a poster child for Web 2.0, Wikipedia is emblematic of the democratic possibilities of online participatory platforms, and so is worth exploring as a form of new biography. “Wikipedia can be seen as an important contributor to the democratisation of knowledge and representation,” Axel Bruns has suggested, “undermining the role of traditional encyclopedic and similar publications in determining the canon of high culture and accepted knowledge” (123). Indeed, on the front pages, Wikipedia cultivates an image of inclusivity and participation for all. Its famous catchphrase, “the encyclopedia anyone can edit!,” appears prominently on the site, and users are continually reminded of the project’s non-profit, crowd-sourced, and crowd-funded status, with frequent pop-up banners pleading for donations. Given these elements of the brand, when it comes to biography it might be expected that this democratic logic would translate to more inclusive representation and practice. However, behind the scenes Wikipedia cautions that it is “an encyclopedia, not a democracy,” with the implication that these two terms are, perhaps, mutually incompatible.

In this chapter I look at Wikipedia as the first of two digital contexts in order to explore the ways in which biographical practice and representation is transforming and evolving online. In light of assumptions about Web 2.0 and its “new”, egalitarian potential, I ask if Wikipedia really does present opportunities for the democratisation of life narrative. Who gets to have a Wikipedia biography, and why? Who writes Wikipedia biographies? What kind of subject does the site foster and produce? Through an examination of some of the site’s policies and discussion forums, as well as a range of its most popular and controversial

biographies, I will show how Wikipedia's generic status as an encyclopedia undermines the site's potential as an inclusive and innovative form of online biography. Wikipedia attempts to replicate Enlightenment ideals of knowledge production. It also attempts to promote an open, participatory and democratic identity. Both of these objectives are in direct tension with the realities of participatory practice, especially when it comes to life writing about contentious subjects. This tension has prompted the development of policies and an authorship culture that place limits on biographical production and representation on the site. Ironically, the consequence is that many of the same power dynamics that exist in traditional print, television, and filmic biographies are reproduced online, fostering a biographical subject that resembles the (now traditional) humanist model of the self, with its assumptions of continuity and autonomy. So in that sense, Wikipedia is really just a replication of older forms of biography, rather than new biography.

Nevertheless, three elements made possible by the online, dynamic, and collaborative environment of Wikipedia complicate this interpretation, and indicate how participatory spaces like Wikipedia have the potential to transform biography. First, Wikipedia makes the processes of collaborative life writing visible in an unprecedented way. The behind-the-scenes debates that occur on the site not only disrupt the liberal humanist subject of the front page, but also show how, in contrast to biography's reputation as a stable and ordered genre, it can actually be a contentious and politically-charged practice. Second, instances of a particular kind of online imposture, known as "sockpuppetry," where an individual may write or influence the writing of his or her biography, destabilise the implied rules of traditional biographical authorship. In doing so, sockpuppetry

challenges existing categories of biography, biographer, and subject. Third, vandalism on Wikipedia shows how online biography can become a site of protest, but also how the form raises familiar, offline ethical issues that are arguably magnified online. Ultimately, I argue that while in some ways Wikipedia replicates traditional structures and models of biography, these instances of behind-the-scenes debate, along with genre non-compliance, such as imposture and vandalism, disturb the easy transference of offline values and practices to an online space, and show how Wikipedia is an example of contemporary new biography.

Getting a (Notable) Life—Wikipedia’s Editorial Policies

Over the course of its short history, Wikipedia has established an array of policies and guidelines governing editorial behaviour and article production, which in turn determine whose lives can be represented. Contributors to the site are encouraged, via the policies and guidelines, to adhere to certain principles so that amongst the Wikipedia community, as Joseph Reagle points out, “there is a history of events, set of norms, constellation of values, and common lingo” (*Good Faith* 10).

The development of policies pertaining to content production is not surprising, given Wikipedia’s generic status as an encyclopedia. Traditionally, an encyclopedia is a book concerned with the “classification of knowledge,” and one that collects, summarizes, and presents a range of information in a systematic way (Yeo 25; Tereszkievicz 30). It is a genre “closely linked with the emergence of modernity, with assumptions about the public character of information and the desirability of free intellectual and political exchange that became distinctive

features of the European Enlightenment” (Yeo xii). Indeed, argues Richard Yeo, the encyclopedia symbolises “the achievements of science and reason” (xii). Traditional encyclopedia entries, therefore, embody these ideals, and are designed to be concise, objective, and clear, and to present the subject matter “in a manner free from any biases and prejudice by the author” (Tereszkiewicz 38). Despite being emblematic of Web 2.0 and the expectations of novelty that association might carry, Wikipedia closely replicates these attributes of the traditional encyclopedia genre and its association with the Enlightenment ideals of reason and order. Like Diderot and d’Alembert’s French Enlightenment-era *Encyclopédie* (1751) that aimed to “collect all the knowledge scattered over the face of the earth” and bring the discoveries of the “new” age of reason to “the people” (Diderot 17), Wikipedia aims to be democratic, innovative, and universal in scope. In this sense, because Wikipedia embodies ideals similar to eighteenth century projects like *Encyclopédie*, the site can be thought of as a kind of Enlightenment project for a digital age. Wikipedia’s key principles and policies underpin this vision, privileging ideals of reason and order, and this in turn determines who gets to have a life on the site. Two of those principles—neutrality and notability—are particularly worth considering here because they influence who gets a biography, how that biography is produced, and in turn how the site reproduces familiar Enlightenment models of life narrative.

The idea of neutrality is central to Wikipedia’s encyclopedic vision, but it also reveals the tension between the site’s aspirations to be a source of authoritative information versus its identity as an open and democratic Web 2.0 project. “Wikipedia is written from a neutral point of view,” stresses the neutrality policy: “All articles must strive for verifiable accuracy, citing reliable,

authoritative sources, especially when the topic is controversial or is on living persons. Editors' personal experiences, interpretations, or opinions do not belong" ("Wikipedia:Five Pillars").

However, when it comes to biography, producing apparently unbiased, "neutral" life narratives is not a simple task. As a practice, biography requires a great deal of commitment: a biographer must be invested in his or her subject in order to undertake research about that person. Therefore, as Hermione Lee has argued, regardless of a biographer's intentions, "there is no such thing as an entirely neutral biographical narrative" (134). Biographers always select and arrange evidence in order to construct a particular kind of story about a subject, and the genre inevitably "arouses strong and passionate feelings" (100). Lee's comments relate to print biography, which traditionally has only one author, but on Wikipedia a single biography can have many authors, so the emotional stakes are even higher. Users are advised to "seek consensus" and to "avoid heated disagreement about content," to "act in good faith" and to "be open and welcoming to newcomers." The emphasis here is on reason and polite cooperation, anticipating that collaborative authorship may lead to dispute that will deter newcomers from participating. For an enterprise that relies on attracting and retaining unpaid editors, these guidelines are important in fostering a community culture where individuals are welcome and can work together to produce a legitimate, verifiable, and impartial reference work.

"Heated disagreement" about content is often visible in behind-the-scenes discussions of individual biographies on the site, particularly for biographies of prominent public figures, such as politicians, historical figures, or controversial media identities. For example, the archived discussion pages of former US

president George W. Bush are filled with debate over how he should be represented on the site. Topics range from whether or not the biography should refer to Bush as an “unpopular president,” to a dispute about what kind of photographs should be displayed on the page. One contributor writes:

I think this article has major problems . . . virtually all the information cited gives a negative impression of Bush’s background, accomplishments, etc. Removing that “The Pet Goat” photo would be a good improvement. It’s not even mentioned anywhere else in the article, and seems to exist here only to portray Bush as a buffoon. (Unsigned Contributor, “The Goat Picture”)

Another contributor responds,

Um, pet goat picture? All the other pictures in this article appear to be official portraits or posed publicity shots of GWB. If they give Bush a “negative impression,” then there is really nothing that Wikipedia can do about that. (Unsigned Contributor, “The Goat Picture”)

Other contributors then offer their opinions, and the debate becomes a drawn-out battle between those who think the photograph is suitable and those who think it undermines the president’s public image. This snapshot of the discussion page provides some indication of how the ideal of neutrality is difficult for these biographers to achieve. The debate here is not about method or accuracy of information, but rather it is about how each biographer feels about George W. Bush, and it reveals how invested in their subjects biographers can be. On Wikipedia, where biographers donate their time and energy to write content, biography is often much less about neutrality and the elusive ideal of objectivity, and more about advocating, protecting or undermining a subject and what he or she symbolises.

Along with the principle of neutrality, the other influential policy is notability. The policy states that a potential biographical subject must be

“significant, interesting, or unusual enough to deserve attention or to be recorded” within Wikipedia (“Wikipedia:Notability”). The policy reads: “A person is presumed to be notable if he or she has received significant coverage in multiple published secondary sources which are reliable, intellectually independent of each other, and independent of the subject.” The policy further suggests that an individual is “likely to be notable” if he or she “has received a well-known and significant award or honor, or has been nominated for one several times,” or “has made a widely recognized contribution that is part of the enduring historical record in his or her specific field.” For an individual to have a biography on Wikipedia, he or she must have been publically acknowledged in a range of secondary sources such as media reports, newspaper articles, and academic papers in either print or digital form. Original biographical research is not permitted, and the subject’s website or Facebook page does not count as evidence of notability.

Although this policy is not an issue for well-known public figures, it creates problems for the representation of lesser-known individuals. For a would-be biographer it would be difficult to justify the notability of subjects who have not been acknowledged and documented by an existing institution, such as a major English-language media outlet, public gallery, or archive. If a biography fails to provide sufficient evidence of notability, then it is nominated for deletion, often within days, and sometimes hours, of being written. The page is then discussed on the “articles for deletion” forum for at least a week, and it is up to an interested contributor to defend why the subject is important enough to have a biography. If no one addresses the nomination for deletion, then the page is removed from the site. In this process, less experienced users will often encounter contributors who devote many hours to editing pages and who pride themselves in

detecting “non-notable” subjects. As biographer Stacey Schiff has observed, “It can still seem as though the user who spends the most time on the site—or who yells the loudest—wins.” On discussion pages and internet forums, there are numerous anecdotal examples of would-be biographers, many of them knowledgeable experts, who have attempted to create a page but have given up in the face of strident opposition.⁶⁴

The behind-the-scenes discussion of the biography of a Nepali singer, Sugam Pokharel, shows the process of notability at work. One contributor, Jeremy, nominates Pokharel’s page for deletion, noting that the biography is “sourced solely to the subject's own website. No usable sources in a search.” Another user, Primefac, then responds with “Delete: subject may have been popular in Nepal at one point in the past, but with only one (almost four year old) reference and no indication of notability in the Western World, it seems unlikely that subject is still notable.” Finally, a third contributor, Howicus, adds “Weak delete: I found several news articles about him, like this one from July 2014 when Pokharel apparently claimed he wasn’t paid for a concert he did, and two from February 2013 detailing Pokharel’s aresst (sic) for heroin possession and subsequent release, along with numerous passing mentions in the Himalayan Times. This may be indicative of notability, but unfortunately I have not found enough to say for certain that the article should be kept.”

This brief discussion provides an insight into the issues of inclusion that the notability policy raises. It indicates how culturally and geographically specific biography as a cultural practice can be. Despite the fact that Wikipedia transcends national borders and aims to be a global project, evidence of notability, in line

⁶⁴ See, for example, the National Public Radio report, and the responses to it, about the experience of US historian Timothy Messer-Kruse (“Wikipedia Policies”).

with Wikipedia's status as a descendent of European Enlightenment ideals, tends to be assessed from a "Western" perspective, as Primefac's comments suggest. In addition, while evidence of notability does not have to be based solely on online sources, it generally is, so if a subject has received coverage in print media in his or her local region, it tends not to be offered as evidence of notability unless a contributor can physically go to an archive and find the documents. Therefore, the notability policy relies heavily on sources from the most prominent online media outlets and archives, many of which are based in the US or Europe.

The notability policy works to restrict who gets a life on Wikipedia, despite the fact that, unlike pre-digital print encyclopedias, Wikipedia is not restricted by page limits and could potentially include as much as server space permits. The concept of notability may further the site's identity as an authoritative reference work, but it also undermines Wikipedia as an inclusive and participatory endeavour, an issue which is further compounded by authorship on the site, as will now be discussed.

"Who Writes Wikipedia? You Do!"—Wikipedia Authorship

Who authors Wikipedia, and what impact might the demographics of authorship have on biographical representation? On Wikipedia, not all contributors are created equal. There is a clear hierarchy, and editorial roles have different names, depending on individual status and experience. Those with the most authority to edit or delete pages or delegate roles to other users are called "administrators," who are elected to the position by the broader community of contributors after a self-nomination and discussion process. Anyone can nominate to be an

administrator, but individuals who tend to be elected are those who have a good knowledge of the site's policies and who are trusted by the community ("Wikipedia:Administrators"). Further down the chain are "active editors," who are defined on the Wikipedia website as "registered users who have made at least one edit in the last thirty days." Finally there are "editors," those who have registered to make edits but who do not necessarily actively contribute. In mid-2014, in the English language version alone, there are 21 million "editors," 130,000 "active editors," and 1,400 "administrators" ("List of Wikipedias"). While it might be assumed that Wikipedia authorship is egalitarian, this editorial structure shows that some contributors, especially those who are trusted to follow the rules and thus become administrators, hold more sway than others. Furthermore, while millions of people may be signed up to edit, only a relatively small number actually write or reject biographical material on Wikipedia, rather than the "anyone" implied by the site's famous slogan.

In addition to this hierarchical structure, a particular kind of contributor culture has developed on Wikipedia, which compounds the increasingly exclusive nature of authorship on the site. This culture has its own norms and jargon, and to be a contributor one must not only learn the policies and act accordingly, but also develop a particular kind of literacy in order to read and participate in behind-the-scenes debates. New authors must learn how to translate the acronyms and abbreviations used by more experienced editors, and this creates yet another layer of hierarchy that can make the site seem exclusive rather than collaborative.

Compounding this exclusivity is the current authorship demographic on the site. Wikipedia is positioned as a global project, and it promotes the idea that editors "come from countries all around the world and have a wide range of ages

and backgrounds” (“Who Writes Wikipedia”). While this is true to some extent, it is perhaps a little misleading. Information on who exactly authors and edits Wikipedia can be difficult to find, but one recent source is a widely cited 2011 survey conducted by Wikipedia itself. The survey found that, “if there is a typical Wikipedia editor, he has a college degree, is 30-years-old, is computer savvy but not necessarily a programmer, doesn't actually spend much time playing games, and lives in the US or Europe” (“Editor Survey”).⁶⁵ The same survey found that only 9 percent of contributors are female. These figures point to a significant authorship bias on Wikipedia, and while it cannot be definitively proven, it is arguable that biographical representation will likely follow the male, Global North-centric view of the site’s dominant authorship group, resulting in more traditional subjects of biography. For contributors who are outside this dominant frame-of-reference, as indicated by the earlier example of the Nepalese pop singer Sugam Pokharel, practicing biography is arguably more challenging, and such authors may struggle to convince fellow editors that a subject is notable. In the few years since the survey, and the coverage of it in the media, the Wikimedia Foundation, the publisher of Wikipedia, has attempted to counter this image and to encourage greater diversity among participants. The organization has set diversity targets for the coming years and has been encouraging outreach projects like Wikipedia Edit-a-Thons that aim, for example, to populate the site with biographies of overlooked female scientists and artists.⁶⁶

⁶⁵ See also an Oxford University study about the Global-North-centric geographical bias on the site (“Geographically Uneven”).

