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***ANY OTHER MOUTH: WRITING THE HYBRID MEMOIR***

Anneliese MacAdams B. A. (Hons.) M. Litt.

Ph.D. by Publication, 2017

## ABSTRACT

This Ph.D. by Publication comprises my short story collection, *Any Other Mouth*, along with a reflective and critical exegesis, which examines what I have termed the *hybrid memoir*. The term describes memoiristic texts that contain significant transgressions from the conventional memoir genre. As well as discussing the definition and its implications, this exegesis demonstrates that *Any Other Mouth* represents an original contribution to knowledge in the way that it engages and experiments with the hybrid memoir form.

In Part One, I define the term hybrid memoir, and explain why my definition differs to that of author/academic Natalia Rachel Singer, who in 2004 was the first person to suggest a definition for the term. With reference to Chris N. van der Merwe and Hein Viljoen (2007) and Vanessa Guignery (Eds. Guignery, Pesso-Miquel, & Specq, 2011), I discuss hybridity as a literary concept, and state that texts that occupy ‘liminal’ spaces can be transformative. By way of contrast, I clarify what is meant by a conventional (non-hybrid) memoir, using a definition by Thomas G. Couser (2011). I mention the problems encountered in producing the hybrid memoir definition, but argue that in spite of such complexities, I believe the term to be a useful tool for thinking about certain texts.

In Part Two, I discuss the rising popularity of hybrid memoirs, using David Shield’s (2011) *Reality Hunger: A Manifesto* as a starting point. I note the limitations of Shield’s work, but propose that it nonetheless provides a key resource in my discussion. I describe some of the significant transgressions from the conventional memoir genre that take place in *Any Other Mouth*, and also Dave Eggers’s (2007) *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* and David Vann’s (2009) *Legend of a Suicide*. I explain that these works provide

helpful comparisons to my own book, due to their hybrid forms and their explorations of filial bereavement. In relation to all three texts, I examine how the hybrid memoir provides authors with new opportunities for self-expression. Building on research carried out by Leigh Gilmore (2001), Elise Miller (2011), and Katarzyna Małecka (2015), I look at how trauma caused by filial bereavement can manifest in the hybrid memoir at a structural and linguistic level. I explore how hybrid memoirs can enable bereaved authors to effectively portray their emotions, and posit that the writing process can help transform grief.

The exegesis concludes by using Patricia Leavy's (2014) text *Method Meets Art* to establish why I view my creative work as a practice-based methodology, and I discuss how my creative practice continues to engage with my research. After emphasising how important writing *Any Other Mouth* has been for me, I explain the limitations of my research, and identify areas where further research could be undertaken by others in the field.

***ANY OTHER MOUTH: WRITING THE HYBRID MEMOIR***

Anneliese MacAdams B. A. (Hons.) M. Litt.

A THESIS SUBMITTED TO THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH, UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD, IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF PH.D. BY PUBLICATION, ACCOMPANIED BY A HARD COPY OF *ANY OTHER MOUTH*. I AM THE SOLE AUTHOR OF THE ABOVE WORK.

MARCH 2017

## **DECLARATION**

This thesis is entirely my own work and has not been submitted in any form for the award of Higher Degree at any other educational institution.

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

With thanks to my supervisors Dr. Simon Crump and Dr. Jodie Matthews for their guidance and expertise. Thanks also to Socrates MacAdams, Susan Mackintosh, and Kirsten Mackintosh for their support and encouragement.

## INTRODUCTION: *Any Other Mouth: A Hybrid Memoir*

[W]e do not, after all, simply have experience; we are entrusted with it. We must do something—make something—with it. A story, we sense, is the only possible habituation for the burden of our witnessing. (Hampl, 1999: p. 18)

My short story collection, *Any Other Mouth*, begins:

1. 68% happened.
2. 32% did not happen.
3. I will never tell. (Mackintosh, 2014: p. iii)

This is one of the most frequent citations in the book's reviews.<sup>1</sup> Reviewer Nija Dalal (2014) writes:

With those three short sentences, Mackintosh kicks off a series of somewhat true stories based on her life—the main character, Gretchen, bears likeness to the author . . . But that first page leaves you wondering, through every sometimes-brutal, sometimes-heartbreaking, sometimes-precious tale, whether this bit really happened—and whether that bit was actually much worse than described. . .

As a reader, there is something special about that wondering.

For Dalal, the percentages present the reader with a puzzle: is it possible to deduce which parts of the stories might be true? Indeed, one reviewer states that 'the reader can't help but

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<sup>1</sup> Excluding Amazon and Goodreads, seventeen online reviews (of the UK version of the book) out of twenty-one mention these percentages [Google search accessed 6 June 2016].

be seduced to play a game of hide and seek' (Cat, 2014), while another writes: 'this teasing game of fiction and biography that [Mackintosh] sets in motion parched my mouth with anticipation for what was to come' (Ruddock, 2014). Furthermore, some readers have wondered if the percentages themselves might be fabricated. Reviewer Gemma Elliott (2015) writes: 'should the reader even believe those percentages? And does it matter?' Rachel Kendall (2014) posits:

Any attempt by the reader to figure out what is real and what isn't . . . is futile. Writers are the best liars . . . whatever percentage of these tales is "true" does not matter, because even the most horrid scenes (and there are some particularly difficult ones) could have come from "real life" but with the sharp corners filed down. Because that's what happens when trauma is translated into text.

*Any Other Mouth* was indeed brought about by trauma, and I have come to describe the book's unusual, composite form—described by Kaite Welsh (2014) in the *List* as sitting 'at the intersection between short story collection, novel and memoir'—as a *hybrid memoir*, which I will go on to define in Part One.

Using existing terminology, the book could be described as a short story cycle, as Sherwood Anderson's 1919 text, *Winesberg, Ohio*, is commonly described—indeed, 'Sherwood Anderson claimed that he had invented the genre' (Pacht, 2009: p. 4). Forrest Ingram's (1971: p. 19) definition of a short story cycle is 'a book of short stories so linked to each other by their author that the reader's successive experience on various levels of the pattern of the whole significantly modifies his experience of each of its component parts'. *Any Other Mouth* could perhaps also be described, like William Faulkner's *Go Down, Moses*, as a composite novel, where: 'all the stories have the structural features that make them seem to a reader independent and meaningful without the others: however—and the distinction is crucial—separately they mean something different from what they mean when read in the

sequence where their [author] published them’ (Ferguson, 2003: para. 10). The fact that I explicitly state at the start of *Any Other Mouth* that 68% of what follows really happened to me (whether the reader believes it or not) pushes the book into memoir territory, as well as these other possible categories. It is this unexpected mix of genres, and the difficulty my readers have had in classifying the book, that has led me to seek a specific term for it—one that incorporates the memoiristic element.

Returning to the percentages at the start of the book, and Elliot’s (2015) question regarding their truth, the answer is as follows: although, instinctively, they feel about right to me, there is no exact science behind them. By using statistics, however, I playfully hint at the impossibility of ever coming up with a precise method of measuring the ratio of truth to fiction in any story, memoir or otherwise. This question of reality versus fantasy in memoir is one that permeates *Any Other Mouth*, as well as Eggers’s and Vann’s hybrid works, which I will explore in Part Two. I will demonstrate how the hybrid memoir enables authors to interrogate standard memoiristic convention, taking ‘the burden of our witnessing’ (Hampl, 1999: p. 18) and using it to create something powerful, original, and even transformative.

I view this exegesis as a form of personal criticism,<sup>2</sup> which is a type of academic discourse that includes subjective experience and has often been associated with female voices, as discussed in the *Encyclopedia of Women’s Autobiography*:

the incorporation of autobiography in academic criticism constituted not only a political act but also a feminist epistemology: a way of reading and writing that took into account women’s perspectives on academic texts . . . . the impulse behind personal criticism ultimately is rooted in the need to claim a **space** in the academy

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<sup>2</sup> Leigh Gilmore (2001: p. 17) notes that the method of blending personal essay with formal criticism is one that has gained momentum in recent years: ‘professors of literature have produced a discourse or “personal criticism” that levers the autobiographical “I” to the fore, sometimes in essays published in scholarly journals or anthologies, and sometimes in memoirs per se’.

from which they can speak with authority. (Boynton and Malin, 2005: p. 459, bold in original)

Given that this exegesis draws heavily upon my own experiences of producing a book about my own life, I believe that this is the most appropriate form for the discussion to take place. In this way, I believe that I am able to formulate an argument from which I can speak with authority.

## PART ONE: What is a Hybrid Memoir?

There's only one kind of memoir I can see to write and that's a slippery, playful, impish, exasperating one, shaped, if it could be, like a question mark. (Shields, 2011: p. 71)

Quasi-memoir. Anti-memoir. Mash-up memoir.<sup>3</sup> An increasingly popular trend is emerging in writing about the self,<sup>4</sup> which involves creating the sorts of 'slippery, playful, impish, exasperating' memoirs that author David Shields, paraphrasing American psychologist and writer Lauren Slater, speaks of in the quotation above.<sup>5</sup> It is difficult to find the right label for these books, because they come in so many different guises and belong to so many subtly variant subgenres. They are the sorts of texts that booksellers might place tentatively in Fiction, Life-writing, or Poetry, but they never quite find an appropriate home; the sorts of books that authors or publishers may choose to categorise simply according to which genre they think will result in the most sales.

I have chosen to use the term hybrid memoir in this exegesis, as I feel that it places emphasis on the fact that the type of writing I want to describe is memoir *combined with something else*. David Duff (2014: p. xiv) defines the hybridisation of genres as 'The process

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to Thompson (1993), Misztal (2007), and Ebersson (2011) respectively.

<sup>4</sup> In a *Guardian* feature on the rise in popularity of works that challenge generic boundaries in literature, Geoff Dyer writes: 'At this moment, it's the shifting sands between fiction and nonfiction that compel attention' (Dyer et al., 2015).

<sup>5</sup> In fact, Shields intentionally alters a quotation by Lauren Slater (2001: p. 221), whose original words are: 'When all is said and done, there is only one kind of illness memoir I can see to write, and that's a slippery, playful, impish, exasperating text, shaped, if it could be, like a question mark?' Of particular note is the extra word 'illness' in Slater's words.

by which two or more genres combine to form a new genre or subgenre; or by which elements of two or more genres are combined in a single work'.<sup>6</sup> The implications of generic hybridity are important. Hybridity scholars Chris N. van der Merwe and Hein Viljoen (2007: p. 4) assert that there is a 'transformative power of in-between zones represented in literature', while Vanessa Guignery states: 'The encounters and mixtures triggered off by hybrid processes open up new perspectives on the world and result in artistic forms which can combine different styles, languages, modes and genres' (Eds. Guignery et al., 2011: p. 3). I believe that these two assertions can be applied to the hybrid memoir. The 'new perspectives' (Eds. Guignery et al., 2011: p. 3) opened up when authors combine their own life stories with unexpected content, styles, or structures, can create powerful 'in-between zones' (Van der Merwe & Viljoen, 2007: p. 4). In such spaces, there are opportunities for authors to shape their texts in ways that might not be possible in standard memoirs, and, as I will go on to argue in Part Two of this exegesis, the process can indeed be transformative.

