

Beneath The Look; A Life In Care: Reflections Upon A Childhood Of Conclusions;
A Critique Of An Adult Life Born Out Of The Care System

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Abstract

This work of nonfiction examines the portraiture of children delivered into the care system by their mothers and their experiences of long-term fostering and adoption as presented in contemporary memoir and autobiographical narratives. The work seeks to explore the consequences and long-term outcomes of childhood experiences upon the adult self. The research attempts an exposé of the hidden emotional lives beneath the texts. The thesis studies the ethicality of writing about connected and identifiable others, the truths and non-truths that emerge and the impact upon the narratives' authenticity. The question of transparency and the enmeshment of multiple genres is examined. The work focuses on how the authors narrate their stories, the potential for social change, and new ways of thinking about children in care and the adults who emerge from the care system experience.

Keywords: nonfiction, fiction, memoir, autobiography, autofiction, fostering, adoption, attachment, separation, truth, non-truth, ethicality, authenticity, communication.

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Introduction

This thesis reflects critically upon the primary texts of three contemporary authors of memoir and autofiction: Joanna Traynor's *Sister Josephine*, 1997; Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, 2011; Lemn Sissay's *My Name Is Why*, 2019. Drawing from the work of the memoirist and academic Vivian Gornick, I seek to isolate and examine the story each writer has come to tell. I discuss how they communicate their written lives, especially separation from their birth mothers shortly after birth, which is a crucial focus of this practice-led research and emerges as a dominant and influencing event for the writers and their protagonists. This investigative process explores lived experience within foster care and adoption environments: it includes interactions with guardian 'parents' within strict religious households as well as multicultural and multiracial relationships for Traynor's protagonist and Sissay, both of whom remained in long-term fostering, experienced racism, and were forced to confront the subject of difference. Both engage with their black identities. John McLeod's work on transcultural adoption pre-empts my research on the lack of adoptive parents for black babies in 1960s Britain. Lisa Sheppard assesses multicultural and fluid identities whilst engaging with real lives lived, explored through the evocative autoethnography genre and creative nonfiction via memoirists Charlotte Williams and Jackie Kay's storying of their search for self and identity. Sheppard highlights how Kay's 'parents were not made aware of the black children in the orphanage ... in the eyes of the orphanage, children like Kay and her brother were unwanted, rejected and incidental'.¹ McLeod's work also emphasises Kay's memoir: he considers her transcultural family environment, adult reflections and '...grim experiences of racism'.² Sissay's writing likewise examines his cultural identities, including growing up in a multiracial foster home, experiencing increasing racism, and exploring 'Rastafarianism'. He narrates a growing interest in his Ethiopian heritage and how he reclaims the Amharic name given to him by his birth mother.³ Traynor's protagonist finds her birth mother's surname has been imposed upon her when she enters nursing, without her knowledge. Whether this is part of the autobiographical writing she alludes to in her interviews publicising the book, or it is part of her fiction is not apparent. Sheppard addresses similar issues as does my research when she states: 'autofiction leaves the reader guessing as to what is fact and what is fiction'.⁴

¹ Lisa Sheppard, 'Autoethnography in Post-British Literatures: A Comparative Reading of Charlotte Williams and Jackie Kay', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan), pp. 87-103 (p. 96).

² John McLeod, *Life Lines: Writing Transcultural Adoption* (London: Bloomsbury, 2015), p. 211.

³ Lemn Sissay, *My Name Is Why* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2019), p. 165.

⁴ Sheppard, p. 88.

For Winterson, sexuality and for Traynor's protagonist, a fascination with sex, become essential and urgent subjects, influencing their emerging adult selves, motivating and underpinning their artistic and creative processes and ambitions. Winterson and Traynor attempt suicide; this perhaps exposes the reader to the outcomes of their childhood trauma. As a reader, I found Hunt's reflexivity and transformative change methodology, which she situates within the processes of creative writing, adds meaning to Winterson's breakdown narratives, confrontational dialogue with her childhood self and eventual journey towards healing and new writing. For Winterson, the separation from her mother as a baby is the ultimate trauma that re-emerges to haunt her adult self when new trauma re-triggers the first memory. As a writer, I engage with Hunt's hope to 'explore the writer's perspective'.⁵ Although this thesis seeks to narrate connectivity between the authors – and protagonists – it also appreciates difference: how our race, sexuality, childhood experience and response to trauma differ; how differences in our cultural contexts may influence the way we interpret and communicate our storied lives as writers and how we read the stories of others. Nevertheless, for all these creative, cultural, emotional and psychological stimuli, it is the actions of our birth mothers who place us into the care of the local authority or Catholic Church that binds us and our creative presentation of memoir. It is this connectivity that allows Winterson, Traynor and Sissay to become participants in this research.

As a qualitative researcher, I must isolate and contextualise my positionality to engage with the 'dynamic, continual, and fluid practice of interrogating [my] own assumptions' to understand influences that might impose upon my research, to allow greater transparency.⁶ I came into the care system ill and challenged by mental and physical disability as a newborn baby. I remained in foster care for my childhood. As an emerging adult, I became determined, religious and political. I re-entered education to become a lifelong learner, was ordained as a Priest and acknowledged my gay identity. I trained and worked as a Social Worker, where I was perceived as privileged through my white identity and demeanour. Postmodern social work academics such as Jan Fook and Karen Healy influenced and challenged me. Like Traynor, Sissay – and Winterson's adoption experience – my childhood in care, childhood experience, and search for answers to questions about my historical and genetic heritage inspired me to write. Harry Ferguson's practice-led social work research ignited my interest in evocative writing. This led me to Carolyn Ellis's works, *The Ethnographic I* and *Revision*, her exploration of evocative writing and autoethnographic research. Finally, I studied the discipline of Creative

⁵ Celia Hunt, 'Autofiction as a Reflexive Mode of Thought: Implications for Personal Development', in *Autofiction in English*, ed. by Hywel Dix (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), pp. 179-193 (p. 180).

⁶ Jessica Soedirgo and Aarie Glas, 'Toward Active Reflexivity: Positionality and Practice in the Production of Knowledge'. *PS: Political Science and Politics*, 53.3 (2020), 527-531 (528).

Writing. Academics such as Christopher N. Poulos and Laurel Richardson and writer Virginia Woolf were already influential; and new influences emerged, including Michel de Montaigne, Richard Gwyn, Hilary Mantel, Gornick and Patricia Hampl. These writers motivated me to research my story, to investigate critically and reflexively my childhood self and the adult that emerged.

My approach to memoir found its original influence in autoethnography and evocative writing: the creative process, the art of writing, began by triggered memory and critical reflexivity, which prompted new memory, new reflection, and insight. It allowed new writing to emerge. In her memoir, Mantel advises writers to trust their readers; writing my memoir first demanded that I trust myself, trust the process of remembering and trust my evolving memories. When I returned to the chapters for editing, I found that this trust had allowed the triggered memories to evolve organically and become a whole. The memories interacted together to find a voice that communicated how it felt to be the boy I had been and how it feels to be the adult I became; perhaps, reflecting Hampl's understanding that: 'Memoirists wish to tell their mind not their story'.⁷ The recall of memory is a fluid experience; and, although Woolf's 'the white light of truth' in memory may remain a constant, the situation in which it is relived, in the present, may change the perception and nuance of it.⁸ Locating memory became a necessary component of the narration: to contextualise both memory and creative memory in the moment of remembering. The process of remembering is naturally evocative because memory is visual and invokes images. Positionality and the research process are equally fluid; it has been necessary to record this, to document change, as Day observes: 'any one dimension of identity is "fluid and context-dependent, with salencies that change and shift over settings and time"'.⁹

I was inspired by Virginia Woolf's exploration of truth, especially in *A Room of One's Own*. Within this thesis, I question whether I am more interested in non-truths than truths, a reflection prompted by my responses to Winterson's imagined narratives and my critical questioning of Sissay's memoir, particularly his critique of his foster family and limited reflection upon his birth mother and her part within his presented narrative. Truth is a focal term within my research; however, seeking out truth is arduous: truth is often fluid and evasive. Woolf narrates that she came to no conclusion about truth and illusion, which has led to the accusation that although she seeks truth, she fails to find it. I argue that although truth eludes her in a

⁷ Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (London: Norton, 2000), p. 18.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Macmillan Collector's Library, 2014 [1929]), p. 52.

⁹ Suzanne Day, 'A reflexive lens: Exploring dilemmas of qualitative methodology through the concept of reflexivity', *Qualitative Sociology Review*, 8.1 (2012), 60–85 (72).

particular moment, seeking truth remains a motivation for her. Notwithstanding that Woolf is considered a key figure in the modernist movement, her engagement with truth and pursuit of it, I argue, could place her as an exponent of postmodern ideas *avant la lettre*. Through a postmodern lens, truth and conclusion are problematical concepts, time-sensitive, challenging to isolate and difficult to sustain; but this does not stop Woolf searching: 'If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?'.¹⁰ Truth can often be sensed from beneath the text, within the humming that an atmosphere creates. Woolf listened for it here; it is where the dramatist Constantin Stanislavski also sought evidence for authenticity; truth and authenticity together are what Woolf suggested convinces a reader that a narrative is believable and perhaps reveals truth in fiction; and, I argue, in nonfiction. The thesis design is practice-led and literary-focused rather than explicitly scholarly due to reliance on triggered memory, contextualised memory, creative memory and writers of touchstone literary works. Woolf and Muriel Spark underpin the thesis' concepts and experimental writing of memory through personal narratives.

In *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf paused to listen to the humming beneath the atmosphere at luncheon, sought to locate truth and societal change that was underway between the Great War and the Second World War. Her writing – her thinking – evokes all the senses: we smell and taste 'the soles' at luncheon, visualise the 'deep dish' in which they sit, our tastebuds salivate at the thought of 'the whitest cream'; the 'spine, which is the seat of the soul', tingles with Woolf's; we see the cat without a tail and then strain our ears to hear the 'murmur or current', a 'sort of humming noise'.¹¹ The creative component seeks to contextualise recalled memory as it is remembered, through all the senses: as my protagonist gazes out of the window, smells the flowers, listens to the birds and cleans the drains, his internal life is externalised and visible.

Novelist and academic Julia Prendergast drew on Danko Nikolić's work, 'Ideasthesia and Art' and Christopher Bollas's 'Concept of the Unthought Known' to describe 'bringing that which is fundamentally known but unnoticed, to consciousness... through an analysis of the highly generative nature of deep, sensory imagining, we are able to observe the processes by which the unthought known simmers to the surface of conscious awareness'.¹² Woolf's observations at luncheon, the humming beneath the atmosphere, also grapples with the concept of the unthought known.

¹⁰ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 43.

¹¹ Woolf, *A Room*, pp. 7 and 8.

¹² Julia Prendergast, 'Stimulus in creative writing – wrangling the experiential unresolved', *New Writing* (28 April 2021), <<https://doi-org.abc.cardiff.ac.uk/10.1080/14790726.2021.1925304>> [Accessed 24 July 2021], 1-12.

Conscious awareness: as a reflexive Social Worker, reflecting upon writing social work reports for children in the care system, which will, as Sissay and I demonstrate, one day likely be read by the adult child, I turned to evocative writing; so, perhaps, the adult might have a sense of whom they were as a fostered child, in their fostered environment. I was aware that these records might be the only connection they had to their childhood selves because their childhood connections are often severed, as Winterson's, Sissay's, Traynor's and mine were to differing degrees. My interpretation of facts, truths and opinions is only a part of the report writing process. Another part – equally important – was the atmosphere, the emotions felt and tacit knowing engaged with or, as Prendergast articulates it: 'deep, sensory imagining'.¹³ This experience was the genesis that became the aims for this thesis, which would eventually prompt my research questions:

How is the loss of the birth mother as a baby portrayed within contemporary literature?

Can research identify and articulate truths and emotions of a child separated from its mother and the impact upon the adult self?

Is accessibility to truth and non-truth essential to a holistic understanding of a personal narrative?

When writing identifiable others into creative memory and enmeshed personal narratives, is ethicality a concern for the writer?

¹³ Prendergast, p. 1.

Review One: Joanna Traynor's *Sister Josephine*
1997 – London: Bloomsbury Publisher

Sister Josephine is a debut novel. It seeks to combine semi-autobiographical narrative with the thriller genre. The book is narrated in the first person and divided into two distinct parts. The first follows the protagonist, Josie, in the care system since birth and under the guardianship of the Catholic Church in a North of England city suburb in the 1960s. Josie is living with her foster family which consists of Mum, Dad and two foster brothers, with a further foster 'sibling' yet to arrive. Part Two takes Josie to a second foster placement, after the breakdown of the first; then, on to adulthood, independent living and training as a nurse.

In the opening scene, the protagonist is caught shoplifting and returned home in a police car, when the subject of her black identity and multiracial household is first explored. The policewoman notes the colour of her skin. 'Softly she said it, like it was a secret'.¹⁴ Traynor reveals the unease with which the woman broaches the subject and contrasts it with her degree of confidence about her race: 'If I hadn't been scared I would have laughed me head off'.¹⁵ Her ethnicity, the subject of race identity and societal perception and reactions to it are the first issues Traynor wishes to raise.

Traynor's gender, black identity and multiracial household differ from my white male identity, perhaps impacting upon how I interpret Traynor's narratives. As a child, I lived in a white and monocultural environment. However, our abusive foster homes, challenging and confrontational characters and emotional struggles from childhood are experiences we share. Nevertheless, the context in which we experience these realities and the outcomes triggered by them differ. Fook highlights that 'we equate "sameness" with "equality" and "difference" with "inequality" [but that] "difference" and "equality" are not part of the same categories themselves, nor are they mutually exclusive categories. In fact, the attribution of equality may involve the recognition of difference'.¹⁶ Fook cautions against making assumptions about sameness and difference. We should seek to challenge our perceptions of the world so we can 'all mutually participate in a joint reconstruction of different viewpoints ... [and] create new ways of seeing through interactions with each other'.¹⁷ Gary and Holmes focus

¹⁴ Joanna Traynor, *Sister Josephine* (London: Bloomsbury, 1997), p. 3.

¹⁵ Traynor, p. 3.

¹⁶ Jan Fook, *Social Work: A Critical Approach to Practice*, 3rd ed. (London: Sage Publications Ltd, 2016 [2002]), p. 111.

¹⁷ Fook, p. 212.

on the need for researchers to scrutinise assumptions and categorises assumption as 'ontological', 'epistemological' and 'about human nature and agency'.¹⁸

Traynor moves from the subject of race to Gran dying; the first sexual assault experience follows quickly. Traynor uses these narratives to demonstrate family dynamics and position herself within the household. A series of thematic crises unfold towards a suicide attempt at the narrative's close. The suicide attempt, when it comes, is confrontational and provocative: it causes the reader to reflect upon the experiences and emotional struggles we have shared with the protagonist throughout the narrative.

Traynor and her novel came from nowhere – unknown and unpublished – to win the Saga Prize in 1996 and her novel was then published by Bloomsbury Group. Today, it has all but vanished. The semi-autobiographical nature of its narrative was central to its marketing.¹⁹ Perhaps its appeal, at the time, was enhanced by a growing interest in 'Misery Lit'.²⁰ After such a promising beginning, the obvious question is, why did it fail to gain longevity and significance?

Its featured themes are multiple and contemporary, then and now: children in foster care; mixed race identity; race; racism; mixed culture foster placement; cultural identity; the role of the state (social services); the role of religion (Catholic Church) with regards to looked after and vulnerable children; the role of foster carers; the breakdown of foster placements; anti-social behaviour and petty crime; childhood sexual abuse and rape; physical abuse and discipline; a young person's move from care to independent living; the impact of childhood care experiences on the adult, including mental health and suicide.²¹

Vivian Gornick's response to Joe Ackerley's *My Father and Myself* in *The Situation and the Story* helps highlight the importance of the author isolating their story to allow it to become the focus of the narrative. After she outlines the many plots and themes she writes:

What I've told you was not his story; it was his situation. Ackerley was, he thought, only putting together a puzzle of family life. All I have to do,

¹⁸ Andrew Gary and Darwin Holmes, 'Researcher Positionality - A Consideration of Its Influence and Place in Qualitative Research - A New Researcher Guide', *Shanlax International Journal of Education*, 8.4 (2020), 1-10 (1).

¹⁹ Eileen Battersby, *Unpublished, debut novel wins prize* (22 October 1996), *IrishTimes.com* <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/unpublished-debut-novel-wins-prize-1.98224> [Accessed: 09 March 2021].

²⁰ Brendan O'Neill, *Misery lit...read on* (17 April 2007), *BBC News Report* <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/magazine/6563529.stm> [Accessed: 09 March 2021].

²¹ Traynor, pp. 44, 72-73, 98, 3, 29, 144, 3, 73, 98, 23-26, 41-44, 83, 91-96, 3, 15-18, 56-57, 6-8215-216, 216.

he said to himself, is get the sequence right and the details correct and everything will fall into place. But nothing fell into place.²²

Traynor appears to have ‘struggled to isolate the story from the situation’ (if she sought to do such a thing.); the thing she came to say is barely heard; it becomes lost in the hullabaloo of competing themes and genres. Had Traynor managed to ‘clarify the voice that could [and should] tell [her] story’, *Sister Josephine* had the potential to instigate change.²³ It had the potential to highlight the plight of children in foster care, inform government policy and social work practice. In other words, had Traynor managed to isolate her story, clarify her truths, such authentic exposé would have possessed the power to improve long-term outcomes for care-experienced children.²⁴ It had the potential to be a relevant and moving account of a childhood in care and document how living in the care system can have long-term consequences into adulthood. Instead, Traynor wove her stories into a mesh of fiction and nonfiction and often fails to convince in either genre.

Reflecting on her novel about her mother, Edna O’Brien notes how she tried to combine two books into one; the result is that both became muddled and enmeshed:

I got myself into a quagmire with *The Light of Evening* because it was two different books and I wrote it about my mother, whom I had a certain ambiguity towards. It was written shortly after she died and I felt guilt and relief and confusion within myself, and perhaps that meant that I wasn’t fully in charge of the material.²⁵

O’Brien found her distance from the book after publication; however, *The Light of Evening* remains in print and therefore, for some time yet, will define the relationship between O’Brien and her mother. It is not the writing of this relationship that is problematical but, as O’Brien observes, the enmeshment of the narrative and genres – the potential to obscure truth from non-truth.

The subject of obscuring truth from non-truth is a recurring theme throughout my analysis of Traynor’s autofiction. My focus on transparency and criticism of enmeshed narratives in this chapter are influenced by my identity as a qualified Social Worker and engagement with professional ethics from this perspective; this has impacted on my approach to Traynor’s narratives. ‘Reflexivity starts by identifying preconceptions brought into the project by the researcher, representing

²² Vivian Gornick, *The Situation and the Story: The Art of Personal Narrative* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2002), pp. 18-19.

²³ Gornick, p. 20.

²⁴ A person who has experienced living within the care system as a child.

²⁵ Sarah Hughes, *Edna O’Brien Interview* (13 December 2020), *The Guardian Newspaper* <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2020/dec/13/edna-obrien-90-ireland-greatest-writer-final-novel> [Accessed: 13 December 2020].

previous personal and professional experiences...'.²⁶ Ethically, the indivisibility of the narratives and uncertainty around truths and non-truths proves problematic for me. However, the themes and experiences Traynor narrates are directly relevant to my research and have potential educational and therapeutic possibilities for those in care today. This is especially true for children of colour in multicultural and multiracial settings. Traynor is a black woman; she grew up in a multiracial household where she witnessed violent racism. Race and sex are important subjects in Traynor's novel.

Novels can challenge perspectives, social norms and 'reconfigure' narratives.²⁷ Social change can develop 'new knowledge which leads to new ways of thinking'.²⁸ Lee's *To Kill A Mockingbird* (racism and equality), Orwell's *1984* (political control and freedom), Walker's *The Color Purple* (power, emancipation and race), White's *A Boy's Own Story* (sexual awakening) and Winterson's *Oranges Are Not the Only Fruit* (sexual and religious freedom) are all exemplary.

As with many coming of age novels, the label 'fiction' apropos of *Sister Josephine* shields nonfiction, [semi]–autobiography and memoir. I argue that in an age of scrutiny, ethical consideration, litigation and changing perceptions of truth, such masking needs now to be viewed as controversial.

Traynor's more convincing stories tend to reflect the autobiographical-led themes; for example, as I explore, Dad's acquittal, the breakdown of foster placements, Traynor's reflections upon her place within the family and childhood abuse. Traynor confirms the latter subjects as autobiographical in the book's promotional interviews.²⁹ Within the semi-autobiographical narrative, Traynor's protagonist, Josie, interacts with prominent and closely related characters which, in semi-autobiographical terms, suggests the likelihood that the characters reflect real, identifiable and, potentially living people: Mum, Dad, Gary, Martin, Boyle and her temporary foster-sister Bernadette.³⁰ The protagonist experiences abuse at the hands of Mum, Gary and Martin; as author and marketer, Traynor unambiguously states that her foster experience involved abuse. Quoting Traynor, Lilian Pizzichini writes: 'There was a lot of abuse – physical, emotional, sexual'.³¹

²⁶ Gary and Holmes, p. 2.

²⁷ Susanne Mathies, *The Simulated Self – Fiction Reading and Narrative Identity* (2019) *Philosophia*, 48 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11406-019-00079-3> [Accessed: 09 March 2021].

²⁸ Fook, p. 200.

²⁹ Battersby, (22 October 1996).

³⁰ Traynor, pp. 6, 5, 7, 9, 23.

³¹ Lilian Pizzichini, *Suicide Attempts, Drug Abuse, Sexual Assault. Author Joanna Traynor's Life Has Been A Series of Triumphs Over Adversity* (29 August 1998), *Independent* <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/a-life-less-ordinary-but-no-sympathy-thanks-interview-joanna-traynor-1174978.html> [Accessed: 13 January 2021].

I argue that the indivisibility of enmeshed fiction and nonfiction is problematical and hinders any meaningful relationship between author and reader, as it creates an air of confusion and suspicion about real life stories.

Geoff Dyer 'stated that he did not see any difference between fiction and nonfiction apart from the techniques used; to him, genres are restrictive of the broad horizon in which the writer can freely write'.³² However, this cannot be the end of the debate; it must be the beginning. The writer, or storyteller, does not exist in isolation, their stories are inevitably other people's stories.³³ Therefore, 'the relationship between the researcher and his or her significant others become a primary focus of ethical action'.³⁴

The trajectory of the creation of Traynor's *Sister Josephine* offers some insight into the way her genres became enmeshed; it evolved from a collage of jottings, perhaps referenced within the novel as: 'My diaries. Two whole years of mindless filth'.³⁵ The jottings became her ambitious and successful attempt at prize-winning – the writing, however, was completed in a hurry. In an article, Traynor explains how it came into being:

"I saw the entry form for the Saga prize." Facing a deadline of less than eight weeks, she began getting up at 4.30 a.m., intent on shaping a novel out of "the bits and pieces of writing" she had on her computer.³⁶

It lacks cohesion. The narrative is piecemeal, pulled together from various times; it explores an array of subjects, experiments with different writing styles and dialects. This fragmentation interrupts the narrative flow. It is both fiction and nonfiction, and Traynor does not attempt to distinguish between the genres.

By contrast, Lemn Sissay, in his memoir *My Name Is Why*, demonstrates how to include a variety of genres (poetry and prose); sources (social work records, school reports, and correspondence); subjects (foster care, identity, race and memory); structural devices (the memoir is for the most part chronological, interspersed with official papers, which are nonlinear), and memory and remembering: 'Memories in care are slippery because there's no one to recall them with as the years pass'.³⁷ He

³² Chayanika Roy, 'Reconstructing the Self: A Critical Study of Geoff Dyer's Paris Trance: A Romance', *JOLRC*, V (2019), 101. http://dlkhsou.inflibnet.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/853/1/8_2019.pdf [Accessed: 13 January 2021].

³³ Carolyn Ellis, Tony E. Adams and Arthur P. Bochner, 'Autoethnography: An Overview', *Historical Social Research*, 36.4 (2011), 273-290 (281).

³⁴ Christopher N. Poulos, 'Narrative conscience and the autoethnography adventure: Probing memories, secretes, shadows and possibilities', *Qualitative Inquiry*, 14.1 (2008), 46-66 (46).

³⁵ Traynor, p. 82.

³⁶ Battersby, (22 October 1996).

³⁷ Sissay, p. 88.

creates out of his fragmented material a coherent and constant narrative, which presents as a whole.

To use Gornick's terminology, Sissay 'composed' his 'thoughts the better to recall the child' and emerging adult he had once been.³⁸ Rather than present a piecemeal narrative, he offers separated memory, commentary and official documents, which, together, expose his creative work to inquiry and, therefore, analysis. I am critical of Sissay's work; it needs scrutiny; yet he provides, consciously or unconsciously, the material that permits such appraisal. Sissay's nonfiction provides the reader access to the various components he presents; Traynor's enmeshed narrative, in comparison, hinder such insight.

Dyer, in his Paris Review interview,³⁹ debates the relational dynamics between fiction and nonfiction:

Now I could whine, "What about the fiction?" but that would be to accept a distinction that is not sustainable. Fiction, nonfiction – the two are bleeding into each other all the time...⁴⁰ If you look at the proportion of made up stuff in the so-called novels versus the proportion of made up stuff in the others, I would expect that they're pretty much the same...'
Fiction and nonfiction: It's just a bunch of books.⁴¹

However, no sooner does Dyer say this than he appears to make a distinction he claims to reject; although criticising Sontag for claiming 'easily recognisable division between' fiction and nonfiction, he goes on to champion 'straight-down-the-line, non-creative history books' over 'creative nonfiction', which suggests there are lines to be drawn and distinctions to be made between differing genres (fiction and nonfiction). It is not 'just a bunch of books' after all.

Traynor might have achieved a semblance of authenticity had she distinguished between fiction and nonfiction, creativity and reality, fantasy and truth. It is the indivisibility of genres that renders Traynor's narrative inaccessible.

Virginia Woolf, in *A Room of One's Own*, struggles as she endeavours to make such distinctions; she values truth and wrestles with its place within the creative process. She places responsibility for reflection on the author: 'it is for you to seek out this truth and to decide whether any part of it is worth keeping'.⁴² She goes on to outline the importance and impact of truth: 'Be truthful, one would say, and the result is

³⁸ Gornick, p. 5.

³⁹ Matthew Specktor, *Geoff Dyer Interview, The Art of Nonfiction, No. 6* (Winter, 2013), *The Paris Review*, 207 <https://www.theparisreview.org/interviews/6282/the-art-of-nonfiction-no-6-geoff-dyer> [Accessed: 18 April 2020].

⁴⁰ Specktor, (2013).

⁴¹ Specktor, (2013).