⁶⁶ Three recent Edit-a-Thons include the February 2014 “Art & Feminism” event, which included a range of international contributors; the “Women in Science” event in 2012, with contributors from across the UK and India and subsequent events in 2013, and 2014; and the “Global Women of Colour Write-In” events in 2013 and 2014 (“Wikipedia:Meetup”; “Wikimedia:WikiProject”; “Wikimedia:Meetup/globalwomen”).

This initiative in itself suggests that the authorship bias is having an impact on content, resulting in an absence of certain biographical subjects. For some critics, such as Adeline Koh and Roopika Rassam, “Wikipedia reproduces forms of knowledge already implicit in older forms of print . . . in which marginalized groups (see: not white, poor, female, queer, disabled) are considered less worthy of representation.” The power dynamics that exist in traditional print, television, and filmic biographies—where some subjects are deemed more worthy than others—do not simply disappear because biography is constructed in a “new” digital space. The hierarchical structure of the site, the cultural conditions and discourse, combined with the authorship bias, create a space that is not as open and egalitarian as the Wikipedia brand initially suggests.

The Wikipedia Biographical Subject

If behind the scenes Wikipedia is not as democratic and innovative as it seems to suggest, then what about the front pages? Does the site’s visual design and layout foster a particular kind of biographical subject? A number of scholars have suggested that when considering digital life writing, critics must attend to how an online site’s visual style, layout, and other templates elicit the life narrative (Morrison; Smith and Watson; McNeill, “There is No ‘I’”). Their work has considered autobiographical acts such as those on Facebook, but it also prompts consideration of digital biography. On Wikipedia, unlike on Facebook or Twitter, no input prompts ask a contributor for a status. It is Wikipedia’s visual branding, and the underlying guidelines and policies that construct a framework for

biographical practice, which in turn produces a particular kind of Wikipedia subject.

In contrast to other websites in the online media-rich environment, it is noticeable that Wikipedia's visual style is very basic. The site offers a recognizable format that visitors can be assured of seeing each time they visit. This predictability reduces the amount of time and energy a visitor must devote to decoding Wikipedia pages, and therefore makes the site easily consumable and, arguably, popular. It also results in a particular kind of biographical subject, one that is relatively homogenized despite the very different nature of the individuals being presented, and one that is traditional in structure and tone. In this sense, Wikipedia biographies illustrate how, as Anna Poletti and Julie Rak argue, "the conditions of Internet subjectivity remain indebted to classic liberalism," whose "assumptions about the subject have continued to travel worldwide, via the grammar of Internet interfaces" (4). The two most viewed Wikipedia biographies in 2013—Nelson Mandela and Jennifer Lawrence—illustrate these observations.

Mandela and Lawrence are, of course, very different individuals. A comparison of their pages, however, highlights the homogenising effect of the Wikipedia template so that, in constructing an encyclopedia entry, the young Hollywood actor becomes implicitly equivalent to the elder statesman. Mandela's biography, for instance, which is over 8,000 words in length, begins with a standard opening paragraph. Written in third-person prose, with a singular, coherent, and authoritative voice, it states Mandela's dates of birth and death, and then provides an extensive rationale as to why he is notable, outlining his various identities as "anti-apartheid revolutionary, politician, philanthropist" and "President of South Africa" ("Nelson Mandela"). From there, the article is

structured chronologically, as a narrative of progress, with sections titled “Early Life,” “Revolutionary Activities,” “Imprisonment,” “End of Apartheid,” “Presidency of South Africa,” “Retirement,” “Death,” and “Influence and Legacy.” At the end of the article is a comprehensive list of over 400 references and citations. Mandela’s page, then, indicates how Wikipedia biographies rely on familiar structural models that present the subject chronologically, highlight certain aspects of the subject’s life that justify his or her exemplary “greatness,” and offer rhetorical devices, such as footnoting and referencing. The visual rhetoric of order and objectivity build a coherent and stable subject that remains “indebted to classic liberalism,” even though, as a black man, its subject might not have fit that model.

Jennifer Lawrence’s biography demonstrates the homogenising effect of this template. Her page begins in a similar way to Mandela’s, with the opening paragraph listing her date of birth. It then provides the rationale to demonstrate her notability, including a list of the most popular films she has appeared in and a list of film accolades that she has received, including the Academy Award (“Jennifer Lawrence”). To further reinforce notability, the final line of the opening paragraph reads “in 2014, Lawrence topped the list of Forbes’s Most Powerful Actresses and was ranked No. 12 in the list of Celebrity 100.” Like Mandela’s biography Lawrence’s is structured chronologically, with sections titled “Early life,” “Career,” “In the Media,” “Personal Life,” “Awards,” and “Filmography.” The “Career” section has further chronological sub-categories, listing “Early work,” “Breakthrough and Success,” and “2013–Present.” Most of the narrative focuses on aspects of Lawrence’s public life, with just a couple of sentences devoted to where she lives and who her partner is. At just under 3000

words the article is significantly shorter than Mandela's, which is not surprising given the differences between the two subjects, but her biography still features an extensive list of almost 100 footnotes and references.

Mandela and Lawrence are very different individuals, but their Wikipedia biographies read in strikingly similar ways. As two of the most prominent biographies currently on the site, they indicate how Wikipedia's guidelines and visual style can act to impose a consistent and homogeneous narrative subject, including "notability" and how it is authenticated. These two biographies share many similarities with the structure, style, and methodology of traditional, cradle-to-grave biographies. The visual structure of the article and the footnotes and citations combine to construct authority based on "objectivity," reason, and order, while the impersonal, singular, third-person voice obscures the fractious, multi-vocal debates that can occur behind the front page.

The discussion pages of both biographies confirm the contrast between the front and back pages. Disputes over minor details—such as the inclusion of Mandela's height, or whether or not a particular text box should be featured on Lawrence's page—are common, but the issues that spark the most lengthy and often acrimonious debate relate to more fundamental issues. Arguments about ideology, the politics of memory, or contemporary concerns about privacy and property are common, and not only contradict the apparent stability and order of the front pages, but also suggest how biography as a genre can reflect wider community concerns and tensions.

One long-running discussion behind Mandela's biography concerns the various characterizations of him as "terrorist" or freedom fighter. In December 2013, one contributor questions a line and reference in the biography:

Someone referenced from a HuffPo blog the following: After his death, a number of right-wing politicians across the world continued to label Mandela a terrorist and a communist. [363] The blog only shows “tweets” from random people with one exception, Nick Griffin of the British National Party. None of the other tweets appear to originate from politicians. I would request this line be removed or re-worded to say, “Nick Griffin continues to label Mandela a terrorist and communist.” as opposed to right wing politicians. (unsigned comment “Blurb in Influence”).

Another contributor, Dodger67, agrees, and advises that he has deleted the line: “Better solution—just remove it entirely. So I did so per WP: BOLD” (Dodger67 “Blurb in Influence”) While the first contributor uses a polite tone and refers to evidence in his or her approach as per the Wikipedia guidelines, the clipped sentences and abrupt style of Dodger67 suggests that he is not interested in working with others towards consensus, and by taking it upon himself to “remove” the line “entirely,” he shifts the character of the discussion. Responding to this shift, another contributor, Midnightblueowl warns:

Woah there, let’s not get too keen on deleting things now. It’s important that we recognise that many people do still deem Mandela to be a communist and/or terrorist; we’ve had big problems on this page in the past for ignoring these people’s viewpoints. I am re-adding the reference. (Midnightblueowl, “Blurb in Influence”)

By reverting the deletion, and warning about “ignoring these people’s viewpoints” Midnightblueowl attempts to refocus the discussion and adhere to the neutrality principle. However, another contributor, Thepalerider2012, challenges this:

Hi again, i noticed the user Midnightblueowl is clearly trying to maintain the assertion that “right wings keep seeing mandela as a terrorist” and avoiding the fact that many leftists also agree with that. Also this user is probably a leftist due her editions in the following pages: political biography: Nelson Mandela, Muammar Gaddafi, Mao Zedong, Early life of Mao Zedong, Early revolutionary activity of Mao Zedong, Luo Yigi, Mao: A Reinterpretation, Fidel Castro, Early life of Fidel Castro, Fidel Castro in the Cuban Revolution, Premiership of Fidel Castro, Vladamir Lenin, Ken Livingston. . . . (Thepalerider2012, “Blurb in Influence”)

In listing her edit history, and suggesting that “this user is probably a leftist,” Thepalerider2012 accuses Midnightblueowl of political bias, moving the discussion away from a reasoned one about sources to an ad hominem attack about individual ideological beliefs. In response, Midnightblueowl takes offense at the accusation of bias:

Your behaviour toward me is inappropriate, palerider2012. You have been repeatedly warned about your disruptive editing before, and now I must point you to Wikipedia: No personal attacks. We have these policies in place for a reason. As I have stated before, I accept that there are likely centrist and leftist figures who have criticised Mandela as a communist and terrorist, but I have also stated that I have not come upon any evidence of that. On asking you to provide evidence, you have not done so, instead launching a bizarre personal attack on myself with vague speculations as to views that I may or may not hold. . . . (Midnightblueowl, “Blurb in Influence”)

By highlighting how ThePaleRider2012 has been “repeatedly warned” about “disruptive behaviour,” and by pointing out the official “no personal attacks” policy, Midnightblueowl turns the ad hominem attack back on her fellow contributor, ironically in an attempt to bring the discussion back to a reasoned one based on “evidence” rather than “bizarre personal attacks.” This discussion, just one of the many rancorous encounters on the site, reveals how the reason, order, and “good faith” encouraged by the site’s policies can quickly give way to aggressive contests about ideology. The debate in this case is a kind of digital memory war about how Mandela is publically remembered and the politics of that memorialization. Given Wikipedia’s very public, popular, and thus influential nature, as a symbol of human rights Mandela’s biography becomes a highly charged cultural site where contributors are willing to engage in combat to ensure their version of history is the one that makes it onto the front page.

The discussion pages of Jennifer Lawrence’s biography also reflect community concerns and tensions, in this case with a focus on the ethics of privacy and the use of digital images. In August 2014, Lawrence’s personal digital storage account was hacked and nude photographs of the actor were leaked online. News of the hacking was reported in mainstream media and circulated widely on social media sites, prompting fevered discussion about the security of digital information, and changing ideas of public and private. In the midst of this, the nude photos were repeatedly uploaded to Lawrence’s Wikipedia page, sparking emotional reactions on the talk pages. One user argued, “the profile photo needs to be changed. I have no alternative to suggest, but I feels it’s inappropriate and disrespectful to both Jennifer Lawrence and those using Wikipedia” (69.9.216.26, “Semi-protected 7 October”). Another user agreed, stating “it [the photo] has been unethically put up here and definitely was done without permission. This is an abuse of someone’s human rights and constitutes a crime” (24.5.78.145, “Semi-protected 7 October”). A few days later, after the repeated removal and reappearance of the offending image, another user demanded in capital letters—the online equivalent of shouting—that the photo be once again removed:

PLEASE REMOVE THE NUDE IMAGE OF JENNIFER LAWRENCE. I CANNOT BELIEVE THAT THE IMAGE IS THERE AFTER THIS WHOLE NUDE PIC LEAK SAGA. I AM DISGUSTED THAT ANYONE WOULD PUT THIS IMAGE UP AND TRY TO GET AWAY WITH IT AND I KNOW FROM READING JENNIFER LAWRENCE’S OWN COMMENTS ON THE ISSUE THAT SHE WOULD BE HORRIFIED. (58.96.86.142, “Semi-protected 14 October”)

Both the Lawrence and Mandela examples illustrate the stark contrast between the consistent and homogeneous Wikipedia subject of the front page and the contentious, emotionally-charged activity that can occur behind the scenes.

Furthermore, these cases foreground a key difference in the production of print and Wikipedia biography: whereas print biography is relatively stable, and cannot be changed after publication, Wikipedia biography is a digital palimpsest. Popular biographies, such as Mandela's and Lawrence's, will continue to evolve, be contested, revised, and updated moment-by-moment as events unfold, or as history is revised.

Disrupting the Model—Sockpuppetry & Vandalism

Wikipedia takes its name from a Hawaiian language phrase “wiki wiki,” which can mean “super fast,” and the encyclopedia's capacity to rapidly and continuously revise, update, and evolve disrupts traditional models of biography (Reagle, “Good Faith” 5). Two more practices not only illustrate this disruption, but also highlight how the online platform of Wikipedia intensifies issues of agency and ethics. The first is “sockpuppetry,” where an individual assumes a fake online identity to advance his or her own interests or support particular viewpoints. This practice of imposture is not unique to Wikipedia; cases of sock puppetry occur in numerous online venues: from blogs, as Kylie Cardell and Emma Maguire have recently shown, to review sites and news website comment sections (“Hoax Politics”). One high-profile case in recent years involved the prominent British academic historian Orlando Figes, who adopted a false identity to write glowing reviews for his own book, and disparaging reviews for those of two fellow historians, on Amazon.com. Figes was subsequently discovered and was forced to offer an apology and pay legal damages to the two historians whose work he had vilified (Topping). Although sockpuppetry is not a practice exclusive to Wikipedia, instances of it on the site are highly significant in terms of new

biography. On Wikipedia, the potential exists for an individual to create a username and then to simply write his or her biography anonymously. This practice not only undermines Wikipedia's attempt to be perceived as an authoritative encyclopedia, but, more significantly for this discussion, the practice destabilises the apparent "objectivity" of biography, by calling into question the veracity and authenticity of the entire biographical enterprise. In other words, sockpuppetry represents a serious disruption to the conventions and norms of these contemporary forms of biography.

Not surprisingly, Wikipedia goes to great lengths to prevent the practice. Despite the fact that behind-the-scenes author-contributors may have their own user pages, the Wikipedia policy titled "Autobiography" explains how self-representation is not appropriate for the front pages of the site. It advises: "creating an article about yourself is strongly discouraged. We want biographies here, not autobiographies." The page explains that first-person narratives directly clash with the site's aims to be objective and verifiable: "It is difficult to write neutrally and objectively about oneself. You should generally let others do the writing." So, in negating self-representation, the guidelines construct the biographical author as an authoritative and reliable individual in contrast to the implicitly unreliable and untrustworthy autobiographer.