Before proposing an exact definition for my term, I will discuss where I first came across it. American author and academic Natalia Rachel Singer was not the first to use the term 'hybrid memoir',<sup>7</sup> but she is the first who has sought a scholarly definition for it. In an article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, Singer (2004: p. 14) states:

The books that have influenced me most as a writer of creative nonfiction and a professor specializing in this genre are what I call hybrid memoirs—works in which a writer presents a life through a lens that reflects both inward and outward. The memoir . . . has come under attack in recent years as an outlet for an author's narcissism, but I have always taught my students that the best memoirists allow their

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of Mikhail Bakhtin and Homi Bhabha, two scholars who contributed much to early discussions of hybridity in literature, see Eds. Guignery et al. (2011).

<sup>7</sup> The first recorded usage is in a 1997 review of Meera Syal's *Anita and Me* in *The New Press*, which states: '*Anita and Me*, whether pure fiction or hybrid memoir, is a delightful and illuminating view of yet another kind of immigrant life in the mid-twentieth century' (Brown, 1997: p. 7). The phrase 'hybrid novel-memoir' was also used by Thompson (1993: pp. 59-78) in relation to Lothar-Günther Buchheim's 1973 novel *Das Boot*.

life experiences to shed light on a culture, a historical moment, a time, a place, a social problem, a political issue that remains timely. Four such memoirists/essayists are George Orwell, James Baldwin, Susan Griffin, and Alix Kates Shulman.

To unpack Singer's definition of the hybrid memoir, further contextualisation is required. Natalia Rachel Singer writes and teaches in the field of creative nonfiction, which evolved in the late 1970s out of the reportage style known as New Journalism, 'on the border between the novel and journalism' (Muhlmann, 2008: p. 135). Lee Gutkind (2007: p. ix), founder and editor of the *Creative Nonfiction* magazine, explains that 'the primary goal of the creative nonfiction writer is to communicate information just like a reporter, but to shape it in a way that reads like fiction'. This understanding of creative nonfiction as a method of reportage is key. In the introduction to *Creating Nonfiction: Lessons from the Voice of the Genre*, Singer notes that:

today's readers . . . . are choosing to learn about Vietnamese war brides, the years of Stalin, and the American 1950s not from the so-called expert historians or ruling patriarchs who led from inside their offices, but from "real people" whose solitary landscapes and single voices have a power which illuminates the larger humanity we all share. (Eds. Gutkind & Jodlowski, 2013: chapter 1, para. 22)

The memoirs that Singer is interested in here contain 'I-as-eyewitness truth' (Eds. Gutkind & Jodlowski, 2013: chapter 1, para. 22). Indeed, Singer (2004: p. 14) states that she hopes that future memoirists 'will use their lives and the worlds they render as a means to become more engaged citizens and commentators on world events'. For Singer, the hybrid memoirist must use her own experiences to provide a cultural, historical, social, geographical, or political commentary. In referencing Orwell, Baldwin, Griffin, and Shulman in her definition of the hybrid memoir, Singer identifies authors who have explicitly addressed

issues of war, race, class, illness and family in their works.<sup>8</sup>

This, for me, is where Singer's definition becomes problematic. There is an assumption here that a standard memoir would not 'shed light' on such issues on its own, but that the author must provide some extra content or literary technique in order to make this commentary possible. Singer's assumption could be interrogated using, for instance, the second-wave feminist argument that 'the personal is political' (Hanisch, 1970: p. 76), and the idea that any memoir is inescapably tied up in a cultural, historical, social, geographical and political context. Jinx Stapleton Watson (2002: p. 11), who has written about the importance of using memoir as a historical tool, writes: 'Memoirists' stories offer readers insight into what makes us human . . . We begin to understand the universal issues that their particular story presents'. Whether an author intends to explicitly contextualise her own life and provide a commentary on people, places or events external to it is arguably irrelevant, because the context is inescapable. Indeed, the fact that Singer (2004: p. 14) talks of a hybrid memoirist presenting 'a life through a lens that reflects both inward and outward' implies that for her, the two can be separated, and that it is possible for people to talk about their own lives without them being intrinsically embedded in any context.

Doğan Gürpınar (2012: p. 537), who has researched the political and ideological meanings attributed to memoirs in twentieth-century Turkey, notes the usefulness of historical memoirs because of their inherent context: 'As the subjectivity of history was recognized, historians now took memoirs, personal accounts, and narratives seriously and began to posit them within the larger picture of the socio-economical and political context in their subjectivity'. This is important, Gürpınar (2012: p. 538) explains, for learning about

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<sup>8</sup> For example: Orwell's (1938) *Homage to Catalonia* is his account of the Spanish Civil War; Baldwin's (1972) *No Name in the Street* recounts the author's experiences growing up as an African-American in 1950s Harlem, as well as recalling the murders of Martin Luther King and Malcolm X; Griffin's (1999) *What Her Body Thought* provides an account of the author's experiences with Chronic Fatigue and Immune Dysfunction Syndrome, while drawing conclusions about illness and society in general; Shulman's (1995) *Drinking the Rain* 'juggles spiritual and political autobiography with a lyrical poetics of place' (Singer, 2004: p. 14).

members of society whose voices might previously have been excluded: ‘Historians of gender studies have shown an astute interest in autobiographical writings, rightly perceiving them to be valuable and heuristic sources exhibiting the subjectivities of women who were marginalized and excluded from written history’. Leigh Gilmore (2001: p. 16) agrees with this assertion, stating that ‘Women, people of color, gay men and lesbians, the disabled, and survivors of violence have contributed to the expansion of self-representation by illuminating suppressed histories and creating new emphases’. If memoirs, subjective as they are, can shed light on the experiences of minority voices throughout history, then according to Singer’s definition there would be something inherently hybrid about *all* memoirs, rendering the term ineffective.

Rather than dwelling on the potential inaccuracies within Singer’s definition, however, I would like to redefine hybrid memoir in more expansive terms, and posit that a hybrid memoir is *any memoir in which its author purposefully disrupts standard memoiristic convention in the telling of his or her own life, by using significant transgressions in content, style, or structure*. As a result, the author will likely push generic boundaries, creating a text that may ultimately be difficult to categorise.

I will go on to explain what I mean by ‘standard memoiristic convention’, but before that, I would like to suggest some books that could be termed hybrid memoirs using my definition. The list is by no means exhaustive, but used illustratively. Maxine Hong Kingston’s (1976) *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* blends memoir with Chinese folk tales;<sup>9</sup> Nicholson Baker’s (1991) *U and I: A True Story* combines

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<sup>9</sup> Rak (2004: p. 493) mentions Maxine Hong Kingston’s book, along with Carolyn Steedman’s (1986) *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Women* and Azar Nafisi’s (2003) *Reading Lolita in Tehran: A Memoir in Books*, and states: ‘Instead of inventing new terms like outlaw genre or neologisms like autography of biomythography to describe these forms, it may make more sense to see these books as their authors described them: memoirs that are intended to combine public and private discourse as the stories of the writer entwine with the stories of others’. By using the term ‘hybrid memoir’, I hope to allow this emphasis on memoir to remain, as well as the combining and entwining Rak describes.

memoir with a biography of John Updike; Marianna de Marco Torgovnick's (1994) *Crossing Ocean Parkway* explores the Italian-American author's experiences of crossing cultural boundaries while including scholarly investigations into American cultural icons;<sup>10</sup> Geoff Dyer's (1997) *Out of Sheer Rage: In the Shadow of D. H. Lawrence* blends memoir with literary criticism; Lauren Slater's (2000) *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir* combines memoir with a possibly-fictional story of a girl's struggle with epilepsy; Art Spiegelman's (2003) *Maus* recounts the author's father's experiences of the Holocaust in graphic novel format, using allegorical animal imagery to depict characters; Damon Galgut's (2010) *In a Strange Room* is a third person account (with occasional first-person and second-person interpolations) of a young South African man's journeys through Greece, Africa, and India—significantly, the protagonist's name and nationality are the same as the author's; David Shield's (2010) *The Thing About Life Is That One Day You'll Be Dead* investigates human mortality while commenting on the author's relationship with his elderly father; Lidia Yuknavitch's (2010) *The Chronology of Water: A Memoir* is an account of the gifted swimmer's struggles with sport, addiction and familial problems, containing experiments with style and structure, including use of the second person; Caitlin Moran's (2011) *How to be a Woman* combines memoir with feminist essay; Sheila Heti's (2012) *How Should a Person Be?* is part autobiography, part essay, containing (possibly fictionalised) transcripts of the author's interviews with her friends; Kyle Boelte's (2015) *The Beautiful Unseen* recalls the author's brother's suicide in tandem with an investigation into the foggy climate in San Francisco; David Lynch's forthcoming *Life & Work* (due 2017) will be a 'memoir/biography hybrid' (Kreps, 2015), in which Lynch will tell his life story via conversations with others, and then add a memoiristic commentary alongside it. From this relatively brief list alone, it is

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<sup>10</sup> Gilmore (2001: p. 1, footnote 2) includes a list of 'academics, perhaps the group considered least likely to cross over, [who] are producing personal criticism, hybrid combinations of scholarship and life writing, and memoir proper'.

evident that the hybrid memoir is not specific to any one gender or geographical location. The transgressions from memoiristic convention come in many forms, including fictionalisation, scholarly essay, stylistic experimentation, and philosophical discussion.

Given that *Any Other Mouth* combines memoir with the short story, it is worth pausing to consider where my work is situated among other texts belonging to this subgenre. As I will go on to discuss, David Vann's *Legend of a Suicide*, published in 2009, reimagines episodes surrounding his father's death via a collection of short stories plus a novella.<sup>11</sup> Penelope Lively's 2005 collection, *Making It Up*, contains eight short stories. At the start of each one, Lively presents the reader with a brief passage of nonfiction, describing a real episode in her life. The story that follows is an exercise in imagining what might have happened if that episode had played out differently.<sup>12</sup> In the Preface to her work, Lively (2006: pp. 1-2) states:

This book is fiction. If anything, it is an anti-memoir. My own life serves as the prompt . . . . It is a form of confabulation. That word has a precise meaning: in psychiatric terminology, it refers to the creation of imaginary remembered experiences which replace the gaps left by disorders of the memory. My memory is not yet disordered; this exercise in confabulation is a piece of fictional licence.