⁴² Woolf, *A Room*, p. 19.

bound to be amazingly interesting. Comedy is bound to be enriched. New facts are bound to be discovered'.⁴³ Almost as a lament, she wonders whether this critical process is worth the effort and by doing so suggests she finds it arduous: 'Yes indeed, which was truth and which was illusion? I asked myself'.⁴⁴ '...I spare you the twists and turns of my cogitations, for no conclusion was found'.⁴⁵ 'Perhaps now it would be better to give up seeking for the truth'.⁴⁶

Here, Woolf might appear equally acquiescing towards infused genres as Dyer; however, contrary to Dyer, I would argue that Woolf wrestles with the contemporary debate around truth, illusion, and enmeshment of the two within creative writing, especially concerning personal narratives. Although she acknowledges that fiction can create enmeshed narratives with a blurring of truth and non-truth – 'Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them'.⁴⁷ Such enmeshment, of lies and truth, fiction and nonfiction, must be the beginning of a process of thinking and not an end: 'If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, picking up a notebook and a pencil, is truth?'.⁴⁸ Woolf must seek out 'which was the truth, which was the illusion?'. For Woolf, the integrity of the work is at stake.⁴⁹

Woolf defines integrity (something she does not do for 'truth' or 'fact'): 'What one means by integrity, in the case of the novelist, is the conviction that he gives one that this is the truth'.⁵⁰ Fact, Woolf suggests, is an integral part of fiction: 'Fiction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts, the better the fiction'; she grades 'fact' on a scale of 'true' and she also suggests there is 'fact' and 'authentic fact'.⁵¹

What one means by integrity, in the case of the novelist, is the conviction that he gives one that this is the truth. Yes, one feels, I should never have thought that this could be so; I have never known people behaving like that. However, you have convinced me that so it is, so it happens. One holds every phrase, every scene to the light as one reads – for Nature seems, very oddly, to have provided us with an inner light by which to judge of the novelist's integrity or disintegrity. Or perhaps it is rather that Nature, in her most irrational mood, has traced in invisible ink on the walls of the mind a premonition which these great artists confirm; a sketch which only needs to be held to the fire of genius to become visible.⁵²

⁴³ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 123.

⁴⁴ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 31.

⁴⁵ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 32.

⁴⁶ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 63.

⁴⁷ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 19.

⁴⁸ Woolf, *A Room*, pp. 43-44.

⁴⁹ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 31.

⁵⁰ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 100.

⁵¹ Woolf, *A Room*, pp. 32, 63.

⁵² Woolf, *A Room*, p. 100.

The question of 'truth' in fiction – 'pure truth' is what gives fiction *and nonfiction* its integrity.⁵³ Woolf grapples with the nature and use of truth. She asks, 'How shall I ever find the grains of truth embedded in all this mass?'.⁵⁴ This articulates my difficulty with Traynor's enmeshed semi-autobiographical narrative. It is not that she writes them, reveals her own experience and other people's stories, and exposes taboo; but that she writes without considering the complexities involved in such an exposé and the potential impact on identifiable others. Traynor implies historical truths, which is problematical as they inevitably reveal intimate lives indivisibly enmeshed in fictional storytelling: truths are masked. Consequently, finding 'the grains of truth embedded' is not possible and readers can mistake non-truths for truths and truths for non-truths. Traynor's enmeshed genres lack Woolfian integrity because they lack the transparency the reader needs to access and scrutinise the contextualised story and its truths.

Patricia Hampl, in her study of memoir, *I Could Tell You Stories*, writes:

Memoirists, unlike fiction writers, do not want to "tell a story." They want to tell it *all* – the all of personal experience, or consciousness itself. That includes a story, but also the whole expanding universe of sensation and thought that flows beyond the confines of narrative and proves every life to be not only an isolated story line but a bit of the cosmos, spinning and streaming into the great, ungraspable pattern of existence. Memoirists wish to tell their mind, not their story.⁵⁵

For Woolf, it is often in the experiential and incorporeal that she finds truths and integrity articulated and authenticated. The central tenet of her conclusion in *A Room of One's Own*, that a woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction is revealed most effectively by communicating the emotional undercurrent she creates beneath the text, 'I listened with all my ears not entirely to what was being said, but to the murmur or current behind it. Yes, that was it – the change was there'.⁵⁶

The poverty of women juxtaposed against the inherited wealth of men is an injustice for Woolf. She articulates this injustice through narrating the different dining experiences she has at a men's college compared to the women's.⁵⁷ The reader can feel Woolf's disdain at the food offered at the women's college: the 'plain gravy soup...beef...prunes and custard followed'.⁵⁸ The disdain emerges through the text, what the dramatist Constantin Stanislavsky calls the 'sub-text' and 'method of

⁵³ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 17.

⁵⁴ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 45.

⁵⁵ Patricia Hampl, *I Could Tell You Stories: Sojourns in the Land of Memory* (London: Norton, 2000), p. 18.

⁵⁶ Woolf, *A Room*, pp. 27-28.

⁵⁷ Woolf, *A Room*, pp. 24-29, 33-34.

⁵⁸ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 34.

physical action'.⁵⁹ It is the art of authenticity – 'the whole expanding universe of sensation and thought that flows beyond the confines of narrative'.⁶⁰ Woolf does not narrate this emotional response, her contempt, or anger, even; but it is there in her words' subtext, which authenticates and resonate truths. The dining hall experience is the situation; what Woolf has come to say; her story (in this scene) is the impoverishment of women and their colleges in relation to male hegemony and wealth.⁶¹ It is given authenticity through the almost tangible emotional reaction a reader feels deep within Woolf's narrative and the composure of her words; it is told first in 'the presence of the one doing the remembering ... [and her] effort to recall with exactness how things had been'.⁶²

Pivotal to Woolf's holistic story about the privileges of men juxtaposed against those of women, is that Woolf remembers with exactitude the 'plain gravy soup...beef... prunes and custard' dinner that reveals her palpable disdain; that which authenticates the narrative and articulates the story. Contrast this with Joan Didion's 'fictitious crab lunch' included in the narrative 'to lend verisimilitude' to the story of her father's return in 1945.⁶³ Didion justifies the inclusion of narratives her family tell her are 'simply not true' because 'not only have I always had trouble distinguishing between what happened and what might have happened, but I remain unconvinced that the distinction, for my purposes, matters'.⁶⁴ Didion would argue, in any case, 'The day's events did not turn on cracked crab. And yet it is precisely that fictitious crab that makes me see the afternoon all over again'. The underpinning of her remembering is the fictitious crab, which she suggests prompted her 'memories' of 1945. However, can authentic remembering flow from fictitious storytelling? I argue that neither Woolf nor Gornick would propose it can. Didion sees the memory first as true, but on reflection, having perhaps been challenged by family members as to the fictitious crab's authenticity, she concedes: 'I was ten years old and would not have remembered the cracked crab'. If it were not true it does not matter for her purposes, she says. Her purposes, we learn, are defined as, 'How it felt to me: that is getting closer to the truth...'⁶⁵ and more explicitly, to 'remember what it was to be me: that is always the point'.⁶⁶ This work by Didion predates Gornick, but their words have resonance: 'the presence of the one doing the remembering'.⁶⁷ However, key to Gornick and a challenge to Didion is Gornick's addition: '[her] effort to recall with

⁵⁹ Sharon M. Carnicke, *Stanislavsky in Focus: An Acting Master for the Twenty-first Century* (Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2009).

⁶⁰ Hampl, p. 18.

⁶¹ R. W. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt, 'Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept', *Gender and Society*, 19.6 (2005), 829-859.

⁶² Gornick, p. 4.

⁶³ Joan Didion, *On Keeping a Notebook in Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (London: Fourth Estate, 2017 [1968]), pp. 131-141.

⁶⁴ Didion, p. 134.

⁶⁵ Didion, p. 134.

⁶⁶ Didion, p. 136.

⁶⁷ Gornick, p. 4.

exactness how things had been'. Gornick understood that the more authentic the orator's recollection the greater the authenticity of their words: 'the better the speaker imagined herself, the more vividly she brought the dead woman to life'.⁶⁸ Gornick's remembering seeks to focus on the holistic story, with 'exactness', to 'vividly' bring characters to life. In contrast, Didion's focus is 'How it felt to me', 'what it was to be me'.⁶⁹ Her characters' role is an enhancement of Didion's self-orientated remembering: 'Might not Mrs. Minnie S. Brooks help me to remember what I am? Might not Mrs. Lou Fox help me to remember what I am not?'.⁷⁰

The better Woolf 'imagined herself, the more vividly she brought the [emotion] to life'.⁷¹ This same vibrancy and externalising of the internal dialogue, emotion and atmosphere, are present within the earlier luncheon scene; here, Woolf appears to be consciously narrating the ethereal.

Relaxing after a luncheon, Woolf notes that 'something seemed lacking, something seemed different'.⁷² She thinks herself 'back into the past, before the war... Everything was different'.⁷³ On reflection, she decides, it is not physical change that she perceives but difference: there is a different undercurrent, or atmosphere. What Woolf observes – the environment – remains the same:

... the murmur or current behind it. Yes, that was it—the change was there. Before the war at a luncheon party like this people would have said precisely the same things but they would have sounded different, because in those days they were accompanied by a sort of humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting, which changed the value of the words themselves. Could one set that humming noise to words? Perhaps with the help of the poets one could...⁷⁴

In a rare interview with Michael Silverblatt, for *Bookworm*,⁷⁵ W.G. Sebald highlights the psychological importance the Great War had on Woolf and her work: 'She was greatly perturbed by the First World War, by its aftermath, by the damage it did to people's souls – the souls of those who got away and the souls of those who perished'. The mood in Woolf's quotation reflects this; it highlights those who survived to perceive of a new age; that 'the age of faith was over, and the age of reason come'.⁷⁶ She then tells the reader that 'Here, however, I shall take the liberty to defy...convention and to tell you that the lunch on this occasion began with

⁶⁸ Gornick, p. 5.

⁶⁹ Didion, pp. 134, 136.

⁷⁰ Didion, p. 138.

⁷¹ Gornick, p. 4.

⁷² Woolf, *A Room*, p. 27.

⁷³ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 27.

⁷⁴ Woolf, *A Room*, pp. 27-28.

⁷⁵ Michael Silverblatt, *W. G. Sebald, Bookworm Interview* (06 December 2001), *You Tube* <https://youtu.be/IVssOL6olQ4> [Accessed: 06 January 2021].

⁷⁶ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 25.

soles...'.⁷⁷ Defying 'convention' and challenging perceived norms would come to define the age that was already underway circa 1929 when, at luncheon, Woolf noted that the humming of the past era had stopped.

With the 'age of reason come', so too came the challenge to traditional concepts of societal structures and truths. These themes become dominant discourses across many disciplines, old and new, including literary criticism; and increasingly so through the emergence of the post-theories.⁷⁸

Traynor's fictional scenes often lack Woolf's requisite fact, truth, authenticity and integrity: 'Nature seems, very oddly, to have provided us with an inner light by which to judge of the novelist's integrity or disintegrity'.⁷⁹ The book's Mafia-esque narrative appears more *Brighton Rock*⁸⁰ than *Sister Josephine*. Her use of thriller motifs jar. The hospital ward orderly's sexual assault on the protagonist is grotesque and stretches the reader's credibility.⁸¹ It is true also for the wider gangster plot in which it sits. Traynor herself appears unconvinced and interjects justifying dialogue, in the tradition of the Greek Chorus. These plot devices do not convince in Woolfian terms.⁸²

We know from the publisher's biographical introduction to Traynor that she 'trained as a nurse'.⁸³ In Part Two, the narrative unfolds within the context of her training. As with Part One, much of the material is autobiographical. However, the 'thriller' element is overpowering. It includes drug use, violence, sexual abuse and gangland activity.⁸⁴ The memoir's realism alongside the fantastical is incongruous. The argument is not that these themes cannot be autobiographical, but that within the context of Traynor's presented narrative, there is a lack of authenticity and so the stories fail to convince.

Conversely, notwithstanding its setting, adult language, concepts and erotica, Traynor's childhood sexual abuse narrative, in Part One, had the potential to defy convention in 1997: her willingness to draw graphic sexual scenes of childhood

⁷⁷ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 26.

⁷⁸ Susanne Gannon and Bronwyn Davies, 'Postmodern, Post-Structural, and Critical Theories', in *Handbook of Feminist Research: Theory and Praxis*, ed. by Sharlene Hesse-Biber, 2nd ed. (London: Sage Publications, Inc., 2012), pp. 65-91.

⁷⁹ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 100.

⁸⁰ Graham Greene, *Brighton Rock* (London: Vintage, 2004 [1938]).

⁸¹ Traynor, p. 197.

⁸² Woolf, *A Room*, p. 100.

⁸³ Traynor, p. 217.

⁸⁴ Traynor, pp. 183, 185, 200-203, 184-186.

abuse predates the first Rotherham paedophile gang's trial and convictions⁸⁵ that dominated the media and shocked a nation from 2010.⁸⁶ Young girls in care are considered the demographic most affected – more often abused – by the men. This revelation resulted in the sentencing Judge condemning the local authority's inaction at the 2019 trial.⁸⁷ Perhaps Traynor's childhood abuse narrative and suggestion of collusion between abused and abuser were the reason *The Telegraph* called *Sister Josephine* 'a daring ... novel'.⁸⁸

Sister Josephine was a book recommended to me as a memoir. I had not questioned the book's genre in my eagerness to read it – accepting it as a memoir. I noted the cover, dark, striking, with a beautiful black woman's face that appears to exceed the cover's four corners: her gazing eyes viewing the world with suspicion. I missed, written in black, hidden within the mosaic darkness, the words, 'A daring and remarkable novel'.

I became perplexed by Traynor's plots; for example, her foster mother's worry over Grammar School expenses: 'You've got into the Convent School, although God knows how we're goin' to manage...We'll all 'ave to cut down, that's all'.⁸⁹ Foster Carers are not responsible for such costs, and the protagonist is bright enough to pass the entrance exam yet not bright enough to remember taking it or understanding that going to a Convent School did not mean becoming a nun. 'The truer the facts the better the fiction'.⁹⁰ Traynor's narrative lacks (factual) consistency and so did not convince.

The book's division into two parts is unnecessary as the reader would naturally understand the progression from Foster Family One to Foster Placement Two, then to exiting care and the beginning of adulthood. I found that the two-part format caused a disconnect; it interrupts the impact childhood experience has on the protagonist's adult self and long-term outcomes. This partition has the effect of turning the book into two distinct and separate stories.

⁸⁵ Alexis Jay *Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Rotherham (1997–2013)* (21 August 2014), *Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council* <https://www.rotherham.gov.uk/downloads/file/279/independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-exploitation-in-rotherham> [Accessed: 22 January 2021].

⁸⁶ *Five Rotherham men jailed for child sex offences* (4 November 2010), *BBC News Report* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-south-yorkshire-11696508> [Accessed: 22 January 2021].

⁸⁷ Lizzie Dearden, *Rotherham grooming gang: Judge attacks "indifferent" authorities as five more men jailed for sexually abusing girls* (30 August 2019), *The Independent Newspaper* <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/crime/rotherham-grooming-gang-members-jailed-trial-yorkshire-a9085246.html> [Accessed: 22 January 2021].

⁸⁸ FantasticFiction, *Sister Josephine* (1999), *FantasticFiction.com* <https://www.fantasticfiction.com/t/joanna-traynor/sister-josephine.htm> [13 March 2021].

⁸⁹ Traynor, pp. 42-43.

⁹⁰ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 32.

In Part Two, the protagonist struggles to adjust to independent living, and her tormenting relationship with alcohol is explored.⁹¹ No causality is made between her drinking, childhood traumas and adult self. Reflections on childhood are rare: her first foster family are referred to little – a trip to Liverpool Cathedral, ‘with me mam and dad and half the church’, is an exception.⁹² The Wallace family disappear completely. However, her drinking has begun prior to leaving their care.⁹³ Developed references to childhood and flashbacks to earlier experiences would have enhanced the authenticity of the continuing narrative. It is inconceivable that the childhood experiences the protagonist engages with during Part One do not reappear to impact upon her as an adult.

Josie is a strong, independent, wilful character, with a tendency towards self-destructive behaviours. We are introduced to her as she is returned home after a shoplifting escapade. Whilst with the police, the focus of the discussion is not her crime but her skin colour. “Are your mam and dad West Indians?” ... “No. They’re more like cowboys – like you,” I said, pointing to her white hand... I was nine and a bit and brown’.⁹⁴ The indication is that Josie is confident with being a person of colour. She controls the narrative around the subject and does not allow it to dominate her child protagonist. She narrates a different story for her foster ‘sister’, Bernadette, whom she describes as ‘a real life version of the Red Indian doll A brown girl with a long black plait’.⁹⁵ From the moment she arrives at the house, Bernadette suffers racism – verbal and physical – at the hands of the biological son of her carers. Josie observes him adopting a racist ideology: ‘The day after Bernadette came Gary had his head shaved’.⁹⁶ Mum buys him ‘a crombie jacket and two Ben Sherman shirts. His uniform’.⁹⁷ Traynor portrays a clear understanding of her ethnic divergence from her foster family but does not portray her protagonist as affiliating herself with or being sympathetic towards Bernadette: she is mocking; her tone is reminiscent of the one reserved for her white family members. I have reflected upon this. As a white child in a predominantly monocultural community, my ethnicity was indistinct. However, my physical disability made me distinctive and a target for bullying. I allowed this to define me. I empathised with Bernadette’s bullying experiences. ‘Researchers should acknowledge and disclose their selves in their research, seeking to understand their part in it...acknowledging personal positions that have the potential to influence the research’ but also ‘locating themselves about the participants’.⁹⁸

⁹¹ Traynor, p. 152.

⁹² Traynor, pp. 118-119.

⁹³ Traynor, p. 96.

⁹⁴ Traynor, p. 3.

⁹⁵ Traynor, p. 23.

⁹⁶ Traynor, p. 23.

⁹⁷ Traynor, p. 29.

⁹⁸ Gary and Holmes, pp. 2 and 3.

Gran is introduced first as an anonymous 'death in the family'.⁹⁹ She is the reason the curtains are closed – a reality noted by the narrator with some surprise and bewilderment: 'I noticed all the curtains were closed. They couldn't have all gone to bed. It wasn't past teatime'.¹⁰⁰ The curtains are closed in Gran's honour. The policeman knows the symbolism instinctively: the narrator observes his bowed head as he sits at the wheel of the car, 'he looked like the hearse drivers outside St. Bede's Church. They always looked like that when they were waiting for a body to come out'.¹⁰¹ Within a few paragraphs, we learn that not only is Gran dead but already removed: Josie '...looked at the door to Gran's room. "Is she in there?" ... "No stupid. She's at the hospital"'.¹⁰² Before the narrator left the house, she did not know that Gran was dying; later, it is expected she should have been present at the death; she also misses Gran's removal to the mortuary. The narrative cohesion is inconsistent and lacks authenticity.

Josie learns of the death in the family by overhearing it being told to the policewoman as she slips past her dad into the house. Gran's death is so unexpected that Josie tells us she, 'hoped it was Gary who was dead. I wanted his bike'.¹⁰³ Gary is not dead. Gary, the bullying racist biological son of her foster parents, is the next character to be introduced. He tells her: "Wait till me mam gets 'yer. Nickin from Oboe's. Not bein' 'ere when your gran died. You've 'ad it".¹⁰⁴ The sentence implies both that she was aware of Gran's imminent death and the expectation that she should have been present – reiterated in the following scene: "Yer can't blame 'im for today's shenanigans, young lady. He was 'ere when your gran died ... not cavortin' with the devil".¹⁰⁵

Inconsistencies within Traynor's narrative – whether it is memoir or novel – raise questions as to the integrity of the work, a lack of authenticity which results in the narrative's inability to convince: are we really to believe that two young fostered girls would be permitted to remain in a foster placement with a 'Dad' accused of and charged with 'indecently assaulting a fifteen-year-old girl' – a man tried at Court, suspended from work, rejected by his community and removed from the marital bed?¹⁰⁶ Traynor narrates that Bernadette returns to the orphanage permanently, having had her dress torn down by her foster mother and hair sheared by a racist

⁹⁹ Traynor, p. 5.

¹⁰⁰ Traynor, p. 4.

¹⁰¹ Traynor, p. 4.

¹⁰² Traynor, p. 12.

¹⁰³ Traynor, p. 5.

¹⁰⁴ Traynor, p. 6.

¹⁰⁵ Traynor, p. 7.

¹⁰⁶ Traynor, pp. 69, 64.

'sibling'.¹⁰⁷ Would the authorities allow Josie to remain in such an environment? Bernadette comprehends Josie's abuse experience, engages her on the subject, yet leaves her to her own devices; she does not report the abuse. 'Look, Josie. There's more to it than that. I've heard yer talking in yer sleep'.¹⁰⁸

What makes the narrative problematical as a convincing story is not that so many adverse events happen to the protagonist, but that they happened in plain sight: the Social Worker, Wilcox, knew about the allegations against the foster father; she speaks to Bernadette about it: 'she asked me things. About me dad'.¹⁰⁹ Moreover, Wilcox would have observed Bernadette's shorn hair.

Inconsistent too is the protagonist's apparent naïveté on the one hand and her erudition and educated insight on the other. Josie is a nine-year-old child. Her sexual knowledge, sophisticated language and grasp of complex relational dynamics, such as power relations are mature: 'He was enjoying his power'.¹¹⁰ They reflect someone with a clear grasp of what is happening to her and what is to come. She watches the experience unfold and encourages the reader to anticipate the abuse plot from the start. Before it begins the first time, she states that she is naked: 'I am naked'.¹¹¹ She had removed her frock and thrown it under her bed, telling us, 'I wanted it to disappear...There were no clean nighties in the drawer'.¹¹² Martin, her abuser, cannot find one either – they are 'wet', on the 'pulley'.¹¹³ It is why she comes to wear his shirt, which is too big so falls from her shoulder repeatedly; then, it drops to the floor, leaving her again vulnerable to her abuser's eyes, 'standing there in the glare of him'.¹¹⁴

The reference to the Flake Chocolate advert at the beginning of the first abuse scene is shocking: it implies a willing participant; equally so, the reference to Martin's blonde curls, described as 'chocolate coins', while 'he crouched down to examine me. I held my dress like a can-can girl and inspected his golden crown ... I dreamed each curl a single golden coin full of chocolate'.¹¹⁵ To those acquainted with the advert, the intended pleasure and phallic metaphor are apparent: the woman is enjoying the moment of sensual pleasure. It appears that Traynor wants to introduce a sense of the erotic. The chocolate coins reference is placed at the beginning of the second abuse narrative reminding the reader of the original

¹⁰⁷ Traynor, pp. 47, 48.

¹⁰⁸ Traynor, p. 49.

¹⁰⁹ Traynor, p. 50.

¹¹⁰ Traynor, p. 17.

¹¹¹ Traynor, p. 10.

¹¹² Traynor, p. 10.

¹¹³ Traynor, p. 12.

¹¹⁴ Traynor, pp. 13-14.

¹¹⁵ Traynor, pp. 14, 19.

Chocolate Flake imagery and so the metaphor is again implied and emphasised. Traynor's use of erotic imagery, putting an adult head on a child enduring sexual abuse, is unpalatable.

After the first encounter is over and Josie heads back to her room, she 'walks to the door' and must pause, look back towards her abuser, because she observes him 'sat biting his fingernails staring at the television: 'He didn't look at me again' – as if she is analysing him. Josie then bids her abuser goodnight, 'Nye Gobless'.¹¹⁶

Josie's abuse ends when Martin marries and leaves home. 'I wanted to tell. But I couldn't. I was just twelve. How could I tell after all that time? For years it went on'.¹¹⁷ Her narrative stripped back, Josie's inner voice is finally heard, in all its depth and devastation. It convinces. However, it contrasts with the dramatised abuse narrative, where the erotic imagery obscures this internalised struggle. Bernadette offered Josie an opportunity to confide in her about her abuse experience, but Josie dismissed her as a 'troublemaker'.¹¹⁸

The Gran character is never present, not described and has little purpose in the early stages of the narrative; however, she – along with the basket full of things awaiting ironing – will be central to the most moving, convincing and authentic scene. That it convinces, while other of Traynor's stories fail, highlights one of this project's research questions: can research identify and articulate truths and emotions of a childhood in care and the impact that experience has upon the adult self?

Mum, the driving force behind the family, uncompromising and harsh, suddenly becomes vulnerable: she, along with the entire community, must face the impact her lack of trust had upon her husband now he has been acquitted of the sexual misconduct charge. She sits 'rolling her hands round and round, really nervously'.¹¹⁹ Mum is silent and insecure. In her turmoil and restlessness, she tries to occupy herself with chores and so turns her attention to the ironing basket. Finally, the winter curtains re-enter the narrative – first introduced in the opening chapters. They finally fulfil their role. Mum failed to support her husband; he struggles to forgive her mistrust in him. In his innocence, he cannot reach out to her; instead, he turns to his dead mother – Gran – who he finally and painfully mourns.¹²⁰ 'I didn't know I would miss her like this. God, I miss her. God, I love me mum'.¹²¹

¹¹⁶ Traynor, p. 18.

¹¹⁷ Traynor, p. 57.

¹¹⁸ Traynor, p. 51.

¹¹⁹ Traynor, p. 62.

¹²⁰ Traynor, pp. 63-64.

¹²¹ Traynor, p. 62.

Mum looks down at her hands, studies them. It is evocative, demonstrating her emptiness, powerlessness, internal angst and vulnerability. She failed her husband when he needed her and is at a loss about how to mend things. She reaches for the orange curtains: 'There were clothes at the bottom of that basket that waited and waited. There were skirts with pleats in and thick orange curtains that weren't needed till wintertime. Every year, they weren't needed till wintertime'.¹²²

The metaphor behind wintertime, which Traynor repeats twice in the original scene, and to which we are prompted to return, suggests the house is in the chill of winter. It is cold. 'Clothes at the bottom of that basket that waited...' are evocative of unexplored emotions and angst within the forlorn couple and the house itself. Traynor's narrative emanates atmosphere from beneath her text. The ether Traynor creates permeates throughout the house, which comes to a halt; everyone feels it and is impacted by it; it is almost tangible. It is Woolfian: it is the equivalent to the humming noted by Woolf at luncheon, an undercurrent.¹²³ Traynor does not refer to the atmosphere – it is not necessary. She has created it deep within the narrative. It is Stanislavskian: Traynor has reached deep within herself as 'the one doing the remembering'.¹²⁴ Traynor writes true memoir here and authenticates her memory with the emotion and atmosphere that radiates from beneath the text.

'Memoirists, unlike fiction writers, do not really want to 'tell a story'. They want to tell it all – all of personal experience, or consciousness itself'.¹²⁵ Here, Traynor captures the stories and ambiances beneath them, she externalises the internalised, and the reader feels it – in the authentic and excruciating atmosphere that engulfs the whole house: into the sitting room where the usually warring foster siblings sit in silence; the bully, Gary, sheds a tear for his parents while Josie, detached, wanders to and fro for unwanted glasses of water so that she might eavesdrop.¹²⁶ This narrative convinces. The reader absorbs the tension, which is intergenerational, that breaks down family barriers and forces momentary fluidity upon the family's power dynamic. It portrays a childlike curiosity within Josie. She longs to know, understand, that which, for once, she does not know – the hidden.

The opening paragraph of Gornick's book describes her attending a funeral; watching as one eulogy follows another; then 'a doctor in her forties who had been trained by the dead woman – moved me to that melancholy evocation of world-and-

¹²² Traynor, pp. 63-64, 10.

¹²³ Woolf, *A Room*, pp. 27-28.

¹²⁴ Gornick, p. 4.

¹²⁵ Hampl, p. 18.