Sockpuppetry, therefore, is an outlawed practice on the site. However, because of Wikipedia's influence as an enormously popular and public space, it is difficult to prevent contributors from engaging in this form of transgression. The notability guidelines are designed, as are the recently tightened "conflict of interest" guidelines, to prevent sockpuppetry, but there is no way to completely eradicate it. In fact, it has been reported that even Jimmy Wales has made edits to

his own biography in the past. When confronted about the self-edits, Wales responded:

People shouldn't do it, including me...I wish I hadn't done it. It's in poor taste...People have a lot of information about themselves but staying objective is difficult. That's the trade-off in editing entries about yourself...If you see a blatant error or misconception about yourself, you really want to set it straight ('Wikipedia Founder Edits').

As Wales's comments reveal, self-editing and sockpuppetry—either in the form of direct edits or by joining behind-the-scenes discussions to influence the editing process—can provide biographical subjects with a degree of agency. In the early-twenty first century, public image is an important and economically valuable consideration for well-known figures, and many businesses and individuals recognise Wikipedia's value as a tool of self-promotion. Some public relations companies now offer services relating to Wikipedia, from advice on how to become notable, to the “dark art” of posing as “ordinary citizen” biographers for clients (D'Souza, Zetlin). Recent years have seen a number of controversies regarding sockpuppetry-as-public-relations. In 2011, the high-profile British PR firm Bell Pottinger was embroiled in scandal when a representative of the company, working under the user name “Biggleswiki,” amended a number of client biographies to erase details of past criminal convictions and drug use (Pegg and Wright). Meanwhile, in 2012, thousands of edits erasing unflattering details on a number of UK politicians' biographies were traced to the House of Commons (Furness). Whether through one's own agency, or by hiring others to carry out edits, sockpuppetry challenges Wikipedia's simple distinction between autobiography as a subjective life writing practice and biography as an objective one, and enables the blurring of author and biographical subject, which has implications for online biography and biography in general.

In addition to sockpuppetry, the second key way in which the ordered model is disrupted is through vandalism, which hijacks the biography to make false or insulting claims about the subject. There are numerous instances of this practice, but an early, high-profile example is that of former Kennedy-era political figure and journalist, John Siegenthaler. In May 2005, an anonymous editor wrote a Wikipedia biography for Siegenthaler that falsely claimed he had been involved in the assassinations of both John F. Kennedy and Robert Kennedy. Despite the biography's defamatory content, it remained on Wikipedia for four months until it was eventually deleted. Initially, its author could not be traced past the IP address from which the edits were made. Siegenthaler was horrified by the experience of being misrepresented and later wrote an article about it in which he explained, "at age 78, I thought I was beyond surprise or hurt at anything negative said about me. I was wrong. One sentence in the biography was true. I was Robert Kennedy's administrative assistant in the early 1960s. I also was his pallbearer" (Siegenthaler). The Siegenthaler case became a formative moment in Wikipedia's history, and led to the development of policies to protect individuals from defamation. It is relatively easy for contributors to make defamatory claims about another individual, and the popularity and accessibility of Wikipedia mean that any such content is then broadcast to a potentially global audience, making vandalism an ethical issue that does not exist in the same way in offline biographies.

George W. Bush's page carries the dubious distinction of being the most vandalised biography on Wikipedia ("Wikipedia:Wikipedia Records"). In Australia, the biography of the former Immigration Minister Scott Morrison has also been the target of numerous instances of vandalism. In one May 2014

example, which appeared in the months after the death of an asylum seeker at a government detention centre, and just hours after federal funding to a key refugee advocate group was cut, Morrison's biography was changed to read "Scott Morrison is a member of the Australian House of Representatives and a member of the Liberal Party. He is human garbage, a psychopath incapable of even the most basic human decency" ("Scott Morrison's Wikipedia Page"). Shortly after the edit was made, the vandalism was removed and the archived copy of the page was deleted from the site, because it violated the "Biographies of Living Persons" policy ("Deletion Log"). These instances of vandalism on Wikipedia, while clearly defamatory and harmful to the subject, can also, in the case of Morrison, be viewed as expressions of protest, where individuals mobilise biography to express disapproval and contempt. As the cases of Mandela and Lawrence have shown, Wikipedia biographies become contested cultural sites, and when it comes to vandalism-as-protest, not only are the reputations of the subjects at stake, but the very model of Wikipedia as an open, democratic endeavour is thrown into question.

Despite the participatory intention of Wikipedia, the impact of vandalism on the site's biographies, and to a lesser extent sockpuppetry, has led to some pages becoming semi-protected. George Bush's biography, for instance, is now only to be edited by confirmed contributors: those who have had an account for at least four days and have made at least ten edits on the site. To maintain the integrity of the encyclopedia genre, but also for legal and ethical reasons, contributors must learn the cultural norms and prove themselves to be "good" members of the community before they can make any substantial contribution. On

the sixth most visited website in the world, biographical practice matters in an unprecedented way.

Conclusion

In his 2009 essay on digital biographies, Paul Arthur predicted that the dynamic and participatory online spaces of Web 2.0 would likely “change our conception of the biographical subject, of the biographer, and of biography in ways that we cannot yet understand” (76). This chapter has shown that Wikipedia biographies support Arthur’s predictions in some respects, but not in others.

Wikipedia’s policies, while perhaps necessary in terms of the encyclopedia’s brand management, work to limit the number of lives represented on the site, and how those lives are represented. To have a biography on Wikipedia one must be authorised by existing frameworks of “notability” that confer significance. If an individual is not present in archives, mainstream media, or other established sites, then it is unlikely that he or she would be considered notable enough for Wikipedia.⁶⁷ Furthermore, at first glance, the open, dynamic, and participatory potential of Wikipedia suggests that biographical representation on the site will be innovative: a clear form of new biography. Bypassing the gatekeepers of traditional print biography and leveraging the increased space of

⁶⁷ Reliance on the archive is not a new issue for biography as a genre, assuring its status as a type of life narrative most associated with the lives of “great men.” Over the past few decades, the work of feminist and postcolonial writers has helped diversify the genre, but as Australian historian Barbara Caine recently remarked, “the dominant subject in biographical writing continues to be significant and important men” (104). Caine highlights that in the newly online *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, for example, only ten per cent of the entries are on women, and she speculates that the bulk of English-language print biographies still tend to focus on male public figures like political and military leaders, celebrities, explorers, artists and writers (104). In an essay on North American television biographies, Julie Rak similarly observes that “fewer than 10 percent of the lives featured on *Biography* [television series] are those of women” (31). Women who are featured tend “to be celebrities or the wives of the American presidents” (31). Rak also notes that there are few African-American lives covered by the series, and that profiles of culturally diverse subjects are almost non-existent (31).

the digital environment, Wikipedia potentially provides a way for a greater number of subjects to be represented. The project positions itself as inclusive and linguistically diverse, and so promises to dissolve familiar national and cultural borders. In many ways, however, the site represents a replication of practices and power structures evident in offline forms of biography. The liberal, humanist model of the self, and its traditional biographical representation, has transferred easily to the Wikipedia platform. As I identified in previous chapters, biography as a genre is usually expected to provide a neat and clear story about an individual. Wikipedia biographies meet this expectation: its biographies rely on familiar structural models that present the subject chronologically, highlight certain public aspects of the subject's life, and offer rhetorical devices, such as footnoting and referencing. These common aspects combine to homogenise and present lives for quick and easy consumption by Wikipedia's millions of visitors, and to build a coherent and stable subject that remains wedded to its liberal humanist heritage. Therefore, rather than "change our conception of the biographical subject," in many ways Wikipedia biographies appear remarkably similar to their offline ancestors.

With respect to the biographer, the authorship community currently suffers from gender, geographical, and cultural biases, which undermine the site's potential as a platform for inclusive, democratic forms of life narrative. Vandalism and sockpuppetry—two practices which, while not entirely unique to the online environment, proliferate within it—also indicate what is at stake on Wikipedia. Vandalism-as-protest shows that Wikipedia biographies, with their high visibility and capacity for rapid updating, are an attractive vehicle for registering discontent. Consequently, offline ethical and legal issues are

transferring online, where they are magnified by the potentially global audience of the internet. Sockpuppetry reveals that Wikipedia is a valuable platform not just for registering discontent, but also for self-promotion. The biographical subject engages in writing his or her own biography as a means of taking control of his or her own public image. Therefore, in blurring the line between biographer and autobiographer, and destabilising neat generic categories, sockpuppetry indicates a significant transformation of the accepted notion of “the biographer” and of biographical practice.

Wikipedia biographies thus illustrate how the online environment has the potential to transform biographical practice and representation. In unparalleled ways, Wikipedia – as a prominent example of online biography – brings into sharp focus the fact that, despite its public image as a reasoned and ordered form of life narrative, biography is actually a contentious, politically charged cultural site. The behind-the-scenes debates show how biography, particularly on a much-accessed site like Wikipedia, can be a cultural flashpoint for issues of competing ideologies, the politics of memory, and present-day social concerns such as privacy and digital property. The open nature of Wikipedia gives rise to a catalogue of transgressive behaviours, and in reaction, policies develop to regulate biographical practice and representation. Ultimately, then, Wikipedia biographies are a rich example of new biography. In some regards, the revolutionary potential of the democratic Web 2.0 sphere is not fulfilled, and the same issues of hierarchy and exclusivity are replicated online. Yet, in other regards, Wikipedia as online life narrative is unprecedented and revolutionary in the way it prompts revision of enduring concerns such as the politics and ethics of biography – two issues that

also surface in another example of digital biography: online death narratives, particularly obituaries, to which I will now turn.

Chapter Five: Death 2.0: Commemorative Websites and Social

Networking Memorials as New Biography

In March 2015, Australian man, Daniel Cook died suddenly. The 34 year old father of six was, as the local newspaper reported it, “killed instantly when he accidentally rode his motorbike into a light post on the way home” (Law n.p.). In one sense, Cook’s death was unremarkable -- many people are killed suddenly in traffic accidents each year. Yet in another way, Daniel Cook’s death was noteworthy in that it highlighted a particular dilemma of the online era: digital legacies. Like the 1.49 billion other users around the world, Daniel Cook had an active account with the social networking site, Facebook (“Our History”). According to his family, Cook used his Facebook profile “a bit like a journal” – uploading photos, posting status updates that, over time, amounted to an autobiographical record of his life (Law n.p.). When Cook died unexpectedly, his family and friends turned his Facebook profile into a memorial space, where they posted condolences, and told stories about him. However, a few days after Cook’s death, Facebook deleted his account without the permission or knowledge of his close family: his partner, Morgan St John and ex-partner, Fiona Wrigley, the mother of his six children. When St John and Wrigley requested that Cook’s profile be reinstated, Facebook stated that because another “close family member” had asked for the profile to be deleted, and had provided evidence of Cook’s death, the page would not be reactivated (Law n.p.) An outraged and bewildered Wrigley responded by establishing a petition to force the social media giant to reverse its decision and change its policies on memorials. The petition read:

Current Facebook policy dictates that any family member or close friend, estranged or otherwise, can request an account closed. Facebook actions this request without any further consideration, and without available recourse for reversing it. They do not consider, nor even contact, beneficiaries or next of kin. This policy needs to be changed as it effectively means that we are all vulnerable to losing this precious link to our loved ones. It takes a single email from a disgruntled family member, or close friend to permanently erase our histories. We are calling on Facebook to immediately review this policy & recover and memorialise the profile of Daniel Cook. Stop denying his kids access to the glimpse into the man their father was (Wrigley n.p.).

For the Cook family, Daniel’s Facebook profile was a “precious link” to the memory of their dad or partner. The profile was a valuable record and personal archive, and its erasure was tremendously distressing to the family. In the wake of the Cook case and other similar instances, Facebook reviewed its policies and introduced its “legacy contact” feature. To avoid problems similar to the one the Cook family experienced, a Facebook user nominates a close friend or family member to manage his or her profile after he or she has died (“Adding a Legacy Contact”). Despite these changes in policy, cases like the one concerning Daniel Cook highlight the complicated flip-side of online lives. The Cook case has drawn attention to questions of ownership of online autobiographical material, and digital legacies, especially on proprietary social media sites like Facebook, highlighting how online spaces are increasingly being used for not only life narratives but also death narratives.

This chapter considers types of representation collected under the umbrella term death narratives – forms of biographical representation that emerge in the wake of an individual’s death. While death narratives can include a range of forms designed for private or semi-private consumption – elegies or funeral orations, for instance – others, such as newspaper death notices and obituaries are aimed at

publically marking an individual's life and death. It is this second category that is the focus of this chapter, as I explore how the digital sphere is transforming established public forms of remembrance, in particular established offline forms like obituaries. Mirroring other forms of biography, obituaries have generally been an exclusive type of life narrative. In North American, British and other Anglophone contexts, obituaries have, as Margaret Gibson points out "historically been determined by the social and economic status of individuals and family lineages" ("Death and Grief" 147). Only those individuals deemed worthy at any given time and in any given community would be the subject of this public form of commemoration. Bridget Fowler reveals how the first "modern obituaries" appeared in 1731 in an English publication called *The Gentleman's Magazine* (4). Emerging at the same time as "coffee-houses and the new reading public within Habermas's democratic eighteenth century public sphere", these "death announcements accompanied by brief biographies" revealed a very clear social hierarchy (5). The coverage for 1869, for instance "started with the names of those in the House of Lords, followed by those of baronets, then those in the worlds of art, literature and science, the legal world, and the professional army and the House of Commons and ended with the medical works, with a coda containing 'foreign royalty and dignitaries'" (6). The obituary, therefore, as Fowler notes, "became linked to class" (6). Nigel Starck suggests that although obituaries evolved to become more egalitarian in the late twentieth century, the exclusivity of the genre has endured to the present day (*Life After Death* xi). Indeed, as Gibson notes, "the lives and deaths of women and other publicly

marginalised identity groups are generally under-represented in public memorial culture” including obituaries (“Death and Grief” 147).⁶⁸

The advent of online media, especially post-Web 2.0, promises to challenge this history of exclusivity as death narratives, such as obituaries, migrate online and evolve. New spaces are providing new opportunities for existing forms of biographical representation surrounding death, with the nature of authorship as well as subjects changing. These shifts raise important questions regarding the cultural politics of biography and the limits of the genre. However, until recently, and consistent with other non-literary forms of biography, life narrative scholars have tended to overlook both analogue and digital forms of obituary. As Thomas Couser has noted, the obituary is “infrequently regarded as a significant form of biography”, even though the form has been enduringly interesting to general readers (“The Obituary of a Face” 3). Over the past forty years there have been a number of publications aimed at the popular market, for instance. Often compiled and curated by professional obituary writers, these books indicate a general public interest in this form of life narrative. Alden Whitman’s 1971 *The Obituary Book*, which draws on Whitman’s experience as the chief obituary writer for the New York Times from 1964 to 1976, or fellow obituary writer, Hugh Massingberd’s *The Daily Telegraph Book of Obituaries* (1996) are two key examples.⁶⁹ More recently, former Time Magazine journalist,

⁶⁸ This observation is supported by other scholars too. Fowler notes that obituaries still tend to focus on a select handful of lives and that women are especially missing from these public forms of biography. Despite the progress made by feminism, notes Fowler, in the current era, “there are still only a very small proportion of obituaries awarded to women.” (9) Also, in her study of obituaries in the early 1990s, Karol K. Maybury found that women were “awarded significantly fewer obituaries” than men, and that women’s obituaries also tended to be much shorter than those of their male contemporaries (“Invisible Lives: Women, Men and Obituaries.” 29).