Vann and I also use this technique of 'confabulation' (Lively, 2006: p. 2), which I will discuss in the following section of the exegesis. Despite having just mentioned two short story / memoir hybrids which employ similar techniques to *Any Other Mouth*, there is, in

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<sup>11</sup> The British version lacks a contents page and has numbered, chapter-like sections. Moreover, the blurb describes the text as 'a remarkably tender story of loss, survival and disillusioned love' (Vann, 2009, back cover). See Linklater (2009) for a discussion of the importance of viewing the book as a collection rather than a novel. Furthermore, note the similarity to *Any Other Mouth*, which is not described as a short story collection on the front cover, and, in the blurb on the back, only vaguely refers to the 'tales' (Mackintosh, 2014, back cover) contained within. It is possible that the hybrid nature of these books makes writers and publishers feel less willing to give them a distinct classification, but my suspicion is that publishers package these books as though they are novels rather than collections in an attempt to generate higher sales. This assertion requires further interrogation, which is beyond the scope of this commentary.

<sup>12</sup> See Oró-Piqueras (2017) for more on the relationship between the personal and the historical in this work.

general, a shortage of texts in this subgenre, perhaps due to the paucity of publishing deals for short story collections in recent times.<sup>13</sup> Among the collections that do exist—while they might not so easily be termed hybrid memoirs—many employ autobiographical information in innovative ways, such as Lorrie Moore’s 1985 text, *Self-Help*, which contains ostensibly semi-autobiographical<sup>14</sup> stories in the second-person, mimicking self-improvement manuals.<sup>15</sup> J. T. LeRoy’s *The Heart is Deceitful Above All Things*, published in 1999, presents allegedly personal information via a literary persona.<sup>16</sup>

Returning to the hybrid memoir definition: in order to locate generic transgressions in hybrid memoirs, I must be clear about what I mean by ‘standard memoiristic convention’, if such a thing can be said to exist. In *Memoir: An Introduction*, Thomas G. Couser (2011: pp. 23-24) writes:

memoirs are *not* novels. Rather, they are nonfictional life narratives. They may focus on the author, on someone else, or on the relation between them.<sup>17</sup> They may try to narrate an entire life course or merely one of its temporal chapters, and they may attempt to include more or fewer of the dimensions of the author’s life.

*Autobiographies* are generally more comprehensive—in chronology and otherwise; *memoirs* are generally more focused and selective.

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<sup>13</sup> As Paul McVeigh (2015) notes: ‘It is difficult to get a short story collection published in the UK, unless you are a well-known author. Certainly, getting any money for that collection is even harder’.

<sup>14</sup> Sharon Olds’s phrase ‘apparently personal’ (Blossom, 1993: p. 30) is applicable here, and will be discussed in more detail in Part Two.

<sup>15</sup> Stories by Moore (2010) such as ‘How to be an Other Woman’ (pp. 1-22), ‘The Kid’s Guide to Divorce’ (pp. 47-52) and ‘How to Become a Writer’ (pp. 117-126) provided inspiration for ‘Doctors’ (Mackintosh, 2014: pp. 101-110) and ‘A Rough Guide to Grief’ (Mackintosh, 2014: pp. 133-140) in *Any Other Mouth*.

<sup>16</sup> There are certainly hybridities at play in regards to LeRoy’s text, notably in the dual authorship of the male persona acted out by Savannah Knoop, who gave readings and interviews posing as LeRoy, alongside the real author, Laura Albert, who impersonated LeRoy’s friend ‘Speedie’. See Steve Rose (2016) for a discussion of Albert’s ‘literary hoax’.

<sup>17</sup> Given that most modern memoirs focus upon the self, my definition of ‘standard memoiristic convention’ will normally assume a first person narrative about the author’s own life.

The two main ‘rules’ of a memoir that can be seen here are that it: 1) must be nonfictional; 2) must be a life narrative. When I discuss hybrid memoirs in the following section, then, I will be looking at the ways that authors *purposefully disrupt* these rules in their works.

However, this definition of memoir is by necessity a simplification. Couser (2011: p. 15) acknowledges the ‘inherent ambiguity’ in the term *memoir*. Rak (2004: p. 495) notes that memoir’s ‘gender and number are inconsistent, reflecting its multiple meanings as a document note or a record, a record of historic events based on the writer’s personal knowledge or experience, an autobiography or a biography, an essay, or a memory kept of someone’. Historically, although the first recorded use of the word ‘memoir’ to mean ‘autobiographical observations; reminiscences’ (‘Memoir’, 2016)<sup>18</sup> occurred in the seventeenth century, over a hundred years earlier than the word ‘autobiography’ (‘Autobiography’, 2016), the difference in meaning between the two was not remarkable. There is a sense that the precision of the term ‘autobiography’—which was described as ‘pedantic’ by William Taylor in the *Monthly Review* in 1797 (‘Autobiography’, 2016)—means that it has historically carried with it the connotation of being slightly less engaging. As Roald Dahl (2012: p. 9) writes in *Boy*: ‘An autobiography is a book a person writes about his own life and it is usually full of all sorts of boring details’. Memoirs have been considered more about gossip and salacious details. For example, in 1818, Seba Smith wrote ‘Any one who provides good dinners for clever people, and remembers what they say, cannot fail to write entertaining memoirs’ (‘Memoir’, 2016).

Despite its entertainment value, memoir has ‘been treated as a minor form of autobiography’ (Rak, 2004: p. 473). This is due to the fact that it has been associated with ‘non-professional or non-literary textual production, [and] has often stood in for problems

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<sup>18</sup> In fact, ‘memoirs’ in the plural came first, in 1676 (‘Memoir’, 2016).

that a wide variety of autobiography critics have had with popular writing' (p. 484).<sup>19</sup>

According to Rak (p. 496), memoir did not become 'acceptable' until the end of the eighteenth-century: 'the moment when Rousseau incorporates scandal memoir into *The Confessions* and insists that he did so for moral reasons is also the moment when memoir becomes part of autobiography, and autobiography itself becomes fashionable'.<sup>20</sup>

Today, critics continue to debate the difference between autobiography and memoir. Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson (2010: p. 274) state that: 'in contemporary parlance *autobiography* and *memoir* are used interchangeably'. Indeed, many bookshops do not discriminate between the two terms. At the time this exegesis is being written, for example, the website for Waterstones (2016) contains a section called 'Biography & True Stories', differentiating only between 'Arts & entertainment biographies'; 'Business & industry biographies'; 'Collected biographies'; 'Diaries, letters & journals'; and 'General biography'. Blackwell's (2016) and Foyles (2016) *do* list memoir as a *subcategory* of biography, but there is a lack of clarity in both cases as to how this section differs, from example, to the subcategory of 'True stories' on the Foyles website, or 'Women' on the Blackwell's website. The term memoir seems to function more as a label for search engines than as a categorical definition.<sup>21</sup> It is interesting, however, that Foyles (2016) differentiates between 'True Stories' and 'Memoir'.

It is difficult to judge whether memoirs are *true stories*, because they rely upon memory. Though memoirs are not written simply for the purpose of remembering—as Hampl states, 'Memoir isn't for reminiscence; it's for exploration' (Wexler, 1998: p. 2)—it is helpful

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<sup>19</sup> For instance, Georg Misch, an early twentieth-century German scholar of autobiography, sees memoir as a more passive form, and 'the province of less-skilled writers' (Rak, 2004: p. 488).

<sup>20</sup> For a detailed survey of confessional literature in Western society since St. Augustine—including discussions of Foucault, Nietzsche, Sartre and others—see Jeremy Tambling (1990).

<sup>21</sup> Smith and Watson (2010) provide a comprehensive overview of many areas of life writing with a critical and theoretical discussion of key terms, including categories of life writing such as 'addiction life narrative', 'autofiction' and 'conversion narrative'. They also discuss the recent 'memoir boom' (Smith & Watson, 2010: p. 127) and examine some of the most popular subgenres of memoir.

to think about memory's role in the construction of life stories. Memories are not just subjective; they are unreliable too. They are easy to exaggerate and fabricate, difficult to corroborate, and they are unstable, and likely to distort over time. In some cases, the distortion and disappearance of memories can be severe. There are various medical conditions that disrupt memory, and some of those conditions can be brought about by emotional trauma.<sup>22</sup> Nevertheless, the unreliability of memory is not necessarily a problem as long as we adjust our expectations when reading a memoir. As Couser (2011: p. 19) remarks, 'the term [memoir] derives from the French word for memory . . . this creates the expectation that the narrative may be impressionistic and subjective rather than authoritatively fact based'.

The complex relationship between truth and fiction in memoir is not a new problem. In fact, the history of memoir in the English language is closely connected with the history of the novel. Couser (2011: p. 15) also states that: 'in the West, memoir developed in tandem with the novel; in English, at least, the two genres have enjoyed a symbiotic relationship for some two hundred years'. Memoir's kinship with novelistic technique means that there may well be a continuum of subgenres on the novel-memoir spectrum. Memoirs have been written since ancient times – Julius Caesar's *Commentarii de Bello Gallico* is one early example – and some of the earliest novels aped the memoir style, and even purported to be true stories, when they were in fact fabricated.<sup>23</sup> Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe*, first published in 1719, is one such example. In the early editions, Robinson Crusoe was credited with being the author, and Defoe merely the editor (Heitman, 2013: p. 13). Defoe 'wrote broadsides against

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<sup>22</sup> For example, Gilmore (2001: p. 25) discusses Ian Hacking's term *memoro-politics*: 'According to Hacking, trauma, which had always meant a physical or psychological wound . . . came to designate a spiritual, psychic or mental injury . . . [and] trauma's wound no longer injured only the body but the soul and, through it, memory itself' (Gilmore, 2001: p. 25). If Hacking is correct, life stories about trauma may be among some of the most unreliable of all. The hybrid memoir is able to interrogate and play with this notion, as seen in Part Two of the exegesis.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion of historical texts that have blended reality and fiction in their work, as well as some possible early forms of hybrid memoirs, such as St. Augustine's *Confessions* and Montaigne's *Essays*, see Shields (2011: pp. 7-19).

those who doubted if his adventures were true, which he signed with the name Robinson Crusoe' (Adams, 2005: p. 127). Though *Robinson Crusoe* may indeed have been influenced by real-life castaways, including Scottish sailor Alexander Selkirk,<sup>24</sup> it was in fact a fictional memoir, and Defoe went on to write several more, including *Memoirs of a Cavalier* and *The Fortunes and Misfortunes of Moll Flanders*. While some of Defoe's contemporaries saw him as a 'prevaricating rascal', a 'great liar' and a ripe subject for satire (Baker, 2009), there is no evidence of any great public scandal arising from Defoe's fabricated memoir.<sup>25</sup> Marshall (2012: p. 4) writes that 'If more of Defoe's contemporaries connected *Robinson Crusoe* with him, we have no record of it'.

In much more recent times, authors have been thrown into the limelight after writing fabricated memoirs, which are now sometimes referred to as *fauxtobiographies*.<sup>26</sup> As Couser (2011: p. 15) asserts, 'Today, memoirs often incorporate invented or enhanced material, and they often use novelistic techniques. Indeed, they are themselves a form of literary art, and their artifactuality . . . sometimes gets their authors into trouble'. For example, when James Frey's *A Million Little Pieces* was published as a memoir,<sup>27</sup> and was championed on Oprah Winfrey's Book Club, there was public outcry when the book was revealed to contain major fabrications,<sup>28</sup> and dissatisfied members of the public were granted refunds for their copies (Rak, 2012: p. 238).