¹²⁶ Traynor, pp. 63-64.

self that makes a single person's death feel large'.¹²⁷ Moved to tears by the woman's words, Gornick asks 'why had these words made the difference?'.¹²⁸ Gornick concludes that the difference between this and the other eulogies was born out of the narrative's genesis: it was rooted in the speaker's own experience of the dead woman; her words are centred first on her remembering: she 'had been remembering herself' first; then, secondly, the deceased. Gornick clarifies this further:

I saw how central the eulogist herself had been to its effectiveness. The speaker had "composed" her thoughts the better to recall the apprentice she had once been, the one formed by the strong but vexing relationship [with the dead woman] ... The better the speaker imagined herself, the more vividly she brought the dead doctor to life ... She knew and didn't forget that the only proper self to invoke was the one that had been apprenticed. That was the self in whom this story resided ... Because the narrator knew who was speaking, she also knew why she was speaking.¹²⁹

The eulogist's memory-centred and experientially focused approach allowed her contribution to resonate where other eulogists failed. An analogy might be made here to the way that Traynor's narrative convinces when written as a memoir rather than pretending to be fiction.

The dramatist Stanislavski came to the same memory-centred and experientially focussed conclusion in the late nineteenth century. Like Gornick, on the eulogist who brings her to tears, he is inspired to reflect upon the nuances of reader/audience connection and response: why does one text and performance have a positive reaction when another does not? In his memoir, he describes two performances he enacted to the same audience on the same night: the first, he was 'whistled' down but he 'did not find anything bad' in his performance; this made him decide to 'play badly' and yet this time he was 'met with applause'.¹³⁰ His reflection on these two performances, and the contradictory audience response, resulted, in part, in his lifelong search for perfection and authenticity in communicating art and performance to an audience: 'it is self-evident that I could not play an unprepared role well', he writes.¹³¹ It culminated in his creation of his acting system, which includes 'Emotion Memory' and 'Inner Motive Forces'; 'you would all use your inner forces to feel out the soul of the part'.¹³² For the memoirist, as for the novelist, evoking memory to

¹²⁷ Gornick, p. 3.

¹²⁸ Gornick, p 4.

¹²⁹ Gornick, pp. 4, 4-6.

¹³⁰ Constantin Stanislavski, *My Life in Art*, trans. by J. J. Robbins (London: Geoffrey Bles, 1962 [1924]), p. 138.

¹³¹ Stanislavski, *Life in Art*, p. 139.

¹³² Constantin Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, trans. by E. R. Hapgood (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013 [1937]), pp. 141-164, 211-217, 219.

connect and convince, to authenticate, using the ‘art of authenticity’ allows us, the reader and observer, to be – in Woolfian terms – convinced.¹³³

In his memoir *The Vagabond’s Breakfast*, Richard Gwyn demonstrates this infusion when he recounts a nocturnal visit to a filling station. Experiencing debilitating symptoms of encephalopathy, which makes speech difficult, communication between him and the unhelpful cashier becomes exasperating: the cashier cannot – or will not – comprehend Gwyn’s request for cigarettes.¹³⁴ Three hooded men stand behind him in the queue, and we anticipate – with Gwyn – confrontation. Instead, one of the ‘hoodies’, Ahmed, transpires to be Gwyn’s former student – a Somali refugee:

Then one of them catches my eye and his face lights up and he flicks back his hood: Hey, man, and he beams at me. I have no idea who he is. You remember me, man? Ahmed, you taught me English. When I first come over. Everything tight wiv you, bro? Need help or somefing?¹³⁵

The narrative moves from Gwyn’s self-observation to his observations of his former student and his fellow Somalis, a description of their plight in 1991 as casualties of civil war; then, back ‘At this miserable filling station under the persistent drizzle of Welsh rain, years on; he has come to rescue me...’¹³⁶ Gwyn tells us. The interaction between Gwyn, educated, educator, smart, but – in this scene – vulnerable, with his Somali rescuers and Asian cashier, offers insight into the fluidity of power differentiation and social dynamics, which moves silently and invisibly in the air around them, beneath the text. The scene is authentic and convincing: tension and energy permeate the characters.

Hilary Mantel in her memoir *Giving Up The Ghost* also achieves Woolfian authenticity, particularly at the close, as she sits contemplating ‘what I have lost and what I have gained’.¹³⁷ High on her balcony illuminated by ‘the clock face [that] hangs above me like a second moon, lighting up the flickering tongues of the gargoyles’. Her ‘forehead on the balcony’s freezing rail’ she thinks about what she has ‘lost’ and what she has ‘gained’. Having attempted to rid herself of her ghosts by selling two homes in search of a new life, the stark irony is pictorial: Mantel’s tragic figure sitting on the balcony of the new home, a former asylum, with the illumined clock face and ‘flickering tongues of the gargoyles’. Mantel’s atmosphere tells the reader something

¹³³ Robert F. Mullen, ‘The Art of Authenticity: Constantin Stanislavski and Merleau-Ponty’ *Journal of Literature and Art Studies*, 6.7 (2016), 790-803; Jon Leon Torn, ‘A Dangerous Method: The Art of Authenticity as a Social Imperative’, *Liminalities: A Journal of Performance Studies*, 7 (2011), 1-7; Woolf, *A Room*, p. 112.

¹³⁴ Richard Gwyn, *Vagabond’s Breakfast* (Talybont: Alcemi, 2011), p. 37.

¹³⁵ Gwyn, p. 37.

¹³⁶ Gwyn, p. 37.

¹³⁷ Hilary Mantel, *Giving up the Ghost: A memoir* (London: Fourth Estate, 2010), p. 233.

she does not articulate directly in the text; that her endeavour has not succeeded, and that she remains – emotionally – where she began.

Gornick tells us: 'It took Ackerley thirty years to find the voice that could tell his story – thirty years to gain detachment, make an honest man of himself, become a trustworthy narrator'.¹³⁸ Traynor fails to isolate the story she came to tell; I fail to discern her story. It would be interesting to read Traynor's memoir thirty years after her semi-autobiographical novel, were it to be written.

Sister Josephine is a challenging narrative. It has the potential to confront perspectives and develop new ways of thinking to motivate change to improve foster children's experience – to impact positively on their long-term outcomes. However, Traynor's enmeshed narrative falls into O'Brien's confessed 'quagmire' because they are 'two different books'. The indivisibility of fiction and nonfiction hinders access to the stories' essence because the critical semi-autobiographical narrative masked beneath intractable genres.¹³⁹ Such intractability serves as an example of why 'fiction and nonfiction [are not and should not be] just a bunch of books' as Dyer advocates.¹⁴⁰ *Sister Josephine* has the ability to cast a long shadow of suspicion over identifiable people supposedly hidden by semi-autobiographical fictional narrative; accusations of abuse and harm are made against partially anonymised but possibly recognisable people while reality, fact and truth and non-truths are inaccessible.

Whereas Traynor's enmeshed narrative proves persistently problematical, Woolf's challenge, to find Nature's 'inner light by which to judge of the novelist's integrity or disintegrity' and 'the murmur or current behind it' – the 'humming noise' beneath – can often rescue Traynor's otherwise indivisible narrative, allowing the reader access to the essence of her stories. The Woolfian hum triggers tacit knowing and discerns authentic narrative. However, it cannot, perhaps, determine truths and facts beyond a suspicion of them:

Instead of observing them in themselves, we may be aware of them in their bearing on the comprehensive entity which they constitute...it is not by looking at things, but by dwelling in them that we understand their joint meaning...How unbridled lucidity can destroy our understanding of complex matters.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ Gornick, p. 20.

¹³⁹ Hughes, (2020).

¹⁴⁰ Specktor, (2013).

¹⁴¹ Woolf, *A Room*, pp. 100, 28; Michael Polanyi, *The Tacit Dimension* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009 [1966]), p. 18.

Reminiscent of Stanislavski's contrary audience response to his performances, she both fails to convince (Josie's childhood abuse narrative) and convinces (Dad's acquittal), prompting Gornick's original question: why had one eulogy moved her to tears when other eulogies, equally seeking to portray truth, did not move her?¹⁴² Gornick's answer is as appropriate to Traynor's narrative as it had been to the eulogists: the presence of the one doing the remembering ... [and her] effort to recall with exactness how things had been'.¹⁴³ The better Traynor 'imagined herself, the more vividly she brought the [emotion] to life'.¹⁴⁴ In the describing scene, the night of Dad's acquittal, Traynor finds the memory's essence.

If, as with Winterson,¹⁴⁵ readers could have the opportunity to compare and contrast Traynor's semi-autobiographical novel with a memoir, perhaps both works would enhance accessibility to Traynor's truths, both to challenge and offer new ways of thinking. It is the essence of her lived experience at the core of her personal narratives that can speak to and free others in care today and those who experience the trauma of sexual and emotional abuse.

¹⁴² Stanislavski, *Life in Art*, p. 138.

¹⁴³ Gornick, p. 4.

¹⁴⁴ Gornick, p. 5.

¹⁴⁵ Winterson, *Oranges*; Jeanette Winterson, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011).

Review Two: Jeanette Winterson's *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal*
2011 – Jonathan Cape Publisher: London

I must acknowledge and affirm Jeanette Winterson's achievement as a lesbian woman and feminist writer in 1985 at the beginning of this review. Diane Abbott, an aspiring politician and black feminist activist at the time, summarises this period as experiencing 'real change': 'The feminist narrative was very gradually beginning to affect how people thought. And the paradox is that the issues the left were attacked for at the beginning of the 80s, such as supporting women's and LGBT rights, were seen as mainstream by the close of the decade'.¹⁴⁶ Winterson's voice was instrumental in that changing narrative as she wrote experientially in *Oranges* on the subjects Abbott highlights. I write as a gay white man; as I write, white identity – especially white male identity – is being scrutinised by activists today: privileged and white men's historical and colonial actions are finally being made accountable. It is encouraging contemporary white men, like me, to reflect upon their impact on the world we live in today. Through her writing, Winterson has been a pioneer for LGBT freedoms and helped enact change. While we share experiences – both of us acknowledge our sexual identities and have been confronted by others about it – difference lies in our genders, societal behaviours towards us and Winterson's global recognition and considerable public scrutiny. Winterson had the strength and confidence in her work to control the narrative around these subjects. This is an example of difference between us. I was forced into the spotlight through the national newspapers in the 1990s, and my sexuality became weaponised against me. Reminiscent of my childhood self and when my disability came to define me, I lost control of the dialogue, allowed my sexuality to define me as an adult; this continues to impact how I view and respond to the world today. A defining difference separating us is that whereas Winterson was adopted, I remained in foster care, which is a significant difference; this may influence my approach to and evaluation of her narratives.

Winterson classifies *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* as 'nonfiction'; is it memoir? 'Perhaps', she says. Autobiography? 'Maybe'.¹⁴⁷ However she claims within the work that she is unable to write her own life, and, in any case, she would prefer to view herself as fiction: 'The womb to tomb of an interesting life – but I can't

¹⁴⁶ Diane Abbott, *Diane Abbott on feminism in the 1980s* (1 February 2018), *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2018/feb/01/women-1980s-diane-abbott-black-women-radical-feminism> [Accessed: 30 August 2021]; LGBT: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender.

¹⁴⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, (2011); Jeanette Winterson, *Promotional Interview for Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal* ([n.d.]), *dailymotion* <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2ucwd0> [Accessed: 09 January 2021].

write my own; never could. Not Oranges. Not now. I would rather go on reading myself as a fiction than as a fact'.¹⁴⁸

Winterson's reluctance to define her work is a reoccurring theme around the precise genre of her first 'novel', *Oranges Are Not The Only Fruit* or '*Oranges*' as she calls it. Such delineation is a subject – I argue – which has likely troubled Winterson since its publication: she exposes identifiable lives under the mask of fiction. Winterson addresses the fiction versus nonfiction question immediately in the opening pages of *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?*

In a conversation between Winterson and her adoptive mother Mrs. Winterson – speaking from their differing perspectives and separate telephone boxes – they discuss the subject of the truth behind *Oranges*.¹⁴⁹ Her first novel's early prominence within this later work highlights its significance and Winterson must be intentionally inviting readers to connect the two books.¹⁵⁰ Winterson strives to justify her literary decision-making for *Oranges*; the memoir's opening chapter reads as an apologetic for it: 'Why could there not be experience and experiment? Why could there not be the observed and the imagined? Why should a woman be limited by anything or anybody? Why should a woman not be ambitious for literature?'.¹⁵¹

The work is often written in a pithy style, as if using bullet points. The narrative is nonlinear as it moves from one time to another, one subject, theme or location to another; but there is a consistency to this movement as it drifts back and forth: Winterson's 'voice goes in and out like the sea'.¹⁵² It is rhythmic. Conversely, perhaps, there is at the same time a driving forwards through the narrative towards a conclusion or climax.

Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal? can be read as an independent work, but perhaps one of its purposes was to help Winterson reflect upon the *Oranges* era of her life and allow her to contextualise specific experiences in her life since its publication in 1985. This specification and narrowing of interest are why the memoir genre label can arguably define this work.

Oranges gave Winterson instant success and a venerated status. A television adaptation followed the book, equally well received; to quote Winterson on the subject: 'Oranges won everything – BAFTAs, RTS awards, a script award for me at

¹⁴⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 154.

¹⁴⁹ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 2-6.

¹⁵⁰ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 1-8.

¹⁵¹ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 3-4.

¹⁵² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 4.

Cannes, numerous foreign prizes – and it was a big talking point in 1990'.¹⁵³ She demanded 'chauffeur-driven transport on book tours' and declared 'herself the natural heir to Virginia Woolf' in a Late Show special on TV... [then] nominated herself as her favourite living author'.¹⁵⁴

Winterson's venerated status daunted me, initially. To quote her accusation of Mrs. Winterson, back at Winterson: 'her Jehovah-like conversational style – really a lifelong soliloquy – ...silenced'.¹⁵⁵ On reflection, as with Sissay's memoir, *My Name is Why*,¹⁵⁶ it had to become a primary text. How could I research a PhD in memoir – in essence about a child given up by his mother at birth – without Winterson's story? It is incomprehensible to me now that I tried to exclude her work and voice: Winterson addresses explicitly the one theme – reality – that connects the authors of the primary texts: Traynor, Sissay, Winterson, and me: we were all given up by our mothers. Winterson particularly – and Sissay – narrate the loss of their birth mothers as a perpetual and unresolved loss that they have carried through their lives. Their memoirs articulate a loss; it is their 'lifelong soliloquy'.¹⁵⁷

The publisher's synopsis does not highlight the impact Winterson's loss of birth mother has on her life and the foundational importance the subject has to the narrative whole; however, applying Gornick's 'Situation versus Story' methodology to assess the memoir, Winterson's 'lost loss' narrative is the story Winterson has come to tell, I conclude.¹⁵⁸

This book is the story of a life's work to find happiness. It is a book full of stories: about a girl locked out of her home, sitting on the doorstep all night; about a tyrant in place of a mother, who has two sets of false teeth and a revolver in the duster drawer, waiting for Armageddon; ... It is the story of how the painful past Jeanette Winterson thought she had written over and repainted returned to haunt her later life, and sent her on a journey into madness and out again, in search of her real mother.¹⁵⁹

At first glance, this synopsis could appear to address Gornick's 'Story and Situation' deliberations, that which Winterson has come to say; the story. I argue that it is a summary of the situation and does not address the story.

The memoir explores a mental 'breakdown', the 'time I began to go mad'; suicide attempt, 'I tried to end my life'; recovery, including searching for her birth mother;

¹⁵³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 156.

¹⁵⁴ Libby Brooks, *Power Surge* (2 September 2000), *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2000/sep/02/fiction.jeanettewinterson> [Accessed: 10 March 2021].

¹⁵⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 47.

¹⁵⁶ Sissay, (2019).

¹⁵⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 47.

¹⁵⁸ Gornick, p. 161.

¹⁵⁹ Winterson, *Normal*, inside cover.

childhood with Mrs. Winterson, 'a monster'.¹⁶⁰ However, these subjects, all vital to the plot of Winterson's life and narrative whole, are situations in which the essential story sits. They are not the story.

'Happiness' is a theme that Winterson addresses – in typical Winterson style: '... back to happiness, and a quick look at the word...'.¹⁶¹ As with many of her subjects and themes, Professor Winterson explores and educates, goes to the root of language:

Our primary meaning now is the feeling of pleasure and contentment ... But earlier meanings build in the hap – in Middle English, that is "happ", in Old English, "gehapp" – the chance or fortune, good or bad, that falls to you. Hap is your lot in life, the hand you are given to play. How you meet your "hap" will determine whether or not you can be "happy".¹⁶²

The publisher is emphatic: 'This book is the story of a life's work to find happiness'.¹⁶³ Nevertheless, it is not the story; it is not even the situation. I explored the possibility, that it is the story, essentially because 'happy' is prominent within the title and Winterson highlights it specifically: 'Pursuing happiness, and I did, and I still do ... it is lifelong...'. She expands, emphasising 'hap' over happiness: 'What you are pursuing is meaning – a meaningful life ... the hap ... and it isn't fixed, but changing'.¹⁶⁴ There is no sense in the memoir that Winterson perceives her story as the pursuit of happiness, and although she might suggest her lifelong interaction with literature – learning and reflection, exercises in the pursuit of meaning – is a part of it, it is still not the story.

I should have liked Mrs. Winterson to have been the story, and initially concluded that she was: there is depth to this character; she is complicated and multifaceted, all which Winterson implies, but only superficially explores. She was an educated, intelligent, quick-witted and practical person. Nevertheless, she appears blinkered by her religiosity and arguably would not have understood the irony behind her statement to Winterson, 'Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal'. Did the paradox concern herself? It is dangerous to speak in terms of 'normal' or 'abnormal' when describing characters and personalities; after all, what is 'normal'? I would probably depict Mrs. Winterson as eccentric. Winterson's stepmother, Lillian, described her to Winterson as mad, 'you know that she was mad...'.¹⁶⁵ Winterson portrays her as, at least, a little unconventional and perhaps suffering mental illness: 'a flamboyant depressive; a woman who kept a revolver in the duster drawer, and

¹⁶⁰ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 161, 168, 178, 229.

¹⁶¹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 23.

¹⁶² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 24.

¹⁶³ Winterson, *Normal*, inside cover.

¹⁶⁴ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 24.

¹⁶⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 49.

the bullets in a tin of Pledge. A woman who stayed up all night baking cakes to avoid sleeping in the same bed as my father'.¹⁶⁶

If normal equates 'the norm' as in 'majority', 'in general' or 'an average', Mrs. Winterson was not it, as in 'normal'.

Without Mrs. Winterson, there would be no *Oranges* – as we have it – because she is central to the narrative. Therefore, perhaps, no Winterson memoir either. Winterson's story, the one she came to tell, cannot be the same without Mrs. Winterson; the situation would be entirely different.

As noted, it was *Oranges* that propelled Winterson to literary stardom. Like Muriel Spark before her, whom Winterson quotes, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* was an early semi-autobiographical novel that became an instant success, succeeded by a film and television series.¹⁶⁷ Both successes ensured two new protagonists entered the literary hall of fame: Jean Brodie, literary characterisation of Christina Kay, and Constance Winterson, as herself.

Winterson is a robust, confident and forceful character. She is a skilled writer and narrator, but in *Oranges* she cannot compete with her magnificently irrepressible mother who 'hung out the largest sheets on the windiest days'.¹⁶⁸ 'My father liked to watch the wrestling, my mother liked to wrestle'.¹⁶⁹

Sheets and wind, my overriding memory of *Oranges*. It is a metaphor which reveals the internal drive and passions of Mrs. Winterson, and the external force and excesses that are Mrs. Winterson.

In her memoir, *Don't Wake Me at Doyles*, Maura Murphy's clean sheets, as a metaphor, likewise opens her narrative:

There is something elegant about a line of washing blowing in the wind... and reminds me of how, as a child, I would stand at the top of Wakley Hill and see our neighbours' beautiful white linen flapping spectacularly in the distance. Mammy would have loved a line, but she had to throw her washing on the hedge to dry, like the gypsies.¹⁷⁰

This metaphor is baptismal: life before she pegs out the newly cleaned washing and life after. It is Murphy's story: a moment of irrevocable change. Winterson's situation

¹⁶⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 1.

¹⁶⁷ Muriel Spark, *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie* (London: Penguin Classics, 2000 [1961]), p. 123.

¹⁶⁸ Winterson, *Oranges*, p. 5.

¹⁶⁹ Winterson, *Oranges*, p. 5.

¹⁷⁰ Maura Murphy, *Don't Wake Me at Doyles* (London: Headline Book Publishing, 2005), p. 1.

is the inescapable and irrevocable influence that her adoptive mother, Mrs. Winterson, had upon her. Winterson's baptismal moment is her arrival at the home of Mrs. Winterson.

Winterson's sheets-and-wind conveys a vastness, a depth of meaning; it is as formidable and uncontainable as the character it denotes; Murphy's line of washing is lifeless in comparison. Winterson's pictorial use of language and imagery introduces Constance Winterson to the reader, and we know her essence instantly.

It would have been the easiest decision to select Mrs. Winterson's lifelong influence on Winterson as the story – that which Winterson came to say, in both the memoir and *Oranges*. As Miss Brodie put it: 'Give me a girl at an impressionable age, and she is mine for life'.¹⁷¹ Mrs. Winterson is stamped as text on every page, in person or implied; she is a story in herself.

There are parallels between Spark's story of Jean Brodie and her pupil Sandy, and Mrs. Winterson and the Winterson situation and story. Both women are forces of nature, egocentric, domineering, raging, irrepressible, driven, passionate, idealistic and blinkered. Both girls are subjugated and underestimated by their tyrannical elders, yet talented and determined. Both appear to find freedom, rebel and are victorious; until, that is, they discover the reality: both are forever trapped within the influential 'primes' of the older women: 'that Sandy clutched the bars of her grille more desperately than ever' was evidence that 'there was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime'; and Winterson herself, reflecting on her birth mother's criticism of Mrs. Winterson, who rages, 'I hate Ann criticising Mrs Winterson. She was a monster, but she was my monster ... At least Mrs Winterson was there'.¹⁷² Winterson then finishes her memoir with 'I have no idea what happens next'.¹⁷³ This final line, final words, are as equally lamenting as Sandy's closing words, the last line of Spark's novel: 'There was a Miss Jean Brodie in her prime'.¹⁷⁴

Both young women go on to be successful authors of notable books, while both oppressors lie in early graves, alone: 'I found Miss Brodie's grave, I put some flowers on it'.¹⁷⁵ Mr. Winterson is 'in ... the grave he shares with his second wife ... Mrs Winterson lies further off. Alone'.¹⁷⁶

¹⁷¹ Spark, p. 9.

¹⁷² Spark, p. 128; Winterson, *Normal*, p. 229.

¹⁷³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 230.

¹⁷⁴ Spark, p. 128.

¹⁷⁵ Spark, p. 127.

¹⁷⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 196.

Perhaps I have imposed Brodie upon Winterson's memoir, but it was difficult not to do it. I am occasionally unsure from where the influences on Winterson's narrative derive. Sometimes it is evident: she references and quotes The Bible, Shakespeare, Malory, and Dickens.¹⁷⁷ Equally obvious, but not referenced, she superimposes her narrative onto other writers' quotations, such as Wilde: 'while losing one set of teeth was a misfortune, to lose two sets looked like carelessness'; and Woolf: 'I didn't even have a room of my own'.¹⁷⁸ It feels crude. Other times, she appears to mislead – having told the reader in one sentence, 'I had not read Virginia Woolf', in the next writes, 'I tried to read books 'about' literature ... I couldn't help noticing that men wrote the books about men who write'.¹⁷⁹ This resonates with Woolf's discussion in *A Room of One's Own* about men who write, men who write about women and the lack of women's voices in fiction: 'have you any notion how many books are written about women ... have you any notion how many are written by men?'. Winterson surely is aware of this.¹⁸⁰

Winterson, in both *Why be Happy When You Could Be Normal*, and *Oranges* is a challenging character; nevertheless, in *Oranges*, she is overshadowed by Mrs. Winterson. In her memoir, she takes the reins to become the unchallenged protagonist. Her narrative voice has become more assertive, authoritative, transparent and accessible. Notwithstanding the book's ending (the rejection of her birth mother, Ann - I had suppressed this from my first reading a year before), Winterson is likeable and amusing. Her frequent use of literary references can interrupt the story and is overwrought. She presents as an author – constructor of the narrative – and protagonist, but her most prominent voice is as a literary expert and educator. She is Professor Jeanette Winterson, first and foremost; this character is dominant. I have reflected on my response to this aspect of Winterson and her work and the possible influence it may have had upon my reading of the narratives. I find I react to her apparent pedagogical stridency. Winterson describes herself as a challenging and robust girl through her childhood narratives, contrasting my childhood timidity and lack of confidence. Winterson honed her intellectual and literary voice at a young age, which differs from my protracted learning experience. These developmental differences have required ongoing reflexivity throughout the research journey; 'educational research cannot be value free'.¹⁸¹

Winterson brings to the memoir her lifelong relationship with books, her home: 'Books, for me, are a home. Books don't make a home – they are one'.¹⁸² Their

¹⁷⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 33, 37-38, 227.

¹⁷⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 65, 155, 115-116.

¹⁷⁹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 117.

¹⁸⁰ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 44.

¹⁸¹ Gary and Holmes, p. 4.

¹⁸² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 61.

influence on her and her ability to retain what she has read, her knowledge, creativity, sharp wit and intelligence, collectively, allow her to produce an accomplished and formidable contribution to literature. A textbook to aid academic memoir writing, perhaps? However, as such, Winterson's flexing of literary muscle can disrupt the narrative.

I found myself quoting Spark at Winterson, more than once, as I read: 'the word 'education' comes from the root e from ex, out, and duco, I lead. It means a leading out. To me education is a leading out...'.¹⁸³ Winterson can impose her knowledge on the reader at the expense of the narrative flow.

In the first half of the book, it is easy to be carried along by Winterson's carefully honed prose as she takes us on her lyrical and literary journey from Manchester, where she was born, and where her 'birth mother ... a little red thing from out of the Lancashire looms ... gave birth to me, easy as a cat'.¹⁸⁴ Her account includes a history lesson in the city's development, its political, financial and industrial might via its global cotton trade, Dicken's *Hard Times* and Engels' 1844 ...*Condition of the English Working Class in England* and she introduces us to the Pankhurst family, women's social and political union, first trade unionist conference, 1868, Karl Marx, Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan; and even 'Queen Victoria [and] her wedding dress'.¹⁸⁵

Eventually we arrive, on January 21st, 1960, to Mr. and Mrs. Winterson at 200, Water Street, Accrington,¹⁸⁶ Winterson's adoptive parents, her childhood home and the foundations of an autobiographical novel and memoir.

It is easy to get carried along this journey of information, learning and literature; but I found, too, that I had to stop and retrace my steps. Winterson often glides over that which underpins the narrative, memory, personal experience, and real characters. She tells us how Mr. and Mrs. Winterson:

...got the baby they thought they wanted and took it home ...They had bought the house for £200 in 1947. 1947, the coldest British winter of the twentieth century, snow so high it reached the top of the upright piano as they pushed it in through the door. 1947, and the war ended, and my dad out of the army, doing his best, trying to make a living, and his wife throwing her wedding ring in the gutter and refusing all sexual relations.¹⁸⁷

¹⁸³ Spark, p. 36.

¹⁸⁴ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 17.

¹⁸⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 13ff, 15, 15-17.

¹⁸⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 19.

¹⁸⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 19.

This presentation is characteristically Winterson. Her prose emphasises detail: the house price, extreme weather conditions, an upright piano – being pushed through a door – and Mrs. Winterson refusing all sexual relations with her husband. However, her narrative ignores context, makes dogmatic claims and can set a detrimental tone. Stripped of house price, piano and weather, this passage is explicit, judgmental and prejudicial: her parents did not want her, a hardworking but struggling father doing his best juxtaposed against his neurotic and demanding wife. Winterson's multifaceted narrative requires scrutiny.