⁶⁹ These works are part of a broader publishing trend of collections from many of the major English-Language newspapers. See, for example, Marvin Siegel. *The Last Word: The New York Times Book of Obituaries and Farewells* (1997); David Twiston Davies, ed. *Canada From Afar The Daily Telegraph Book Of Canadian Obituaries* (1996); Phil Osborne, ed. *The Guardian Book*

Marilyn Johnson's book, *The Dead Beat: Lost Souls, Lucky Stiffs, and The Perverse Pleasures Of Obituaries* (2007), Jim Sheeler's *Obit: Inspiring Stories of Ordinary People Who Led Extraordinary Lives* (2007), Ian Brunskill's series about The London *Times* newspaper obituaries, including *Great Lives: A Century In Obituaries* (2005) and Brunskill and Andrew Sanders' popular historical collection, *Great Victorian Lives: An Era In Obituaries* (2006) have added to what the Economist magazine has suggested is a trend towards the "obituary as entertainment" ("The Obituarist's Art" 64). Although despite this ongoing, increasingly popular interest in the topic, academic work on the genre has been relatively limited. Over the past few decades, there have been isolated monographs and papers, with key works including Armando Petrucci's anthropological history of death writing, *Writing the Dead: Death and Writing Strategies in the Western Tradition* (1998), and papers such as William Haley's "Rest in Prose: The Art of The Obituary" (1977) and Gary Long's sociological study of North American obituaries, "Organizations and Identity: Obituaries 1856–1972" (1987). However, as the opening lines of the entry on "obituaries" in the 2001 *Encyclopedia of Life Writing* admits: "little research has been done" on the history and characteristics of the obituary (667).

It has only been in the last fifteen years, paralleling the increased interest in memory studies and memorialisation, that scholars have turned their attention to death narratives in public culture. As one scholar puts it,

the early twenty-first century is a time of considerable interest in death. Archaeologists describe the pre-history of death rites, historians compare and contrast the mortuary rites of more recent eras, and anthropologists describe contemporary patterns of dealing with the

of Obituaries (2003); Keith Colquhoun. *Economist Book of Obituaries* (2008). Other books designed for the popular market include: Mary Ellen Gillan. *Obits: The Way We Say Goodbye* (1995), and John C. Ball and Jill Jonnes. *Fame at Last: Who Was Who According to the New York Times Obituaries* (2000).

dead. Around these scholarly volumes clusters an ever-growing number of biographies, booklets and pamphlets describing how individuals have coped with their own loss..." (Davies, *Death, Ritual and Belief* 1).

Accordingly, the obituary as cultural form has received increasing amount of academic attention in the early twenty-first century. Two of the most widely-cited current books on obituaries – Nigel Starck's *Life After Death: The Art of the Obituary* and Bridget Fowler's *The Obituary as Collective Memory* – published in 2002 and 2007 respectively, both claim to be the first to study the form at length. Adding to this corpus are Mushira Eid's cross-cultural, gender-focussed study, *The World of Obituaries: Gender Across Cultures and Over Time*, and Janice Hume's *Obituaries in American Culture*. Complementing these full-length studies is a body of scholarship that has emerged in recent years from the fields of death studies and autobiography studies, evidenced by the work of, for instance, Elizabeth Barry, Laurie McNeill and Thomas Couser (Barry "From Epitaph to Obituary", McNeill. "Writing Lives in Death", McNeill. "Generic Subjects", Couser. "The Obituary of a Face").⁷⁰ The advent of new media has substantially added to this growing body of work, and in a short few years, numerous conferences have been established, and scholarship – from monographs to papers – has emerged on the topic of online death narratives.⁷¹

However, most of the critical attention tends to come from scholars in theology, journalism, sociology or health contexts and so, like numerous other biographical forms, online memorials, including obituaries, have been mostly

⁷⁰ See also Marysa Demoor. "From Epitaph to Obituary."

⁷¹ The website *The Digital Beyond* was established in 2010 as an information source on the topic of digital legacies as "a way to help everyday people understand more about their digital afterlives" ("About"). Also, with the tagline: "Exploring death, digital legacy and bereavement in today's increasingly digitised world", the first Digital Legacies conference was held at University College London in May 2015 ("The Digital Legacy Conference 2015").

been overlooked as a form of life narrative. Even though, as Paul Arthur recently argued, “for biographers and scholars of life narrative, online memorialisation opens up new opportunities for understanding changing concepts of identity and community in the digital era” (“Memory and Commemoration” 155). Drawing on the work of the sociology of death and dying, as well as literary studies scholarship on obituaries and memorials, this chapter will consider case studies from commemorative websites and social media memorials to think about how these virtual sites are examples of new biography.

Working with online memorials of any kind poses unique methodological obstacles. On sites like Facebook, for instance, individual profile pages can be closed to all but family and friends and so can be difficult to access. Tim Hutchings points out that getting access to memorial sites often “requires the consent of the owner, and requesting such consent” in the wake of a death can be “enormously insensitive” (52). Moreover, while the internet is often conceptualised as a sort of public square, there are enduring expectations around privacy that make the selection of case studies complicated.⁷² Drawing attention to an ordinary person’s Facebook profile, for instance, through the publication of academic work has potential to cause distress and harm as an invasion of privacy. Therefore, working with online death narratives requires particular sensitivity and careful methodological selection. For that reason, the examples I work with in this chapter are limited to those which are explicitly publically available. I consider three specific contexts as new biography – an individual Facebook profile page, a crowd-sourced obituary project administered by an Australian public broadcaster, and an example from Twitter that shows how the platform has the potential to

⁷² On the topic of online death narratives and research ethics see Carmack, & DeGroot. “Exploiting Loss?: Ethical Considerations.”

“write back” to received ideas about the cultural politics of obituaries. In reading these digital examples, I explore the ways in which the online spaces of Web 2.0 transform existing death narratives, particularly the obituary. Does Web 2.0 democratise death narratives, or merely reinforce existing hierarchies and privileges? How do these old forms in new media highlight enduring biographical concerns such as questions of ethics and the ownership of lives?

Online death narratives, as this chapter will show, do indeed transform existing forms of biographical expression about deceased people. The participatory spaces of Web 2.0 not only provide a way for a greater range of individuals to be memorialised in a public way, but they also change the very nature of memorials and established death narrative forms, like the obituary. Sites like Twitter can provide opportunities to expand the limits of biography and transgress genre boundaries and expectations. Both institutional, purpose built memorials, as well social networking sites encourage intersubjective participation. Any visitor to a Facebook memorial page, for instance, can offer his or her memory or opinion of the deceased person. Such online narratives are, in a sense, collaborative biography. At the same time, these new contexts for death narratives also raise particular and in some cases, new questions regarding biographical ethics, and can also, paradoxically undermine the egalitarian potential of the online sphere.

“Death can make a good story”: The emergence of online memorials at the turn of the century⁷³

⁷³ This quote is taken from Starck. *Life After Death*, ix.

Soon after the establishment of the publicly-available internet in the early 1990s, online memorials began to appear. Pamela Roberts suggests that the first “was a simple bulletin board, dedicated to a member of an online community” (55). Meanwhile, Tim Hutchings names Canadian-based “The World Wide Cemetery”, created in 1995, as the first dedicated digital memorials website (48). Indeed, the site itself, still in existence, proudly claims to be the “oldest on-line cemetery and memorial site in the world!” (“About”). Since those beginnings, the number of dedicated memorial sites on the internet has flourished and there is now a plethora to choose from. The founder of one site, Jonathan Davies, attributes the rapid emergence of these sites to the combination of two social factors: late twentieth century celebrity deaths, which changed public rituals of grief and the emergence of online technology. “The death of Diana brought about a change in how we grieve publicly” suggests Davies, “and then the internet connected people and provided a place for it. Two or three years ago, when we launched, we were quite unusual...Now there are lots of host sites...as well as families and friends starting their own pages” (qtd in Saner “The Comfort of Memorial Websites”). One of the most prominent sites is Legacy.com, which was established in 1998, and has since rapidly developed, so that by 2015, it claims to be the “leader in the online memorial and obituary market” (“About Us”). With the tagline “Legacy.com: where life stories live on”, the site has global reach, but is especially prevalent in the North America, where, according to its own figures, it apparently “features obituaries and Guest Books for more than 60 percent of people who die in the United States” (“About Us”). Other US-based sites include Forevermissed.com (2008), and iLasting.com (2009). Along with these North American-administered spaces, two other prominent ones have emerged from the United Kingdom.

Gonetoosoon.org was established in 2005, and is now the “the UK’s largest virtual memorial site”, while MuchLoved.com was founded in 2000 and in 2015 “hosts memorial websites on behalf of over 180,000 people.” (“About Us”; “Welcome”). These websites all feature similarities. All memorial profiles on these sites include a short obituary of the deceased person, accompanied by photographs, stories, music and videos. Profiles also have the capacity for visitors to leave comments or tributes to the deceased. Those building the profile can often choose to use a set webpage template that usually features common memorial tropes such as candles, flowers and angels. A profile can be set to remain private, so that only family and friends can access it, or it can be made public, for any visitors to the site to see. The Muchloved.org site, for example, has a “Remembrance Gardens” feature, where visitors are invited to openly explore the various biographical memorials.

According to the business profile of these sites, most of them were founded in response to the death of a close family member, and then were expanded to provide virtual memorial space for the general public. Some of the sites provide space free of charge, like Gonetoosoon.com and MuchLoved.org, which is a registered charity in the UK, although most other sites have been commercialised and charge fees. Legacy, for example, provides 14 days free of charge, after which time the profile must be, as the website puts it “sponsored” to, “prevent it from being archived” (“FAQs”). Sponsorship fees are \$49US for the first year and then an annual fee of \$19US (“FAQs”). Whether driven by a social or commercial imperative, or both, these online memorial spaces, and the biographical practices that accompany them “alter the visibility of physical death as they are integrated into our everyday life” (Christensen and Gotved “Online

Memorial Culture” 2). However, with this come not only possibilities but ethical questions. Online memorials now constitute an entire industry. In fact, there are now so many of these purpose-built memorial sites, that a code of ethics has recently been developed to encourage best practice (TheMemorialCode.org). The very presence of that code suggests how the sudden emergence of these sites has also raised a host of ethical questions. In addition to charging real estate fees, some of these sites also have the potential to sell advertising space, or cross-sell other death-related products, such as funerals and life insurance, all of which raises the question of how appropriate is it for enterprises, such as the ones listed above, to commercialise and profit from the death and grief of others. As if to anticipate this problem, iLasting, for instance, proudly distinguishes itself from other memorial sites: “We’re Different: Here’s Why...No third-party ads are displayed on the memorials. This is important to us” (“Memorial Website Pricing”). While death has long been an industry, this statement hints at one of the uncomfortable dilemmas that the online sphere raises regarding the biographical representation of lives in these new contexts (Mitford).

Moreover, the public nature of these sites leaves them vulnerable to vandalism and abuse. Someone creating a profile on these dedicated memorial platforms usually has the option to adjust privacy settings to protect the profile and make it available to family and friends only. However, those who want their loved one’s life publically commemorated face potential problems in terms of vandalism. For instance, referring to a 2006 *New York Times* article on the topic of online memorials, Alice Marwick and Nicole Ellison highlight how Legacy.com is bombarded with “negative comments about the dead”, and how vigilant the host site has to be to ensure that potentially distressing content is

removed as quickly as it appears (383). They note how “funeral workers and grief counselors point out that people rarely, if ever, leave negative comments in cards or physical guest books, but such comments are common online. They are so common that Legacy.com devotes one-third of its budget to managing such comments, deleting them before are published” (383). Of course vandalism of memorials is not a new issue – it happens offline too – but Marwick and Ellison’s point illustrates how, as I argue with regards to Wikipedia, the online environment is prompting new ethical issues, and magnifying old ones.

There is also the issue of permanence. As Paul Arthur highlights, “while nothing is truly permanent, memorials are usually intended to be as enduring as possible” (“Memory and Commemoration” 155). In contrast, online memorials are more ephemeral, dynamic spaces, where “permanence takes on a different meaning. Far from being cast in stone, the online memorial is *not* an object in space, but a “live” endlessly changeable and fluid set of connections” (“Memory and Commemoration” 157). While a traditional, physical monument is designed as “a thing to be looked at by those who wish to remember the dead”, the online monument is “a *process* to participate in” (“Memory and Commemoration” 157). The ephemeral nature of online memorials, then, combined with their participatory and interactive capacities raises further ethical questions. While regulation on dedicated memorial sites, like the ones discussed so far, deals with some of these issues, ethical representation is clearly an ongoing and shifting problem, one which is further complicated on sites outside of the remit of the new online memorial industry. As suggested in the introduction, social media are now being co-opted as memorial spaces. Existing alongside dedicated memorial spaces like Legacy and MuchLoved, sites like Facebook and Twitter are increasingly

being used to narrate death. However, the fact that these sites were originally designed to for users to chronicle life, and not death, complicate biographical ethics in new and dynamic ways, as the next section will show.

Participatory Collective Obituaries and Biographical Ethics on Facebook

In early April 2015, British teenager, 17-year-old Hayley Okines died of pneumonia. As a sufferer of the rare premature aging disease, progeria, Okines had not had an ordinary life. She and her family had devoted years to campaigning to raise awareness of the disease in order to find an effective treatment or cure, and as such, Okines had become a celebrity. She had been the subject of numerous media reports and biographical documentaries, and as the author of two autobiographies, she also had a public profile on Facebook, where updates about her life and health were regularly posted (figure 46). Hayley's

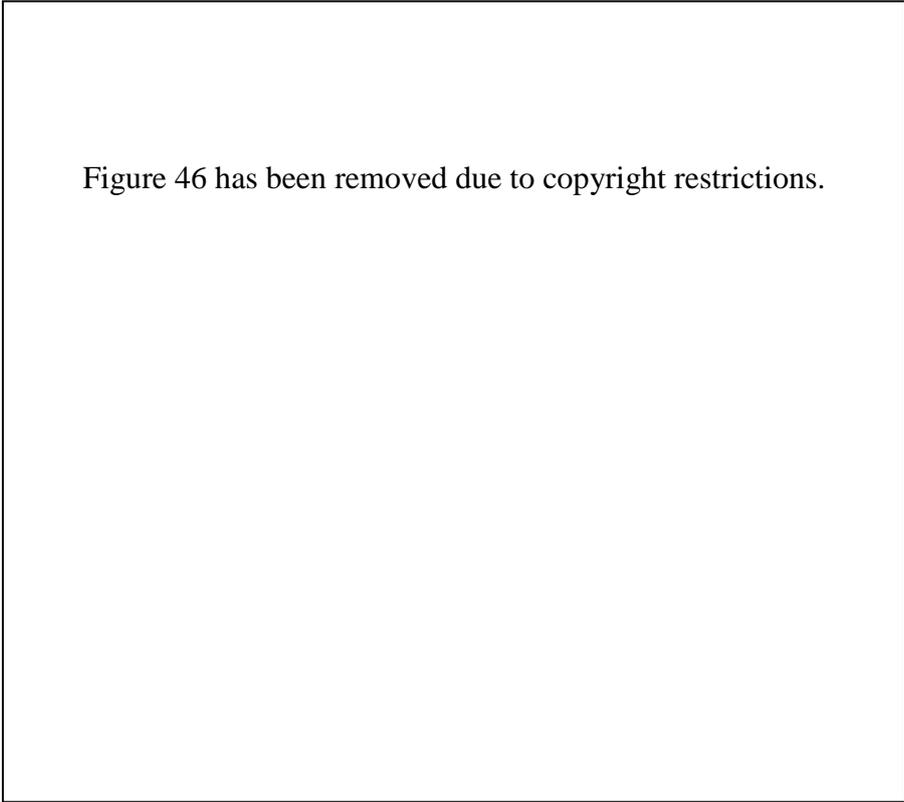


Figure 46 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 46: Hayley Okines' Facebook Page (September 2015)

autobiographical social media presence was bright and intimate. She would directly address followers and made liberal use of social media parlance of emoticons, hashtags and hyperbole: “My new book is out today on Amazon Kindle! Check it out 😊” read one note in the months before her death (“My New Book” 18 December 2014). She posted regular pictures of herself, often in order to mobilise followers to support a particular cause. Just before Christmas 2014, for instance, she posted a photo of herself in a knitted reindeer jumper with the message:

Please join me in supporting #XmasJumperDay for Save the Children. Text the word TEAMACCENT to 70050 to donate £2 - or visit the JustGiving page to make a donation <https://www.justgiving.com/TEAMACCENT> - thank you!