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<sup>24</sup> See David Fausett's (1994) *The Strange Surprising Sources of Robinson Crusoe* for an overview of various inspirations for Defoe's novel.

<sup>25</sup> However, as critic Ashley Marshall (2012: p. 3) notes, Defoe 'was not regarded as an author of any import until half a century after his death'. For a detailed review of changing attitudes towards Defoe throughout history, from 'slapdash journalistic hack' to 'sanctified father of the English novel', see Marshall (2012).

<sup>26</sup> See Zakarin's (2013) article on *The President of Vice*.

<sup>27</sup> Apparently, Frey initially 'offered [*A Million Little Pieces*] to a number of publishers as a novel but it was turned down . . . [and] Frey said . . . that he found success by changing the generic categorization of his book [after] industry giant Random House Inc. read the manuscript and suggested that the book be published as a memoir' (Rak, 2012: p. 228).

<sup>28</sup> See 'A Million Little Lies: Exposing James Frey's Fiction Addiction' in *The Smoking Gun* (Anon, 2016) for the investigative article that first revealed these fabrications. For a critical investigation into Frey's 'deception' and the ensuing court case, on the ultimately unsuccessful grounds of 'consumer fraud' see Vice (2014).

If readers can expect a certain amount of mis-remembered information, and even a little artistic license within the memoir format, where do we draw the line? At what point is a little bending of the truth too much fiction for a conventional memoir? Barrington (2014: p. 110) believes that ‘When you name your work “memoir” or “fiction”, you are entering into a kind of contract with your reader. You are saying “this really happened”, or “this is imaginary”’. Barrington (2014: p. 110) does not condone intentionally blending fact and fiction in memoir, but she in fact goes on to state that ‘Writers of memoir vary in how much they feel free to reorganise their experience. One thing to bear in mind, though, is that you will gain little of value if you end up abusing the reader’s trust’.

We can extrapolate from this that there is supposed to be a contract of *trust* between the author and reader in a conventional memoir. The reader needs to believe that the text will contain a rendering of truth to the best of the author’s ability. In his text *On Autobiography*, critic Philippe Lejeune (1989: p. 13) describes the rules for what he terms the ‘autobiographical pact’.<sup>29</sup> Lejeune (p. 14) states:

The autobiographical pact comes in very diverse forms; but all of them demonstrate their intention to honor his/her *signature*. The reader might be able to quibble over resemblance, but never over identity (“identicalness”).

He suggests that this pact causes the reader to ‘think of himself as a detective, that is to say, to look for breaches of contract (whatever the contract)’ (p. 14). This goes some way to explaining the outcry when the fabrications in Frey’s *A Million Little Pieces* were exposed: the contract of trust had been broken.

In hybrid memoirs, however, the author is pushing the boundaries of the memoir form, playfully transgressing those boundaries and creating something new and

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<sup>29</sup> R. R. (1990: p. 719) notes that ‘Only later in his career did Lejeune become uneasy about the concept of pact, which depends on the principle of sincerity. Later Lejeune moved from an author-based perspective, according to which the genre is defined on the basis of the extratextual state of authorial intention, to a reader-oriented search for the signs of this intention in the text’.

unpredictable. These transgressions are normally made visible to the reader,<sup>30</sup> and for that reason, the reader is rarely being tricked. There is no need for the story to be true, or for the author to provide an exact representation of her own identity, and, as I will demonstrate in the following section, this can create exciting new opportunities for authors to tell their life stories.

As well as the ambiguities of the term *memoir*, there are also many complexities associated with genre<sup>31</sup> and hybridity.<sup>32</sup> A discussion of this is beyond the scope of this commentary. Nonetheless, what the term *hybrid memoir* can do is offer a helpful framework for considering certain texts, and I suggest the term not as a perfect solution to the problems raised by critics throughout history, but as a tool to suit my purposes. When I talk about genre, I do so with the caveat that there is no such thing as an essentialist definition for any particular genre. When I discuss hybridity, it is for its rich cultural and literary associations (Eds. Guignery et al., 2011). When I discuss memoir, it is on the understanding that it means different things to different people, and has been inherently ambiguous throughout history. Ultimately, I believe that the ‘slippery, playful, impish, exasperating’ (Slater, 2001: p. 21) aspects of hybrid memoirs can provide abundant opportunities for authors to present their own life stories in such ways that a standard memoir may not be able to achieve. In the following section, I will use specific texts to develop this argument, looking at what the form offers its authors.

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<sup>30</sup> Via, for instance, the percentages at the start of *Any Other Mouth*, or the preface to *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, or the re-categorisation of the text as fiction in *Legend of a Suicide*. These transgressions will be discussed in the following chapter,

<sup>31</sup> See Ed. Duff (2014) and Mäntynen and Shore (2014).

<sup>32</sup> See Young (2005) and Allen (2013).

## **PART TWO: Why Write a Hybrid Memoir?**

I can be the hero of my own story. But I can also switch to the third person.

(Mackintosh, 2014: p. 211)

In the introduction to *Reality Hunger*, David Shields (2011: p. 3) writes:

My intent is to write the *ars poetica* for a burgeoning group of interrelated but unconnected artists in a multitude of forms and media – lyric essay, prose poem, collage novel, visual art, film, television, radio, performance art, rap, stand-up comedy, graffiti – who are breaking larger and larger chunks of “reality” into their work.

Shields’s ‘ars poetica’ contains over six-hundred points, which work to provide a compelling argument for artists to break down genre boundaries, splice together autobiography and creative writing, nonfiction and lyricism in their work, potentially leading to ‘a blurring (to the point of invisibility) of any distinction between fiction and nonfiction: the lure and blur of the real’ (p. 5).

However, Shields’s ‘manifesto’ is by no means straightforward. Many of the points appear, upon first glance, to contradict one another, and it is only partway through the book that Shields reveals the fact that the work is largely made up of (sometimes inaccurate) quotations from other writers. In point 296, over halfway through the text, Shields (p. 103) writes: ‘Most of the passages in this book are taken from other sources. Nearly every passage I’ve clipped I’ve also revised, at least a little – for the sake of compression, consistency or

whim'. In fact, over five-hundred of the six-hundred and eighteen points are attributed to other authors. There are no footnotes, but at the end of the work is an appendix, listing, point by point, the names of the authors he has borrowed from. In between the borrowed ideas, Shields has included a smattering of autobiographical detail, but as he admits in the appendix, not all of it is true (p. 218).

There are criticisms that could be – and have been – levelled at the book,<sup>33</sup> and it seems as though Shields intentionally seeks them out, by including many contradictory statements in his work, with only vague attributions regarding source material. As such, it is not always clear what Shields's thesis is. However, as Shields (2011: p. 209) writes in his appendix, 'Your uncertainty about whose words you've just read is not a bug but a feature'. Indeed, Shields does provide a convincing argument in favour of the hybrid memoir and other genre-defying works where reality bleeds into fiction and vice versa. In one of the unattributed points on the 'manifesto', he writes: 'To be alive is to travel ceaselessly between the real and the imaginary, and mongrel form is about as exact an emblem as I can conceive for the unsolvable mystery at the center of identity' (2011: p. 72).

I believe that the 'mongrel form' Shields talks about is not simply an effective metaphor for the mysteries of real life, but that it provides new opportunities for authorial expression. I will go on to discuss this postulation in the remainder of the exegesis by considering my own experiences with *Any Other Mouth*, along with texts by David Vann and Dave Eggers. Initially, I was tempted to compare my writing to hybrid memoirs by women, which could prove fruitful in terms of feminist memoir theory.<sup>34</sup> Certainly, *Any Other Mouth* contributes to a broadly feminist tradition of women's autobiographical creative writing. In recent years, there has been a rapidly growing body of work in this area. Works such as

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<sup>33</sup> For example, see Toby Litt's (2010: p. 16) criticism that '*Reality Hunger* assembles a lot of cultural stuff and lets it lie there'.

<sup>34</sup> Stanley (1995), Eds. Cosslett et al. (2000), and Buss (2006) provide a good overview of this subject area.

Annie Dillard's (1999) *For the Time Being*, Mary Cappello's (2010) *Swallow: Foreign Bodies, Their Ingestion, Inspiration, and the Curious Doctor Who Extracted Them*, Leslie Jamison's (2014) *The Empathy Exams*, Helen Macdonald's (2014) *H is for Hawk*, Maggie Nelson's (2015) *The Argonauts*, and Olivia Laing's (2016) *The Lonely City* deftly combine memoir with critical writing. Several creative practitioners also include poetry, prose fiction, and illustration in their memoiristic works. One of the most striking examples of this is Anne Carson's (2010) *Nox*, which scholar Liedeke Plate (2015: p. 98) describes as 'a multimodal work. A replica of the scrapbook Carson originally made as a means of dealing with her brother Michael's sudden death, *Nox* comes folded concertina style in an ash-grey box of solid cardboard'. Carmen Giménez Smith's (2010) *Bring Down the Little Birds: On Mothering, Art, Work and Everything Else* combines 'fragments of thought, daydreams, entries from notebooks both real and imaginary, and real-life experiences' (The University of Arizona, 2010) and Susan Howe's (2010) *That This* is a collection in three pieces, consisting of an essay, text collages, and poetic verse.

In spite of the rich opportunities available for studying *Any Other Mouth* alongside work by women such as these, I have chosen to examine my texts alongside Eggers and Vann, given that these authors have both created hybrid texts out of filial bereavement—the death of one or both parents)—which means that they cover similar thematic territory to me.<sup>35</sup> At the time of writing *Any Other Mouth*, the death of my father felt like the primary stimulus for the book, and the crucial factor in determining its format. Moreover, on a personal level, I read Eggers's and Vann's books as I was constructing my own hybrid memoir, and found them to be inspiring and influential.

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<sup>35</sup> I also considered comparing my work with Nancy K. Miller's *Bequest & Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent's Death* (2000). However, the emphasis in Miller's book was using personal experience in order to illustrate a scholarly essay, and I felt as though it was more useful to use fiction writers as a comparison, as their books' overall goals feel more in line with my own.

So: why write a hybrid memoir? Given that I am examining books by authors who tell stories of bereavement in their works, it is helpful to think about the hybrid memoir in relation to grief. Katarzyna Małecka (2015: p. 155) has looked at ‘how grief reactions contribute to self-disintegration’ in relation to spousal bereavement. Małecka (2015: p. 162) believes in ‘writing as a way of regaining one’s sense of self’, and posits that an author may show the story of her disintegration at a linguistic level. Commenting upon Joyce Carol Oates’s *A Widow’s Story: A Memoir*, she writes: ‘[Oates’s] sense of being lost is reflected in the way she switches “between first and third persons” as well as in her focus on “the psycho-chaos of grief”’ (Małecka, 2015: p. 159).<sup>36</sup> As Linda Belau notes, ‘discourse on trauma appears, in some aspects, as if it has itself undergone trauma’ (Eds. Belau & Ramadanovic, 2002: p. xix).