Notwithstanding Winterson being regularly locked out of the house overnight and Mrs. Winterson's disappearances, which I will explore later, what makes Winterson's work compelling is *The Prime of Mrs. Winterson*, in all her excesses and extremes, 'a revolver in the duster drawer' and the customary way she had of greeting visitors: 'If anyone knocked at the door, she ran down the lobby and shoved the poker through the letterbox.'¹⁸⁸ Winterson often introduces these idiosyncrasies with the comedic style of caricature; they dominate and define Mrs. Winterson, but within the narrative there are hints of another person from the one more prominently portrayed: hardworking, homemaker, carer, thoughtful. Not mentioned in the passage quoted above is the fact that Mrs. Winterson worked and earned up to the moment of Winterson's arrival: She is a 'Clerk' on the adoption correspondence, and Winterson notes: 'When I arrived, my mother never worked outside the home' as was the custom.¹⁸⁹ 'She baked, she sewed, she knitted, she mended'.¹⁹⁰ She decorated: 'she was an expert at measuring and putting up wallpaper'; 'I woke up in my own bed in the little room my mother had made for me when she got a grant to put in a bathroom.'¹⁹¹ 'I loved my little bedroom'.¹⁹² When Mrs. Winterson went to bed, 'around six in the morning – she spread the thin dusty tarry slack over the fire to keep it low and hot and left coal for me to get the fire going again at 7.30'.¹⁹³ Then the touching moments: 'when Mrs Winterson saw the tent in the field, she used to grab my hand and say, "I can smell Jesus" ... Mother, halfway up the tent aisle, helping people to find a seat'.¹⁹⁴

After their estrangement, with Winterson leaving home, she asks if she can come back for Christmas – and bring a friend. Mrs. Winterson says, 'Yes'.¹⁹⁵ Characteristically, Winterson criticises her for what she does not do, the questions she does not ask. I see a mother going to tremendous trouble to get things right for

¹⁸⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 4, 100.

¹⁸⁹ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 19, 21.

¹⁹⁰ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 57.

¹⁹¹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 107.

¹⁹² Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 81-82.

¹⁹³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 57.

¹⁹⁴ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 71-72.

¹⁹⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 145.

Winterson and her friend, Vicky; but in her 'obsessive' way, she fails to carry it through to a positive outcome.¹⁹⁶ In preparation, learning that Vicky is black, Mrs. Winterson 'went round to veterans of Africa and asked, "What do they eat?" The answer was pineapples'.¹⁹⁷ Winterson is mocking.

Mrs. Winterson felt this failure and struggled to absorb it. Winterson appears to overlook this or misses it completely. I found this aspect of the narrative insightful, deeply sad and moving.

To steal Mrs. Winterson's funeral money, Winterson had to unpick the curtain hem, where Mrs. Winterson hid it; she found there a note, with the money, 'Don't cry Jack and Jeanette. You know where I am'.¹⁹⁸

About *Oranges*, and perhaps the memoir also (for example – as I will explain – Mrs. W. would probably object to her apparent lack of telephone), there are sufficient non-truths to allow Mrs. Winterson to say, 'But it's not true' and there is enough truth in the [semi]-autobiographical narrative for Mrs. Winterson to want to object to Winterson's 'creative memory', memory creatively presented in well-fashioned prose.¹⁹⁹

I am often asked, in a tick-box kind of way, what is 'true' and what is not 'true' in *Oranges*. Did I work in a funeral parlour? Did I drive an ice-cream van? Did we have a Gospel Tent? Did Mrs Winterson build her own CB radio? Did she really stun tomcats with a catapult? I can't answer these questions.²⁰⁰

Why can she not answer these questions? Does she not remember? Unlikely. She goes on to say, as a response:

I can say that there is a character in *Oranges* called Testifying Elsie who looks after the little Jeanette and acts as a soft wall against the hurt(ing) force of Mother. I wrote her in because I couldn't bear to leave her out ... an imaginary friend.²⁰¹

Imaginary friends are a childhood reality for some; in *Oranges*, Winterson uses imagery and fairy-tale to articulate internal emotion and experience, otherwise unseen; it is creative writing and the art of authenticity, as was Stanislavsky's use of emotion to portray and articulate the inner lives of characters not reached by the text alone. My criticism of Winterson is that she imposes the same creativity on real

¹⁹⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 146-151.

¹⁹⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 146.

¹⁹⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 31.

¹⁹⁹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 6.

²⁰⁰ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 6.

²⁰¹ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 6-7.

people, real lives, the living and the dead. She says, 'about the cover version that is *Oranges*, is that I wrote a story I could live with'.²⁰² Yet, what about Mrs. Winterson? Could Mrs. Winterson live with Winterson's version, the one she said is 'not true'? The stark reality is that Mrs. Winterson had no choice; it is written, published and televised in her lifetime. She read it. It wasn't true. Winterson describes her as 'borne up on the shoulders of her own outrage'. She said, 'It's the first time I've had to order a book in a false name'.²⁰³ With some degree of irony, elsewhere, Winterson has stated she would 'never keep a diary and that she destroys everything because nobody can do anything privately these days'.²⁰⁴ She is a private person – as was Mrs. Winterson.

Three of us lived together in that house for sixteen years. I told my version – faithful and invented, accurate and misremembered, shuffled in time. I told myself as hero like any shipwreck story.²⁰⁵

Had Winterson not written her memoir – twenty-five years later – such clarity would never have been recorded in this way – if clarity is what Winterson offers. It was too late for Mrs. Winterson, in any case; she died eleven years before the memoir was published.

200, Water Street, the house the 'three of us lived together in' can be viewed on Google Street View: I have visited. As Winterson states, it is near the top of the hill; I note its closed curtains, upstairs and down.²⁰⁶ I imagine hordes of people on pilgrimage to 'Winterson-World', the present occupants forced to live in perpetual darkness – hidden from prying eyes behind drapes.²⁰⁷

I also walked down the street to where 17, Water Street, stood, presumably where Mrs. Winterson took her family so she could care for her dying mother when Winterson was three years old and Grandad tended his roses.²⁰⁸ I assume this because it is where the family are in 1939 (national census): Mrs. Winterson, then Ms Williams, her parents and brother. Grandma, a 'genteel woman who had married a seductive thug, given him her money, and watched him womanise it away'.²⁰⁹ Said thug, Harold Williams, is documented in the census as 'Managing Director Motor

²⁰² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 6.

²⁰³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 3.

²⁰⁴ Camila Turner, *Author Jeanette Winterson Keeping Diaries is Too Scary* (03 October 2015), *The Telegraph* <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/books/11909804/Author-Jeanette-Winterson-keeping-diaries-is-too-scary.html> [Accessed: 11 January 2021].

²⁰⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 6.

²⁰⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 6.

²⁰⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 145.

²⁰⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 9.

²⁰⁹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 230.

Coach and Garage Firm'.²¹⁰ Winterson also states that her 'mother had married down. Marrying down meant no money and no prospects'. However, she grew up on the same street; her maternal ancestors lived in the parallel street, Avenue Parade. In one generation, far from flitting his wife's money away, 42-year-old Harold seems to catch the mechanical wave, successfully move from carts to motors and is eventually able to bequeath his son, 'Alec', a 'thriving garage and petrol station'.²¹¹ Such research shows Winterson brusquely dismisses Williams, perhaps only partially portraying his undoubtedly more complex character. I argue that it is ethically questionable in fictional autobiography, but more so in nonfiction, and especially memoir, to be selective in one's portraiture.

One of the most striking memoir scenes is Winterson's summons by Mrs. Winterson to a telephone call upon *Oranges*' publication. It is vivid, precisely written, prose and included perhaps to introduce several subjects into the narrative. We understand, graphically, Mrs. Winterson's large physical stature proportioned as she is against the telephone box; her force of nature is understood, as this too fills the booth: 'She filled the phone box. She was out of scale, larger than life'.²¹² The passage introduces the question of *Oranges*' veracity and Winterson's justification polemic: *Oranges*' legacy appears to weigh heavily on Winterson; her response to accusations of falsehoods is: 'I am an ambitious writer' and 'ambitious for literature'.²¹³ She asks, 'Why could there not be the observed and the imagined?'.²¹⁴ Mrs. Winterson's contribution to the veracity question is both valid, and invaluable: 'It is not true' and, crucially, 'if it is a story, why is the main character called Jeanette? Why?'.²¹⁵ So, perhaps the phone box is a literary ploy to demonstrate the sheer volume of Mrs. Winterson, which is why the scene is set thus. 'I went to a phone box – I had no phone. She went to a phone box – she had no phone'.²¹⁶ Perhaps it is also a mechanism to emphasise Winterson's childhood poverty; a subject explored elsewhere in the memoir? The call took place in 1985: 'Phone box 1985. Mrs Winterson in her headscarf in a rage'.²¹⁷ I have found a phone book entry dated 1984: 'Winterson, John W, 200 Water St. Accrington, 391451'.²¹⁸ Mrs. Winterson – it appears – did have a telephone.

²¹⁰ R. H. Ratcliffe, *England and Wales National Census Register, 1939* (06 October 1939), *Ancestry.co.uk* https://www.ancestry.co.uk/discoveryui-content/view/27764669:61596?tid=&pid=&queryId=70c46ec8e641148e1559158ead4e5132&_phsrc=FiP3&_phstart=succes sSource [Accessed: 11 January 2021].

²¹¹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 109.

²¹² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 2.

²¹³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 4.

²¹⁴ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 3.

²¹⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 6, 5.

²¹⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 2.

²¹⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 224.

²¹⁸ BT Archives, *The Phone Books: Blackburn Area* (April 1984), *Ancestry.co.uk* https://www.ancestry.co.uk/imageviewer/collections/1025/images/RDUK1850_901760-00675?ssrc=&backlabel=Return [Accessed: 12 December 2020], p. 595.

Winterson's creativity does not alter the scene's discussion – it both entertains and adds to its visuality. The essence of the scene's story and debate about truth and literature remain central and accessible.

Nonetheless, to quote Mrs. Winterson: 'it's not true'.²¹⁹ The phone number revelation is problematical for Winterson. It encourages doubt over the veracity of her 'nonfiction' narrative and the reader begins to question it in its entirety.

She'll read the Bible all night, and when Dad comes home, he'll let me in, and he'll say nothing, and she'll say nothing, and we'll act like it's normal to leave your kid outside all night, and normal never to sleep with your husband.²²⁰

For my Social Work Master's degree dissertation, I analysed an article which sought to assess the torturous death of Tiffany Wright.²²¹ As part of my findings, I argued for the culpability of the broader community in which she lived. I named this group the 'anonymous community' assessed from the 'anonymous community perspective'. Winterson's memoir, literary contribution and childhood experience might be analysed from the same perspective:

Until nursery school, Tiffany experienced an average home life, was part of an extended family; she was developing as might be expected of any child. She was enrolled at and attended for a while, nursery school. Without warning, Tiffany began missing nursery until she stopped going entirely. Soon, Tiffany did not go outside the home. The home was a flat above the pub her stepfather and mother ran together. Tiffany disappeared from daily life. Except for one health official – who sadly was not persistent enough – the community, punters, neighbours, school, and doctors, never enquired after her. Tiffany was discovered dead in her bed. Cause of death: starvation and neglect. Both mother and partner were jailed. How can a child, living in a vibrant community, die of starvation?

Winterson's book raises a similar question. How can a child, living in a vibrant community, be left out on the doorstep of her home all night? Winterson writes this as true in her memoir; thus, as with Tiffany's community, it is a damning indictment on the anonymous community who lived around her – on the same street.

²¹⁹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 6.

²²⁰ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 4.

²²¹ Adrian Levy and Cathy Scott-Clark, *Death of a Child* (6 February 2010), *The Guardian Newspaper* <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2010/feb/06/child-neglect-adrian-levy-cathy-scott-clark> [Accessed: 10 December 2020].

Winterson introduces us to a neighbour, who gives her a bag of chips, as she sits on the doorstep, again. 'She knows what my mother is like'.²²² When Mrs. Winterson makes one of her 'disappearances', which she seems to do regularly, without notice, she leaves money for pies: 'Onion and potato for me, meat and onion for Dad. At the corner shop they always knew she had disappeared. 'She'll be back tomorrow, will Connie. She always comes back'''.²²³

This lets the reader know that the anonymous community around about her knew of her plight; yet they did nothing; they leave her sitting out on the doorstep, all night. Winterson tells us, 'I hated being locked out ... I used to shout and bang on the door, but this had no effect'.²²⁴

Winterson tells us what Water Street was like: 'long low terraces of houses ... under shallow-pitched roofs of slate tiles' ... 'a narrow house in a long narrow terrace', which faces another inward-looking terrace (as can be seen on Google Street View).²²⁵

If I was locked out overnight I sat on the doorstep till the milkman came, drank both pints, left the empty bottles to enrage my mother, and walked to school.²²⁶

I imagine Winterson sitting on the step, late at night, neighbours putting out milk bottles ready for the morning, closing the curtain, surveying the street, letting out a cat, or coming home from the pub. It is almost unbelievable that they left her there. However, abuse, of any nature, is inevitably not believable. Winterson's narrative shows us that it is everyone's responsibility. Unlike Tiffany Wright, who died hidden and alone, Winterson was sitting in plain sight, in an anonymous community that chose not to see.

As I have noted, Winterson's stepmother Lillian tells us that Mrs. Winterson was 'mad': 'You know she was mad don't you?'.²²⁷ I am not trying to defend the indefensible, but Mrs. Winterson was in no one's terms 'normal'. I suspect something more profound – medical – that might today explain – but not excuse – her behaviour. Perhaps Winterson has a similar inkling; she writes: 'Only later,

²²² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 4.

²²³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 94.

²²⁴ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 45.

²²⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 17, 44; 'Street View', *Google.co.uk*, (July 2015), <https://www.google.co.uk/maps/place/Water+St,+Accrington+BB5+6QU/@53.7570521,-2.355067,3a,75y,150.27h,96.55t/data=!3m7!1e1!3m5!1sGhkUGWW6rIGutaF6riUxrA!2e0!3e1!7i13312!8i6656!4m5!3m4!1s0x487b98e2a2f16759:0x44dcd04d4f8f487a!8m2!3d53.7566878!4d-2.3556419> [Accessed: 11 March 2021].

²²⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 2.

²²⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 49.

much later, too late, did I understand how small she was to herself. The baby nobody picked up. The uncarried child still inside her'.²²⁸

In a rare rebuke of her father, in discussion with Lillian, Winterson says, 'He didn't fight for me'. Lillian replies, 'I know, I know, I've told him ... and that horrible house.'²²⁹ When she looks to him for support, as the senior Wintersons head for a week's holiday in Blackpool, leaving her behind, Mrs. Winterson locking her out of the house, he does not challenge his wife:

'Give me the key. I live there. [Winterson]

We'll be back next Saturday. [Mrs. Winterson refusing]

Dad ... [Winterson pleading]

You heard what Connie said ...' [Dad].²³⁰

When he arrives home from a night shift, finds his daughter on the doorstep: Winterson says, 'he'll let me in, and he'll say nothing'.²³¹

Winterson's memoir has many villains, seen and unseen. Mrs. Winterson is the intended villain; she is the antagonist. However, like Sissay in *My name is Why*, Winterson – perhaps unintentionally – reveals another, her father, and others, the anonymous community who chose not to see her.

Sometimes she seemed happy, and played the piano, but unhappiness was always close by, and some other thought would cloud her mind so that she stopped playing, abruptly, and closed the lid, and walked up and down, up and down the back alley under the lines of strung washing, walking, walking as though she had lost something.²³²

This insight is a rare, touching and reflective moment for the protagonist towards her antagonist. Mrs. Winterson is a fascinating character; I do not find I want to mock her, as Winterson tends to do. I want to understand her. Although Winterson exposes a multifaceted character, daughter, mother, wife, longstanding neighbour and community member, a monster, depressive, brutal, erratic, practical, intelligent but narrow; the narrative is insufficiently in-depth to allow me insight into the reasons why she developed into the person we meet in the pages of Winterson's memoir. She had not always been the person we meet: 'I don't think my mother was depressed in those days'; Winterson tells us.²³³

²²⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 2.

²²⁹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 49.

²³⁰ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 106.

²³¹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 4.

²³² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 23.

²³³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 19.

We can only take Winterson's lead that Mrs. Winterson was the 'baby nobody picked up. The uncarried child still inside her'; that is, presumably, the child not loved enough.²³⁴ However, her relationship with her mother, Kate, contradicts Winterson's suppositions; the mother and daughter relationship appears close: Mrs. Winterson dedicates herself to her mother's care over several years, until she dies; Mrs. Winterson mourns her when she is dead: 'and she shut herself up in her grief'.²³⁵ Gornick's 'distance' methodology might have helped Winterson whilst contemplating and assessing her adoptive mother. She appears too close, emotionally, to allow reflection, too close to allow her to see beyond her own story. At 'the right distance: not too close, not too far...everyone and everything is made understandable'.²³⁶ 'Gain detachment' to become what Gornick terms, 'a trustworthy narrator': 'Actively working to strip down the anxiety till [she] can get to something hard and true beneath the smooth surface of sentimental self-regard'.²³⁷

Likewise, 'Paul [the] ... ghostly brother ... his sainted self ... always invoked when [Winterson] was naughty'.²³⁸ Winterson similarly lacks distance and, therefore, compassion in the way she approaches the subject of Paul, the child Mrs. Winterson had expected to adopt... Winterson perhaps misses the probability that Mrs. Winterson was in mourning for Paul when Winterson became his substitute. Mrs. Winterson had met him, the baby she was to adopt, bought clothes for him and prepared as an expectant mother would. Then, for whatever reason, he is lost to her. Hilary Mantel, in her memoir *Giving Up the Ghost*,²³⁹ longed for her phantom daughter Catriona for most of her married life until she finally gave her up and mourns. Mrs. Winterson would not have swapped one child for another without consequence. Mantel's writing beautifully explores the complexities hidden within such an experience: sadness and mourning would have descended upon her, as it would have done upon Mrs. Winterson when she experienced the loss of Paul. Mantel's prose articulates the depth of emotional impact the loss of a child can have upon a mother.

Yet, seemingly without pause, a different child enters Mrs. Winterson's life and, as Winterson demonstrates, she is compared relentlessly with him as a child. He might have been better than her, but 'the devil led [Mrs. Winterson] to the wrong crib'.²⁴⁰ Winterson – through the thoughts offered by 'Susie', Winterson's emerging new partner – considers that 'Mrs W had psychologically prepared herself for a boy'. Characteristically, Winterson quickly takes this story for herself, 'I am ... beginning to

²³⁴ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 2.

²³⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 11.

²³⁶ Gornick, p. 19.

²³⁷ Gornick, pp. 20, 19-20.

²³⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 10.

²³⁹ Mantel, (2010).

²⁴⁰ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 1.

take in that Mrs Winterson was expecting a boy ... I would have been dressed as a boy ... I started life not as Janet, not as Jeanette, but as Paul ... I began as a boy'.²⁴¹ Winterson does not discuss the impact the loss of Mrs. Winterson's anticipated son, Paul, must have had on her adoptive mother.

I expected Winterson to show empathy towards Mrs. Winterson in this one area because it goes to the heart of the story she came to write; the story of her loss: 'I had lost the warm safe place, however chaotic, of the first person I loved. I had lost my name and my identity. Adopted children are dislodged'.²⁴² It is the story Winterson came to write, wants the reader to engage with and understand. Winterson intersperses the story across the narrative. The reader needs to put the pieces together, but we meet someone whose existence and identity rests on loss and separation: 'I got picked up from Manchester and taken to Accrington. It was all over for me and the woman whose baby I was. She was gone. I was gone. I was adopted'.²⁴³ Winterson says that Mrs. Winterson could not comprehend this level of loss:

Child psychology hadn't reached Accrington, and in spite of important work by ... Bowlby ... on attachment, and the trauma of early separation from the love object that is the mother, a screaming baby wasn't a broken-hearted baby – she was a Devil baby.²⁴⁴

When her 'six-year relationship' ends with her partner the 'director Deborah Warner', who leaves her, and never returns a single telephone call, the 'loss' returns to challenge Winterson: the separation, as a baby, from birth mother and subsequent broken Attachment, drives her to 'go mad' and to attempt suicide.²⁴⁵

My bewilderment and rage, these emotional states were taking me to the sealed doors ... I started waking up at night and finding myself on all fours shouting 'Mummy, Mummy'. I was wet with sweat....²⁴⁶

This narrative brings to the fore the severe long-term effects broken Attachment(s) can have; how violently it can impact on an adult self, as Winterson bravely describes in the story she came to tell; how a sudden loss can trigger the return of the 'lost loss'.²⁴⁷ After the breakdown and suicide attempt, Winterson battles the Family Court in search of documentation that will lead her to her birth mother.²⁴⁸

²⁴¹ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 203, 202.

²⁴² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 23.

²⁴³ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 18-19.

²⁴⁴ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 20.

²⁴⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 157, 161, 168.

²⁴⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 162.

²⁴⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 161.

²⁴⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 189.

Perhaps the reality is that both protagonist and antagonist suffered from a loss from which they could not move on. It introduces another villain into the narrative, the adoption agency. One baby should never have been substituted for another without a process of mourning first taking place.

As I have already suggested, Winterson's primary story does not involve Mrs. Winterson; Mrs. Winterson, however, allows Winterson's story to be a commodity. There is not necessarily a readership for stories about children given up by their mothers and Bowlby's Theory of Attachment.²⁴⁹ The stories readers more often seek out are the stories about the consequences of the 'lost loss' rather than the experience of loss itself; Winterson, however, although demonstrating the consequences, appears determined to tell the story of the loss itself. The devastation this separation and subsequent isolation had upon her adult self and childhood is the situation. Despite being set within Winterson's blaze of literature and philosophy, the separation story stands vividly as the story, which she writes evocatively, demonstrating the emotional effect of being given up by her birth mother. Winterson successfully makes her story about herself, first, as 'the one doing the remembering'.²⁵⁰

As the memoir ends, Mrs. Winterson is in a grave and her birth mother set to one side; separated and self-isolated, Winterson says, in the final chapter entitled, *The Wound*: 'I have no idea what happens next'.²⁵¹

Were Mrs. Winterson at the other end of the telephone to Winterson, upon the publication of *Why Be Happy When You Can Be Normal*, as she was *Oranges*, she would still be 'borne up on the shoulders of her own outrage'.²⁵² As a proud woman, she would find it intolerable, for example, to be portrayed as too impoverished to have the telephone she possessed. She might claim that it is 'the second time I've had to order a book in a false name'. The telephone box scene would give her ammunition to pronounce the memoir, as she did *Oranges*, 'not true' and excuse her from reflecting upon other, harsher, truths within the narrative regarding her impact upon Winterson's childhood and adult self.

The telephone box scene focuses readers' mind on two opposing aspects: 'It is not true'; yet it convinces in Woolfian terms.

²⁴⁹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 20.

²⁵⁰ Gornick, p. 4.

²⁵¹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 230.

²⁵² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 3.

The absence of distinctive genres, fiction and nonfiction; the enmeshment of the two; masking of truth, creative memory and fantasy; each hinders access to veracity, which remains intractable, even as the narrative concludes.

Review Three: Lemn Sissay's *My Name Is Why*
2019 – Canongate Books Limited: Edinburgh

Lemn Sissay's book, *My Name Is Why: A Memoir*, evaluates Sissay's childhood. The narrative concludes with Sissay moving to independent living as a seventeen-year-old and leaving the care system he experienced from birth. Sissay's analysis is through the prism of his adult self. Although the narrative is subjective, Sissay's intention was the impression of objective and evidenced reality.

There are three distinct components to the memoir: creative memory, official papers (social work records and family and professional correspondence), and Sissay's commentary and analysis. The story is narrated in the first person and is linear in structure and chronology, except for official documentation, which is occasionally reproduced and presented in non-chronological order.

Sissay's memoir features within this research as both our mothers placed us into the hands of the local authority at birth and we remained in foster care for our entire childhoods. Sissay and my view of the world and experiences would have been different and probably remain so today as adults.

Sissay was born to a single mother, an international student, sent to the North of England to give birth before returning to student life in the Southeast of England, while Sissay remained in Wigan Social Services' care. He was placed into long-term foster care with a then childless Caucasian couple, with a view to possible adoption by them in the future. For most of Sissay's childhood, this placement was successful and he both settled and flourished. Tensions began to rise as the foster parents' younger biological son grew and developed, but struggled to compete with an intelligent, athletic and charismatic Sissay; problematical too was Sissay's rejection of the family's exacting religious beliefs.

This combination of factors led to the breakdown of the foster placement and Sissay's move to multiple residential institutions, and progressively controlling environments, which led to an increasingly unsettled and rebellious teenage Sissay.

Before the memoir begins – preceding his *Preface* – Sissay offers the first of his poems. It sets out a central theme.

I am the bull in the china shop
With all my strength and will
As a storm smashes the teacups
I stood still.

Having been born into the Sartrean void (mud), the inevitable passivity that babyhood entails, Sissay gives us the Sartrean 'Act of Will'.²⁵³ The act of will which sees him determinedly stand still amidst the chaos and furore of the tempest of those whose actions rendered him victim. Sissay is still whilst the storm engulfs him and rages around him, he says. From the opening paragraph, Sissay explicitly sets out his stall: 'I've been somewhere I should never have been. I was not who I thought I was. The Authority knew it but I didn't'.²⁵⁴

Only, Sissay does not remain still.

In her introduction to Carl Jung's autobiography, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Aniela Jaffé quotes its author:

A book of mine is always a matter of fate. There is something unpredictable about the process of writing, and I cannot prescribe for myself any predetermined course. Thus this 'autobiography' is now taking a direction quite different from what I had imagined at the beginning.²⁵⁵

I read this extract directly after my first reading of Sissay's memoir. It prompted me to understand something I had yet to grasp fully; something troubled me about Sissay's work. Jung pinpointed the issue precisely for me and gave it expression: 'I cannot prescribe for myself any predetermined course'. For his memoir, Sissay did prescribe for himself a predetermined course; and, critically, it appears contrary to the memoir's prescribed intentions: the promise of enquiry and challenge as expressed in the use of the word, 'Why'. Both the memoir's title *My Name Is Why* and the memoir's final word, 'Why?'.²⁵⁶

Ironically, despite his work's emphasis on 'Why?', Sissay's narration does not seek to challenge fundamental questions; the impression that he does – seek answers – is an illusion. It is misleading. The question I cannot answer is whether Sissay intended the illusion and to mislead.

²⁵³ Asli Tekinay, 'From Shakespeare to Kierkegaard: An Existential Reading of Hamlet', *Doğuş University Journal*, 4 (2001), 115-124 (115); John A. Cuddon, *A Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, 5th revised ed. by M. A. R. Habib (London: Penguin Books, 2014 [1977]), p. 260.

²⁵⁴ Sissay, p. 1.

²⁵⁵ Carl Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections: An Autobiography*, trans. Richard and Clara Winston (London: William Collins Publishers, 2019 [1963]), p. 2.

²⁵⁶ Sissay, p. 191.

Sissay's conclusions do appear preconceived however and from the first page: 'I've been somewhere I should never have been...'. *My Name Is Why* is an eisegetical²⁵⁷ reading of his selected sources and constructed commentaries. He hones both sources and commentary in such a way as to evidence and prove a fixed hypothesis.