However, when Hayley died on 2nd April 2015, the register and social function of her Facebook page changed. On the morning of 3rd April, Hayley’s mother, Kerry, posted: “The world is waking up to the loss of our beautiful Hayley...” (Okines). With that address, the page went from being an autobiographical chronicle of Hayley’s life to a biographical memorial. In response to Kerry’s announcement of Hayley’s death, followers began to post comments in remembrance of the teenager:

Praying for the family and friends of Hayley. God bless you Hayley. Your positive outlook and willingness to share your life's journey with us has been very much appreciated. I pray that you know of the love of so many on this good earth who came to know you. Rest with the angels precious one! (Morrison).

My heart breaks for you and the family...I remember seeing Hayley in several interviews / tv specials, and remember how much courage and guts she had to live her life the best that she could...R.I.P Hayley you are one of God’s Angel’s now (Jones).

R.I.P. Sweetheart 🥺💔 x (Begley).

I taught at Hayley's school Bexhill High and thought she was very brave and very funny. I'm very sorry to hear such sad news - thank you for sharing her story (de Braux).

So very sorry to hear the awful news of Hayley's passing, she was an inspiration, she certainly packed a lot of memories into her short life and has touched the hearts of us all, God bless you Hayley and to all your loved ones xxx (Jones).

RIP Hayley, such a Beautiful young Teenager, that warmed the heart of us all, so sad to wake up to the news you have passed, RIP you was such a strong girl  (Anderson).

So sorry for your loss of Hayley. Beautiful soul and such a sweetheart!! Thoughts and prayers from NYC  (Lyons).

As these responses show, Hayley was immediately written about in particular ways, and in death, became a particular biographical subject. Consistent with the latin phrase *De mortuis nil nisi bonum dicendum est* (Of the dead, nothing but good is to be said), the majority of responses were overwhelmingly positive. Hayley was remembered as being a “precious one” who had a “positive outlook” and who altruistically shared her experience in order to benefit others. Followers repeatedly referred to Hayley as “courageous”, “brave”, “strong” and “beautiful.” While a more nuanced response – from a teacher at Hayley's school who, unlike the majority of followers, presumably had some personal interaction with the teenage – remembered her as “very funny.” These interactions on Hayley's Facebook page are not part of an isolated case. Rather, they are part of a wider trend of the emergence of social media memorials, and illustrate how such online platforms are enabling digital examples of new biography.

In their 2013 paper, Jed Brubaker, Gillian Hayes, and Paul Dourish frame Facebook memorials as “postmortem social networking site profiles” which they suggest are “techno-spiritual spaces in which the identities of the deceased are

inter-subjectively produced” through the contributions of other users (154). On sites like Facebook, the identity of the deceased person is constructed by what others say about him or her. Users can add content to the deceased’s page – whether that is an ordinary individual whose profile has been memorialised, or a more public person, like Hayley. Users can leave comments about the deceased, add photos or tags, and in doing so engage in biographical practice.

Although each of the comments made on Hayley’s page are not biographies in and of themselves, when read together these commemorative snippets amount to a kind of collective, participatory obituary. As Janice Hume points out “an obituary is an idealized account of a citizen’s life, a type of commemoration meant for public consumption...An obituary distils the essence of a citizen’s life, and because it is a commemoration as well as a life chronicle, it reflects what society values and wants to remember about that person’s history” (12, 14). Hume’s observation is derived from a very different context to that of social media: North American newspaper obituaries. Yet Hayley Okines’ Facebook page shows a number of striking similarities between more traditional and collective, social media obituaries. Hayley’s Facebook profile evolves from an autobiographical author’s page into a hagiographical memorial, where Hayley is remembered in an idealised, distilled way as a self-sacrificing, positive and brave young woman – all characteristics that are valued at this moment in time by Anglophonic cultures. While it is true that a traditional newspaper obituary has a single, professional author, and a Facebook memorial has many contributors who are usually non-professional writers, the hundreds of comments that appear on Hayley’s page work together to build an image – an idealised “essence” of her life, much like a traditional obituary.

At the same time, Hayley's page shows the ways in which collective social media obituaries are also a kind of therapeutic and relational biography. For example, a number of Hayley's followers directly address her. "RIP you was such a strong girl!" and "God bless you Hayley. Your positive outlook and willingness to share your life's journey with us has been very much appreciated." This direct-address aspect of social media memorials is common, as critic, Jocelyn DeGroot has noted. In her study of Facebook memorial groups DeGroot discovered that "grieving individuals wrote to the deceased as if the deceased could read the messages" (195). DeGroot identified that these direct-address posts serve two particular social functions. First, they help followers, friends and family make sense of the individual's death (196). Second, they maintain a "continuing bond" with the deceased (199).

In other words, social media can be considered a therapeutic space, where biographical stories about the deceased person not only become a tool of remembrance, but are also a valuable way to "work through" loss and grief. Of course this is not a new idea. Leading death studies scholar, Tony Walter has pointed out with his "biographical theory of grief", that telling stories about the dead has long served a cathartic social purpose in a number of cultures ("Bereavement, Biography and Commemoration" 10). "Jointly constructing the biography of the dead" suggests Walter, "helps [mourners] know who they are grieving and helps them construct an ancestor who will accompany them into the future" (11). The construction of the collective obituary that plays out on Hayley's page, then, is not necessarily new. However, on social media this biographical process and the social function of the obituary are made public and visible in an unprecedented way.

With this public focus, though, comes the foregrounding of a number of ethical questions. On the one hand, in many Anglophone contexts, generally speaking, an individual's death does not prompt celebration and flamboyant responses. The social norms around death are designed to prompt sobriety and quiet respect. On the other hand, social media, such as Facebook, are designed "for sharing and interaction" and "for presenting performances of lived life" (Christensen and Gotved 2). On a site like Facebook, quiet reflection is arguably less valued than extroverted, broadcasted displays of identity. Additionally, these platforms come with a specific vernacular. Individuals have the capacity to "like" or "favourite" the posts of fellow users, to add hashtags, emoticons, or to use truncated speech and acronyms to communicate emotional states or physical actions. Hyperbolic statements and acronyms such as OMG! (Oh my God), LOL (laugh out loud), TLDR (too long, didn't read) are common parlance on sites such as Facebook. Therefore, death narratives on Facebook foreground the tension between the identity performances that the platform encourages, and the expectations around the kinds of biographical scripts available to narrate death at this particular moment. Although the informal register and performative function of Facebook suits the context when users post positive or humorous content about their lives, when it comes to an individual's death, acronyms, emoticons, hashtags and "like" buttons can seem inappropriate, and for some, unethical.

Hayley's Facebook page is an obvious example of this. In response to her death, many of Hayley's followers posted emoticons, and made liberal use of acronyms. One follower, for instance, posted: "Wtf noooooooooooooo 🤔" (Barkla). For a reader unfamiliar with social media discourse, this post might seem banal and flippant. The exclamatory, hyperbolic acronym, wtf (what the

fuck), and the use of the crying emoticon contrasts with offline, formal ways of addressing death in Anglophone cultures.⁷⁴ Therefore, despite the fact that the above response seems to be more about the user's outrage than Hayley's death, on a site like Facebook, this kind of reaction is a legitimate and common form of expression, and it suggests how the social norms around biographical death narratives are being transformed on these platforms. Indeed, the shift is so rapid that some users are unsure about the ethics of this new context for discussing the dead. For example, another follower on Hayley's page indicates the conflict between the "like" button and the discussion of death: "Didn't want to 'like' this but wanted to show my support somehow RIP Hayley xxx" (Rogers). This user wanted to be part of the community of grief, but at the same time, her resistance to the like function shows a hesitance to adopt the new language available to these collective biographers. This is despite the fact that the like button on Facebook is not always used in a literal sense. The like button can also be used to signal solidarity with a cause, or support an author's feelings about a topic. As Margaret Gibson has pointed out, on the memorial page for the Boston Marathon bombing, for example, "'Like' was often translated to mean 'Prayer'" ("Automatic and Automated Mourning" 343). Still, understanding and interpreting these new scripts can be complex and so when a death is announced on social media, the like button can seem incongruous with the context, highlighting one of a range of ethical questions that arise with this particular kind of biographical expression in these online contexts.

⁷⁴ In a pre-digital era, such hyperbolic responses to death were generally reserved for celebrities – the lipstick kisses covering the gravesite of Oscar Wilde at Père Lachaise Cemetery, or the ocean of floral tributes and notes left for Princess Diana in London and Paris. Social media absorbs these offline celebrity grief practices and encourages extroverted displays of emotion not only for celebrities but for lesser-known individuals as well.

Moreover, as highlighted earlier, social media is about sharing performances of identity and so the focus of many Facebook posts and responses to death can be interpreted as self-absorbed instead of dignified and thoughtful. Indeed, as Gibson highlights, “many commentaries” about death narratives on social media “call out what they see as ‘jumping on the bandwagon’ or other signs of parasitic opportunism to promote self-image and self-interest” (“Automatic and Automated Mourning” 343).⁷⁵ While this criticism might be valid to some degree, it fails to take account of the fact that death narratives are almost never for the dead. As the earlier discussion about the therapeutic dimensions of biography suggests, death narratives exist for the living. An anecdote from John Green’s 2012 bestselling young adult novel, *The Fault in Our Stars*, nicely illustrates this.

In one of the final chapters of the novel, the protagonist and narrator, sixteen-year-old Hazel Grace, surveys her recently deceased boyfriend’s social media “wall.” “I got out my laptop” she explains “and fired it up and went onto his wall page, where already the condolences were flooding in” (264). “I love you, bro. See you on the other side” reads one note, while another: “You’ll live forever in our hearts big man” (264). As Hazel reads these messages, she is struck by the way they fail to memorialise her boyfriend, Augustus, in an adequate way. The Augustus she knows is not the one who appears in the banal, but well-meaning biographical snippets, prompting her to decide that such death rituals are not for the deceased person, but “are for the living” (273). Like offline forms of death narratives, online forms similarly serve a therapeutic role, “for the living” to work through grief and to remember those who have passed away. However, the interactive, participatory nature of social media, and the new language they

⁷⁵ This is a point vividly illustrated with the online outpouring of grief for David Bowie in the wake of his death in January 2016, and the proceeding debate about who has the right to grieve and in what way. See Burchill “Please Spare Us the Sob Signalling Over David Bowie.”

encourage, vividly highlights how biography is implicated in performances of grief.

Commemoration on social media is partly about performance – individual users being seen as a certain kind of person and being part of a community. As Hayley’s follower puts it, wanting “to show support somehow.” Yet, commemoration offline is also a kind of performance, and individuals are expected to perform grief in prescribed ways. It is simply that social media platforms, like Facebook, make these performances visible in a new way. Individuals’ reactions and behaviours are recorded and broadcast on social media – a process that is complicated by the relatively new parlance of a site like Facebook. Those who use social media are then confronted with a range of commemorative performances, which in turn affects the kind of biographical narrative that is produced about the deceased person. For some, such commemorative public performances, are discordant with death. As one reader responding to a 2009 article about online memorials said:

...these sorts of things are fine in theory but once you get people who didn’t know or barely knew the person who has died posting supposedly heartfelt feelings of grief, the whole thing becomes cheap and offensive. I’m talking mainly about the sorts of comments you get on local news websites where people ‘wish they had known the person as he or she sounds like they were lovely’ or where they say their ‘heart goes out to the family’. All so trite and insincere, it’s almost grief tourism. It just seems to cheapen the death of somebody into something that a ‘community’, if such a thing exists, can take part in and show how sensitive they are. Whatever happened to privacy? (Ribena).

So there is a concern here that an individual’s memorial may attract banal self-serving contributions from those who want to perform grief, and be seen to be “good” people. For this reader, Facebook memorials encourage “trite and insincere...grief tourism” that “cheapens” death. The fact that social media makes

death and stories about death more public and more visible than ever is confronting for this person and thwarts her expectations of the function of death narratives. This reader's response draws attention to the role biography plays in the wake of death, but also how such narratives about the deceased are more about the living than the dead.

In addition to the performative aspects of social media, the participatory nature of a site like Facebook also raises other ethical concerns. As the Wikipedia example in the previous chapter has shown, many websites, especially high-profile ones, are vulnerable to vandalism. Online memorials, especially those on social media attract internet trolls – those who seek to disturb and offend – and this behaviour has become a clear ethical concern on such platforms. In her paper, “LOLing at Tragedy: Facebook Trolls, Memorial Pages and Resistance to Grief Online”, Whitney Phillips cites the case of California university student, Chelsea King, who was murdered in 2010 (n.p.). Phillips outlines how, in the days after King's body was discovered, numerous memorial pages were established to commemorate her death. With titles like “1,000,000,000 Million STRONG to Remember Chelsea King,” “In Loving Memory of Chelsea King <3,” and “RIP Chelsea King <3”, these pages were “interactive newspaper obituaries” where any number of users could post condolence messages. As Phillips notes, “RIP pages are often open to anyone interested in participating, making them ostensibly private but effectively public social spaces. As a result, the tenor, not to mention coherency, of comments is often mixed.” Thus, while most users had good intentions, there were also a number of users, or “trolls”, who posted messages that were intended to offend and disrupt the page. “RIP trolls” as Phillips calls them, make fun of death and the deceased. Trolls engage in a range of offensive

activities such as posting “pictures of car crashes onto car crash victims’ pages” or “posting pictures of dead kids onto dead kids’ pages.” On Chelsea King’s memorial pages, such abusive messages were swiftly deleted by the page’s administrators, but, as Phillips points out, the offending posts still prompted angry responses from fellow users, who condemned the messages as disrespectful to Chelsea King and her family. When examined in mid-2015, Hayley Okines’ page featured no such dramatically offensive content, although a couple of posts hinted at the way memorial pages can be hijacked not just by trolls who are interested in disrupting and offending, but also by commercial concerns wanting to publicise various business endeavours. Amongst the condolences on Hayley’s memorial, for instance, is a link to a website promising “naked pictures”, and another that apparently links to a weightloss scheme (“I decided to shed pounds. I lost 23 pounds with the diet that site here FATXU.COM”) (Maravilla, Jenelle). These two posts, while relatively banal in comparison to those that appear on other memorials, nonetheless are a reminder of the ethical hazards of collective social media obituaries.