It is entirely possible that the loss of a parent may lead to a similar ‘self-disintegration’. Thomas Leopold and Clemens M. Lechner (2015: p. 748), who have looked into the effects of filial bereavement in early adulthood, state that ‘losing a parent is a major transition of adulthood that may involve . . . a transformation of the child’s identity’. Moreover, ‘Compared with those who experience their parents’ death in older age, younger adults are likely to sustain more severe and longer term declines in subjective well-being’ (p. 749). Indeed, Eggers, Vann, and I did lose one or more parents ‘off-time’, that is to say, it was not in fitting with ‘the script of the “normal, expectable life”’ (p. 749). Using Małecka’s thoughts on self-disintegration, then, the transgressions in *Any Other Mouth*, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, and *Legend of a Suicide*, may be a result of, or a way of expressing, this chaos and instability, not just at a linguistic, but also at a stylistic and structural level.

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<sup>36</sup> The quotations here are taken from Barnes (2011).

I will discuss the ways in which traumatic experiences can shape texts in more detail later in this section. However, I will first talk about the practical reasons for creating a hybrid form. Gilmore (2001: p. 7), who writes on autobiography and trauma, states that: ‘Although those who can tell their stories benefit from the therapeutic balm of words, the path to this achievement is strewn with obstacles. To navigate it, some writers move away from recognizably autobiographical forms even as they engage autobiography’s central questions’. The biggest obstacle for me was not wanting to upset my family by revealing too much personal information. Notably, by blending fact and fiction and using a fragmented, multiperspective narrative, I was able to keep certain elements of my real life private. However, as the text started to take shape, the hybrid form began working, for me, on a much deeper level than the merely practical.

Laura King (2015: p. 29) argues that the blending of fact and fiction in memoir contributes to an exploration of the complexity of the notion of self:

according to Jungian psychology . . . for every positive personality attribute, we each also have a ‘shadow’ (repressed) side to our nature. This makes the protagonist a villain *as well as* a hero; a contradiction that we . . . as writers in limbo between memoir and fiction, struggle to reconcile, compelling us towards the composite protagonist device, as a means of simultaneously identifying yet disassociating ourselves from the ever-elusive subject matter: our self.

The protagonist of my *Any Other Mouth*, Gretchen, could be seen as a type of ‘shadow’ self. Gretchen is not me. Nonetheless, she has been purposefully created to bear a strong resemblance to me. For instance, her name, like mine, is German: ‘The [name] was German; it caught on your tongue like a mouthful of lace’ (Mackintosh, 2014: p. 213). When crafting Gretchen, I felt as though she was my alter ego, and the things that she did, even if I hadn’t done them, felt like things I *might* have done if presented with the chance, or if other factors

had played out differently.<sup>37</sup> At the time of writing *Any Other Mouth*, my mental health was fragile. I was trying to repress what I saw as my own weaknesses, but at the same time, was unable to recognise many of my strengths.<sup>38</sup> Gretchen became both more heroic and more villainous than I felt able to be in real life; an exaggerated version of myself.

This is comparable to the way Lauren Slater views the protagonist of her hybrid memoir *Lying: A Metaphorical Memoir*. Slater was asked in an interview whether she considers her text to be fiction or nonfiction, and answered:

This character in *Lying* does not feel made up to me. She is me. For whatever reason I just feel that the personality on the page is who I am, amplified. It's not an exact transcription by any means, but it captures a real piece of my psyche. My psyche, not someone else's psyche. This means to me that it's not fiction. (Culhane, 2005: p. 167)

In a 2014 interview, I made a similar point about *Any Other Mouth*:

for me, the book is a hundred percent emotionally true. And every bit of every story feels like something that happened to me because in some ways it all did. Whether the actual events happened to me or not, the emotions are things that I've been through.<sup>39</sup>

By finding ways to represent my emotions in a literary format, without having to provide a facsimile of my life, I wanted to achieve what Fern Kupfer (1996: p. 22) terms an 'aesthetic truth', when she claims that: 'We need to give memoir writers permission to lie, but only when the reconstructed version of the story does not deceive the reader in its search for the aesthetic truth'. Kupfer (p. 22) lists three types of lies which she views as 'acceptable – indeed, sometimes even necessary – in memoir writing', in line with achieving aesthetic truth. These are: (1) 'the little white lies that are "created" when memory has blurred the details; (2) 'the lies that narrative structure often demands'; (3) 'a kind of conjecture, what I

<sup>37</sup> See Lively's (2016: p.2) discussion of 'confabulation', mentioned in Part One of the exegesis.

<sup>38</sup> See Barry McRory (2012) for an overview of common symptoms associated with depression.

<sup>39</sup> See Mackintosh (2014, June 8).

call “the gift of perhaps” (p. 22). To illustrate why these lies are appropriate in memoir, Kupfer narrates a memory as she recalls it, and then questions its truth: ‘did all this happen on the same day? Were the jeans white? Were those the professor’s exact words of praise? And does it matter? The truth of the story is the narrator’s perception of youth, of fleeting time, of the longing to capture a golden moment’ (p. 22). The lies Kupfer allows herself to tell relate to temporal adjustments, descriptive details and dialogue, but it is what she says about getting at ‘the truth of the story’ that is really important here. The truth, for Kupfer, involves being able to *show* her audience something of how she once felt, in a way that is more effective than if she had simply tried to *tell* us,<sup>40</sup> remaining faithful to her hazy recollections, but creating a more engaging and beautiful story, which she hopes will create greater empathy within the reader.

Film and documentary maker Werner Herzog is also interested in the difference between facts and truth in art, and his ideas on this bear resemblance to Kupfer’s, though they are even more liberal. In *Reality Hunger*, Shields (2011: p. 67-68) paraphrases Herzog: ‘When you read a great poem, you instantly notice that there’s a deep truth in it, which passes into you and becomes part of your inner existence’. Herzog (1999) believes that ‘there is such a thing as poetic, ecstatic truth. It is mysterious and elusive, and can be reached only through fabrication and imagination and stylization’.<sup>41</sup> This is where the hybrid memoir comes in. Conventional memoir is ‘nonfictional’ (Couser, 2011: p. 23), so it naturally has limitations where fabrication, imagination, and stylisation are concerned. Hybrid memoirs, contrastingly, are likely to contain such things by definition.

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<sup>40</sup> Peter Griffiths (2014) provides a critical discussion surrounding the old edict ‘show, don’t tell’, which is a staple of creative writing classrooms. He discusses the ‘the relative “psychic distance” between showing and telling’ (2014: p. 33) but also calls for a more thorough investigation into the assumptions and limitations of the rule. For the purposes of this exegesis, however, the term suffices: it has always proved a useful tool for consideration in my own writing, and I will use it here when discussing authors sharing their emotional truths.

<sup>41</sup> The use of the word *ecstatic* rather than *aesthetic* seems a deliberate choice for Herzog, as it goes beyond the merely beautiful or artistic, and into the realms of mysticism and transcendentalism.

By creating an alter ego to speak my aesthetic/ecstatic truth in *Any Other Mouth*, I am able to show the reader something of what I have been through, without feeling bound to tell all of the cumbersome, unwieldy, unstable facts. For instance, in the story ‘If You Drank Coffee’, Gretchen describes a day spent with an imaginary lover (addressed in the second person as ‘you’) which is full of imperfections, yet the story concludes that ‘this is about the most perfect day I could ever imagine’ (Mackintosh, 2014: p. 145). Two stories later, in ‘Borderline’, Gretchen goes to a café with her boyfriend, Simon:

‘Do you remember that story?’ I asked, taking his hand. ‘The one I wrote after we had an argument? That day we listened to the radio play, then we had a row and you went home?’

‘The one about an imaginary lover?’

‘That’s the one. In the story, my imaginary lover and I listen to a radio play, just like you and I did in real life, but in the story, my lover and I don’t have an argument – we have a bath – and then we leave the flat together and go to a café.’

‘Yes, I remember.’

‘When I wrote it, I imagined that *this* was the café in that story.’ (p. 164)

Here, Gretchen admits that she has used elements of her real life to craft a story, but alters them in order to fashion a more satisfactory narrative. Of course, the second layer here is what actually happened to *me* as author, in order to prompt these two stories. I *did* in fact go with my partner to the café referenced in ‘If You Drank Coffee’ after listening to a radio play, but it was there that we had an argument and went our separate ways. In order to give that story a feeling of understated yearning, however, I did not want a full-blown argument to appear. I wanted the story to feel dreamlike, to be melancholy without being melodramatic, to show the minor, everyday struggles of a couple, demonstrating that Gretchen accepts that no relationship is ever without flaws, and that she craves those minor struggles, rather than the

major ones she is experiencing. Gretchen's story reflected the truth of my own situation at that time, and so I used this stylised, second-person story, inspired by a real day I had experienced, to communicate that truth.

Afterwards, in 'Borderline', I had Gretchen admit that she was imagining the trip to the café that she wrote about, to create a metafictional narrative. By showing the reader that Gretchen was turning her experiences into semi-fictionalised stories, this was a reminder to the reader that I, as author, was doing the same thing. I wanted 'to create a fiction and to make a statement about the creation of that fiction' (Waugh, 2001: p. 6). As Patricia Waugh (2001: p. 2) explains, '*Metafiction* is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality'. Given that I was creating a hybrid memoir, highlighting this relationship came instinctively.

Another example of where I feel that using stylisation and fabrication helped me not just tell my truth but show it too is in 'Your Alter Ego Does Not Exist', in which the narrator (who we suppose to be Gretchen although she remains unnamed) plays a computer game in which she creates an alter ego for herself by answering multiple choice questions throughout the alter ego's – Jake's – life. At first, she is excited: 'Fuck it . . . . This is my chance. I'm going to live out my wildest fucking fantasies, right here, right now' (p. 87). As the game progresses, however, the narrator becomes so involved in her alter ego's life – trying to shape him into the most interesting character she can, making him do anything she was ever scared to do herself – that she neglects her own life entirely:

My alter ego spoke conversational French, liked going for quiet bike rides at the weekends, and his favourite TV programme was 'Never Mind the Buzzcocks'.

I, on the other hand, had stopped taking showers. I only ate meals that could be prepared in under three minutes, and I was developing bedsores. (p. 90)

Gretchen's desire to live out her fantasies via her alter ego not only fails because she is unable to make her alter ego interesting enough, but also, her own life begins to fall apart. She is doomed to be unsatisfied with both her real and imaginary selves.

This extract could be read as a comment on my own situation as author, creating Gretchen as my alter ego, pouring all my energy into trying to give her experiences that feel true to me and engaging to the reader, while at the same time, struggling to maintain control over my own life. Indeed, I wrote most of the book with such ferocious intensity that my health and friendships deteriorated, and I suffered what Orwell (2004: p. 10) describes when he says: 'Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand'.