In my social work dissertation, I challenged Barbara Czarniawska's claim that the origins of Critical Narrative Analysis begin in the hermeneutic exploration of sacred texts: 'beginnings of Critical Narrative Analysis can well be placed in the hermeneutic studies of the Bible, Talmud and Koran'.²⁵⁸ I argued that traditional biblical scholarship held the Bible as uniquely God's word, approached reverently and incontestably. Scriptures were interpreted within a predetermined and conclusive framework to evidence faith and convince the reader of predetermined conclusions around belief systems and God's existence – not as a text to be analysed independently of author, context, history and tradition. Augustine's approach to hermeneutics is an example; he highlighted the importance of humility when approaching biblical texts:

But when the student of the Holy Scriptures, prepared in the way I have indicated, shall enter upon his investigations, let him constantly meditate upon that saying of the apostle's, "Knowledge puffeth up, but charity edifieth".²⁵⁹

This early approach was not critical analysis but apologetics. It is the art of justification, which is not – as Czarniawska suggests – Critical Narrative Analysis. Sissay's memoir – likewise – engages apologetics and the art of justification. I do not suggest such an approach is consciously deceitful; as with the biblical writers, conviction and belief were the motivations.

Sissay's poetry heads each chapter and the chapters themselves have three main components: memoir, extracts from social services records and Sissay's commentaries on both his memories and the images of official documents. This structure, clear division, is skilfully crafted as he combines disparate parts into a critiquable but holistic whole, which enables independent scrutiny. That said, his inclusion of original sources – social work records – and commentary feigns an air of biography, creating an illusion of third-person scrutiny, analysis and validation.

²⁵⁷ Paul Dixon, Eisegesis (Gr., A bringing in, from Eiseheiqai, to lead, guide): an improper method of exposition by which the expounder introduces his own ideas into the interpretation of the text, *Eisegesis, Exegesis, Epegesis* (11 September 1998), *eburg.com* <http://www.ibiblio.org/bgreek/test-archives/html4/1998-09/27342.html> [Accessed: 12 December 2020].

²⁵⁸ Barbara Czarniawska, *Narratives in Social Science Research* (London: Sage Publications, 2004), p. 1.

²⁵⁹ Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Kindle ed., trans. by J. F. Shaw (Dover Philosophical Classics, 2009 [1886-1890]), p. 65.

Academic biographers, who include original source material and exegesis, for example, Lee (Woolf), Ellmann (Joyce), and Uglow (Gaskell), are sagacious with their material. As Lee cautions herself when reviewing Woolf's diaries: 'yet for all this mass of material, I am also afraid of presuming'.²⁶⁰

In the following extract from Sissay's commentary, he outlines relationships between his foster mother, Catherine, her twin and their mother. His assessments are intrusive, harsh and judgmental. The subjective presupposition suggests fundamental flaws in the family's dynamics and individual characters:

Maybe [Grandma] did love Catherine Greenwood, the twin who survived. Maybe she loved her so much she couldn't show it. Because to show it would have made her feel she loved her daughter in the asylum less. Maybe Catherine was her favourite, the one she fought for, the one who survived ... But Catherine never felt it and consequently found love difficult to give.²⁶¹

As here, it is easy to be carried along unquestioningly with Sissay's narration, his claims and interpretation of events. He expects readers to accept his narrative as authentic – true: 'The reason I am writing this book is so that they can get a clear idea of what happened'.²⁶² He claims that the purpose of his memoir is to inform the Greenwoods of the truth of what happened during the time of their guardianship of him and beyond. However, his frequent use of the word 'maybe' in the above quotation should be a caution to the reader: maybe there are other versions of events, alternative truths or [maybe] the narrative is creative memory? Whereas Sissay is keen to evidence his claims about himself via official records, he does not necessarily afford the foster family the same diligence; his accusations are without comparable evidence.

Sissay is the protagonist, narrator, author, editor and rhetorician. His voice is dominant, which undermines its weight as an authenticating influence because other voices become pacified through Sissay's orotundity. He is the subject assessed in the social work records, but he decides which records to select, how editing is applied and the context to which they appear in the narrative whole. This is a writer's prerogative. However, while Sissay claims to write 'a clear idea of what happened', it often seems that he offers only a partial narrative.²⁶³ His description of how Mrs. Greenwood resentfully gives him photographs illustrates how Sissay's narrative seeks only to portray a one-dimensional story which favours his version of events. She 'flew into a rage and slammed the album on the floor. She phoned my

²⁶⁰ Hermione Lee, *Virginia Woolf* (London: Vintage Books, 1997), p. 4.

²⁶¹ Sissay, p. 42.

²⁶² Sissay, p. 83.

²⁶³ Sissay, p. 83.

social worker and demanded he take me away'.²⁶⁴ He tells us he had questions to ask her about his birth mother. Why did Mrs. Greenwood resort to calling Sissay's Social Worker? What triggered her rage? Sissay does not say. He omits narratives that could shed light on a more complicated situation. Instead, he juxtaposes Mrs. Greenwood's rage with his implied passivity: 'She threw me out of the house and I waited for [the Social Worker] on the front step'.

This scene hides a significant theme in Sissay's work: whereas Traynor is the lost soul cut off from her past and Winterson is the heartbroken baby of the 'lost loss', Sissay is the shadow of lost memory: 'I had no proof of my childhood. I needed photographic evidence that I once belonged'.²⁶⁵ He introduces the subject of insecure memory and his fear of losing memories in the opening of Chapter One, 'Maybe that was false memory syndrome', 'They stole the memory of me from me' and again, 'if there is no one to care enough to dispute, resolve or recall the memory, then did it happen?'.²⁶⁶ This is a theme for Sissay, and which here exists beneath Sissay's narrative. It is the lack of what I term 'memory security' is a universal reality for care experienced people and with it appears a void, which erodes a sense of belonging, history and self. Sissay here makes an important contribution to research which explores the lived experience of a child from care. How can one have memory security when those who shared them with the childhood self are no longer present? Often, social services records are the only link one has to memory and childhood.

Sissay's reflections can be vivid and pictorial; they offer the most insight into Lemn Sissay. His first visit to his foster mother's twin sister in the asylum allows readers to experience Sissay from within his mind, as if we are experiencing the memory with him. It convinces as creative memory. Sissay is confident and in control: 'I pull myself together. "Hello, Aunty," I said. I liked her and she liked me', he says; his foster brother, however, is nervous: 'Chris was chewing his lip and getting paler and paler'.²⁶⁷ Beneath the text, Sissay reveals one of the essential elements in the story of his exit from the family, his competitiveness towards his foster parents' biological son and his ability to outshine him.

Mum, me and Chris walked through the front door to an archway and after Mum signed a register we stepped into the wide tiled corridor of the Asylum. It smelled of vomit, bleach, Savlon and urine. Our footsteps were louder here and followed by a sharp echo. Haunting moans pealed into the air as we stepped onwards. A nurse appeared as if from nowhere and rushed past us. Chris was chewing his lip and getting paler

²⁶⁴ Sissay, p. 156.

²⁶⁵ Sissay, p. 156.

²⁶⁶ Sissay, pp. 3, 83, 88.

²⁶⁷ Sissay, pp. 39-40.

and paler ... Our long journey in this other world led to a big public room, like a cove, with lots of winged armchairs with women in them. I scanned the room slowly and I noticed that none of the women were right. They were holding their heads all wrong, they were strange, dribbling creatures. Then Mum spotted one of them and stepped quietly over to her. The woman had an overhang to her mouth, wolf-like, dribbling, hair like a nest, and she was rocking backwards and forwards, a twisted arm held out like a snapped twig. There was a familiar shape to her eyes. 'This is Aunty,' Mum said. 'Say hello to your aunty.' I pulled myself together. 'Hello, Aunty,' I said. I liked her and she liked me.²⁶⁸

Sissay's recording of his memory is a minor component in the overall narrative; yet, as here, it can be the most successful in nurturing Sissay's objective: it allows his beguiling and persuasive rhetoric to permeate and guide the story. This is a critical passage as it reveals reflection on Sissay's part: he uses his creative memory to position himself within the Greenwood family as a child – seen through the prism of his adult self. Sissay aligns himself with 'Aunty'; like her, he exists outside the family's inner circle, and it is from this separated position that he narrates his memory. Writing from this perspective, Sissay creates an authentic space. To employ Hunt's language around therapeutic writing, Sissay is 'putting something out in order that something new might come into being...where new knowledge of the self might emerge'.²⁶⁹ As Sissay begins his narrative, he tells us that he has just read his childhood social work records and, as my memoir reveals, this can create both clarity and chaos. The experience influences perhaps our reflections on the childhoods we portray in our writing. In the narrative, it is tempting to see an alienating and alienated Sissay character as his foster placement begins to falter and then fails. However, this memory gives insight into a Sissay who felt set apart from the family; here, Sissay feels alone and reaches out to another separated person, 'Aunty'. Once I perceived him, I met the separated Sissay throughout the narrative: at birth, in the numerous residential homes and – finally – at his new home as a young adult at Poet's Corner. A similar aloneness can be perceived in my narratives; it is as influential on my writing as Sissay's. It would be to acknowledge one aspect only of Sissay's story to attribute this separateness to his experiences of racism and reactions to him as a person of colour: like me, Sissay was in long term foster care from birth and, like me, can be seen to narrate his separateness within the portrait of his baby self. As I highlight, Fook recognises "sameness" and "difference" as inviting rigorous analysis; Aisha Giwa suggests that scrutinising apparent 'sameness' is 'critical within the insider epistemology' to allow for a reclaiming of our difference.²⁷⁰ This is a prime focus of my reflections upon my analysis of Sissay's narratives.

²⁶⁸ Sissay, pp. 39-40.

²⁶⁹ Hunt, p. 186.

²⁷⁰ Fook, p. 111; Aisha Giwa, 'Insider/Outsider Issues for Development Researchers from the Global South, *Geography Compass*, 9.6 (2015), 316-326 (318).

It is interesting to contrast this reflective approach to his memories with his use of commentary that we find in the passages that follow. These are notable examples of how Sissay employs commentary and creative memory to authenticate his objective: he 'was born into a laburnum-tree family with its beautiful bloom and poisonous seeds'.²⁷¹ Sissay seeks to cast doubt over the Greenwoods' suitability as foster carers by attacking the extended family's key influencing characters. His attitude towards them is uncompromising: 'The Authority placed me with incapable foster parents'.²⁷² As already noted with Sissay's use of the word 'maybe' he often sets out his commentary as a series of masked questions he intends to imply as statements; here, he repeatedly employs the word 'was':

Was there something cruel in this family, a strong undercurrent threatening to drag me out into the wild ocean? Was there something about this family that locks its damaged children into places they can't be seen and then punishes itself for the guilt it feels? ²⁷³

Offering no substantiation beyond the subjective he asserts, 'It's not my aunt who has the problem. It's my grandmother who couldn't look at her, and whose subsequent hatred of her other daughter – my mother – caused my mother's inescapable feeling that she didn't deserve to be alive'.²⁷⁴ As here, Sissay attempts to move seamlessly from memory to commentary whilst presuming readers will accept that one leads naturally to and evidences the other. There is no such harmonisation between these two components: he imposes his subjective reading onto the stories he tells and to the exclusion of any alternative voice or interpretation. This monolithic narrative is unreliable without the unheard voices of Catherine Greenwood, her mother and twin. Sissay is an intrusive narrator: his use of official records alongside his imposing commentary gives an illusion of reliability and truth, which do not always withstand analysis. [The] 'real complaint against the literary intrusive narrator stems from the fact that he is supposed to be totally reliable'.²⁷⁵ Later, my exegesis of Sissay's presentation of his mother's letter to children's officer, Goldthorpe, will illustrate this intrusive and unreliable narration.

Occasionally, Sissay trusts his reader. The scene where his foster mother demands he take off his trousers and give them to his foster brother to wear – her biological son – before a family wedding is a harrowing example. Sissay recollects the memory without elaboration or commentary. Neither is needed. The memory is powerful; its stark reality exposes the subtext, relational dynamics and emotion. It convinces as true. Sissay writes reflectively, 'it was the sense of an underlying

²⁷¹ Sissay, p. 42.

²⁷² Sissay, p. 2.

²⁷³ Sissay, p. 44.

²⁷⁴ Sissay, p. 41.

²⁷⁵ Robert Scholes, James Phelan and Robert Kellogg, *The Nature of Narrative* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968).

unkindness that stayed with me'.²⁷⁶ This statement is integral to the memory, not a judgemental addendum. Beautifully understated, the story serves to enhance veracity and exposes Sissay's lasting response to it and, presumably, other analogous experiences. It gives a profound insight into his foster mother, the complex Catherine Greenwood, without being accusatory or silencing her.

Whereas Catherine appears to be an intended villain, Ms Sissay is exonerated: 'My birth mother did nothing wrong', Sissay says.²⁷⁷ However, inadvertently, he reveals her as the one who gave him up and failed to return for him; therefore, the portraiture of her is nuanced and Sissay appears unaware of the contradictions he exposes.²⁷⁸ Unlike a novelist's choice to employ an unreliable narrator, this is not a conscious strategy for Sissay; concerning his birth mother, he fails to achieve Gornick's distancing persona: his commentary surrounding her lacks both analysis and alternative scenarios.²⁷⁹

My Name Is Why: A Memoir is an evocative and intriguing title. Sissay keeps readers in suspense until the last word of the book – at the end of the Epilogue – before revealing its origins; but he does not reveal the intended allegory behind it.

My mother is from the Amhara people of Ethiopia. It is a tradition of the Amhara to leave messages in the first name of the child. In Amharic the name Lemn means Why? ²⁸⁰

The 'Why?' ending returns the reader to the beginning, where 'Why' buzzes around the opening paragraphs. It excites. It acts as a motivating trigger, encouraging the reader forward, suggesting the memoir seeks answers to existential 'Why?' questions.

'Why?' is the Socratic path: "Do you understand what you are talking about?" Socrates asked as he confronted his fellow Athenians with his constant questioning of them.²⁸¹ He asked, "Why?" to everything.²⁸² 'Why?' is not present in Sissay's following declaration; the questions are hypothetical. It is a hypothesis. It is a statement of 'how' and not a question of 'why?'.

²⁷⁶ Sissay, p. 54.

²⁷⁷ Sissay, p. 136.

²⁷⁸ Sissay, p. 135.

²⁷⁹ Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1983); Gornick, pp. 6-7.

²⁸⁰ Sissay, p. 191.

²⁸¹ Julia Annas, 'Classical Greek Philosophy' in *The Oxford History of the Classical World*, ed. by John Boardman, Jasper Griffin and Oswyn Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 234-253 (p. 237).

²⁸² David Park, *The Grand Contraption: The World as Myth, Number and Chance* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 89.

'How does a government steal a child and then imprison him? How does it keep it a secret? This story is how'.²⁸³ Sissay states this hypothesis at the start of his memoir. Initially, this led me to believe that he sought to employ the Socratic challenge, ask 'Why' and how? However, like the New Testament's gospel writers, I suspect Sissay had already arrived at his conclusion before he started to write; this is his polemic: he is a stolen baby and victim of an all-powerful top-down State.

His angry ontological inner 'self' haunts and enrages him. He is the tempest: he kicks out at his foster carers, the care establishment, the racist who calls him a 'fucking wog'; his existence and experience drive a perpetual need to challenge those who have wronged him.²⁸⁴ His anger appears to come from the essence of who he is; this force, perhaps, allows him to succeed in adulthood, unlike most children from the care system. Sissay tells us: 'I had a plan all along'.²⁸⁵ The plan was to play the system 'so I could get away from it': 'gain privileges' to achieve unsupervised gardening, then break out.²⁸⁶ He broke out of the institution in which he was incarcerated 'to the housing office'.²⁸⁷ The narrative is urgent. Sissay's short sentences create a breathlessness and suspense beneath the text, which is fast-moving. I was with him, willing him on.

Characteristically, even in the face of triumph, Sissay is critical: 'Back then, no one told me that it had worked'.²⁸⁸ What had worked here – Sissay's incredible achievement is: 'By mid-December 1984 I was in my flat. My first home. I was seventeen and a half. I lived on the newest housing development in Atherton. It was called Poets' Corner. My one-bedroom flat...'.²⁸⁹

It cannot be understated how extraordinary it was for Sissay to find himself in such privileged housing, being so young, male, and a care leaver. To contextualise, as a care leaver, two years older than Sissay, I was living independently at sixteen; at seventeen, having let the bath overflow at my squalid bedsit tenement, I was thrown out by the landlady. I went to Southampton City Council housing office – still officially in the care system – seeking help with accommodation. As a single male, the council would take no responsibility to house me; I was sent away. It was 1982. In 1984, when Sissay moves to his first home, I will have moved six times and will still live in 'Bedsit Land'. The week I write this, the British Broadcasting Company will chronicle a Watchdog report outlining case studies about vulnerable children,

²⁸³ Sissay, p. 2.

²⁸⁴ Sissay, p. 149.

²⁸⁵ Sissay, p. 181.

²⁸⁶ Sissay, p. 182.

²⁸⁷ Sissay, p. 181.

²⁸⁸ Sissay, p. 182.

²⁸⁹ Sissay, p. 186.

including a seventeen-year-old given a tent to live in by his local authority.²⁹⁰ It is 2020.

They said they were mine for ever because my birth mother didn't want me. They were my mum and dad. The reason I am writing this book is so that they can get a clear idea of what happened. They stole the memory of me from me. The only sense I received from them was the sense that I should disappear.²⁹¹

We are encouraged to believe this pronouncement is Sissay's central theme – as he perceives it – 'that which the writer has come to say'.²⁹² Sissay tells us why he needs to write his book: 'The reason I am writing this book is so that they can get a clear idea of what happened'.²⁹³ By the time I arrived at the final sentence of Sissay's memoir, I had begun to realise that this is Gornick's situation concept and not the story. This situation is vital to Sissay's story, but it is not the story. The story is the title of the book, *My Name Is Why* and the book's closing, 'My mother is from the Amhara people of Ethiopia... In Amharic the name Lemn means Why?'.²⁹⁴

Every work of literature has both a situation and a story. The situation is the context or circumstance, sometimes the plot; the story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say.²⁹⁵

Sissay – perhaps unwittingly – confirms his Gornick story himself: the government steals him from his mother and denies him his father, family, culture and homeland; this is his story: 'This story... is for my brothers and sisters on my mother's side and my father's side... for my mother and my father... aunts and uncles and for Ethiopians'.²⁹⁶

Like Winterson, Sissay's story centres on his birth mother; but, unlike Winterson, Sissay's story is the truth surrounding her and the reason why he is separated from her. The situation comprises other themes, lies told, lies that hid his mother from him and forced alien identities and life experiences upon him.

The Story.

'4th July 1968 ... They lied to me. Someone did love me. My mother'.²⁹⁷

²⁹⁰ Hannah Richardson, *Vulnerable Teen Given Tent To Live In Watchdog Report Finds* (10 December 2020), *BBC News Report* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/education-55246562> [Accessed: 12 December 2020].

²⁹¹ Sissay, p. 183.

²⁹² Gornick, p. 13.

²⁹³ Sissay, p. 83.

²⁹⁴ Sissay, p. 191.

²⁹⁵ Gornick, p. 13.

²⁹⁶ Sissay, p. 2.

²⁹⁷ Sissay, p. 135.

How can I get Lemn back? He needs to be in his country, with his own colour, his own people. I don't want him to face discrimination' ...Very sincerely yours, Yemarschet Sissay.²⁹⁸

'They lied to me' is a statement. Sissay does not invite readers to question or reach a different conclusion. As my second reading progressed, I became critical of the intransigence his narrative portrays. Sissay takes me from a sympathetic reader to critic.

He writes, 'The Authority placed me with incapable foster parents...At eighteen years old, I had no history, no witnesses, no family'.²⁹⁹ This statement is my cue to compare and contrast our shared experience: how our single mothers placed us in the care of a local authority at birth, an authority whose decision making processes would put us in long term foster care for our entire childhoods; how our foster parents – those we called Mum and Dad – would appear to us to turn their backs; how we would leave school with no meaningful qualifications, both sent on paths of manual work; how we would live independently before we reached adulthood; how someone would reach out to us and change the course of our lives; how we would fight the local authority for our social services records; and how, for me, those records would be illuminating, perturbing and revolutionary: the beginnings of a process of reflection and new ways of thinking about my experiences.

'I don't want him to face discrimination'. Miss Sissay tells Sissay's Social Worker.³⁰⁰ As a white male from a monocultural background, where my only interaction with ethnicity and race was being marginalised as an Irish child due to my name, I cannot equate to Sissay's developing engagement with his black identity nor his experience of racism. During supervision as a student Social Worker, I was asked to consider whether I had given attention to a service user's black identity: whether he might have observed me as superior as a white male. My supervisor had assessed me negatively as 'colour blind'. I considered that I had treated the man equally; equality is an important value that underpins social work practice. Fook's work prompted me to reflect on 'difference' and 'sameness'. I concluded that I might not have considered how our ethnic backgrounds encourage us to view our worlds through different lenses. Perhaps I should acknowledge this as a potential difference between Sissay and me: our races and ethnicities differ. Fook points out that positionality, reflection, and deconstruction of the narratives is complicated.³⁰¹ Gary and Holmes state 'that positionality around 'life history and experiences are more

²⁹⁸ Sissay, pp. 135, 134.

²⁹⁹ Sissay, p. 2.

³⁰⁰ Sissay, pp. 135, 134.

³⁰¹ Fook, pp. 111-112.

fluent and contextual'.³⁰² It entails not only difference, sameness and isolation of assumptions but an assessment of power relations, 'searching for contradictions, different perspectives and interpretations. Perspectives which might be missing or glossed over should be uncovered'.³⁰³ The interesting dichotomy I refer to demonstrates the complexity in isolating Sissay's and my positionality and our relationship to each other's stories. Whereas I cannot equate to his experience of racism, I can relate to his mother's fear of discrimination, which I have experienced due to disability and sexuality. In his narrative, Sissay presents as charismatic, popular, athletic, and academically gifted; I cannot relate to these aspects of his character and experience. I, contrarily, present as unpopular; in my memoir, I recount my childhood Social Worker's words: '...the other boys don't like Patrick'.³⁰⁴ My school reports described me as 'below average' academically, and I had no athletic ability and have a disability.

As I ponder, the scene of Woolf sitting in the British Museum contemplating her lecture on *Women* and *Fiction* stops my thoughts. It is how literature resonates with me: a pictorial scene from past reading flashes to the forefront of my mind... I see Woolf waiting for books at a desk. I know it is crucial. I seek out the scene:

...on the table inside the room a blank sheet of paper on which was written in large letters *Women* and *Fiction*, but no more...One must strain off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth. For that visit to Oxbridge and the luncheon and the dinner had started a swarm of questions. Why did men drink wine and women water? Why was one sex so prosperous and the other so poor?³⁰⁵

Woolf advises that I 'strain off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth'.³⁰⁶ What is the pure essence of truth for Sissay? This is the passage my memory was seeking. As she sits with her 'blank sheet of paper' she considers comparing, as I compare Sissay and me, but, like me, she finds it a challenge; struggles to isolate 'the essential oil of truth':

...a few remarks about Fanny Burney; a few more about Jane Austen; a tribute to the Brontës and a sketch of Haworth Parsonage under snow; some witticisms if possible about Miss Mitford; a respectful allusion to George Eliot; a reference to Mrs Gaskell and one would have done.³⁰⁷

³⁰² Gary and Holmes, pp. 2 and 3.

³⁰³ Fook, p. 121.

³⁰⁴ Seosamh McGrath, *Beneath Silence* (Creative Component, 2021), p. 169.

³⁰⁵ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 43.

³⁰⁶ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 43.

³⁰⁷ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 17.

Woolf stops. 'But at second sight the words seemed not so simple', she tells her audience.³⁰⁸ Woolf finds comparing narratives more complicated than she had first imagined. I concur. To compare real lives lived is a difficult task; more difficult perhaps when those we interact with appear, at first, to share similar experiences as perhaps Sissay and I do. For Woolf, the essence of understanding often hides beneath simple comparisons within the 'murmur or current', the 'humming noise' and the 'deep, sensory imagining'.³⁰⁹

The memoirist, like the poet and the novelist, must engage with the world, because engagement makes experience, experience makes wisdom, and finally it's the wisdom – or rather the movement towards it – that counts.³¹⁰

At the opening of his narrative, there is a hint that he could have chosen the Socratic path towards challenging enquiry in pursuit of wisdom; essential questions of truth appear to float to the surface for Sissay: 'What truths or untruths? Maybe I was loved. Maybe my mother didn't want me'.³¹¹ Instead of engaging, however, he turns to his predetermined narrative: 'They lied to me. Someone did love me. My mother'.³¹² Here are the most critical sentences in Sissay's memoir, perhaps; yet does he comprehend their wisdom? However, like Woolf, I must seek the essential oil of truth within Sissay's narrative, engage with his world, its atmosphere, to find its essence.

Sissay claims that he approached his social services records with an open mind, 'I'll start by simply recording my reactions to the first early documents and we'll see how this unfolds'.³¹³ Perhaps Sissay sought to adopt this inquisitive approach from the outset; however, analysis of the text suggests he quickly imposes presupposition upon his sources and into his commentary. The question that is difficult to answer is why.

Sissay outlines a central theme within the Preface: 'How does a government steal a child and then imprison him? How does it keep it a secret? This story is how'.³¹⁴ Before I begin my analysis of the sentences, it is important to consider why Sissay introduces them. I suggest he endeavours to concentrate the reader's attention on the question of responsibility for his separation from his mother and his subsequent childhood in care. For Sissay, responsibility rests with the local authority and, therefore, the government. This is important because the responsibility question

³⁰⁸ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 17.

³⁰⁹ Prendergast, p. 1.

³¹⁰ Gornick, p. 44.

³¹¹ Sissay, p. 3.

³¹² Sissay, p. 135.

³¹³ Sissay, p. 3.

³¹⁴ Sissay, p. 2.

highlights a significant difference between our two perspectives. Sissay writes from a position of loyalty towards his birth mother and seeks to convince the reader to share his loyalty. Contrarily, I hold my birth mother responsible for my separation from her and subsequent childhood care experience; this must influence my reading of Sissay and the writing of my narratives. As Hunt notes: 'to produce a piece of creative writing one also brings one's intentions to bear, some conscious and some not'.³¹⁵ Sissay and my contrary perspectives of our birth mothers must reflect upon our creative memory and how we interpret and communicate our stories.

Sissay's plot begins at St. Margaret's House 'an institution for unmarried mothers'.³¹⁶ St. Margaret's is a repository for Sissay's villainous characters. He states, 'in England unmarried pregnant women or girls were placed in Mother and baby homes like St. Margaret's with the sole aim of harvesting their children'.³¹⁷ These places were baby farms. The mothers were the earth and the children were the crops. The church and state were the farmers and the adopting parents were the consumers'.³¹⁸ Sissay's metaphor makes extraordinary allegations.