The interactivity of platforms like Facebook “shifts control over how the person will be remembered, from a carefully crafted obituary written by a family member and published in a static, broadcast medium, to a free-for-all discussion forum” (Marwick and Ellison 379). This provides new possibilities for biographical expression--in the form of intersubjective, collaborative biography of the deceased--but it also leaves online memorials vulnerable to vandalism and abuse, thereby raising ethical concerns unique to the digital environment. In the next part of the chapter, I turn to another case study that complicates these

questions even further, but also shows the ways in which obituaries are no longer the province of prominent people and celebrities

**Australian Broadcasting Company's In Memory of...Crowdsourced
Trans/national Obituaries as New Biography**

In 2010, in a response to a changing journalistic landscape, Australia's government-funded, national broadcaster, the Australian Broadcasting Company (ABC), launched an initiative called ABC Open. Designed to harness the energy of citizen journalism, and to help the broadcaster stay relevant in an increasingly participatory environment, ABC Open combines community storytelling with the resources and expertise of the ABC. With a tagline, "Real Stories Made by Real People" the scheme invites members of the Australian community to make and submit news stories to the broadcaster, who then publishes them on its television

Figure 47 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 47: The Front Page of ABC Open's *In Memory of*

or online platforms (“ABC Open”). The initiative has resulted in various kinds of material being produced, but there is one particular ABC Open project that is especially worth considering here. In 2014, the broadcaster called for members of the community to submit obituaries of those who had died during the year. Titled *In Memory Of: People we Lost in 2014*, the project effectively crowdsourced the obituaries of “ordinary Australians”, which were subsequently published alongside obituary content from official ABC news sources. The resulting website is a mix of short biographical profiles, of both well-known national and international public figures – for example Maya Angelou, Philip Seymour Hoffman, Lauren Bacall and Clarissa Dickson Wright – and ordinary Australians.

What the project illustrates is how the online sphere has the potential to challenge a number of features associated with traditional obituaries. First and most obviously, the ABC Open project is an example of how Web 2.0 is in some ways realising its democratic potential with regards to biography. Many of the individuals whose stories feature on *In Memory Of* would never receive an obituary in a major newspaper. The project therefore is an example of how the online environment can challenge the traditional social hierarchies that are associated with obituaries, thereby making the lives and deaths of ordinary people visible in an unprecedented way. Second, the *In Memory Of* project illustrates how the digital age is transforming the relationship between geographical context and obituary. On the one hand, as a project that is administered by the national broadcaster, and which promises to tell the life stories of “real Australians”, *In Memory Of* constructs – according to Benedict Anderson’s formulation – an imagined Australian national community (*Imagined Communities* 204 -206). At the same time, the site features the obituaries of American and British public

figures who are clearly not from an Australian context, but who are well-known across the global Anglosphere. As a result, this project shows how the internet is enabling biography to simultaneously confirm and transcend national contexts.

Additionally, and in parallel with Facebook memorials, this project further suggests how biographical death narratives in the digital age raise particular ethical questions. For instance, the *In Memory Of* site uses a range of features unique to an online platform. As is the case on other sites, each obituary on the ABC Open project includes the provision for comments. Visitors can therefore leave condolence messages and interact with the obituary. Each obituary features a number of keywords or tags that classify the narrative and help visitors to the site to find the narratives that interest them. Users can also search by Australian geographical region, and so those living in Australia can find obituaries of people from their local community. In addition, the site has adopted the “like” function of social media platforms, which visitors can use to indicate approval, and which in turn ranks the obituaries in order of popularity. All of these functions not only make these online biographies more participatory and interactive, but, like the example of Hayley Okines’ Facebook profile, they also raise new ethical questions specific to the digital environment.

Consistent with its scope of offering “real stories of real Australians”, the profiles on the site represent people of various gender and age – from newborn babies to elderly people. At first glance this appears to be an example of the way the site challenges the exclusive nature of traditional obituaries, and in some ways it is. As suggested above – a fact that bears repeating – the majority of people on the *In Memory Of* site are not well-known public figures, most of whom would be unlikely to be the subject of an obituary. From this perspective, the site is more

democratic and egalitarian than traditional spaces for obituaries are. Yet from another perspective, the site's egalitarian ethos is undermined by the various features available to visitors. For example, in addition to the features outlined above, visitors to the site also have the opportunity to sort the obituaries into three main categories: "latest" "featured" and "popular". While the first category simply provides a way for individuals to view the newest content on the site, the other two categories rank the death narratives according to whatever the site's editor chooses, or whatever other users have "liked" the most. This ranking of obituaries, while consistent with database logic that provides a way to sift and sort content, is ethically troubling. For instance, although the "like" feature epitomises democratic participation, effectively providing a way for visitors to vote for their favourite obituary, in the context of death this seems insensitive. The ranking that occurs on social media-type sites like *In Memory Of* reveals how obituaries are not created equal. The death narratives that are more shocking or sensational rise to the top of the pile, while those that are less dramatic are marginalised. Implicit in this is the idea that some lives and deaths are more deserving of attention than others. The obituary is therefore an exclusive form of biography regardless of context.

The *In Memory Of* website clearly attempts to use newly-available digital platforms to challenge the existing politics of the obituary and to make this particular form of biographical representation more egalitarian. Yet, in adopting the *lingua franca* of social media – especially the like button – it undermines this potential, as some obituaries are foregrounded on the site, whilst others receive little attention from visitors. The stories that take the lion's share of attention, and are marked as attracting the most number of "likes" are ones that flout

expectations of the assumed subjects of death narratives. As such, the two most popular obituaries on the site are those of babies. Baby Eloise's story attracts 200,000 views, 398 likes and 110 comments, and baby Lincoln John Cook's story attracts 7,000 views, 79 likes and 56 comments. Both of these obituaries focus on non-traditional subjects, who, because of their age, would not normally be expected to feature in a death narrative, yet visitors to the site are confronted with the stories of their short lives and their unexpected deaths. A small photograph of each baby also features on each obituary, heightening the pathos of the narratives.

Baby Eloise's obituary, for example, features a photography of her lying in her cot, presumably a few days old, and the accompanying story announces that the "healthy baby girl was born on the 1st of November 2014" and soon went home to join a family of six (mummy03). However, "a few days later" reads the obituary, "the family's life turned upside down." Eloise became sick and was admitted to hospital where she was diagnosed as carrying the herpes simplex virus, apparently caught from a relative who had kissed her. The obituary states: "After three weeks of being on machines for her heart, lungs that had collapsed and kidneys that were not functioning, Eloise caught a staph infection in her blood. At three weeks old, Eloise took her last breath on the 25th of November" (mummy03). Beginning with the subject's birth and written in third person, the obituary begins in a style that resembles traditional conventions of the form. However, half way through the obituary, the voice and tone of the narrative changes, and it becomes apparent that the writer is Eloise's mother. Speaking in first-person voice she explains: "I am writing this so hopefully people will be more aware of this virus and think twice before cuddling a newborn if they have a

cold sore on their lip. Please pass this vital information onto your family and friends.” She directly addresses the reader:

We all have had that one friend that likes to be a little over protective of their baby and not want to be swamped with a room full of visitors. Instead of thinking they are over reacting, respect their wishes and know they are just trying to protect their little treasure.
Cold sores, or herpes simplex virus is deadly!
No baby's life should ever be cut short.
May you fly high little Eloise xxx

It is not surprising that this obituary is the most popular on the site. Not only does it present an unconventional subject, it also amends the obituary form to present an unconventional kind of death narrative. While the obituary begins in the prescribed way, it soon gives way to a confessional, intimate and personal story of grief. Visitors to the site are not kept at a distance from this biography, but, in using a personal voice and suggesting that “we have all had that friend” who is protective of their child, visitors are invited to identify with its author and her grief. This shift in tone reveals the tension that emerges as the older biographical form of the obituary migrates online. In a new media environment, especially on social media, where intimate voices and conversational tone is the mode du jour, obituaries are becoming a combination of distanced biographical writing and personal response the deceased’s passing.

Also, in the case of Eloise, the obituary’s educational function is extended and evolves to fit with the digital age. Her obituary reads at once as three types of address: a traditional biographical death narrative, a mother’s personal expression of grief, and a public health announcement about the dangers of virus transmission to newborns, and readers’ comments testify to these various registers. Some visitors leave relatively conventional responses that would not be out of place in an analogue condolence book “Such a beautiful baby and a tragic

story. Love to you and your family” says one, while another offers: “So very very sad. Dear Eloise. A tragic loss of life” (Colins, Fifi). But the online platform, and its capacity for sharing content means that numerous visitors take the opportunity to respond to the author’s grief, share their own stories of the loss of a baby, and endorse the public health message. One visitor, for example, offers her own story of loss and urges others to heed the warning:

Our precious grandson Brayden born Feb 2013 died when he was 11 days old due to HSV. The signs he was sick were very subtle... I know I have HSV but had no clue I could spread it without an active cold sore. Though we don't know for sure who he contracted the virus from, the guilt of it potentially being me is painful. Please continue to bring awareness and education by sharing this story and all others like it. No family should have to suffer this loss...Educate anyone who will listen. Never kiss a baby! (Haena).

Numerous others praise the author for publicising her child’s death in order to educate the public. For instance another user offers:

I am so sorry for the loss of your beautiful Eloise and appreciate that writing this piece must have been very painful for you. Your courage is to be commended. I am sure there are many other people like me who had no idea of the danger associated with the herpes simplex virus. Thank you for sharing (Kelly).

Eloise’s narrative suggests how, on a site like this one, obituaries become not only public memorials to the deceased, but also spaces for “sharing stories” and for education. As I have indicated – one of my key arguments in this thesis is that as in previous eras, biography now is often more about public issues than it is about the subject. In many of these contexts, lives become a cultural site for a range of ideologies, or concerns to emerge and be worked through. With online biographies, such as those on Wikipedia, or on *In Memory of*, this function of biography becomes particularly clear, and consideration of another of the more popular obituaries on the ABC site further illustrates this.

After Eloise and Baby Lincoln John Cook's story the next most popular obituaries are those of a number of young people. Jessica Cleland, for instance, who was born in 1996, and died in 2014, aged 19 is the subject of a death narrative that has been viewed over 5000 times, and has attracted 21 likes. Her obituary begins with the photo of a smiling young woman, dressed in a summery top and denim shorts, looking relaxed and happy. Written by Jessica's grandmother, Fran, the obituary begins by explaining the photo: "My granddaughter Jess was 17 in this photo. It was impossible to take a bad photo of her. She had the perfect face. She and her sister decided to have some professional photos taken for fun and every single one was beautiful" (Cleland). Fran tells us how Jessica "loved beauty" and "loved animals". "Meeting tigers in Thailand was one of her best memories. She was always surrounded by dogs, horses and cats, and had just started a new job." At this point, after discussing Jessica's life, the obituary turns to her death, like Eloise's narrative there is a change in tone. Jessica's obituary becomes fragmented, as the cause of her death is revealed. Fran continues:

And now she's gone...
So much to live for, so many people who loved her.
Just 18...
The pain left behind is impossible. So many, "If onlys." There's nothing worse than this.
Our beautiful Jess committed suicide on Easter Saturday. We struggled to understand why.
The coroner's report came this week: *cyber bullied by two boys*.
We can't wait for the cyber bullying law to come in. Had it been sooner, we would have had our day in court to face these mindless cruel young men (Cleland).

Written in conversational language, and featuring ellipses and fragmented phrasing, Jessica's story lacks the polished, objective tone of an official obituary. Instead, what is presented is a personal intimate narrative that communicates the

bereft emotional state of grief and incomprehension of the author. While obituarists in many prominent newspapers tend to use euphemisms when discussing an individual's death, in online forums like *In Memory Of*, the discussion is much more candid and direct (Starck "Revelation and Intrusion" 375).⁷⁶ Here Jessica's cause of death is not obscured, but rather directly addressed, and in fact, the Jessica's obituary finishes with a message from the Australian suicide prevention charity, Lifeline. "If you need advice about coping with your situation there are lots of places to get help. Find someone to help you. 24 hour support is available from Lifeline - 13 11 14"

Therefore, in a similar way to Eloise's obituary, Jessica's has a clear social and educational purpose – to raise awareness of the potential consequences of cyberbullying. As a story that relates a topical issue, the obituary attracts numerous responses from visitors sharing similar stories or supporting Fran's anger at the loss of her granddaughter. One visitor says: "I am so sorry for your loss. I have an 18 year old niece who has suffered terrible bullying over the years and I have watched hopelessly while my sister has lost sleep with sheer helplessness. Something needs to be done. RIP Jessica" (Paula). Another indicates her condolences and her outrage at cyber bullying, "I am so so sorry for the loss of your beautiful Jess. No more bullying! NO MORE BULLYING!"(Sarah). As Jessica's obituary suggests, some of the short biographical narratives that feature on *In Memory Of* are, like those on social media, such as Facebook, therapeutic and educational spaces where individuals can register concern or learn about a contemporary social issue. Through its highly personal tone and structure,

⁷⁶ Laurie McNeill also makes this observation about Canadian death notices: that there are some causes of death, such as suicide, which are considered "taboo", and so are usually "coded" for readers to interpret, rather than explicitly stated. ("Writing Lives in Death" 196).

Jessica's obituary becomes a cautionary tale that is mobilised in a fight against cyber bullying. On sites like *In Memory Of*, that make use of the online sharing economy encouraged and popularised by Facebook, it is not the objective authoritative third-person voice of the obituarist that is appreciated, but rather, in the wake of confessional discourse and the memoir boom, it is the highly personal voice of the obituarist, who is willing to share his or her story that is most valued. This idea is illustrated by turning to the least popular obituary on the site.