In *Reality Hunger*, Shields (2011: p. 38) includes a point attributed to Hampl, which states: '(Ambitious) memoir isn't fundamentally a chronicle of experience; rather, memoir is the story of consciousness contending with experience'.<sup>42</sup> For Hampl, it seems that in order for a memoir to be ambitious, there needs to be a sense of struggle, not just in terms of narrative arc, but in terms of the author's ability to rationalise and communicate her own experiences. We need to feel the author striving to make sense of her own existence, within the limitations of self-expression.

One way in which this can be seen in *Any Other Mouth* is in the switching between first, second, and third person narratives. King (2015: p. 28) states that: 'the [autobiography] genre's conventional assumption of continuous identity is a fiction in itself. Occasionally,

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<sup>42</sup> Though Shields claims to have taken this idea from Hampl's interview with Laura Wexler (1998), his paraphrasing of Hampl is vague here. In fact, Hampl's point about consciousness is as follows: 'The right voice can reveal what it's like to be thinking. This is memoir's great task, really: the revelation of consciousness. That's been the main task of lyric poetry, too, at least since Keats' (Wexler, 1998: p. 2). Though the meaning is not altogether different to Shields's quotation, the emphasis in Hampl's original assertion is on revelation rather than contention. However, Shields's quotation remains relevant to the exegesis, and I will use it with the caution that it does not exactly match Hampl's own words.

autobiographers remind us of this fact by casting their identity narratives in the form of an intrasubjective dialogue – between “you” and “I””. A dialogue between first and second person is apparent in the very first story of *Any Other Mouth*, in which Gretchen, the ‘I’ character, writes messages of advice to her future self, addressed to ‘you’, for example: ‘Magic exists. Don’t forget where you put it’ (Mackintosh, 2014: p. 5). The younger Gretchen fears that her older self will forget ‘the important things in life’ (Mackintosh, 2014: p. 5), and writes these messages in order to try to maintain, in King’s (2015: p. 28) words, a ‘continuous identity’. As the book goes on, however, Gretchen’s story is told in the first, second, and third person, as she struggles to make sense of her identity, and I, as author, do so alongside her.<sup>43</sup>

The sense of my struggle to communicate my own experiences is further complicated in *Any Other Mouth* because it deals with mental illness. Gretchen may or may not have borderline personality disorder, which, as the text states, is characterised, among other things, by a ‘lack of clear sense of identity’ and ‘frantic efforts to avoid real or imagined abandonment’ (Mackintosh, 2014: p. 156). This makes it difficult to trust Gretchen’s portrayal of events, as a highly unreliable narrator who battles to work out what is real and what is not. She asks other characters for help, to try and understand herself: ‘I don’t do that, do I?’ (Mackintosh, 2014: p. 171). Given that the book is, to use poet Sharon Olds’s terminology, ‘apparently personal’ (Blossom, 1993: p. 30),<sup>44</sup> this also calls authorial reliability into question. The hybrid structure of the book echoes Gretchen’s ‘lack of clear sense of identity’ (Mackintosh, 2014: p. 156), being a ‘borderline’ genre in itself. Timothy

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<sup>43</sup> Smith and Watson (2010: p. 257) explain that when the second person is used in autobiographies ‘it is [often] understood as the subject talking to her—or himself’.

<sup>44</sup> When Laurel Blossom (1993: p. 30) asked Sharon Olds whether she views her poetry as in the confessional tradition, Olds responded: ‘I would use the phrase *apparently personal poetry* for the kind of poetry that I think people are referring to as “confessional.” *Apparently personal* because how do we really know? We don’t’. Olds’s desire to emphasise the gap between art and real life, as well as between writer and reader, is important here.

Dow Adams (2005: pp. 120-121) explains this in relation to Susanna Kaysen's self-portrayal in *Girl, Interrupted*: 'Borderline personality disorder (BPD), Kaysen's final diagnosis, is itself a description of generic confusion, occupying a liminal position somewhere between "normal" neurotics and psychotics'. The interplay between fact and fiction in *Any Other Mouth* becomes a puzzle, not just for the reader to work out which bits are true, but for the author as well.

There are several other moments in the collection where I hint at my authorial presence. In 'Let's Buy A Keyring So We Remember This Forever', as Gretchen looks at Anne Frank's bedroom in Amsterdam, she muses: 'She was called Annelies . . . . I bet most people don't know that' (Mackintosh, 2014: p. 153). The self-conscious, self-referential moments that appear throughout the text serve to remind my readers that although they are not reading an autobiography, the truth, whatever it is, is lingering somewhere very near behind the words. The importance of doing this is not simply the literary version of a smug wink, but, more significantly, I feel as though the fact that I fictionalised my life in order to create *Any Other Mouth* is a necessary part of the whole story. Indeed, the creation of the text led to a turning point for my own recovery. Eventually, having put my emotions on paper, my grief became more bearable, and I stopped mining my own life for difficult memories. I began living in the present, with more mental space for those around me. This idea is touched upon in 'Possible Subject For A Future Novel' where, towards the end of the story, Gretchen muses:

Not everything I do has to be a possible subject for a future novel. I don't have to fall in love with nasty acts because they make great sentences.

I can be the hero of my own story. But I can also switch to the third person.  
(Mackintosh, 2014, 211)

There was, however, another motive behind fictionalising some of the events in my stories. Writing them helped me feel in control of bad memories, making the ugly – to my mind – beautiful. After tackling the difficult subject of sexual abuse in ‘For Anyone Who Wants To Be Friends With Me’, I felt like I had taken ownership of my past, and from now on I could choose to remember the *story*, rather than the events themselves. From a feminist autobiography theoretical perspective, ‘If women have been categorised as “objects” by patriarchal cultures, women’s autobiography gives an opportunity for them to express themselves as “subjects”, with their own selfhood’ (Eds. Cosslett, Lury, & Summerfield, 2000: pp. 5-6). However, I was aware as I wrote the stories that I did not just want to turn my pain into one long cry of self-pity. I have always used humour as a way of dealing with even the darkest moments, and I wanted this to be the case in the book too, to avoid what sociologist Frank Furedi (2007) describes as the ‘pornography of suffering’.<sup>45</sup> In recent decades, so-called misery memoirs have in fact sold extremely well, as, according to Julia Glass (2006), ‘Fiction doesn’t cut it anymore because no one really and truly suffers’, and there is also a growing scholarly interest in these books.<sup>46</sup>

However, translating one’s suffering onto the page is not without its complexities. Gilmore acknowledges the difficulties of translating trauma into text. As she explains, ‘Trauma, from the Greek meaning “wound”, refers to the self-altering, even self-shattering experience of violence, injury, and harm. Crucial to the experience of trauma are the multiple difficulties that arise in trying to articulate it’ (2001: p. 6). This comes back to Hampl’s idea of ‘consciousness contending with experience’ (as cited in Shields, 2011: p. 38). How does a

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<sup>45</sup> For an exploration of the rise of misery memoir in popular culture, see Anne Rothe’s (2001) *Popular Trauma Culture: Selling the Pain of Others in the Mass Media*.

<sup>46</sup> Academics in the field of medical humanities such as Victoria Bates (2012: p. 61) note that misery memoir, which is ‘commonly characterised by unknown female authors recounting their experiences of child sexual abuse . . . [can be] an important resource for medical humanities scholars working on narratives of trauma and illness’.

wounded consciousness begin to tell the story of its own experience? Gilmore (2001: p. 6) identifies a paradox here:

Something of a consensus has already developed that takes trauma as the unrepresentable to assert that trauma is beyond language in some crucial way, that language fails in the face of trauma, and that trauma mocks language and confronts it with insufficiency. Yet, at the same time language about trauma is theorized as an impossibility, language is pressed forward as that which can heal the survivor of trauma.

In *Any Other Mouth*, I wanted to talk about my trauma in order to ‘heal’, but I often found that simply describing what it felt like was not enough. In the text, therefore, I employ specific literary techniques to create emotional stories, where a literal telling of my trauma, or ‘Gretchen’s’ trauma, would not have such impact. In ‘What Happens When Someone Dies Twice’, rather than merely telling the reader that the narrator is grieving, her grief becomes a character in the story: ‘I think you are starting to get funny about having to share the bed with my grief. I think *you think* it touches me in the middle of the night, that it puts its fingers into the places yours no longer go’ (Mackintosh, 2014: p. 8). By personifying grief, I show how influential the narrator’s feelings have become for her and her partner. As Zoltán Kövecses (2002: p. 35) states, ‘Personification makes use of one of the best source domains we have – ourselves. In personifying nonhumans as humans, we can begin to understand them a little better’. Here, the narrator’s grief becomes a third party in the relationship, causing a love triangle, leading to competitiveness, jealousy, and betrayal. The narrator explains that the only way out of this problem is to ‘beef up’ (p. 9) her partner’s grief: ‘And as we cried . . . we wouldn’t need words any more, because the shadows at our sides would be enough, and we would be enough, and the whole world, as it was, would be enough’ (p. 10). For the narrator, the idea of banishing her own grief is so impossible – in fact, it even sustains her – that the

only way she can imagine feeling better is knowing that someone else is suffering as much as she is.

Ultimately, what was really transformative about writing *Any Other Mouth* was how freeing it felt. I was not constrained by genre or form. I was able to work against standard definitions of ‘memoir’, providing content that was not always a ‘narrative recollection of the writer’s earlier experiences’ (Baldick, 2008). I wrote a speculative story about my parents’ relationship when they were younger (‘Somebody Else’s Story’) as well as my future, unborn children (‘This Could Happen To Us’). I described my own funeral (‘When I Die, This Is How I Want It To Be’), satirised my own failures (‘Doctors’), and created my own rules as I went along. Writing the book in this way felt fresh, rebellious, and defiant.

Like me, Dave Eggers also tackles difficult autobiographical subject matter by playing with conventional expectations of memoir. *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is an account of Eggers’s parents’ death and the aftermath: both his parents died of cancer, thirty-two days apart from one another, when he was twenty-one, and Eggers became a guardian for his eight-year-old brother. Although this sounds like a typical misery memoir set-up – and *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* is sold as nonfiction, which sets up readers’ expectations that this will be a faithful retelling of Eggers’s struggles – in the preface, Eggers (2007: p. ix) begins: ‘For all the author’s bluster elsewhere, this is not, actually, a work of pure nonfiction. Many parts have been fictionalised in varying degrees, for various purposes’. Eggers struggles to refer to the work as a memoir, but fails to come up with a more appropriate label. He refers to it as ‘this... this... *memoir*’ and ‘a kind of memoir-y thing’ (p. xxii). Eggers goes on to explain that the dialogue has been reconstructed, and some of the characters’ names have been changed, along with their characteristics. There are also ‘a few instances of location-switching’ and ‘compressions of time’ (p. x).