Testimony has come to light in national campaigns for unmarried mothers in England that in the 1960s coercion and subterfuge were used to get vulnerable women to sign the adoption papers. This is exemplified in the 2013 film *Philomena*.³¹⁹

This is misleading. *Philomena* does not validate Sissay's baby farming accusations: it is a dramatisation of Sixsmith's biography, *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee*, which tells the story of an unmarried Irish orphan who becomes pregnant and confined at a convent, in Ireland.³²⁰ Lee has her baby and then pays off her 'debt' to the Sisters by working out allotted years of service at the convent's laundry. From some of these Roman Catholic institutions, including the one experienced by Lee, children went to wealthy Americans – with money allegedly exchanged. This scenario took place in Ireland but was not the situation in 1960s England. Either Sissay is trying to deceive or fails to research. Baby-Farming in England is generally associated with the mid to late Victorian era, and even then, was being challenged from within academic circles.³²¹

³¹⁵ Celia Hunt and Fiona Thompson, *Writing: Self and Reflexivity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), p 156.

³¹⁶ Sissay, p. 5.

³¹⁷ Sissay, p. 8.

³¹⁸ Sissay, p. 12.

³¹⁹ Sissay, p. 12.

³²⁰ Martin Sixsmith, *The Lost Child of Philomena Lee* (London: Pan Books, 2010).

³²¹ Jane Taylor, *Baby-Farming* (24 June 1871), *The British Medical Journal*, 1.547 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2260780/?page=1> [Accessed: 11 January 2021]; Caroline Jagger, *Baby-Farming* (25 January 1868), *The British Medical Journal*, 1.369 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2309717/?page=1> [Accessed: 11 January 2021]; *Baby-Ganger* (11 January 1868), *The British Medical Journal*, 1.367 <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC2309689/?page=3> [Accessed: 11 January 2021].

The 1908 Children Act was instrumental to significant change:

Only when legislation started to put children's lives first, did an end come to this terrible business. The Children Act of 1908, which became part of the Children's Charter, introduced foster parents' registration and finally formed the death knell of baby farming in Britain.³²²

Sissay was born under the 1948 Children Act. St. Margaret's, at the time, was overseen by the Liverpool Social and Moral Welfare Committee, a registered charity, which was a linked charity of Liverpool Diocesan Board for Social Welfare.³²³ Goldthorpe was a children's officer for Wigan Borough Council. Sissay from the outset seeks to weave Dickensian villains out of both the institutions and responsible professionals.

My mother would not sign the adoption papers for Norman Goldthorpe. So, Norman Goldthorpe defied her and assigned me to long-term foster parents' Catherine and David Greenwood.³²⁴ ...My mother was supposed to give birth and sign the adoption papers. She didn't. She wouldn't.³²⁵

Ms Sissay was alone, an overseas student; 'Her college in the South of England sent her to the North ... to St Margaret's to deal with her pregnancy'.³²⁶ Such distancing, for some women, allowed them to be free from the stigma of being unmarried mothers, and to have the freedom to resume 'normal' life after giving birth. Although a devastating and harrowing experience, it was often argued as the best option for mother and, in some cases, for baby. Contrary to Sissay's narrative, it is likely that the church and college saw themselves as acting charitably towards vulnerable women in an impossible situation in 1960s Britain, which, although a changing environment, still did not provide financial support to unmarried mothers.

The imagery of the Dickensian villain gives credence to the victimhood Sissay bestows on himself and his mother – so essential to his plot and the premise of his hypothesis: 'I found testaments online' he writes, 'from people who lived near to St Margaret's'.³²⁷ The use of the word 'testament' is misleading. Testament has legalistic overtones; as a noun, it can mean 'proof'. The Merriam Webster dictionary

³²² Margaret and Chris Drinkall, *Angel Makers: How the Victorians Encouraged Baby Farming*, Kindle ed. (CreateSpace Independent Publishing, 2016), Location 2572.

³²³ Charity Commission for England and Wales, 'Liverpool Diocesan Board for Social Welfare', <https://beta.charitycommission.gov.uk/charity-details/?regid=221990&subid=0> [Accessed: 11 January 2021].

³²⁴ Sissay, p. 9.

³²⁵ Sissay, p. 12.

³²⁶ Sissay, p. 9.

³²⁷ Sissay, p. 9.

defines it as 'a tangible proof' with its archaic definition 'a covenant between God and the human race'. In the Cambridge dictionary, it is, 'testament to (= proof of)'.

I also found these 'testaments'. They are, in reality, chats in an online forum and responses to a simple question: 'St. Margaret's, where is/was it?'.³²⁸ Sissay quotes two of many contributions, including memories of those who had personal acquaintance with St. Margaret's or community members aware of it. His selective choice of quotes is revealing. Both have specific roles to play in the narrative. The first, by 'Reenie', is edited to emphasise Sissay's intended subtext: 'it was very eerie in certain parts it really felt haunted'. Whereas the full quote is:

What memories that brought back, we always wondered about it as we were told to cross the road if we saw any of them from the home as we would catch what they had and end up in there with them, what a dilemma when my aunty and uncle became caretakers when the home closed, what a place, it was very eerie in certain parts it really felt haunted, but it had beautiful gardens they had the really old fashioned prams in the nursery (sic).³²⁹

'Eerie and haunted' fit Sissay's Dickensian narrative, that which he has 'come to say' and what he wants the reader to hear.³³⁰ It encourages images of Victorian England. A scary, eerie and oppressive place where his mother was sent, against her will, to have her baby stolen by evil baby farmers. Its 'beautiful gardens' do not fit his narrative and are excluded. The omitted line 'we were told to cross the road if we saw any of them' appears to help Sissay's narrative, but on reflection, it does not adversely reflect on St. Margaret's. It demonstrates attitudes of the wider British society into which Sissay is born and offers a possible explanation as to why Ms Sissay is sent away from college – to allow her to return free from such prejudice.

The second quotation Sissay quotes in full:

I can remember being in the Billinge Maternity unit when one of the young girls from St. margarets (sic) had her baby. The only visitor was a lady social worker and on the day Mum and baby were due to leave, Mum was taken away in one car (crying) and baby hurried away in another!!!!

It is clear why Sissay decided to enter this contribution in full. In the absence of any insight into his mother's lived experience as a pregnant woman, resident at St. Margaret's, or the immediate aftermath of giving Sissay up, this quotation helps provide the missing imagery Sissay intends the reader to visualise for his mother.

³²⁸ *Wiganworld* ([n.d.]), *St. Margarets, where is/was it?* https://www.wiganworld.co.uk/communicate/mb_message.php?opt=f2&msd=5807&offset=&subject=St.%2520Margarets,%2520where%2520is/was%2520it%3F [Accessed: 11 March 2021].

³²⁹ Sissay, p. 9.

³³⁰ Gornick, p. 13.

The imagery is successfully achieved: Ms Sissay was alone; she had no visitors; she was subject to an empowered social worker and authoritarian State regime, and then, the dramatic ending: Ms Sissay, driven away crying in one car, as baby Sissay is 'hurried away in another!!!!'

These are key images for Sissay's plot development and 'through line', which takes Sissay's narrative forward to what Stanislavsky termed, 'the super objective' and Gornick calls the story.³³¹ The scene gives credence to Sissay's hypothesis: 'How does a government steal a child and then imprison him? How does it keep it a secret? This story is how'.³³²

Had Sissay written fiction, literary licence would have allowed him freedoms to elaborate storylines as his imagination allowed, if it – to quote Woolf – could 'convince me'.³³³ However, he entitles his work 'memoir'. The forum quotation is neither his nor his mother's memory. It is a post by 'christi' and dated 2006. Christi appears to recall her memory from an observation she makes whilst at the maternity hospital. Her observations are unlikely to be precisely accurate for reasons I will explain. Nonetheless, they give essential insight into St. Margaret's and the experience mother and baby might have had, which cast doubt on the veracity of Sissay's created imagery.

As the quote points out, Mothers gave birth at a maternity unit, as part of the National Health Service and not, as Sissay seems to imply, at St Margaret's, secretly. Through children's officers, the Local Authority oversaw the care of children coming into the care system both for fostering and adoption. This process was governed by the 1948 Children Act, which did not remove parental responsibility from mothers. Only a Court order could allow that.

I was born a few years before Sissay; my social services records detail what happened when my birth mother relinquished me to the care system. Having already left the hospital, she returns to hand me to the children's officer. The process is a rite of passage in 1965, a legislative requirement. Although reluctant, she is required to do it a second time for my twin. My mother physically gave her children up into the care system; every detail observed and written down for the record.

The image of a child being hurried away in a car is gripping theatre. Christi's imagery of mother, taken away in one car while her baby is 'hurried' away in another, offers

³³¹ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, pp. 237-244.

³³² Sissay, p. 2.

³³³ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 112.

the reader tension and suspense; villain and victim; despair and emotion. Like Sissay, that baby probably simply returned to St. Margaret's where it was cared for under the guardianship of the local authority and trained State Registered Nurses. Sissay includes two notes from his social services file (written by L. Winnard, SRN), which show he returned to St. Margaret's and is still there at six weeks old, 30th June 1967.³³⁴

I will add one more contribution from the blogs, not included by Sissay, dated 2016 from 'annron1928'; it is revealing: 'I never knew where it [St. Margaret's] was but my mum used to say "bring any trouble home lady and its St Margarets home for you"'.

It articulates the stigma surrounding the subject of pregnant women out of wedlock in post-war Britain. Sissay can portray St Margaret's in villainous Victorian clothing because society perpetuated the myth of shame long after institutions like State and Church, as well as new cultures and emerging attitudes, were taking more pragmatic and compassionate approaches towards pregnant single women. I have found records for St. Margaret's Home for unmarried mothers, going back to 1883. It is described as an institution for the 'friendless and fallen'.³³⁵ The place Sissay and his mother experienced had evolved, became 'St. Margaret's House'. It is a newly registered charity established just prior to Sissay's birth.

Sissay writes, 'I'm six months old. At this point my mother is invisible'. He then includes a letter from Barnardo's Adoption Department in response to an enquiry made by Goldthorpe about a possible adoption for Sissay.³³⁶ Following is an extract from a letter written again by Goldthorpe – only weeks later – suggesting the local authority is now looking to place Sissay in a 'permanent foster home'.³³⁷ Sissay does not tell us the details of the letter. He follows this by continuing the 'stolen' narrative: 'placed in mother and baby homes ... with the sole aim of harvesting their children'.³³⁸ 'My mother would not sign ... for Norman Goldthorpe. ...Goldthorpe defied her and assigned me long-term foster parents'.³³⁹ The obvious response to Sissay is to ask, in turn, what the alternative options were: multiple short-term foster placements or children's homes. Sissay is disingenuous here, with the absence of his mother or any other carer, these were the only alternatives open to the local authority. Without the possibility of adoption, a stable long-term placement would have been considered by far the best option for Sissay. Further, it is unlikely – as Sissay was in the local authority's care – that Ms Sissay would be required to sign

³³⁴ Sissay, p. 4.

³³⁵ *Mother and Baby Homes, Lancaster to Lincolnshire* ([n.d.]), <http://www.childrenshomes.org.uk/list/MB4.shtml?LMCL=N5qRm4> [Accessed: 11 January 2021].

³³⁶ Sissay, p. 6.

³³⁷ Sissay, p. 8.

³³⁸ Sissay, p. 8.

³³⁹ Sissay, p. 9.

adoption papers until an adoption process was proceeding. A point Goldthorpe makes during his correspondence with Ms Sissay: she would be required to consent were adoption an outcome.³⁴⁰

Goldthorpe writes to Ms Sissay, 22nd March 1968: 'it has not been possible to place your baby with parents who would adopt him legally, but I am hopeful that these parents may wish to take this next step later on ... I must ask you to keep in touch with me, even though you may leave the country, as your written consent will be necessary at some stage'.³⁴¹ The expectation is that Ms Sissay is aware of and congruent with the adoption narrative at the start and willing to sign adoption papers; there is no record of her objecting nor contradicting Goldthorpe in her next communication. Sissay is eight months old. The assumption I make for the swift change from adoption to long-term fostering is that there was no appropriate adoption option open to Sissay.

Ms Sissay's eventual reply to Goldthorpe, received four months later, is the central conflict; it unlocks the story's secrets and turns it into a tragedy. Its revelations do not prove Sissay's hypothesis. Nonetheless, he presents her letter as inviolable, revealing and evidencing his truth.

In the letter to which hers responds, Goldthorpe informs Ms Sissay that 'Lemn is still in my care'. Goldthorpe initiates the correspondence and encourages Ms Sissay to 'keep in touch with me' and expresses the hope that the Greenwoods will adopt Sissay eventually. He asks Ms Sissay for a regular financial contribution for Sissay's maintenance: 'I should like, also, to remind you that it is my duty to assess you for a contribution towards the maintenance of the child, and I shall be glad to receive your comments'.³⁴² She does not oblige.

Goldthorpe addressed his letter to her college in Bracknell. Her response comes from Ethiopia. He understood her to still be a student in Britain: 'I realise that you are a student but feel sure that you may be able to make a weekly payment'.³⁴³ Her reply appears to be the last she writes to Wigan District Council: Ms Sissay begins by acknowledging her silence and lack of contact:

*You may have wondered where I disappeared.*³⁴⁴

³⁴⁰ Sissay, p. 132.

³⁴¹ Sissay, p. 132.

³⁴² Sissay, p. 132.

³⁴³ Sissay, p. 132.

³⁴⁴ Sissay, p. 133.

But I got a telegram telling me that I had to come home to Ethiopia because of my father's serious illness. I came the very next day I graduated from Newbold College. With God's help I managed to pass all my examinations. When I came home I found my daddy at hospital and it took me quite a while to recognise my own father. He is just skin and bone. I didn't expect him to live one day but somehow he is still alive. It is just a miracle. So much about myself.³⁴⁵

'I came the very next day I graduated'. Sissay is placed third in her listed priorities, behind graduation and father. She not only completes her examinations before returning to her father but awaits graduation. Whilst preparing for her travels, why did she not write to Goldthorpe informing him of her planned return to Ethiopia? Having returned, why did she not make contact?³⁴⁶

She then asks three questions:

One (which I need to break down):

If I want to get Lemn out here what steps should I take? I would very much like to bring him.

At first reading, this could be read as a request to have Sissay sent to Ethiopia. On closer examination, it is not so simple; she writes '*If I want...*'; this is an enquiry, not a request.

Equally, the second sentence appears to suggest she wants Sissay returned to her; however, the remainder of the text does not endorse this assumption. She wishes him sent to Ethiopia, but not explicitly to her.

Last week someone came to me – that was the pilote (sic) – asking for excuse and explained what he has done – and what has happened to me there-after.³⁴⁷

The assumption is that the pilot is Sissay's father. He appears not to know of Sissay's existence before the week Ms Sissay replies to Goldthorpe's letter. Sissay is one year and two months old.

I told him everything just because I thought it would be fair for the child otherwise I don't have any love for the child at all.³⁴⁸

Here, Sissay reads his mother stated love for him. However, it is possible to have an alternative reading.

³⁴⁵ Sissay, p. 133.

³⁴⁶ Sissay, p. 133.

³⁴⁷ Sissay, p. 133.

³⁴⁸ Sissay, p. 133.

I told this person as well. I told him that he was the cruellest person in the world, and that I don't want to see his face at all. For Lemn's sake I have to make some arrangements with this man. Lemn needs someone to take care of him. He needs to be in his own country, with his own colour, with his own people. I don't want him to face discrimination.³⁴⁹

Ms Sissay describes why Sissay should return to Ethiopia: 'he needs to be in his own country, with his own colour and not face discrimination' [that he will inevitably face in Britain]. She does not say he should return to her, his mother. She could be suggesting that Sissay's father will look after his son but does not clarify the arrangements she needs to make with him nor confirm that she wants to care for Sissay herself; only that she 'would very much like to bring him'. If she intended to care for Sissay herself, why did she not say it? Instead, she says, 'someone' needs to care for him and, 'he needs to be ... with his own people'.

That she never wants to see the man again is concerning; if she intends for him – 'the cruellest person in the world' – to be the 'someone to take care of' Sissay. Although qualified as a secretary with English qualifications, later achieving a position at the United Nations, she is enigmatic and noncommittal in her language.

Two:

Could you give me his foster parent's address?

Three:

I would like his surname (sic) to be Gedday not Sissay.³⁵⁰

On close inspection of the original: Ms Sissay first asked for Gedday to be Sissay's middle name, but she amends this to his surname. Sissay's father is Gedday. My reading is that he is the intended carer – the 'someone to take care of' Sissay. Although Sissay highlights his other multiple name changes, he does not comment on his mother's request or that the local authority failed to fulfil her wish, which it was obliged to consider. Sissay rarely fails to point out such failings; here, he is silent:

... a letter from my mother dated 1968 and birth certificate with my name: Lemn Sissay. All the names which came before – Norman, Mark and Greenwood – were created to hide me from my mother and from Ethiopia.³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ Sissay, p. 133.

³⁵⁰ Sissay, p. 134.

³⁵¹ Sissay, p. 191.

His mother continues:

*Please answer me very soon. I would like to get over this problem soon. I know life is a problem, but it is good to solve the very urgent one first.*³⁵²

Ms Sissay sees her son as a problem – albeit an important one, a problem nonetheless; and despite not having prioritised him before, this ‘problem’ needs solving now and at speed. Does this again suggest his father’s influence on Ms Sissay’s efforts?

Had it not been for your help I don’t know what I would have done. I owe you very much.

*I wish God’s blessing upon your rewarding work.*³⁵³

This extract is an endorsement of Goldthorpe and his work on her behalf. As such, a challenge to Sissay’s stolen baby narrative.

In response to his mother’s letter, Sissay writes: ‘They lied to me. Someone did love me. My mother’.³⁵⁴ Sissay misquotes her to allow for her to say it. He writes: ‘How can I get Lemn back?’³⁵⁵ Ms Sissay writes, ‘If I want to get Lemn out here what steps should I take?’. The two sentences are different.

In response to Ms Sissay’s letter, Goldthorpe writes an open and inviting reply. She was entitled to ask for her son’s return; the local authority was obliged to consider it. Goldthorpe does not rule it out:

He begins by expressing surprise that she has left the country. He agrees that it would be best for Sissay to be amongst his own (takes her lead, refers to ‘family’ rather than to her specifically): ‘it would be best for your son to be amongst his own family’.³⁵⁶ He tells her that he must ensure Sissay will be adequately cared for: ‘I must take very great care that all would be well for him if he were sent out to you’. He assures her Sissay is looked after well at present. He reminds her that it was her intention initially that Sissay should be adopted. He clarifies that her permission would be necessary were this to happen: ‘You were adamant about this when we interviewed you, and were determined that this should happen, because you thought that this was in his very best interests’.³⁵⁷

³⁵² Sissay, p. 134.

³⁵³ Sissay, p. 134.

³⁵⁴ Sissay, p. 135.

³⁵⁵ Sissay, p. 133.

³⁵⁶ Sissay, p. 135.

³⁵⁷ Sissay, p. 135.

Sissay's narrative is linear for the most part; however, he places his mother's 1968 letter, and Goldthorpe's related correspondence, at the book's close in 1983. Presumably, he places the correspondence here to reflect when he received them (as an adolescent). Placing them here helps his objective: had the letters been placed chronologically at the time of writing, in 1968, they would have answered several looming 'trigger' questions that trouble, intrigue and enliven the unfolding plot from the outset: why had the local authority sought adoption with Barnardo's if Ms Sissay expressly refused to sign the papers? Why had Goldthorpe presumed to change Sissay's name to Norman Greenwood under such circumstances? The answer: it had always been Ms Sissay's stated intention that Sissay should be adopted; she does not contradict Goldthorpe on this point.

It may also answer the question as to why she did not prioritise Sissay before returning to Ethiopia and only later, after a conversation with his father and her possible change of heart regarding Sissay's future. It also suits Sissay's objective to place the letters at the end: with Ms Sissay's original intentions revealed within the first few pages, Sissay's hypothesis becomes undermined at the outset, and, before he can outline his arguments. Ms Sissay, otherwise, a central character, disappears entirely from the narrative; Sissay's story would have had to have been entirely different.

It appears no further communication was had between the local authority and Ms Sissay after the three-letter exchange. In 1970, the local authority undertook court proceedings to gain full guardianship of Sissay on the grounds of abandonment; the likelihood is that Ms Sissay did not respond to Goldthorpe's letter in which he signed off: 'please give this a great deal of serious thought and write to me again'.³⁵⁸

Sissay includes an extract from his files: 'There is a letter on file from Norman's mother, written in 1968, requesting that he be returned to her in Ethiopia – perhaps Norman should be made aware of this?'. The anonymous response: 'not yet – I think'.³⁵⁹ It is difficult to assess the extract. Its inclusion assumes support for Sissay's hypothesis.

His Social Worker, Norman Mills, records: 'I have shared more of her letters with Norman – particularly relating to the time (1968) when she tried to regain his care but was refused (virtually) by Wigan CB, Children's Dept'.³⁶⁰ The word 'virtually' reveals a more complex narrative than the one portrayed; Sissay shares one of his

³⁵⁸ Sissay, p. 135.

³⁵⁹ Sissay, p. 136.

³⁶⁰ Sissay, p. 155.

mother's letters, in which there is a tentative inquiry but no request for Sissay's return, nor does Miss Sissay appear to respond; there is no correspondence from Wigan Council refusing such a request.³⁶¹

There are pivotal questions Sissay neglects to ask: Why would the State steal a child? Based on Sissay's hypothesis, the State's grand plan to steal him was thwarted only by his mother's refusal to sign adoption papers. What would have become of Sissay if she had signed?

The answers are in Sissay's narrative:

Barnardo's letter closes with a straightforward question: does Ethiopian mean 'Negroid or not?'. In 1960s Britain, placing children of colour for adoption was 'difficult, if not impossible' and 'everyone knew black children didn't get picked for adoption'.³⁶² I suspect the Greenwoods did not lie when they told him he 'was alone in the hospital because no one would adopt a 'coloured' baby'.³⁶³ The protagonist appears unaware of the story he has come to tell; in his determination to voice one story, he reveals another.

In part, his conclusion is right: he had 'been somewhere he should never have been'.³⁶⁴ However, the responsibility for this is perhaps not – as he claims – baby farming, lies, an empowered State and incapable foster carers, but a mother who – for whatever reason – did not return.

Critical to understanding Sissay's memoir is appreciating his motivation for writing it. Fundamental to this is understanding his approach to his writing the memoir and selected sources. Sissay articulates two – opposing – methodologies: the Jungian approach, 'I'll start by simply recording my reactions to the first early documents and we'll see how this unfolds'; and the predestined approach: 'The reason I am writing this book is so that they can get a clear idea of what happened'.³⁶⁵ I argue that Sissay chose the predetermined approach: as with the writers within the early church, Sissay began his literary journey with a firm and preconceived conclusion. Key to this is his placing of his mother's correspondence with Wigan Social Services of 1968. Contrary to the work's linear structure, Sissay chose to place this crucial correspondence at the end of the memoir instead of chronologically at the beginning. This allows him space to argue his desired outcome: he was stolen from his birth mother who refused to sign adoption papers. The letters reveal that Ms

³⁶¹ Sissay, p. 155.

³⁶² McLeod, pp. 11 and 42.

³⁶³ Sissay, p. 11.

³⁶⁴ Sissay, p. 1.

³⁶⁵ Sissay, pp. 3, 83.

Sissay had encouraged Sissay's adoption: 'You were adamant about this when we interviewed you ...'.³⁶⁶

Sissay failed to achieve Gornick's required distance, which allowed him unchallenged to pursue the stolen baby narrative. Had he achieved distance and reflection, he might have written the story that analysed Wigan Social Services decision-making around his care. Had Sissay achieved what he purports to have intended – 'I'll start by simply recording my reactions...' – and achieved the necessary distance and focus, his story of a baby born into a life of foster care, residential living and incarceration would have been a powerful narrative, which could have challenged the care of foster children even today.

Sissay skilfully compartmentalises his three components, within which, those memories unfettered by imposing and predetermined commentary, successfully depict him as the one doing the remembering, and give insight into his experience as a fostered child and young person. His foster mother demanding he remove his trousers so her biological son can wear them instead, is exemplary. There are other such examples. It is effortlessly Woolfian.

Sissay makes an important contribution to research into the consequences of living in care and its possible long-term impact upon the adult self by highlighting fading memory and the lack of what I term 'memory security'.

Nevertheless, the inevitable conclusion to my research into Sissay's memoir is that he failed to isolate his story; and the story he seeks to tell, the 'stolen baby' narrative, fails to convince.

³⁶⁶ Sissay, p. 135.

Bridge Chapter

The narrators of the stories in the chosen primary texts and creative component share comparative histories and commonalities through their separation from birth mothers and fostered and adoption narratives. However, as Fook argues, such shared experience should not necessarily imply 'sameness'.³⁶⁷ Instead, the assessment of and empowerment through the recognition of 'difference' should challenge perception and 'fashion new ways of thinking about power which place ourselves back in the centre of possibilities'.³⁶⁸ In the Introduction and through the review process, I have highlighted my positionality and the different realities and narrated identities each author reveals. An example of which is their ethnicities: Winterson's proud Mancunian heritage; multicultural identities for Traynor, Nigerian, Irish and British; Sissay, Ethiopian and British; me, Irish and British. Gary and Holmes outline 'aspects of positionality ... regarded as being fixed, for example, gender, race, skin colour [and] nationality'.³⁶⁹ The narrators 'fixed' identities are different, as are 'political views, personal life history, and experiences, [which] are more fluid, subjective and contextual'.³⁷⁰ Even when the purpose is to find commonality, as this chapter seeks to do, we are most likely to find diversity; here through baby and childhood stories, birth parents, adoptive parents and foster carers, education, physical, mental and emotional development, and long term ambitions. Analysis of difference and divergence can become pedagogical as they allow 'room for contradictions, changes and difference'.³⁷¹

The protagonists are all given up by their birth mothers as babies. Through adoption and fostering, they are placed in long-term homes for the majority of childhood and encouraged to call 'guardians' Mum and Dad, only to leave them before their childhoods end: Lemn Sissay first, at twelve, Joanna Traynor's protagonist at fifteen, Traynor, Jeanette Winterson and me, at sixteen.³⁷² Subsequently, all protagonists, not yet adults, live independently, fend for themselves, their childhoods over: Winterson moves into a borrowed car; me, to a 'grotty bedsit'; Traynor, after a second foster placement, to the nurses' accommodation to begin professional training; and Sissay, after multiple residential placements, is allocated a flat.³⁷³

³⁶⁷ Fook, pp. 67-68.

³⁶⁸ Fook, p. 146.

³⁶⁹ 'Gender' is under discussion in contemporary thinking.

³⁷⁰ Gary and Holmes, p. 2.

³⁷¹ Fook, p. 69.

³⁷² Sissay, p. 61; Joanna Traynor, *Sister Josephine*, p. 81; Pizzichini, (29 August 1998); Winterson, *Normal*, p. 38; Seosamh McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 155.

³⁷³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 124; McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 183; Traynor, pp. 96-97; Sissay, p. 186.