The obituary of 88-year old Reverend Bonnie Mary Frances Bradley has been viewed a mere 62 times, has attracted no "Likes" or comments. Arguably this is least popular obituary on the site for two reasons. First, and in contrast the obituaries of Eloise and Jessica, Reverend Bradley is an elderly woman and so is an expected subject for a death narrative. Second, written by an author with the username Colin, who does not identify in any personal way with Reverend Bradley, her story is a highly-traditional kind of obituary. Using a third-person voice, her narrative begins in a chronological, linear way. "Mary Frances Butler, born in 1926, became known as Bonnie due to her happy disposition. The family lived in Tecoma, then North Brighton. Bonnie married Les Bradley in 1948, a union that would last 66 years" (Colin). The obituary then focusses on her individual achievements. "While raising her five children and supporting Les in his career in the 1960s and 1970s, Bonnie was deeply involved in the Presbyterian Church. At the age of 50, Bonnie returned to school, completing her Higher School Certificate and a Bachelor of Theology. In December 1982, she was ordained as one of the first female Ministers in the newly formed Uniting Church" (Colin). Following convention, and reading as a list of the contribution to public life, the obituary continues "In 1983, Bonnie became Minister of Cranbourne,

Clyde and Devon Meadows in outer Melbourne, and led the congregation in building their own church. Many believe that the building, opened in 1989, would not have happened without Bonnie's leadership." Finally, the obituary ends in a traditional way, with her death: "Bonnie moved to Mayflower as a resident where she passed away quietly in her sleep in late August 2014. Her ashes were interred in Brighton Cemetery, not far from her childhood home."

Bonnie's obituary markedly contrasts with those of Jessica and Eloise. Bonnie's story is composed in clear paragraphs and progresses logically and chronologically. The tone of the narrative is objective and distanced, and unlike the earlier examples, there is no expression of emotion or grief from the author. Bonnie's obituary echoes its analogue newspaper predecessors, rather than the confessional, personal tone that is valued in many online spaces. These three obituaries suggest how certain subjects and scripts for narration are valued at this particular moment, but also how the online obituary can become a site for discussion and working through contemporary issues.

However, not only does *In Memory Of* suggest how the online sphere is shifting the way death is narrated and discussed, but it also shows how online obituaries can confirm a sense of national identity, as well as linking to a transnational narrative. For instance, the *In Memory Of* website features a number of obituaries of people who migrated to Australia from Post-War Europe. The story of Rozalia (Głód) Dudkiewicz, for example, is a narrative that not only commemorates her life, but also places her in a transnational context, thus linking her life, and the nation's own biography to a broader historical framework. Written by her granddaughter, Wendy Gleeson, Rozalia's obituary begins with an old black and white photo of two women, stylishly dressed in 1940s attire,

standing on the verandah of a weatherboard home in tropical northern Australia. Unlike the other obituaries that used first or third-person singular voice, this one uses the more collective, intimate register of first-person plural: “We laughingly impersonated Grandma’s thick Polish accent. She used to say, “You too skinny,” no matter how old we were. We literally had two mums – one regular, part-time working, running around mum and another ‘Babcia-ly’ one who taught us how to sew, tend chooks, pray and had the best feather bedding for sleepovers” (Gleeson). Immediately, the visitor is invited into what reads as not a distanced remembrance of a life, but a collective, joyous, family recollection of a beloved matriarch. Moreover, the obituary draws attention to Rozalia’s “thick Polish accent” and by implication her status as a post-war migrant, which is elaborated on as the story progresses.

Displaced by Nazis from Nowy Sącz Southern Poland, she was transported to a farm labour camp in Regensburg. Her only child, our Mum, was born on the farm. Rozalia was always grateful to the German farmer for giving her a day off to recover! In 1950 her small family emigrated to Australia by steamer. Their choice of a new home was easy – her sister already moved to Brisbane so sponsored them. In the photo they look so relieved and happy – their troubles left in war-torn Europe (Gleeson).

Here Rozalia is represented as a “grateful” migrant, who escaped “war-torn Europe” for a “new home” in Brisbane, Australia. This marks Rozalia as someone with a history that goes beyond a national context. Furthermore, because her obituary is on a space run by the national broadcaster, on a project that promises the stories of “real Australians”, Rozalia’s story makes an implicit statement about the place of migrants in Australia’s history and contemporary national identity. As the obituary continues, this idea is further extended, as the author explains how Rozalia encouraged the family’s Polish-Australian identity.

She sent care parcels to Communist Poland stuffed with chocolate contraband and coffee – with family there and throughout the world Roza was an avid correspondent. She convinced Mum to send her granddaughters to Polish School to embrace our heritage. She always said the most important things are money and health, but her proudest achievements were family and home (Gleeson).

Rozalia's story indicates how new subjects can have obituaries on the internet, and how in turn those stories can construct new community identities that are transnational, rather than simply national. As a female migrant, whose labour was dedicated to domestic work, and whose "proudest achievements were family and home" she is unlikely to receive an official newspaper obituary. However, a project like *In Memory Of* writes Rozalia into the public sphere, acknowledging her life and work. The fact that her story features on the website of the Government broadcaster, the ABC, authorises and publically sanctions her narrative.

The obituaries on the ABC Open website highlight how, with regards to biographical representation, the democratic potential of Web 2.0 can be realised. By including the death narratives of a range of "real Australians" the site challenges the traditional social hierarchies that are associated with obituaries, thereby making the lives and deaths of ordinary people visible in an unprecedented way. In doing so, the site also indicates how the relationship between geographical context and obituary is shifting in a digital age. Transnational stories of migration, like Rozalia's, which appears alongside those of international celebrities on the ABC website, show the role obituaries play in constructing imagined communities beyond a purely national context.

Yet, like Facebook memorials, a site such as *In Memory Of* also raises considerable ethical issues. If, as Thomas Couser suggests, the obituary "occupies

an important place among life-writing genres” for the way it has the capacity to “fix the subject’s image in the public mind”, then the ethical implications of online death narratives are indeed significant (“The Obituary of a Face” 8). Not only do these online forms broadcast the “last word” about a person, memorialising his or her public image in particular ways for a potentially global audience, but the interactivity and the language of social media adopted by a site like *In Memory Of* adds another layer of complication. The provision to rank obituaries by popularity may reveal a contemporary interest in personal stories and non-traditional subjects, but it also sends the implicit message that some lives are more valued than others, an idea in direct conflict with the apparent egalitarian promise of Web 2.0. The lives and deaths that are the most sensational or unexpected, or those that operate as moral lessons are the ones that emerge most prominently online. In other words, death online, like its offline ancestor, is a compelling, dynamic but in some ways more problematic form. This is an observation that is illustrated by the final case in this discussion: Twitter and its potential for satirical parody.

“Plain of feature, and certainly overweight...” #MyOzObituary: Tweeting

Back to the Cultural Politics of the Obituary

Speaking of North American newspaper obituaries, G. Thomas Couser asserts, “Obituaries are news, the first draft of history: They are written by professional journalists employed by newspapers or news agencies” (“The Obituary of a Face” 3). Yet, as suggested at the beginning of this chapter, it is clear that the obituary is an exclusive form. Bridget Fowler notes that obituaries still tend to focus on a

select handful of lives and that women are especially missing from these public forms of biography. Despite the progress made by feminism, notes Fowler, in the current era, “there are still only a very small proportion of obituaries awarded to women.” (9) Another critic, Karol K. Maybury, in her 1990s study, found that women were “awarded significantly fewer obituaries” than men, and that women’s obituaries also tended to be much shorter than those of their male contemporaries (30). Thus, like biography as a cultural form more generally, obituaries are gendered. This is not surprising, especially as obituaries, as a type of biography, are a vehicle for cultural memory construction, and as Marianne Hirsch and Valerie Smith remind us “what a culture remembers and what it chooses to forget are intricately bound up with issues of power and hegemony, and thus with gender” (225). However, as writing that connotes professional, rather than amateur, and is considered to be “the first draft of history”, obituaries carry significant weight as public memorials. Consequently, when an obituary in a prominent newspaper errs in how it presents a life and a death, it is very noticeable, and even more so in an era of social media, where readers of the obituary can interact with the short biography. This is exactly what happened when a prominent Australian woman was memorialised in the nation’s most well-known newspaper, *The Australian*.

In January 2015, Australian novelist Colleen McCullough died aged 77. Her passing was marked by posts on social media, as well as in more traditional forms such as free-to-air television and newspaper obituaries. Most of the obituaries about McCullough were fairly standard – they focussed on her professional achievements. *The New York Times*, for instance began with the following sentiment:

Colleen McCullough, a former neurophysiological researcher at Yale who, deciding to write novels in her spare time, produced “The Thorn Birds,” a multigenerational Australian romance that became an international best seller and inspired a hugely popular television mini-series, died on Thursday on Norfolk Island in the South Pacific, where she had made her home for more than 30 years. She was 77 (Fox).

However, the Rupert Murdoch-owned broadsheet newspaper, *The Australian*, published an obituary that began not by relating McCullough’s professional achievements, but by focussing on her physical appearance and her apparent appeal to men. “Plain of feature, and certainly overweight, she was, nevertheless a woman of wit and warmth. In one interview, she said: ‘I’ve never been into clothes or figure and the interesting thing is I never had any trouble attracting men’” (“The Thorn Birds Author”). Therefore, although McCullough made the cut as one of the handful of women to be memorialised in an obituary, her obituarist, and *The Australian*’s editor clearly considered remarks about her appearance to be a fitting way to commemorate her life. As one commentator lamented, McCullough’s is not the first female obituary to focus on irrelevant details, rather than accomplishments, suggesting that the case is a “sad reflection of how women’s lives are valued” and that “we’ll celebrate a woman for anything, as long as it’s not her talent” (Shaw).⁷⁷ Yet while some critics were lamenting the inappropriate obituary, the Twittersphere began to take a different approach: mockery. The hashtag, #MyOzObituary soon trended on Twitter as users took the opportunity to parody the “official” death narrative, by offering their own self-deprecating obituaries. According to a BBC report, over 22,000 tweets were

⁷⁷ McCullough is not the only woman to be commemorated in this way. See, for instance, the 2013 *New York Times* obituary for eminent scientist, Yvonne Brill, which focussed on her ability to cook a “mean Beef Stroganoff” and devotedly follow her husband “from job to job” (Williams “Groundbreaking Rocket Scientist”).

generated in the 24 hours after the publication of The Australian's now-infamous profile (“#MyOzObituary- ‘Rude’”).

Figure 48 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Figure 48: Jane Caro's #MyOzObituary Tweet

Numerous public figures offered their pre-death obituaries. In Australia, writer and broadcaster, Jane Caro tweeted: “Short and dumpy with an extra chin, she nevertheless wrote books novels & articles & was occasionally allowed 2 appear on telly #myozobituary”(Caro, figure 48). Comedian, Wendy Harmer wrote: “Plain as a pikestaff, loud and annoying, nevertheless carved a career in comedy. Which is odd, because women aren't funny. #myozobituary” (Harmer). While writer and memoirist, Benjamin Law tweeted: “Despite a forehead like a solar panel and hair mown by the blind, Benjamin Law had basic literacy and dabbled in social media” (Law).

Soon after the hashtag trended, the parody moved beyond its original, national context and drew responses from across the English-speaking world. Regular Twitter users, as well as celebrities contributed. From the United Kingdom for instance, writer Caitlin Moran tweeted “#myozobituary would be ‘Although she grew a disappointing arse, she nonetheless got laid & won awards’” (Moran). Actor Katy Brand offered: “Spotty of chin and wide of thigh, she nonetheless summoned the courage to leave the house and do things. #myozobituary” (Brand). Novelist, Neil Gaiman also joined in with “Although his

beard looked like someone had glued it on & his hair would have been unconvincing as a wig, he married a rockstar. #MyOzObituary” (Gaiman). In North America, novelist, Jennifer Weiner tweeted: “Thin of hair and thick of thigh. Strident. Per NYT, lacked ability to sleep way to top. Puzzlingly, also a #1 NYT bestseller. #myozobituary” (Weiner). Meanwhile, the producer of the David Letterman show, Barbara Gaines wrote: “Despite being a fat, Jewish lesbian who couldn’t spell, she was nonetheless an Emmy award winning television producer. #myozobituary” (Gaines).

In addition, various commentators revised the obituaries of “great men” in the style of #MyOzObituary. One Twitter user wrote the following for *The Australian* newspaper owner, Rupert Murdoch: “Australia’s most successful businessman was a charmer. Ugly of face, devoid of morals, with a neck more wrinkled than a stegosaurus’s scrotum, he was nevertheless a man of wit and warmth who succeeded in charming everyone on the planet with his much-loved newspapers and his impartial and enlightened broadcasting organisations.” (Pegg). *The Age* in Australia and *The Washington Post* in the United States revised the death narratives of “great men” in the style of #MyOzObituary. President Roosevelt’s obituary became, “resembling a fat walrus in little spectacles, he was, nevertheless, president at one point or another” (Petri). Charles Dickens’ read, “Definitely balding, with an increasingly visible comb-over and facial hair that looked like a sloth had crawled onto his face and died, nevertheless, this gentleman wrote a thing or two”(Petri). While Albert Einstein’s was rewritten as such: “Although he looked like a monkey that had stuck its head through an old straw hat and been electrocuted, he was I guess okay once you got to know him

and might or might not have done some science that doesn't really make sense to me" (Petri).

While these responses might be considered a bit of fun, they can also be read as a serious challenge to the gendered nature of obituaries and the sexist assumptions that can underlie the form. Parody, as leading humour theorist, Salvatore Attardo points out, is "derived from the noun for ode and prefix para (meaning "near to" and "opposite")" and is the "comic reworking of other serious, epic or heroic works" (552). Humour critics Conal Condren, Jessica Milner Davis, Sally McCausland and Robert Phiddian add that parody involves "the borrowing from, imitation, or appropriation of a text, or other cultural product or practice, for the purpose of commenting, usually humorously, upon either it or something else" and that "pure parody is likely to be [relatively] light-hearted" (402). However, when combined with satire – a mode of humour that has a "moral dimension" and a clear critical intent, "which draws attention to hypocrisy and pretence", parody becomes more serious. This mode, what they call "satirical parody", is exemplified by the work of Australian television comedy program, *The Chaser*. In particular, they cite as a key example *The Chaser*'s "risky 'Eulogy to Dead People', a song concerning the hypocrisy which gags the media from mentioning, after the deaths of public personalities, those negative traits exploited for comment during their lifetimes" (407, 408).⁷⁸ This mode of satirical parody "imitates and distorts some pre-existing work or genre" whilst also critiquing a social norms (402). With *The Chaser*, for example, the genre or mode of the

⁷⁸ A recording of "The Eulogy Song" can be found on YouTube: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dXHleozgQ18&feature=youtube_gdata_player "The Eulogy Song" sketch caused great offence and controversy when it was broadcast in 2007. See for instance: Ricketson, Schubert and Murphy. "Politicians Join the Rush to Denounce Chaser's 'Eulogy'"

eulogy was imitated in order to critique the hagiographical discourse that surrounds celebrity deaths.