There are many more transgressions than this at the start of the book. On the copyright page, for instance, Eggers (2007: p. iv) details his weight and allergies, and his ‘place on the sexual-orientation scale, with 1 being perfectly straight, and 10 being perfectly gay’. There is a short section titled ‘Rules and Suggestions for Enjoyment of this Book’ (p. vii), including comments such as ‘many of you might want to skip much of the middle, namely pages 239-351, which concern the lives of people in their early twenties’ (p. vii). Following the preface, there is an acknowledgements section, which includes a discussion of the ‘faux (real? No, you beg, please no) boastfulness’ (p. xxvi) of the title. There is also a flow chart mapping out Eggers’s reactions to his parents’ deaths, as well as a breakdown of gross and net earnings for the book, and a pledge to give \$5 to the first two hundred readers of the book, with a description of how to claim the money. Additionally, Eggers (p. xlv) provides an ‘Incomplete Guide to Symbols and Metaphors’, such as ‘ocean = mortality’ and ‘bridge = bridge’, and a drawing of a stapler, before, some forty-seven pages after the book started, the memoir finally begins.<sup>47</sup>

The main part of the book is stylistically closer to a standard memoir than the introduction, although, as Elise Miller (2011: pp. 984-985) notes, Eggers ‘borrows from a number of different literary genres, which he juxtaposes in sometimes jarring ways’. There are unexpected moments of surrealism (p. 45), sections written as scripts containing manufactured conversations (p. 197), and moments where the self-conscious voice from the preface returns (p. 200). The self-consciousness is acknowledged by Eggers (pp. xxx-xxxii) as having a purpose other than mere novelty:

the gimmickry is simply a device, a defense, to obscure the black, blinding,  
murderous rage and sorrow at the core of this whole story, which is both too black and

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<sup>47</sup> Another nonfiction example of a book containing a long, digressional introductory section like this is Derrida’s (1998) *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, which contains sections titled ‘Note’, ‘Exergue’, ‘Preamble’ and ‘Foreword’, before the ‘Theses’ section begins, eighty-three pages later.

blinding to look at – *avert... your... eyes!* – but nevertheless useful, at least to the author, even in caricatured or condensed form, because telling other people about it helps, he thinks, to dilute the pain and bitterness and thus facilitate its flushing from his soul.

The playfulness allows Eggers to provide darker, more upsetting, more intimate content than he might otherwise have been able to include, without appearing mawkish or overserious.

The self-consciousness at the start of the book, which at times is self-deprecating and cynical, also functions as a disclaimer – Eggers anticipates any criticisms we might have of the book, and assures us that he has already thought of them too.

This is not, in fact, an altogether dissimilar device to one I have used in *Any Other Mouth*, where secondary characters comment on Gretchen’s life or her writing, accusing her of things that my readers might perhaps accuse me of. In ‘Possible Subject For A Future Novel’, Steve conjectures about Gretchen:

‘What’s your story, then?’ he asked . . . ‘Let me guess,’ he said, not giving me time to answer. ‘Beneath the veneer of cosy middle-class existence there lurks some terrible secret? What could it be... Daddy issues? Looking for love in all the wrong places? I don’t know... struggling to finish your doctorate?’

His words stung. For a moment, I enjoyed the pain. (Mackintosh, 2014: p. 203)

Steve’s guesses correspond to stories within the collection: ‘Butterflies’, ‘Daddy Smokes’, ‘The Easiest Thing I Know’, and ‘Doctors’ respectively. When Steve accuses Gretchen of having clichéd middle-class concerns, this enables me to anticipate reader responses to those stories, and even be a little self-deprecating, like Eggers. Moments like this also allow my future self to pass judgments on my past actions. In ‘This Could Happen To Us’, the narrator’s daughter is critical of her mother’s actions in ‘For Anyone Who Wants To Be

Friends With Me’: ‘I’ve read your story . . . . The one you wrote when you were in your twenties . . . . The one about getting really drunk and having sex with all those men . . . . You’re an idiot for not going to the police’ (Mackintosh, 2014: pp. 251-252). The importance of demonstrating a sense of self-improvement is a common trope in the memoir genre. Couser (2001: p. 45) states: ‘there is a very deep bias toward the comic plot in *all* first-person life writing, whether or not it has to do with illness. We all like to think we are better – or better off – than we once were’. The playfulness and self-consciousness therefore work together as an authorial statement that says: *I have changed*.

Nevertheless, the transformative, therapeutic effect of writing a hybrid memoir is not necessarily the same for all authors. Miller is interested in Eggers’s relationship to trauma, asserting that:

Trauma has been understood as “a blow” to the “tissues of the mind,” . . . . What distinguishes Eggers’s book from its predecessors is the ways it preserves the impacts of those psychic blows, leaving in full view what happens when intense pain collides with language and the conventions of literary genres. *Heartbreaking* is catastrophic loss and trauma literalized, as if it is being enacted rather than depicted. (2011: p. 987)

This echoes Małecka’s (2015) ideas about texts showing disintegration at a linguistic level. The implication here is that Eggers’s transgressions from the ‘conventions’ of the memoir genre are a kind of re-enactment of the trauma he has suffered. Miller (2011: p. 1007) believes that the process of creating the text in this way must have been therapeutic for Eggers: ‘I would argue that the metanarrative musings and insertions ultimately made writing and publishing *Heartbreaking* possible, and perhaps also saved Eggers from the fate of his mother’. However, Eggers has not openly been so positive about the writing process. Following the book’s publication, Eggers only conducted interviews via email, and his replies

were at times abrasive.<sup>48</sup> Later, he admitted that he had mixed feelings about the amount of truth that he revealed in his memoir. In an interview with John Preston (2009), Eggers admitted: ‘I’ve had a really complicated relationship with it for some years. In a lot of ways the guy in it is me, but also he isn’t. We were very private people, my family, and that kind of self-revelation is something that was not in any way native to them’. Preston explains that Eggers’s sister, Beth, at first accused him of downplaying her role in bringing up their younger brother. It is interesting that even in a memoir such as this, full of postmodern flourishes,<sup>49</sup> caveats, and self-criticism, Eggers was still unable to avoid the familial problems that so often come with writing a memoir.<sup>50</sup>

From my own perspective, having *Any Other Mouth* published has indeed meant having to navigate some difficult conversations with family. Blending fact with fiction did not necessarily lessen the blow of telling the truth for my family members, but it certainly helps me feel as though I have created something of literary merit, rather than simply writing an exposé of myself and those around me. Sue Silverman (2009: p. 117) writes:

Since my family was involved in the creation of who I am, I feel justified, even obliged, as a writer, to reveal the roles they played . . . . How can I write a life, be a memoirist, without including members of my family? They are woven into the threads of every experience . . . . Only by telling my secrets can I be an authentic woman.

This is the only way for me to be an authentic writer, as well.

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<sup>48</sup> See Rachel Cooke’s (2010) Guardian article, ‘Dave Eggers: from “staggering genius” to America’s conscience’ for a brief discussion of these abrasive replies.

<sup>49</sup> For an exploration into the relationship between postmodernism and autobiography, see Eds. Ashley, Gilmore, & Peters (1994).

<sup>50</sup> In fact, a mere eight months after the memoir was published, Vintage published a new edition of the text, entitled *Mistakes We Knew We Were Making*, containing a forty-eight-page addendum. It includes a detailed rebuttal to the readers and critics who have labelled his work or parts of the work as ‘ironic’, as well as a discussion of how the text was received, not just by general readers, but by those mentioned within the book: ‘when so many have asked for name-changes . . . I’ve decided to let most of the people—save some primary characters—breathe easier and live freer, by allowing them to slip back into semi-fictional personae’ (Eggers, 2001: p. 12).

Examining the relationship between memoirist and family would constitute another Ph.D. entirely, but Silverman's point about gaining authenticity through confession is interesting.<sup>51</sup> A hybrid memoirist both confesses and disrupts the act by breaking out of the confessional genre. There are many reasons a writer might choose to do this, but I suggest that such disruptions can lead to an even greater level of authorial authenticity. In Eggers's case, the self-conscious digressions remind us of the gap in representation between the author-protagonist and the real-life author, bringing us a little closer to that real-life voice. In *Any Other Mouth*, I feel able to present the reader with some of my most intimate memories by contrasting them with fabrications or stylisations, and, furthermore, the disruptions show something of my chaotic, grieving mind.

Perhaps as a way of trying to avoid familial drama, David Vann's *Legend of a Suicide* bears a closer resemblance to fiction than it does to memoir, and indeed it is labelled as such. The narrator is a character called Roy, but he bears a strong resemblance to the author, including sharing a birthplace. The text begins with a standard autobiographical trope, describing the narrator's birth and early years. Vann (2009: p. 1) writes: 'My mother gave birth on Adak Island, a small hunk of rock and snow far out in the Aleutian chain, at the edge of the Bering Sea'. After this, the book, comprising five short stories and a novella, soon disintegrates into conflicting narratives surrounding Roy's father's death. Journalist Alexander Linklater states that Vann could certainly have written this book as a conventional memoir,<sup>52</sup> 'but such a memoir, however direct, however honest, however lacerating, could never have reached the psychological depth, the real-world knowledge, of the fiction that he has produced instead' (Linklater, 2009).

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<sup>51</sup> Jeremy Tambling (1990) provides a detailed survey of the compulsion to confess in Western society since St. Augustine.

<sup>52</sup> Vann's first book, *A Mile Down: the True Story of a Disastrous Career at Sea*, published in 2005, is a conventional memoir.

The hybrid form of *Legend of a Suicide* is by no means accidental. Vann is clear about his intentions behind the work's fragmented structure: 'The five stories and novella have to be read together and in that order to gain their full meaning. Each reflects on the other and modifies or debates, not only in content but also in style, borrowing from the stylistic debate of *The Canterbury Tales*' ('Five Questions for David Vann', 2010). The conflicting narratives relate to the subjectivity of memory: 'I didn't know how to write about my dad and no one in my family had the same story about who he was and what happened, which explains why there is so much confusion in the story' (Cox, 2011). Writing the book, therefore, was a way of exploring the 'legends' surrounding his father's suicide: 'My father came back to life for me in various ways during the ten years I worked on this book . . . In fiction, we can take what was ugliest in our lives and transform it into something beautiful, and we can also do something very close to raising the dead' ('Five Questions for David Vann', 2010). I have already mentioned that transforming a grim reality 'into something beautiful' is a goal that I had while writing *Any Other Mouth*. However, the nonfictional elements of Vann's life are crucial for understanding his text. The dedication at the start of the book reads: 'For my father, James Edwin Vann, 1940-1980' (Vann, 2009: p. i), and the main character's father in the book is the not dissimilarly titled 'James Edwin Fenn' (Vann, 2009: p. 172), known as Jim.