At a pivotal moment in their evolving lives, the protagonists receive timely and life changing support which assists in transforming their futures: Traynor, directed by her second foster carer, secures professional training and a home; Sissay, aided by a housing officer, secures a home of his own; Winterson's school's Head of English invites her to live at her home and guides her to the University of Oxford; a woman from church offers me a home and sets me on the first rung of the ladder towards qualifications and academic life.³⁷⁴

For all of us, the guardian families – those we call Mum and Dad – become estranged, with contact limited or lost entirely. With the exception of Traynor, we trace and interact with our birth mothers; only Winterson and I engage with this subject fully within our narratives; neither of us continue a long-term relationship with them. Sissay narrates his desire to know and meet his birth mother and early searches to find her.³⁷⁵

Winterson highlights the loss of her birth mother as the ultimate loss; she prescribes the term 'lost loss' to the experience of losing her birth mother, suppressing it and losing all connection: 'the Wintersonic ... loss and longing.³⁷⁶ It is my mother. It is my mother. It is my mother'.³⁷⁷ She relives the 'lost loss' as an adult when she suffers a further loss, that of her partner; the combination of losses takes her to a place of despair and a suicide attempt: 'The lost loss I experience as physical pain is pre-language. That loss happened before I could speak, and I return to that place, speechless'.³⁷⁸

Attachment Theory suggests that a broken Attachment can interfere with how a baby's brain develops: the brain comes alive with the flash of neurons creating channels of communication that trigger more and more connections, ignited by stimulation as information and communications travel around the brain. Broken Attachment can negatively affect this process, which can have long term consequences.³⁷⁹ Winterson incorporates the impact of her broken Attachment explicitly within her narrative.³⁸⁰ I include hidden neuronc language at the beginning of my Prelude, not considering at the time – unlike Winterson – that Attachment is material for memoir, 'the gritty graffiti – messages created in a flash of fury. A

³⁷⁴ Traynor, p. 88; Sissay, p. 186; Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 124-125, 128-129; McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, pp. 230.

³⁷⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 213; McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 250; Lemn Sissay, *One Extraordinary Woman in My World Now: Yemarshet Sissay* (2013), *lemnsissay.com* <http://blog.lemnsissay.com/2013/03/08/one-extraordinary-woman-in-my-world-now-yemarshet-sissay/#sthash.OAMydJ61.dpbs> [Accessed: 13 January 2021].

³⁷⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 191.

³⁷⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 160.

³⁷⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 191.

³⁷⁹ 'The Neurobiology of Attachment to Nurturing and Abusive Caregivers', *The Hastings law journal*, 63.6 (2012), 1553-1570.

³⁸⁰ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 20.

mission accomplished – begun and ended – in that same single spark of reaction’.³⁸¹

Constantin Stanislavski’s concept of the ‘through line’ highlights critical themes recurring beneath the text, ‘the subconscious activities that flow into the through line of action as it goes across the whole’.³⁸² The ‘lost loss’ experience is foundational to Sissay’s narrative: ‘I’m six months old. At this point my mother is invisible’; he is ‘becoming invisible’; became ‘invisible ... hidden in plain sight’; ‘All the names which came before ... were created to hide me from my mother’.³⁸³ Traynor also employs invisible and hidden themed language: ‘I could sink. Hidden’; ‘invisible mother’; ‘I sat and made myself invisible ... I cried’.³⁸⁴ Neither Sissay nor Traynor articulate connectivity – cause and effect – to the ‘lost loss’; thus, they elicit a sense of detachment from it. Nonetheless, there is a continuity to this loss, which is a significant element of both through lines. This is especially true for Sissay: his desire to know his mother becomes increasingly stark as the narrative progresses towards his search to find her and the unveiling of his super objective.³⁸⁵ In contrast, Winterson’s sense of the ‘lost loss’ appears integral, an irrepressible part of self, in childhood and adulthood: she expresses, demonstrates and interconnects it holistically. It is Winterson only who directly addresses the profundity of the ‘lost loss’.³⁸⁶

Perhaps the ‘lost loss’ underpins all our stories as the theme of loss is prominent within all our narratives. Winterson is the ‘lost loss’. Traynor, the lost soul, drifting like a cloud, detached, aimless: “Nurse...nurse...nurse...” Day in. Day out. I took more and more time off work.³⁸⁷ In my room ... I stayed in. Curtains closed all day. Food – toast. Drink – cider. Listen – Bob Dylan. “There’s a Slow Train Comin’”.³⁸⁸ Sissay is the shadow of lost memory: ‘it was impossible to take something away as a memory. This is how you become invisible’.³⁸⁹ I become lost in silence. Silence articulates my loss: ‘It is the silence that greeted me first. Like a long-lost familiarity, forgotten and triggered back into existence from a long-forgotten grave’.³⁹⁰

Loss prompts the first research question assessed in this thesis: how is the loss of the birth mother as a baby portrayed within contemporary literature?

³⁸¹ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 91.

³⁸² Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 260.

³⁸³ Sissay, pp. 6, 85, 88, 191.

³⁸⁴ Traynor, pp. 68, 98, 157.

³⁸⁵ Sissay, p. 162.

³⁸⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 161.

³⁸⁷ Traynor, p. 80.

³⁸⁸ Traynor, p. 174.

³⁸⁹ Sissay, p. 88.

³⁹⁰ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 145.

As Winterson's narrative illustrates, the question of the 'lost loss' is not confined to childhood experience alone, but the long-term: the consequential impact triggered by the broken Attachment and its effect upon the adult self: 'in spite of important work by ... Bowlby ... on attachment, and the trauma of early separation from the love object that is the mother, a screaming baby wasn't a broken-hearted baby – she was a Devil baby'.³⁹¹

Winterson emphasises the uniqueness of this loss – the loss of mother. She believes the abrupt loss of her partner triggered a return to the 'lost loss' and all its devastation; thus, demonstrating how impacting the 'lost loss' can be on an adult self:

Deborah left me. We had a final fearful row, triggered by my insecurities and Deborah's detachment, and the next day we were over. The End. ... Deborah did not intend to detonate the 'lost loss', and I didn't even know it was there – not in any matter of fact way of knowing – though my behaviour patterns were a clue.³⁹²

This prompts a second research question: can research identify and articulate truths and emotions of a child separated from its mother and the impact upon the adult self?

Initially, I did not consider the impact of Sissay's loss of his mother at birth, as he does not explore this subject explicitly within the memoir, other than through the plots of secondary and anonymous characters. Likewise, Winterson does not comprehend Mrs. Winterson's loss of Paul, the baby she had expected to adopt and Sissay does not consider the pain his foster family – notably Mrs. Greenwood – felt when he departed. Perhaps the most tragic of all is Traynor's protagonist: as a young nursing student, she does not comprehend her loss of her birth mother, even when confronted with her name for the first time on her birth certificate, the fictitious Mary O'Leary. 'The invisible mother had a name' is her apathetic response to the subject of the 'lost loss'.³⁹³ However, in her media interviews, Traynor 'goes back to "the primal wound" inflicted on a baby when it's born and whipped away. "They know something's wrong inside"'.³⁹⁴ Perhaps because our loss is so foundational, so fundamental to our existence, we take the loss we see in others for granted, as we take for granted our loss deep within ourselves.

³⁹¹ Anne O'Connor, *Understanding Transitions in the Early Years: Supporting Change through Attachment and Resilience*, 2nd ed. (London: Routledge, 2017); David Howe, *Attachment Across the Lifecourse: A Brief Introduction* (London: Red Globe Press, 2011); Winterson, *Normal*, p. 20.

³⁹² Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 161-162.

³⁹³ Traynor, p. 98.

³⁹⁴ Pizzichini, (29 August 1998).

Without Winterson's contribution, I should not have considered the separation from my birth mother. I explain in my memoir that it happened, my 'fate was sealed', but I do not consciously mourn the loss; but six foster placements later, at fourteen months old, I am settled, happy, 'beginning to smile'.³⁹⁵ I am moved again.³⁹⁶ Extraordinarily perhaps – before the move happened – I anticipated it; documented in my social services records: I became anxious, clinging to my foster mother, Mrs. Nicholas, and refused food. I became Winterson's character, a screaming and broken-hearted baby.³⁹⁷ Nevertheless, social services still moved me to a new foster mother, Joyce. In my early fifties, that which I knew instinctively as a child is finally confirmed: Joyce did not want me; she had 'to be persuaded' to foster me.³⁹⁸ Mrs. Nicholas, my social services records disclosed, tried to keep me; that they revealed this – allowed me to know it – was the one gift they gave.

There is no portrait of a heartbroken baby in Sissay or Traynor's narrative. It is possible to interpret Traynor's suicide attempt as reflecting Winterson's – 'the lost loss'³⁹⁹ – which is detonated by adult-led triggers. Sissay does not include the narrative of his separation at birth; instead, he assumes another person's story to imply what he wants the reader to imagine for him: in the story he borrows, the events and images portrayed, both the mother and baby are separated then driven away in different directions.⁴⁰⁰ For Sissay, both characters are victims of national institutions, government and church. Sissay reflects upon his mother's experience at the time of his birth: 'My mother must have been at her most vulnerable. She was pregnant and alone in a foreign country'.⁴⁰¹ He does not, however, explicitly express the vulnerable and broken-hearted baby that he must have been.

Winterson's story is about the desolation of separation and loss of her birth mother. Sissay's story is the process, about how he became separated. The 'lost loss' for Sissay is the separation from Mrs. Greenwood: 'my mum wouldn't hug me as I left, so I hugged her ... The car filled with a quiet loss'.⁴⁰² Likewise, my separation story is not about birth mother, but the 'love object', my foster mother, Mrs. Nicholas.⁴⁰³

In my memoir, I quote Joyce's response to learning that my birth mother did not want me: 'How can you tell a child that their mother doesn't want them?'.⁴⁰⁴ As part of this discussion, an agreement appears to have been made between my Social

³⁹⁵ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 127.

³⁹⁶ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 128.

³⁹⁷ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 128.

³⁹⁸ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 154.

³⁹⁹ Sissay, p. 161.

⁴⁰⁰ Sissay, p. 71.

⁴⁰¹ Sissay, p. 12.

⁴⁰² Sissay, p. 71.

⁴⁰³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 20; McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, pp. 126-128.

⁴⁰⁴ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 123.

Worker and foster mother that my birth mother's rejection of me should be kept a secret. Had the law not changed in my lifetime, which gave me the right to access my social services records, as Sissay did, and Winterson her adoption files, I would have lived out my life not knowing the truth. It is the hardest thing in the world to tell a person that they were not wanted – but it is harder still to tell them that it is their mother who did not want them. However, no matter how difficult the truth, I had a right to know it; and, had I possessed the truth as a younger man, I would have made different decisions concerning meeting my birth mother: I would have refused to meet her when the opportunity arose. Likewise, Winterson's reflections encouraged her to imagine she might have taken a different approach towards Mrs. Winterson had she had a greater understanding of her: 'Only later, much later, too late, did I understand how small she was to herself'.⁴⁰⁵

While reviewing Sissay's memoir, I wrestled with the truth I perceived he exposed and how I should articulate it. My reading is that Sissay's mother did not return for him. It is Sissay's truth, after assessing his records, that she did, 'Why would she say, how can I get Lemn back? If she didn't want me?'.⁴⁰⁶ As I highlight, these are not her words; she wrote, 'If I want to get Lemn out here...'. At the beginning of the memoir, Sissay writes, 'What truths and untruths? ... Maybe my mother didn't want me'.⁴⁰⁷ Here, through 'locked fingers'⁴⁰⁸ in an ephemeral moment he allows a flicker of light to catch upon different possibilities to the one he will go on to argue – forcefully. The one he wants to be true – wants the reader to hear – his truth.

Sissay's momentary glimpse is an insight into an alternative narrative and is fleeting; it triggered my thoughts towards R. S. Thomas's movement of a curtain, through 'locked fingers' in his poem *Folk Tale*.⁴⁰⁹ Whereas Thomas longs to see something, Sissay, conversely, does not; but under the narrative – within the atmosphere of his story – it appears his involuntary revelation has touched Sissay: 'Maybe my mother didn't want me'.⁴¹⁰

Thomas writes,

...to what purpose open
that far casement?
I would have refrained long since
but that peering once
through my locked fingers
I thought that I detected

⁴⁰⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 3.

⁴⁰⁶ Sissay, p. 135.

⁴⁰⁷ Sissay, p. 3.

⁴⁰⁸ R. S. Thomas, *Collected Poems 1945-1990* (London: Phoenix, 2000 [1993]), p. 517.

⁴⁰⁹ Thomas, p. 517.

⁴¹⁰ Sissay, p. 3.

the movement of a curtain...

In response to my Sissay review, which challenges the memoir's preface that Sissay was a stolen baby, I was asked: 'Is he not allowed his truth?'. The question is a legitimate one and highlights a theme of this thesis: the importance of truth and non-truth in fiction and nonfiction and the legitimacy of what I term 'creative memory', 'memory creatively presented in well-fashioned prose'.⁴¹¹ This prompted a further question about how defined and accessible truth and non-truth should be – especially within personal narratives, semi-autobiographical novels and memoir. This highlighted the complexities involved when truth and non-truth become enmeshed into creative memory and – consciously or unconsciously – begin to obscure and so hinder access to truths and non-truths. A third research question emerged: is accessibility to truth and non-truth essential to a holistic understanding of a personal narrative? This led to the fourth and final research question: when writing identifiable others into creative memory and enmeshed personal narratives, is ethicality a concern for the writer?

I found myself jotting down thoughts on the subject: is it a contradiction to say that I am not so much interested in truth as non-truth, untruths or, as Mrs. Winterson would define it, the 'not true'?⁴¹² Regarding Sissay, I would not wish to undermine his truth if it were that he lived in isolation – and his truth incriminated no one else – I should wish him to own whatever truth suited him. However, to get to his truth, to argue it and maintain it, he implicates the British government, diocese of Liverpool, Wigan social services, Norman Goldthorpe and the Greenwood family. These have become villains within his story, villains that allow him to stand by his truth.

I argue that his truth is not true. His story is untrue. Perhaps to be gentler, less harsh, there is the possibility of a different story and a different conclusion.

Traynor's *Sister Josephine* was the first primary text to present the possibility of a different story. She described her work as semi-autobiographical and a novel; that she expressed her creativity on the foundations of her experience. I highlight the potential non-truths within the narrative of her principal stories. The first sexual abuse story, at the hands of her foster brother, while they watched the Flake Chocolate advert, is a good example. I do not question the truth behind Traynor's sexual abuse narrative. However, I am unconvinced by the setting in which it is portrayed, the maturity with which she handles the experience and the vocabulary used for her protagonist's nine-year-old self. Most problematical for me is that

⁴¹¹ Seosamh McGrath, *Critical Component* (2021), p. 31.

⁴¹² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 6.

Traynor attempts to hide her real-life abuser behind a fictional character, Martin, while publicising her work as based on her family experience.

A high-profile example of shielding a character behind anonymity is Ulrika Jonsson in her autobiography *Honest*, in which she claims that she was date-raped by a TV presenter; however, she does not name the person. The autobiography ‘kick-started feverish speculation’,⁴¹³ which culminated in Matthew Wright, live on-air, naming John Leslie as the culprit. In August 2003, Leslie said: ‘I was not damned by anything Ulrika said – her silence damned me. With one simple statement, she could have resolved this one way or another’.⁴¹⁴ Jonsson has never clarified the identity of her attacker revealed in her autobiography. However, Leslie has been investigated numerous times by the police for sexual assault allegations since the publication of *Honest*; the last court appearance and another ‘not guilty’ verdict came the week I write this. Judge Taylor told him, you “leave this court without a stain on your character and I hope it will be the last time you have to attend.”⁴¹⁵ Leslie lost his career.⁴¹⁶

There is no suggestion that Jonsson is creating her experience; her rape claims are believed; she writes in graphic detail and is emphatic: ‘I had been raped’.⁴¹⁷ Concern surrounds the revelation: the choice of narrative, the identification of the character and the potential for non-truths to be created and assumed as true.

Jonsson writes autobiography; Traynor semi-autobiography, which includes veiled accusations that are shielded beneath the enmeshment of lived experience and fantasy, as ‘a novel’. Is Traynor accusing the elder of two identifiable foster brothers, or are they – especially Martin – created characters within a fictional context? If nonfiction, what is the truth behind the identity of her attacker? The same question, about the veracity of her narrative, as asked of me about Sissay’s, is equally pertinent. My response is the same: Traynor [as Jonsson] does not live in isolation within her own stories; her truths are not her own; other people are incriminated, accused, pronounced as sexual abusers. If Traynor had a foster brother, does

⁴¹³ Tristan Kirk, *Behind the John Leslie Trial 18 years in the Showbiz Wilderness* (19 October 2020), *The Evening Standard* <https://www.standard.co.uk/news/crime/john-leslie-trial-showbiz-wilderness-a4572197.html> [Accessed: 13 January 2021].

⁴¹⁴ Rebecca Davison, *Snog, anyone?* (21 October 2020), *The Daily Mail Online* <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/tvshowbiz/article-8863417/Ulrika-Jonsson-declares-cleanest-mouth-Britain.html> [Accessed: 23 October 2020].

⁴¹⁵ Martin Evans, *John Leslie Cleared of Sex Assault Charge* (19 October 2020), *The Telegraph* <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/10/19/john-leslie-cleared-sex-assault-charge> [Accessed: 23 October 2020].

⁴¹⁶ Stephen Wilkie, *Emotion in Court as Former Blue Peter Presenter John Leslie is Cleared of Sexual Assault* (19 October 2020), *The Edinburgh News* https://www.edinburghnews.scotsman.com/news/crime/emotion-court-former-blue-peter-presenter-john-leslie-cleared-sexual-assault-3008324?itm_source=parsely-api [Accessed: 23 October 2020].

⁴¹⁷ Ulrika Jonsson, *Honest* (Basingstoke: Sidgwick and Jackson, 2002), p. 70.

suspicion not fall on him regardless of the reality of Traynor's truth? Through the enmeshment of the real and the created, truth and the non-truth, or as Winterson puts it, 'observed and the imagined', are real people with alternative truths.⁴¹⁸

To answer Winterson's question, by quoting it: 'Why could there not be the observed and the imagined?'. Other people are inevitably implicated by the imagined and the observed, creating confusion and uncertainty around what is someone else's truth and non-truth. Winterson reflects on her semi-autobiographical novel *Oranges* in her memoir; she concludes: 'thinking about the cover version that is *Oranges*, is that I wrote a story I could live with. The other one was too painful. I could not survive it'.⁴¹⁹ Mrs. Winterson is enraged by it. Perhaps it was too painful for her, the semi-autobiography that Winterson decided she could survive? Winterson failed to consider the ethical questions around other people's stories, or, if she did consider them, did she decide to put them aside?

Mrs. Winterson is emphatic: 'She said, 'But it's not true'.⁴²⁰

As I suggest in Chapter One of my memoir, *An Act of Will*, implicating someone can be the right thing to do. I incriminate 'the lodger'⁴²¹ and highlight Rolf Harris' sexual assault trial.⁴²² Celebrities who revealed their experiences of Harris' predacious behaviour, spoke out against him, named him a sexual predator, and were right to give weight to his victim's accusations. Those who testified in court against him were vindicated further: the additional validation may have encouraged other victims towards healing and potential closure.

In the context of my own experience, I narrate a time of inner turmoil and reflection before writing the story. I hesitate and procrastinate.

Jung became unwell if he did not write:

If I neglect to do so for a single day, unpleasant physical symptoms immediately follow. As soon as I set to work they vanish and my head feels perfectly clear...Something within me has been touched. A gradient has formed, and I must write.⁴²³

Jung articulates a physicality to his writing; this is something I felt as I sought to write my own sexual abuse story. It is both the physical and reflexive together that

⁴¹⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 3.

⁴¹⁹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 6.

⁴²⁰ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 6.

⁴²¹ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, pp. 100-103.

⁴²² Reuters, *Rolf Harris: The charges against him* (30 June 2014), *BBC News Report* <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-27907511> [Accessed: 10 February 2021].

⁴²³ Jung, pp. 2-3.

should challenge the writer and the writing; within this authentic space, the authentic narrative has a greater possibility of being created and the unauthentic challenged.

Thomas's poem, 'Folk Tale', cited above, articulates a fleeting moment, an authentic space. Sissay, likewise, appears to allow himself, fleetingly, to contemplate a different, more painful, narrative – an alternative conclusion: he writes, 'Maybe my mother didn't want me'.⁴²⁴ We can only imagine Sissay's thoughts in part because he only gives them to us in part. Much is hidden from us, intangible – the not heard and that which is just beyond the reach of the reader. The space, doubt, possibility of a different narrative is not what Sissay intends to convey. Nevertheless, it exists beneath the narrative in how Sissay arranges, infers and imposes upon his social services records by the changes he makes, statements made, conveyed as questions, within his commentaries, and the silences he leaves – in the material he omits.

Thomas's movement of the curtain articulates a silence beneath his text and narrates alternative spaces that introduce new possibilities: 'I thought that I detected the movement of a curtain...'.⁴²⁵ Thomas's poem is a lament about his lack of faith in God – his struggle with doubt. However, the possible movement of the curtain transforms the poem into an expression of faith and the possibility of belief. Traynor, in the close of Chapter Two, articulates silence and narrates an alternative space. At the end of the first abuse scene, she 'walked to the door. Martin sat biting his fingernails staring at the television. He didn't look at me again'.⁴²⁶ Traynor does not state how, at the door, she observes her abuser; this pause is implied. It is a pivotal moment in the narrative; it authenticates the otherwise problematical scene. I believe Traynor was a victim of sexual abuse, but I am unconvinced by her portraiture. However, in this moment of silence – pause – a gaze, we experience, fleetingly, a discernment of something we cannot easily grasp, which authenticates. As the moth crossed the pane in 'The Death of a Moth', Woolf sees it, 'I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible'.⁴²⁷

In the same essay, Woolf describes an attempt to aid the moth: 'I stretched out a pencil, meaning to help him to right himself, it came over me that the failure and awkwardness were the approach of death. I laid the pencil down again'.⁴²⁸ As a reader, I am captivated by the movement of the hand, the pencil, I follow the

⁴²⁴ Sissay, p. 3.

⁴²⁵ Thomas, p. 517.

⁴²⁶ Traynor, p. 18.

⁴²⁷ Virginia Woolf, *The Death of the Moth and Other Essays* (London: The Hogarth Press, 1942), p. 10.

⁴²⁸ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 10.

physical action with my eyes, yet the critical element of this narration is the thinking beneath the act – the pondering of dying and death.

I watch the lodger leave the room after my own abuse experience: ‘he walked off, out of the room; yes! I do remember. I remember his back as he walked through the doorway’⁴²⁹ and finally, ‘... I am alone ...’.⁴³⁰ Both Traynor and I are left – consciously or unconsciously – in the space of reflection. We are both left with our thoughts; yet, neither of us writes the space or the thoughts; instead, we imply it; our reflections exist beneath our narration, in space and silence: the fleeting perception of something we cannot entirely grasp. It is Woolfian: the perception of humming at luncheon, as she thinks herself ‘back into the past ... Everything was different’.⁴³¹

For Traynor’s protagonist and for me, that moment of reflection – Traynor at the door observing; me, watching the lodger leaving through the doorway – reveals a silence beneath the physicality of the text when, for Traynor and me, from this point on, ‘everything was different’.

Within the rhythmic wordiness of the opening of my memoir – the neuronic explosions – there is a pause – space lost, a void – an awakening prelude. ‘A pivotal silence’.⁴³² It is this, the pivotal silence, that I wanted to write, to convey. However, when it comes to writing silence and space, it is like putting air into a jam jar and holding it up as ‘a thing’.

It is silence I seek to write: ‘sitting stretched out on the two front seats of the motorhome, looking out over the valley’s top, across, towards the tower of St. Nectan’s, Welcombe, which I knew so well. The rain, cloud and mist swept away now, as have the last of the raindrops on the windscreen, dissolved by the wind, no doubt. I am sitting, ‘doing nothing...’ My mind is ablaze. My twin has gone home. My partner is gone’.⁴³³

It is challenging to write silence and space. I wanted to see both these realities in Hugo Hamilton’s memoir, *The Speckled People*. However, Hamilton presents a tirade of words, thoughts and thinking, and his process of thinking; but he does not offer pause – space – for reader connection and response; any one of his honed and meaningful concepts merit reflection and emotional engagement:

⁴²⁹ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 101.

⁴³⁰ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 101.

⁴³¹ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 27.

⁴³² McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, pp. 91, 92.

⁴³³ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 147.

When you're small you can inherit a secret without even knowing what it is. You can be trapped in the same film as your mother, because certain things are passed on to you that you're not even aware of, not just a smile or a voice, but unspoken things, too, that you can't understand until later when you grow up. Maybe it's there in my eyes for all to see, the same as it is in my mother's eyes. Maybe it's hidden in my voice, or in the shape of my hands. Maybe it's something you carry with you like a precious object you're told not to lose.⁴³⁴

Hamilton successfully creates an atmosphere – a tension within the fabric of his words – but it is not silence. By contrast, Winterson fills space and silence with too many words. Despite her raw material, the forever heartbroken baby, the deserted woman, going mad, breakdown and suicide, all finely portrayed and communicated, she talks over silence and dominates space. After her suicide attempt, being saved by the cat, 'scratching my face, scratching my face, scratching my face', we find her lying on the gravel:

...looking up at the stars – the miraculous stars and the wood that deepens the dark – I could hear a voice. I know I was having an hallucination but it was the hallucination I needed to have. "Ye must be born again. Ye must be born again" (John 3:7).⁴³⁵

Winterson does not trust the reader to experience the moment with her, hear the voice and discern the orator's identity; she must elucidate. Although lacking Winterson's sophistication as a writer, Traynor hints at emotion, space and silence; her protagonist, recovering from a suicide attempt, also looks at the sky: "There's a Sister Josephine to see you." And then I remembered. I could make clouds move'.⁴³⁶ Traynor trusts the reader to understand her thinking, without referencing it. The moving clouds take us on a rare journey back to her childhood to her first foster placement, where she called her guardians Mum and Dad; she is 'the cloud mover' and Sister Josephine is coming to rescue her for the first time, as she does a second time at the close of the book. Traynor – like Sissay – communicates a narrative she did not intend to write: a yearning for her original foster family, which she was forced to leave.⁴³⁷

Like Sissay, Traynor also did not fully recognise the pivotal moment of change, her actual rescue. I would argue that Traynor's rescuer is Mrs. Wallace, the second foster carer, who positively and pragmatically changes her life. By her admission, Traynor is objectionable to these foster carers; yet they do their duty by her. When Traynor lacks vision for herself, her future, Wallace visualises one for her; 'I've taken the liberty...', Wallace says: 'I've managed to get you an interview'.⁴³⁸ Traynor's

⁴³⁴ Hugo Hamilton, *The Speckled People* (New York: Fourth Estate, 2003), p. 18.

⁴³⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 168.

⁴³⁶ Traynor, p. 216.

⁴³⁷ Traynor, p. 83.

⁴³⁸ Traynor, p. 88.

nursing career commences. When Traynor arrives to begin her training, she is on the path towards becoming a professional. This was extraordinarily rare for a child exiting care at that time. Although ill-prepared, lacking motivation, and ultimately failing to make a success of the opportunity offered to her, Wallace, nonetheless, had given Traynor a chance. Sissay creates his chances. He flees to the council, begs for accommodation and is fortunate: he meets Graham Wilson, housing officer, in a position (and willing) to help. He secures a one-bedroom council flat for Sissay who is just seventeen.⁴³⁹ Most of us – including me – exiting care will end up in squalid bedsits, in the most deprived parts of towns and cities. Wilson changes Sissay's life. At sixteen, Winterson and Mrs. Winterson part company. It is her Head of English who rescues her, who changes her life. Winterson is living in a car. The teacher gives her a room, a home, and helps her to the University of Oxford.⁴⁴⁰ My story mirrors Winterson here: 'The woman who changed my life', likewise, gave me a home, encouraged me into education and helped me to Theological College at Oxford.⁴⁴¹ To this day, forty years since I left childhood, Joyce and Strawberry Water, children exiting care do not have a right to a minimum standard of accommodation.⁴⁴² In 2009, the United Kingdom Parliament debated Helen Southworth's Private Members' Bill, which would have bound local authorities by statutory legislation to provide minimum accommodation standards for care leavers. However, as I watched live on television, it failed at its second reading, upon the wave of a Conservative member's hand: that hand, that wave, condemned care leavers to continued sub-standard accommodation.