Returning to the responses to the Colleen McCullough obituary, satirical parody was used to draw attention to the gendered double-standards in obituary production. The tweets that emerged from the controversy imitated the form of the obituary, whilst critiquing and satirising it. As is clear from the quoted examples, the self-deprecating tweets focussed on unflattering aspects of physical appearance, with a cursory nod to the author's achievements. Some tweets even highlighted the author's sexuality or cultural heritage, and so extended the critique of traditional obituaries beyond the gendered aspects to indicate the way the lives of LGBTI and non-white people are also marginalised in public death narratives, or the way such aspects of identity are used to contain or limit a life story. Barbara Gaines' description of herself as a "fat, Jewish lesbian" is a case in point, but there are other examples, too. Australian poet and author, Maxine Beneba Clarke writes: "A struggling single parent, she occasionally took breaks from making gumbo & spitting watermelon pips to pen fables. #myozobituary" (Clarke). While Australian journalist, Bhakthi Puvanenthiran added, "she was short, ethnic and had a voice that carried. Despite this, she managed to finish university. #myozobituary" (Puvanenthiran).

These two tweets scathingly mock the obituary form. Beneba Clarke's use of the phrase "struggling single parent" highlights the lowly status afforded to parenting as an achievement in public life, let alone single parenting. Additionally, by including the phrase "making gumbo & spitting watermelon" she attacks an enduring stereotype of black people in the United States – a stereotype that is presumably so powerful that it carries to an Australian context.

Puvanenthiran's tweet, through the use of the out-dated word "ethnic", can be interpreted as a statement about how that aspect of her identity may have little relevance to her professional achievements as a journalist, but is likely to be called on in an obituary, potentially overshadowing other aspects of her identity.

The tweets that emerged in the wake of the McCullough obituary show how the internet provides a way for the public to respond to, and challenge memorial practices that have traditionally been exclusive. Thanks to the participatory platforms of the online environment, biography – its conventions and associated politics – is now subject to contest or rebuttal in new and unprecedented ways. Although intended for a national readership, *The Australian* obituary prompted a reaction across national borders – a reaction that would not have been possible to the same extent in a pre-digital age. Users employed the hashtag as a virtual rather than physical location where they could meet and participate in the mass criticism of the offending obituary.

Not only that, the Twitter platform encouraged a new style of protest to emerge, one that drastically challenges the formal power of the obituary as an elite, authoritative and definitive type of biography. The original obituary was so ridiculous that the best response was to make fun of it en masse with mini, satirical life narratives. That would have been unlikely to happen in the analogue age. A newspaper may have received a few witty letters to the editor, which they may or may not publish, but not 22,000 comments from across the world that are accessible in a public archive.

The tweets generated in response to the McCullough obituary, then, are not only an amusing form of life narrative, but also send a strong cautionary message to official news outlets about the perils of getting the so-called "first

draft of history” so very wrong. The #MyOzObituary case is an example of how the online sphere is not only providing new platforms for the representations of a greater range of lives and deaths, but is also a potentially vital tool for shifting the cultural politics of this significant type of biography.

Conclusion

In her provocative essay from the 2015 Online Lives *Biography* special issue Julie Rak begins by suggesting that “online environments are rapidly changing our understanding of what it means to construct a life story and what identity itself might come to mean in virtual worlds” (“Life Writing Versus Automedia” 155). As this chapter has suggested, online environments are not just “rapidly changing our understanding of what it means to construct a life story”, but also what it means to construct a biography in the wake of an individual’s death. With the participatory platforms of Web 2.0 comes the potential for anyone to be the subject of a death narrative. From dedicated memorial sites, like those found on MuchLoved.org, or Legacy.com, to spaces like Facebook or crowdsourced partnerships like *In Memory Of*, more and more individuals are becoming the focus of these very particular biographical narratives.

Many of the individuals whose stories feature on *In Memory Of*, for instance, would never receive an obituary in a major newspaper. The project therefore is an example of how the online environment can challenge the traditional social hierarchies that are associated with obituaries, thereby making the lives and deaths of ordinary people visible in an unprecedented way. Furthermore, with its mix of ordinary Australians and North American and British

celebrities and other public figures, this project shows how the internet is enabling biography to simultaneously confirm and transcend national contexts.

The *In Memory Of* project, along with Hayley Okines' Facebook page, also show that as death narratives and obituaries move online, they are becoming more collaborative and participatory. In doing so, these examples reveal a key function of biography in death: biographical stories about a deceased person not only become a tool of remembrance, but are also a valuable way to "work through" loss and grief. While this is not a new idea, on social media this biographical process and this social function of death narratives are made public and visible in a new ways.

This discussion has also highlighted the ethical issues that come with these forms of new biography. Any public memorial, offline or on, is open to being vandalised, but what a page like Hayley Okines' shows is how online the stakes are considerably raised because of the potential reach of online materials. Hayley's page shows how this new participatory biographical form can be hijacked not just by trolls who are interested in disrupting and offending, but also by commercial concerns wanting to publicise various business endeavours.

Moreover, Hayley's page also highlights ethical issues unique to this particular form of new biography: how death narratives on Facebook foreground the tension between the identity performances that the platform encourages, and the expectations around the kinds of biographical scripts available to narrate death at this particular moment. While the informal register and performative function of Facebook suits the context when users post positive or humorous content about their lives, when it comes to an individual's death, acronyms, emoticons, hashtags and "like" buttons can seem inappropriate, and for some, unethical. The

interactive, participatory nature of social media, and the new language they encourage, clearly highlights how biography is implicated in contemporary performances of grief.

Likewise, despite the *In Memory Of* project challenging traditional social hierarchies that are associated with obituaries, and making the lives and deaths of ordinary people visible in an unprecedented way, it too comes with ethical challenges. The provision the site makes for visitors to sort the obituaries into three main categories: “latest” “featured” and “popular” might be useful, but it undermines the egalitarian potential of the project. As we have seen, some lives – those who do not fit expected subject models, such as babies and young people – and some mode or scripts – intimate and confessional, rather than traditional and detached, are more valued than others. Additionally, those biographies that provide a way for readers to engage with social issues are also more valued – as evidenced by the public health message in Baby Eloise or Jessica’s obituary.

Sitting as a meta-example to both of these instances of new biography is #MyOzObituary. As the responses to McCullough’s obituary so entertainingly show, in dynamically new ways the online environment, and social media platforms like Twitter offer the potential for individuals and communities to write back to the hierarchical nature of the obituary like never before. As a medium that encourages bite-sized life narratives, Twitter shows its potential for shifting the memorial politics of biography in both its offline and online forms. Ultimately, this chapter has only sampled some of the many rapidly appearing biographical death narratives online, but what this discussion has revealed is that death online, like its offline ancestor, is a compelling and complex form of biography. It is a form that will no doubt emerge more prevalently in the coming years, making

lives and deaths more visible, and raising more questions for scholars and the general public to grapple with.

Conclusion: Reconceptualising “New Biography”

This thesis begins with an epigraph from Smith and Watson’s 2001 paper, “The Rumpled Bed of Autobiography”, in which they consider how life narrative scholars might think about first-person stories emerging from new contexts at the start of the new millennium. Characterising avant-garde autobiographical sites as a “rumpled bed”, Smith and Watson ask: “To what extent does our theorizing itself need to be remade by contemporary practice at these ‘rumpled’ sites of the experimental, so that we may take account of changing autobiographer-audience relations, shifting limits of personal disclosure, and changing technologies of self that revise how we understand the autobiographical?” (“The Rumpled Bed” 13). In many ways this research has been a response to this question.

This thesis uses the term “new biography” as a theoretical lens to identify and explore a selection of popular and innovative contemporary examples of the genre. Despite the implication of novelty, the term “new biography” actually has a long and shifting history and what this thesis has articulated is a reconceptualisation of the “new” in response to the immense social and technological changes of the last two decades. This reconceptualisation highlights three key aspects. First, the existence of new technology has created, and continues to offer, opportunities for biography to be practiced and represented in new ways. Second, is the way biography is implicated in social justice projects. In this sense, new biography is most concerned with diversity, and memorial politics: with narrating previously overlooked lives and entering them into the public record. Third, “new biography” refers to experimental and aesthetically innovative kinds of biography that offer opportunities for new ways of narrating

lives, at the same time revealing the conventions, limits and epistemological basis of the genre. In many ways, this aspect of the “new” hearkens back to, and now begins to extend, the Modernist idea of new biography.

As we have seen throughout this thesis, these three key aspects of new biography are distinct but are also interrelated. For example, the element of addressing social justice emerges strongly in the creative nonfiction biographies. Skloot’s *The Immortal Life of Henrietta Lacks*, or Garner’s *Joe Cinque’s Consolation* take the lives of previously overlooked or “ordinary” individuals and narrate them into compelling, and highly marketable, biographical narratives. In these books, creative nonfiction emerges as a methodology to write “the lives of the obscure” – to use Woolf’s term – into public life and to acknowledge the gaps and silences in the archive (Woolf “The Lives of The Obscure”). At the same time, these texts also relate to the experimental and genre-challenging aspect of new biography. By inserting themselves into the text, Skloot and Garner buck the convention of the invisible biographer. They both use a personal, confessional narrative voice and this allows them to confront the problems and ethical dilemmas faced by biographers, especially those writing the lives of disempowered subjects. So, in this sense, these creative nonfiction biographies push at the limits of genre, revealing some fundamental and enduring aspects of biographical practice, even if that ironically leads to further ethical questions and criticism.

Graphic biographies also embody the experimental and genre-challenging aspect of “new biography.” Comics are not a new form for narrating lives, but, as a currently popular and increasingly prevalent mode, they literally illustrate what biography is and does. Not only do texts like *Radioactive* and *Anne Frank* reframe

existing icons for circulation in the current era, but they also make visible particular characteristics of biographical practice and epistemology. As hand-drawn narratives, and through their use of archival materials, graphic biographies prompt viewers to consider how life narrative is an act of interpretation by a biographer, rather than a mere case of recording a life. With its use of concurrent storylines on a single page, *Anne Frank* maps out the relational nature of biography, thereby challenging the enduring idea of the unified, autonomous subject most associated with the genre. Meanwhile, *Radioactive*, with its fragmented, abstracted narrative, pushes even further at the limits of biography. *Radioactive* demands that consumers engage not only with the life story of Marie Curie but also with the very nature of biography itself.

Like *Radioactive*, Todd Haynes' biopic, *I'm Not There* directly challenges received understandings of biography. Rather than attempt to present a singular, coherent biopic subject, Haynes opts to construct Bob Dylan as a cluster of very different personas. In doing so, *I'm Not There* contests the traditional biographical subject, and destabilises the very foundations of the biographical genre. In particular, *I'm Not There* critiques the celebrity biography, and the assumption that audiences and fans can ever know "the authentic" or "real" Dylan. Haynes' aesthetic and narrative choices also reveal a key expectation of biography: that it will educate the consumer. In emphasising innovation and experiment, texts such as *I'm Not There* and *Radioactive* fail to provide the neat, consumable life narrative expected of biography, prompting some perplexed and frustrated reactions from consumers.

In contrast, Gus Van Sant's *Milk* is constructed as a conventional biopic, and so it does not embody newness in an experimental sense. However, as an

exemplar of the social justice aspect of new biography, Van Sant's film is primarily concerned with memorial politics, designed to "write back" to the historical record, mythologising and canonising a previously marginalised individual. Van Sant strategically uses the often hegemonic form of the traditional Hollywood biopic, including the casting of a major actor in the title role, to leverage the memorial power of this commercial-focussed cultural product.

The most dramatic and obvious aspect of new biography, which has been a major focus of my research, and perhaps for many people is the very definition of the 'new', concerns the impact of technology. An exemplification of this impact is Wikipedia. As the sixth most visited website in the world, and emblematic of participatory platforms, Wikipedia is a context where many fundamental aspects of biography are highly visible. As a kind of microcosm of the genre, biography's cultural politics, epistemology, methodology and ethics are all evident on the site. The current gendered nature of Wikipedia authorship, behind-the-scenes disputes over evidence, and the characterisation of biographical subjects, show the often contested nature of biography more generally. Biography, as we saw with *Milk*, has important symbolic power and on Wikipedia, Nelson Mandela or Jennifer Lawrence's biographies, for instance, become significant spaces where the politics of memory or contemporary concerns emerge and are debated. Practices such as vandalism or sockpuppetry further show how online biographies are valuable real estate that can be co-opted into public relations exercises.

Examples of online biography also vividly illustrate the diversification of contemporary biographical authorship. Not only are public archives being digitised and made available in unprecedented ways, but individuals are engaging in biographical acts in unprecedented numbers. Family histories are an obvious

example here, but online obituaries and memorials, as well as the Wikipedia biographies, further suggest the ways in which authorship is becoming more diverse thanks to participatory media.

Online death narratives, such as obituaries and memorials, also illustrate the potential for the online environment to challenge existing biographical conventions. As we have seen from the confessional, collective biographies on Facebook and *In Memory Of*, new narrative scripts for old forms are emerging online. As the obituary itself moves online it is becoming a more intimate and democratic form of biography, reworking convention and traditional genre expectations. This is further enhanced by the capacity of ordinary citizens to now have a say in how biography is practiced. As the #MyOzObituary case shows, social media especially provides opportunities for users to “write back” to the prevailing politics of biography in immediate and direct ways that were simply not available in a previous era.

However, these online examples of new biography come with complications: just the online sphere offers opportunities for new subjects and authors, it also raises new ethical issues and magnifies existing ones. The highly accessible and visual nature of virtual spaces raises the stakes, meaning that biographical practice matters in an unprecedented way. This is especially evident on Wikipedia, or on sites like *In Memory Of*, or Hayley Okines’ Facebook page where the parlance of social media is the encouraged language of choice, and users can “like” obituaries, effectively reinstating the idea of a hierarchy where some individuals’ lives are considered more important than others. In other words, these examples of digital biography reveal the multifaceted and uncharted ways

in which the online environment tests the limits of biographical practice and representation.

Ira Nadel observes, “as a genre, biography continually unsettles the past, maintaining its vitality through its continual correction, revision and interpretation of individual lives....Versions of a life are necessary stages in the evolution of the genre...” (Nadel *Biography*, 103). As this thesis has shown, despite biography’s reputation as a staid and traditional genre, it is in fact a dynamic, complex and evolving type of life narrative that acts as a cultural barometer for social norms and preoccupations. Implicated in contemporary cultural politics, national and community identity and memorial discourse, biography in the early twenty-first century is a diverse and significant genre and practice.

Therefore, as this thesis has argued, the genre deserves much more attention from life narrative scholars. Each of the biographical forms in this thesis – creative nonfiction, graphic, and online biographies as well as biopics – could be considered further. There is fruitful and dynamic work being done with regards to biopics, and Candida Rifkind’s forthcoming monograph will do much to fill a gap in the criticism regarding graphic biography, but more research on the other biographical forms would enrich our understanding further. As I write this conclusion, online biography is especially overlooked. This is a significant oversight, considering the attention that other manifestations of digital life are currently receiving. Popular cultural forms such as biographical fiction, television, and biography in museums, are also deserving of further examination, but they were outside the scope of this project. Also outside the scope of this project is any further analysis of the links between biography and memorial processes beyond what I have already referred to in this thesis. Given the prevalence of memorial

and retro cultures, and the contemporary interest in representations of the past, a future research project that focusses on biography as cultural memory would be beneficial to both life narrative and memory studies. Contemporary biography is an enduring, significant and complex cultural form, and one whose story remains to be told in much more detail in coming years.

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