All four protagonists share palpable anger, which grows as their narratives progress. Traynor is troubled and increasingly rebellious at her first foster placement, but at the end of the car journey to the second placement, anger and confrontation have exploded within her, and she goads the Wallaces from the moment she steps out of the car. The Wallaces' crime is to greet her, as she arrives, with a wave, a friendly gesture, one imagines: 'I didn't want a family that waved like that' and she is adversarial until she leaves. In turn, they pen a farewell note to her on her last day with them – then visit Blackpool rather than stay to see her go.⁴⁴³ Her anger she takes with her to the nursing home and tries to drown in cider. Sissay, before he leaves the Greenwoods, rebels: Lemn's 'temper is so volatile'.⁴⁴⁴ He questions the regime under which he lives, the rigidity, and God. His anger will take him to a secure unit called Wood End, where it festers and grows. Nevertheless, despite the

⁴³⁹ Sissay, p. 186.

⁴⁴⁰ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 125.

⁴⁴¹ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 198.

⁴⁴² Southworth, Helen, *Young People Leaving Care (Accommodation) Bill (2008/9)*, *House of Commons* <https://services.parliament.uk/bills/2008-09/youngpeopleleavingcareaccommodation.html> [Accessed: 10 February 2021].

⁴⁴³ Traynor, p. 83.

⁴⁴⁴ Sissay, p. 60.

new-found security of having his own home, early recognition as a promising writer – interviewed as such on television, aged twenty – Sissay’s anger remains beyond the close of his book; it sticks to me long after I put it down.⁴⁴⁵ Conversely, Winterson appears to have negotiated with her anger by the end of her memoir. She, perhaps, displays the most explosive anger of all. It probably grows from the heartbroken baby she was when she arrived at Mrs. Winterson’s; grew greater each time she was compared unfavourably to Paul; was locked out of the house all night; when Mrs. Winterson destroyed her books; and subjected her to exorcisms.⁴⁴⁶ Winterson tells us how she was ‘often full of rage and despair’.⁴⁴⁷ In adulthood, ‘I hit my girlfriends until I realised it was not acceptable’ and she thinks herself capable of ‘murder’.⁴⁴⁸

I thought I had reconciled my own anger, but no sooner had I driven the motorhome onto the nondescript field at Welcombe than it popped up in all its ugliness; silence descended. I was confronted by my childhood self. I became very small. Conversely, my anger made me very large indeed.⁴⁴⁹

I will conclude this chapter by reflecting on the way the authors chose to close their work. The endings all appear inconclusive: Traynor ends her narrative remembering, ‘I can make clouds move’, which can appear optimistic at first reading; but in context, she has just survived a suicide attempt and ‘there’s a Sister Josephine to see [her]’.⁴⁵⁰ I argue that Sister Josephine symbolises rescue, endings and uncertain beginnings; she reverts the narrative to the original foster family; she also symbolises a perpetual and seemingly unbreakable cycle of endings and beginnings that exist beyond Traynor’s narrative. Winterson ends: ‘I have no idea what happens next’, which suggests a looking forward, into an unknown future, but positivity falters within the narrative context; she has just reflected upon the word ‘love’: ‘The difficult word.⁴⁵¹ Where everything starts, where we always return. Love. Love’s lack. The possibility of love’; having survived her suicide attempt, traced her birth mother, whom she appears to reject, it is Mrs. Winterson who survives Winterson’s analytical journey of critique and purification: ‘I hate Ann [birth mother] criticising Mrs Winterson.⁴⁵² She was a monster but she was my monster’, which appears to see her gaze revert backwards to childhood rather than to the future.⁴⁵³ In an atmosphere that appears equally circular as that of Traynor and Winterson, my

⁴⁴⁵ Lemn Sissay, *Celebration*, Granada Television (14 October 2017 [1989]), YouTube <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EnmGRR0sZu8> [Accessed: 13 January 2021].

⁴⁴⁶ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 9, 2, 4, 45, 40-41, 80, 84, 105.

⁴⁴⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 21.

⁴⁴⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 46.

⁴⁴⁹ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, pp. 145-146.

⁴⁵⁰ Traynor, p. 216.

⁴⁵¹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 230.

⁴⁵² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 230.

⁴⁵³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 229.

ending suggests cyclical realities: my partner ‘notices me looking at houses for sale. He says he does not want to move. I say I do not want to stay ... He says he is not going anywhere’.⁴⁵⁴ The memoir ends as it begins, I am contemplating a house move.

If one were to conclude that Sissay’s memoir ends with the Epilogue, and the line, ‘The name Lemn means Why?’, one might conclude the same cyclical reality for Sissay that we ascribe here to Traynor, Winterson and me.⁴⁵⁵ However, Sissay’s chronological life story ends with a clear beginning at Poet’s Corner, his new one-bedroomed flat, with his own business and interest in poetry. It is the most optimistic:

Somebody left a gift for me outside the flat. I don’t know who. It was a thing of beauty to me: a black Olivetti typewriter with a waterfall of ebony finger pads, each ingrained with one mother-of-pearl letter.⁴⁵⁶

However, Sissay concludes with the Epilogue, which takes us back to his birth, his mother’s letter dated 1968, the ‘stolen’ baby theme at the beginning of the memoir, name changes designed to ‘hide me from my mother’ and back to the Greenwoods.⁴⁵⁷

No matter where his memoir ends, Sissay remains within the same cyclical reality; his memoir is a memorial to it: he cannot turn his gaze away from the Greenwoods:

Lemn still retains some loyalty to the Greenwood family and visits them very occasionally. The foster family however have not contacted Lemn for some years to my knowledge.⁴⁵⁸

Likewise, Winterson cannot completely turn away from Mrs. Winterson, and Traynor too appears to harbour a connection to her original foster parents, whom she called mum and dad.

⁴⁵⁴ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 246.

⁴⁵⁵ Sissay, p. 191.

⁴⁵⁶ Sissay, p. 189.

⁴⁵⁷ Sissay, p. 191.

⁴⁵⁸ Sissay, p. 152.

Conclusion

A book of mine is always a matter of fate. There is something unpredictable about the process of writing, and I cannot prescribe for myself any predetermined course.⁴⁵⁹

Carl Jung's quotation became my PhD's research maxim. It reflects my journey and – I can see now – describes the methodology by which I set out the creative component, my memoir. There could not, in any case, have been a 'predetermined course'. From the beginning, my writing was evoked by a series of triggered memories; equally critical was the context into which each memory was recalled. As I highlight in the introduction, the recall of memory is a fluid experience; although 'the white light of truth' within a memory may remain a constant over time, the situation in which it is remembered and re-lived, within the present, can change the perception and nuance of it.⁴⁶⁰ While writing the memoir, for example, words written by the church official, Andrew Nunn, words about me, words that I had never seen before, prompted vivid and harrowing memories of my time as a vicar in Sheffield; they were memories of experiences twenty years before. As I remember – and, as I write – I am interrupted. I must break off to deal with an urgent problem with the drains, which entails clearing a blockage. As I do so, the protective plastic bag I have carefully placed over my arm splits, so my arm becomes immersed in sludge and, after several washes, the potent smell remains. The smell sticks to my flesh and lingers in the back of my throat. As I return to the memorandum written by Andrew Nunn, dripping in criticism of me and damning my character, it is another atmosphere which surround the memories of Mr Nunn.

Yet, for these narratives to become research, they had to be held up to Woolfian scrutiny:

Whatever the reason, all these books, I thought, ... were worthless scientifically, that is to say, though humanly ... they had been written in the red light of emotion and not in the white light of truth.⁴⁶¹ ...One must strain off what was personal and accidental in all these impressions and so reach the pure fluid, the essential oil of truth.⁴⁶²

A Room of One's Own is an influential contribution to my thesis, aspects of which resonate with the work of academics in other disciplines who have developed broader processes of change and have inspired new ways of thinking: for example, by applying ideas from post-structuralism and postmodernism in social work.⁴⁶³ Woolf rejects the antiquated British Museum in search of truth, determined to seek it

⁴⁵⁹ Jung, p. 2.

⁴⁶⁰ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 52.

⁴⁶¹ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 52.

⁴⁶² Woolf, *A Room*, p. 43.

⁴⁶³ Fook, (2016); Karen Healy, *Social Work Theories in Context: Creating Frameworks for Practice* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), pp. 193-215.

out: new ways of thinking and knowing.⁴⁶⁴ Notable is her experimental use of language, a challenge to traditional hierarchical structures; and, critical to this thesis, her scrutiny of truths in fiction.⁴⁶⁵ She did not intend to follow convention by presenting her Cambridge audience with ‘a nugget of pure truth’ but to facilitate debate and analyse truth [in fiction]: ‘If truth is not to be found on the shelves of the British Museum, where, I asked myself, ... is truth?’.⁴⁶⁶ Equally important is her exploration of undercurrents implied beneath the text: ‘a sort of humming noise, not articulate, but musical, exciting, which changed the value of the words themselves’.⁴⁶⁷ It is a literary example of tacit knowing.

As Woolf used her writing to highlight the inequality and impoverishment of women in relation to male hegemony and wealth, I seek to open dialogue about the inequality and impoverishment of children delivered (by their mothers) into the care system.⁴⁶⁸ I explore internal undercurrents and the long-term outcomes their experiences impose upon them. As I engaged with truth and non-truth, ethical questions emerged about connected others within the primary texts.

As was often the case while writing this thesis, Woolf focussed my mind: ‘What conditions are necessary for the creation of works of art? – a thousand questions at once suggested themselves. But one needed answers...’.⁴⁶⁹

Gornick’s theoretical distancing ‘persona’ helped me to isolate themes within each personal narrative.⁴⁷⁰ Winterson identified her partner, Deborah Warner’s, departure as the trigger of ‘the lost loss’, which is her birth mother, Ann; Sissay, the loss of the Greenwood family and principally the processes, truths and non-truths, behind the loss of his birth mother.⁴⁷¹ For Traynor, perhaps, the loss is that of the original foster family; and mine is the loss of Mrs. Nicholas and the long-term impact of that separation.⁴⁷² Sissay’s work, in particular, offers the potential for further research: his connection between what I term ‘memory security’ with achieving visibility and identity, the role and impact of social work practice on childhood and the breakdown of the Greenwood placement.⁴⁷³ With Traynor, we learn of the internal undercurrents beneath the text: Winterson’s and Traynor’s undercurrents suggest a link between

⁴⁶⁴ Woolf, *A Room*, pp. 43-44.

⁴⁶⁵ Nasrullah Mambrol, *Analysis of Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own Literary Theory and Criticism* (11 October 2020), <https://literariness.org/2020/10/11/analysis-of-virginia-woolfs-a-room-of-ones-own> [Accessed: 3 March 2021].

⁴⁶⁶ Woolf, *A Room*, pp. 1, 43.

⁴⁶⁷ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 28.

⁴⁶⁸ Connell and Messerschmidt, (2005).

⁴⁶⁹ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 43.

⁴⁷⁰ Gornick, pp. 6-7.

⁴⁷¹ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 161; Sissay, pp. 71, 132-136.

⁴⁷² Traynor, pp. 83, 95; McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 164.

⁴⁷³ Sissay, p. 83; McGrath, *Critical Component*, p. 31.

children given up by birth mothers and possible suicide attempts, which point towards research into preventative actions and rebuilding lives.⁴⁷⁴

Winterson and Sissay's memoirs provide valuable research into personal narratives that engage with the impact of the loss of the birth mother upon the baby and the subsequent outcomes upon the adult. Their adult longing for invisible and hidden mothers also informs my own story. Traynor's indivisibility of fiction and nonfiction, her narrative's intractability regarding truth and non-truth, renders her work less scrutable and therefore more challenging as research material; nonetheless, her protagonist displays patterns of behaviour that expose internal realities observed in the other protagonists. Woolfian imagery – 'I could fancy that a thread of vital light became visible' – can facilitate visualisation of undercurrents beneath the text.⁴⁷⁵ Traynor's narrative is insightful as 'threads of vital light'; and her abuse narrative offers fleeting insight – vital light – into inner realities. Holistically, Traynor's narrative may not be entirely true, I argue, but the abuse experience is and elicits important tacit knowing.

Research Question One: *How is the loss of the birth mother as a baby portrayed within contemporary literature?*

Traynor's protagonist's birth mother, the fictitious Mary O'Leary, is mentioned rarely: portrayed as the 'invisible mother', 'Who's me real mother then? Where is she?'.⁴⁷⁶ At the crucial moment her birth mother's name is revealed, Traynor's character demonstrates no emotional connection to her, and the invisible mother disappears. Her narrative whole, however, portrays 'loss' as an atmosphere and constant companion: I articulate this loss as the 'lost soul' experience. The foundations of this loss are not attributed to the birth mother directly. There is no evidence that Traynor intends it or even alludes to it in her text. Yet, existing beneath Traynor's narrative is a sense of Winterson's 'lost loss'.⁴⁷⁷

Likewise, Sissay portrays an invisible and hidden mother: he does not address the topic of his birth mother and the act of separation from her but focuses on processes and answers to practical questions.⁴⁷⁸ He addresses the subject of separation through third party narratives.⁴⁷⁹ Ms Sissay is invisible: 'My story begins without her or any knowledge of her'.⁴⁸⁰ Sissay's early inquiries about her are identity questions and equally involve race: 'At school I was subject to all kinds of questions about my

⁴⁷⁴ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 168; Traynor, pp. 215-216.

⁴⁷⁵ Woolf, *Death of the Moth*, p. 10.

⁴⁷⁶ Traynor, pp. 98, 44, 97.

⁴⁷⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 191.

⁴⁷⁸ Sissay, p. 2.

⁴⁷⁹ Sissay, p. 9.

⁴⁸⁰ Sissay, p. 4.

race, which I couldn't answer. I brought all these questions home: 'She left you ... she didn't want you'.⁴⁸¹ Ms Sissay is the hidden mother that Sissay portrays as increasingly significant to him, and her absence develops into a deep longing. Does my memoir portray a loss and longing for my birth mother, Doreen? If it does, I do not recognise it. But perhaps, it is the story I do not know.

Winterson's narrative tackles Attachment theory directly and the impact upon a baby separated from its birth mother: 'in spite of important work by ... Bowlby on attachment, and the trauma of early separation from the love object that is the mother, a screaming baby wasn't a broken-hearted baby – she was a Devil baby'.⁴⁸² This reminds the reader of the opening sentence, where 'The Devil' led Mrs. Winterson 'to the wrong crib', within which lies Winterson.⁴⁸³ The memoir opens with Winterson alone, and she takes this aloneness with her to the Wintersons at Water Street; here, the rawness of separation is palpable within the screaming baby.⁴⁸⁴ Once, during childhood, she imagined her birth mother called to the house; the subject of her becomes suppressed, forgotten; and, when reminded, she remembers, I 'never wanted to find my birth parents'.⁴⁸⁵ However, finding a birth certificate she thought was hers triggers the re-emergence of the concept of birth mother, a growing intrigue and, finally, develops into the determination to find her. Her birth mother's presence is introduced on the first page, and the impact of the act of separation is equally fundamental to Winterson's story both beneath the text and explicitly narrated; it is the Stanislavskian through line with both a physical and tacit manifestation.⁴⁸⁶

Research Question Two: *Can research identify and articulate truths and emotions of a child separated from its mother and the impact upon the adult self?*

Winterson seamlessly connects the separated and broken-hearted baby to her adult self through the reignition of the 'lost loss' and her partner Deborah's sudden and final departure.⁴⁸⁷ As with Winterson's birth mother, one day Deborah is present; the next, she has disappeared, seemingly forever. The child and adult collide: 'waking up at night and finding myself on all fours shouting "Mummy, Mummy"'.⁴⁸⁸ Winterson demonstrates the impact on the adult of a baby separated from their birth mother, and as with the first research question, and of the three authors under consideration, Winterson responds to it the most convincingly. Sissay's focus on his

⁴⁸¹ Sissay, p. 25.

⁴⁸² Winterson, *Normal*, p. 20.

⁴⁸³ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 1.

⁴⁸⁴ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 19.

⁴⁸⁵ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 155.

⁴⁸⁶ Stanislavski, *An Actor Prepares*, p. 260.

⁴⁸⁷ Winterson, *Normal*, pp. 161-162.

⁴⁸⁸ Winterson, *Normal*, p. 162.

birth mother increases as the narrative develops, notably after he departs from the Greenwood family, when it might appear she becomes his primary focus; although I would also argue that Mrs. Greenwood is central to his loss and longing. For Sissay, the loss of his birth mother is an injustice and a crime, whereas the loss of the Greenwoods is his tragedy, as Mrs. Nicholas is mine.⁴⁸⁹

Except for asking who and where her birth mother is, Traynor's protagonist is generally silent about the impact of her birth mother and offers no causality between separation and her adult self. On the rare occasion she articulates a memory as an adult, it is to 'Mum and Dad', her former foster parents, the Milners, that her thoughts return.⁴⁹⁰

For each of the protagonists, as they exited the secure family homes for uncertainty, an involuntary process of re-construction of self was triggered and imposed, which would challenge them to the core of their identities, even their names. Traynor narrates: 'the door on my history closed leaving me rattling around in my future' and the beginning of her journey towards despair, with only a hint of a new beginning at the narrative's close.⁴⁹¹ There are parallels with Winterson's stories, their journeys towards attempted suicide, but Winterson takes the reader beyond it, to a place of confrontation with the self, to her birth mother and new horizons: to the re-construction of her identities. Sissay, compelled to hug a mother who would not hug him back, narrates a sense of loss; yet, he emerges with a new sense of 'self-identification... Ethiopian roots... black consciousness and black pride'; eventually, he will confront his social work records.⁴⁹² As Strawberry Water moves away from me, as the car reverses through the gateway pillars, a life of detachment and fragmentation begins, until – over thirty-five years later and on the non-descript field at Welcombe – I digest my social work records and step into my future, beginning a dialogical relationship with the self. I reject the constructed realities others had imposed and I had adopted: the 'thick' and 'difficult' identities. I choose, instead, a new process of narrated re-construction, towards new identities and realities and new writing. I develop 'an unfixd reality, that discounts the notion of a bounded self as a singular identity in a social world ... it is not the self that individuals bring to form relationships, but ... the psychological self [that] emerges'.⁴⁹³ The psychological self emerges through the narrative; the reader can find meaning in the atmosphere beneath the text; it is embedded within the silence on the non-descript

⁴⁸⁹ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 128.

⁴⁹⁰ Traynor, p. 44.

⁴⁹¹ Traynor, p. 97.

⁴⁹² Sissay, p. 165.

⁴⁹³ Neil Summers, 'From schoolboy to counsellor: An auto ethnography of deconstructions and re-constructions of the self as a learner'. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing (Early Access)*, (11 February 2021), <<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/jpm.12741>> [Accessed 09 September 2021].

field at Welcombe, in the raindrops on the windscreen of the motorhome, as the child-me meets the adult-me and we walk together along my childhood lanes – and in the silent scream on the clifftop at Welcombe Mouth as I look into the darkness. I have written scenes full of metaphor and connotation to which the reader can bring their emotions and insights and engage with my processes of remembering that they might listen to the humming beneath the text and perhaps offer a dialogic response. It is the Stanislavskian relationship between the text and its reader; the understanding, emotional engagement, experiential input, through which both writer and reader might share and develop new knowledge and new ways of thinking.

My social work records were a pivotal addition to the research process and prompted a new assessment of both the critical and creative components. Having already reflected on the historical stories passed down to me from childhood within the memoir, the new narratives found within the social work records undermined the old. A metanarrative emerged with new voices and alternative truth claims. It was out of these – in emotional despair – that I was forced to re-construct new identities and new ways of thinking about my past, my present – and finally – a freedom and a future. Some claims engaged with the traditional narratives heard before; for example, that I was a mentally handicapped baby. Other narratives were new and challenged my perception of characters involved: that my natural father had left Doreen and his children in January, professing to be ‘fed up’ and returned only to take the television; how Doreen had woven a series of lies to shield him and herself from social services and financial responsibility for my twin and me, had never returned for us but instead signed a number of adoption forms over seven years even though she was by then a married mother, with a civil servant husband and her own home. These previously silenced narratives encouraged me to re-construct my long-held assumptions about my birth parents, which encouraged me to re-evaluate my identity as their son and, eventually, in the light of new incidents, led me to change my name.

Reminiscent of Sissay, Traynor’s protagonist highlights the confusion around her name: when she attempts to register herself at the nurses’ home, she is invisible, does not appear on the list of expected admissions. There is no Josephine Milner or Wallace; she discovers she has been renamed in her absence to reflect her birth name; without consultation, she becomes ‘Josephine O’Leary’. This new O’Leary era begins with her standing alone in her room, her new home, with her new identity, with ‘the door on my history closed leaving me rattling around in my future, I paused for breath. A deep breath. Then I opened my suitcase...’.⁴⁹⁴ This is ‘creative memory’.⁴⁹⁵ It is also a powerful articulation of the moment she leaves the care

⁴⁹⁴ Traynor, p. 97.

⁴⁹⁵ McGrath, *Critical Component*, p. 31.

system and begins independent living and adulthood: a pause, deep breath and the physical action of opening her suitcase. What follows is difficulty integrating with peers, an escape to isolation, drinking and her eventual suicide attempt. Traynor narrates an emotional journey; she does not link separation as a baby and her childhood with adult experiences. Mary O’Leary is a printed name, which is how it remains. It is never a person. She is, throughout, ‘the invisible mother’.⁴⁹⁶

Traynor’s imagery here is strong. However, it presents the question of veracity within creative memory; it prompts me to introduce the third research question: *Is accessibility to truth and non-truth essential to a holistic understanding of personal narrative?*

The authors’ primary texts convince that their personal narratives are essentially developed from real life experience; yet all exhibit examples of elaborated creative memory which can be agenda-led and culturally influenced. The creative can impose upon – rather than enhance – the memory. One senses the vibration of imposition, a ‘wild flash of imagination ... which leaves them flawed and imperfect’.⁴⁹⁷ In Traynor, it is the wild flash of imagination that can interrupt. The enmeshment of truth and non-truth, the indivisibility of genres, fiction and nonfiction, obscures clarity and hinders insight; however, the ‘wild flashes’ also hint at a Stanislavskian ‘art of authenticity’.⁴⁹⁸

My response to Sissay’s memoir is critical, but I have engaged with the structure within which he tells his stories: he offers separated memory, commentary, and official documents, which allow his creative input to be more thoroughly scrutinised. Out of Sissay’s process I have consciously employed what I have termed ‘Creative Memory’. Ishbel told me of her memory of me at Mrs. Nicholas’s sitting in my highchair, propped up and unresponsive. Ishbel later withdrew this story. She had no memory of it, she said. When my social services records arrived, there it was in the text: me sitting in my highchair, propped up and unresponsive, in Mrs. Nicholas’s kitchen when the other children – teenagers – at the children’s home arrived back from school. This reflects Ishbel’s original memory and my social work records. However, I elaborate the scene – my memory of Ishbel’s story: ‘I had been stimulated by all the other children at the home as they arrived back from school, chatting, laughing, teasing and shoving one another – loud and boisterous’.⁴⁹⁹ I, like Ishbel, had no understanding as to whether I had been stimulated but it is a possibility that I was or perhaps the children arrived home in silence that day

⁴⁹⁶ Traynor, p. 97.

⁴⁹⁷ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 21.

⁴⁹⁸ Mullen, (2016).

⁴⁹⁹ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 154.

infuriated by a teacher or games lesson. My scene is creative memory. By drawing an easily imagined scene, a memory many people might have of their teenage years, or a group of teenagers many of us have witnessed on a bus, in a shop or in the middle of a city. It is possible that a reader will bring their own scene – embedded in memory and cultural context – to my story without consciously doing so; without creative memory, this triggered process might be less natural, interactive and transformative.

It is a requisite in memoir and personal narratives that the reader is given sufficient knowledge to distinguish truth and non-truth. One may challenge Sissay's manipulation of his sources and commentary, but this he does overtly, allowing scrutiny. As Woolf would have it: 'One can only show how one came to hold whatever opinion one does hold ... give one's audience the chance of drawing their own conclusions as they observe the limitations, the prejudices, the idiosyncrasies of the speaker'.⁵⁰⁰

Each of the protagonists interact with real communities of identifiable people; for example, Traynor, the anonymised Milners and Mrs. Wallace; Sissay, the Greenwoods and Norman Goldthorpe; and Winterson, her adoptive mother, Mrs. Winterson. Without exception, each implicated person, fellow actor, is portrayed negatively. This brings us to the final research question: *When writing identifiable others into creative memory and enmeshed personal narratives, is ethicality a concern for the writer?*

The cause and effect of Ulrika Jonsson's autobiographical narrative about her sexual assault by an unnamed TV presenter, the speculation, accusations, subsequent court cases against John Leslie, and his acquittals highlight a contemporary example of an anonymised autobiographical text which instigated devastation upon real lives.⁵⁰¹

Perhaps Jonsson did not anticipate the consequences of her anonymised TV presenter on the world of an unsuspecting TV presenter. Traynor appears to anonymise her abuser, 'Martin', a foster brother. However, if – as with Jonsson's abuser – Martin masks a real character, he might have been raised on a Liverpool council estate by strict Catholic parents, 'who were very poor, with lots of children'; and who fostered a black girl called Joanna in the 1960s.⁵⁰² He later married and

⁵⁰⁰ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 18.

⁵⁰¹ Jonsson, (2002); *Former Blue Peter Presenter John Leslie Cleared in Sexual Assault Trial* (19 October 2020), *The Guardian* <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2020/oct/19/former-blue-peter-presenter-john-leslie-cleared-in-sexual-assault-trial> [Accessed: 07 March 2021].

⁵⁰² Traynor, pp. 16-18; Pizzichini, (29 August 1998).

'had two baby girls, one of them with a cleft palate'.⁵⁰³ There is a sufficiently detailed picture emerging within Traynor's anonymised text and publicity interviews to allow for speculation and accusation against a real person, whether the actual abuser or an innocent substitute, and this event demonstrates the importance of writers considering the ethicality and possible consequences of the words they write.

My creative component begins not with my memoir but with a discussion about communication, the freedom of speech, censorship and the ethicality of writing about other people and including their stories. I introduce the subject of anonymity and the complexities connected to anonymising real people: 'how am I to make anonymous 'mother', 'sibling', or 'guardian' – all those individuals essential to my story?'.⁵⁰⁴ The early conclusion was that one could not wholly anonymise; as demonstrated by the case of 'Banksy', there will almost certainly be someone somewhere who can identify most people.⁵⁰⁵ Although a valuable convention and sometimes, as I found, the only option available – for positive and ethical reasons – anonymising is a problematical option for writers of memoir and autobiographical narrative.

Woolf focusses the mind once more: 'stick to facts', she writes, 'the truer the facts the better the fiction – so we are told'.⁵⁰⁶ Her advice is true for memoir also: the truer the facts the better the memoir.

⁵⁰³ Traynor, p. 57.

⁵⁰⁴ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 95.

⁵⁰⁵ McGrath, *Beneath Silence*, p. 95.

⁵⁰⁶ Woolf, *A Room*, p. 32.