Vann's reasons for creating alternative versions (alter egos) of himself and his family are different to my own. In an interview in the *New Yorker*, Vann explains how the central novella in the collection, 'Sukkwan Island', helped him explore feelings of guilt:

I never went homesteading with my father, but he did ask me to come live with him for a year in Alaska, and I said no. Two weeks later, he killed himself. So I always felt tremendously guilty, and wondered what would have happened if I had said yes, and in this novella, the boy says yes. That's the kind of transformation that happens in

fiction, and I think that's more powerful than the true story. ('Five Questions for David Vann', 2010)

As Nancy K. Miller (2000: p. x) says, 'The death of parents – dreaded or wished for – is a trauma that causes an invisible tear in our self-identity . . . . We don't choose our families, but we get to revise their myths'. The way that Vann revises the myth of his father's suicide in 'Sukkwan Island' is extreme: Roy, the *son*, commits suicide using the .44 magnum his father uses to end his life in various other stories in the collection, and here the *father* must deal with it. This is the most shocking and powerful moment in the whole book, and possibly the most surprising moment I have ever encountered in literature. Vann explains: 'I didn't see it coming until I was partway through the sentence. I had thought I was heading in a different direction, but a pattern and momentum was happening in the fiction beyond my conscious control' ('Five Questions for David Vann', 2010). The way that Vann explains the writing process as gaining a momentum 'beyond his conscious control' echoes Hampl's thoughts on how ambitious memoir reveals 'consciousness contending with experience' (Shields, 2011: p. 38). For Vann, this struggle is a positive thing, as it brings a certain energy to the writing. He states, 'I've written memoir also, but I don't find myself surprised by it in this way. Everything goes according to plan, which is disappointing, and I think readers, also, can feel whether a piece of writing has found its own life or not' ('Five Questions for David Vann', 2010).

Vann's myth-revising may well be, to some extent, a way of expressing anger too. After finding Roy dead, Jim tells himself: 'You get to be awake and thinking about this every minute for the next fifty years. That's what you get' (Vann, 2009: p. 132). In the grim, protracted fall-out that follows Roy's suicide, Jim drags his son's body around a desolate and freezing Alaskan landscape, trying to escape the terrible reality of what he has witnessed, surviving by breaking in to another family's cabin, stealing their food, and – mad and

desperate – talking to his decomposing son about the absurdity of the situation. Here, Jim truly suffers, and he comes to realise that he deserves it: ‘he hadn’t really thought of Roy or of what Roy might have wanted even for an instant’ (p. 151). Aggression permeates the entire book: Jim points a gun at Roy (p. 22), Roy points a gun at his mother’s boyfriend Merrill (p. 31), Rhoda loses both her parents to a murder-suicide (p. 122),<sup>53</sup> and Roy smashes a fish’s head with a rock (p. 70). Vann revises his father’s death multiple times too: Jim shoots himself in the head with a .44 magnum on the deck of his boat (p. 9) in several stories, but in other stories he dies in different ways, including drowning (p. 199) and a gas cooker fire (p. 223).

However, in spite of all this aggression, *Legend of a Suicide* does not come across as a childish retaliation. In fact, it feels more like the melancholic yearning of an adult who has raked over his past and played out every possible scenario that *could* have happened if his father had not committed suicide, and he seems to have come to a place of acceptance. When Jim tells Roy about his affairs, he says:

I just couldn’t help myself. God, I felt bad. I felt sick all the time. But I kept doing it. And the thing is, even after seeing all that that did, and all it destroyed, I don’t know for sure that I’d act any differently if I had the chance again. The thing is, something about me is not right. I just can’t do the right thing and be who I’m supposed to be. Something about me won’t let me do that. (Vann, 2007: p. 76)

There is real tenderness, understanding, and warmth, in the way that Vann positions himself so skilfully inside the head of Jim Fenn. It is as though he scorns, pities, and embraces the character all at once. The hybrid memoir format enables this to function successfully, as Vann is able to play out multiple parallel universes, and each time, come to the same conclusion:

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<sup>53</sup> Vann’s stepmother did in fact lose her parents in this way, which is an event explored in Vann’s (2011) novel, *Caribou Island*.

there is only one reality, and the past is inescapable. But ‘Absurdity is all that makes grief bearable’ (p. 205), and to embrace the absurdity of it all is, in some ways to deal with it. Besides, it is only in the present that we *can* make changes.

In the case of Vann, Eggers, and myself, the hybrid form has allowed us to express our grief in a way that does not just tell people about our situation, but in some ways shows them how it has felt for us. In Vann’s case, he takes us into a dreamlike world of fantasy lives and deaths, showing the various workings of his mind since his bereavement. Eggers’s memoir gives us an insight into the way in which the death of both parents – in quick succession, when he was so young – made him feel strangely special, and led to him creating a self-aware voice in the book that mocks and reveres itself in equal measures.<sup>54</sup> In *Any Other Mouth*, I have created a splintered narrative that shows a young, grieving woman with mental health difficulties, whose story we must piece together, while witnessing the very writing that has saved the author (me) from my debilitating problems. Perhaps this makes the hybrid memoirist’s style of writing closer to Shield’s (2011: p. 152) description of ‘What personal essayists, as opposed to novelists or faux-naïf memoirists, do: keep looking at their own lives from different angles, keeping trying to find new metaphors for the self’s soul mates’.

The need for people who tell their stories of bereavement to break out of the constraints of the memoir genre might be explained by Gilmore (2002: p. 8), who talks of ‘the paradox that the autobiographer be both unique and representative . . . . Because trauma is typically defined as the unprecedented, its centrality in self-representation intensifies the paradox of representativeness. Indeed . . . the self-representation of trauma confronts itself as a theoretical impossibility’. Indeed, Desirée Henderson (2011: p. 162) notes that

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<sup>54</sup> An exploration of Standing and Ringo’s (2016) ‘study of orphaned or abandoned individuals who subsequently became eminent in diverse fields’ in relation to Eggers’s ‘genius’ may prove interesting.

Familiar texts and rituals are intended to reestablish meaning and coherence after the destabilizing event of loss, yet the reliance upon convention co-exists with an investment in innovation, the need for memorial literatures to address the unique circumstances of each death. Mourning generates new forms of expression.

Perhaps grieving writers produce hybrid memoirs in an attempt to address both the familiar and the unique. The memoiristic aspects of a text provide a sense of familiarity and ritual for authors and readers, but in hybridising the memoir, an author is able to occupy a liminal space between genres, and produce something unprecedented. Van der Merwe and Viljoen (2007: p. 11) discuss Victor Turner's (1974) explanation of liminality in relation to social rites of passage, noting that as people engaged in a social ritual

cross the limen . . . . [t]hey enter a different space and time that is so radically different from the ordinary that it cannot be expressed in ordinary language, but has to be described in metaphors or states of the in-between . . . . In this state of anti-structure elements of culture can be recombined into new configurations. The old self dies so that a new self can be born.

Losing a parent can be seen as a social ritual or rite of passage, causing a disintegration of the notion of the self, which may be why the liminality of the hybrid structure offers the author that necessary '[metaphor] or [state] of the in-between' that empowers and enables her to better represent her struggle and transform her own life story into something new.

In summary, among the texts I have examined, the hybrid memoir format can: a) enable authors to skilfully reveal their *emotional* truths; b) allow authors to show (as opposed to simply tell) the reader something of how it felt, not just to have experienced certain things, but to then *write a book about them*; c) make writing the book into a transformative event for authors. When I wrote *Any Other Mouth*, I was never interested in producing a straightforward memoir. I wanted to recast my own life in an imaginative way, one that not

only challenged me as a creative writer, but challenged my readers too. I was suffering, and I wanted to create an intimate—and at times uncomfortable—narrative, that helped my readers to connect with that suffering. Michael Cohen (2008: p. 187) notes that:

Writing about suffering is a special case of the storyteller's art because it produces a reaction in the readers' bodies—a visceral reaction. The readers' bodies respond in a peculiar sympathy with the writer's. It makes them wince. In this way writing about suffering tests what storytelling is able to do.

The hybrid memoir is certainly one way in which storytelling's possibilities might be tested. The idea of using artistry and lyricism to relate autobiographical detail is not a new one; in 1937, Yeats (1968: p. 522) wrote:

all that is personal soon rots; it must be packed in ice or salt . . . . If I wrote of personal love or sorrow in free verse, or in any rhythm that left it unchanged, amid all its accident, I would be full of self-contempt because of my egotism and indiscretion, and foresee the boredom of my reader. I must choose a traditional stanza, even what I alter must seem traditional.<sup>55</sup>

While Yeats's sentiment regarding traditional stanzas might not resonate as strongly for today's readers as it did in the 1930s, the question of how best to present autobiographical stories for the enjoyment of readers remains an important one. Seeking an answer to this elusive question is unfortunately beyond the scope of this commentary. Nonetheless, from personal experience, with regards to what I have witnessed with *Any Other Mouth*, finding a method to present my life narrative to my readers, in a way that feels right for me, has been a fascinating process, and a pivotal step on my journey as a creative practitioner. Moreover, on a human level, I no longer perceive myself as the passive *object* I felt like I was before writing the book—someone who had bereavement and trauma thrust upon her. I now feel like

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<sup>55</sup> The first part of this quotation appears in the 'autobio' section of *Reality Hunger* (Shields, 2011: p. 154).

a subject,<sup>56</sup> reconfiguring those stories of bereavement and trauma, and moulding them into a new and original piece of literature.

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<sup>56</sup> Refer to the discussion of ‘selfhood’ in Eds. Cosslett, Lury, & Summerfield (2000: p. 6)—mentioned earlier in this section—which investigates the perceived object-subject transition from a feminist autobiography theoretical perspective. Suzette A. Henke (1998: p. xix) looks at using life writing after trauma as a means of ‘reinventing the shattered self as a coherent subject capable of meaningful resistance to received ideologies’.

## CONCLUSION

The *Writer's Digest University* states:

You may be able to find a publisher willing to take a risk on your cross-genre book, but most agents and editors look for stories they can easily target to a specific audience. Without a firm categorization, your book is a difficult pitch to store buyers, and it's a difficult sell to readers. (Eds. Friedman et al., 2010: p. 30)

Although cross-genre works have become more popular in recent years,<sup>57</sup> I was not able to find a home for *Any Other Mouth* with a major publishing house. However, I do feel that I have been extremely fortunate to have found a publisher for my hybrid work, and more fortunate still that it has been received well by so many readers. In 2014, *Any Other Mouth* won the Green Carnation Prize, was shortlisted for several other awards, and long-listed for the Frank O'Connor International Short Story Award.<sup>58</sup> It was a book of the year in *The Herald*, *Scotsman*, *List*, *Civilian*, *Scots Whay Hae!* and *Cadaverine*. In May 2016, the German translation of the book, titled *So Bin Ich Nicht*, reached number sixteen in the 'Bestseller' chart on Amazon in Germany, and I am currently in discussion with a German composer about the possibility of turning the text into an opera. The English version of the book is on its third print run, and new reviews of the book still appear online.

While all of these successes naturally delight me, there are parts of the book that make me cringe, and which I find almost impossible to revisit. Eggers (2001: pp. 7-8) describes something similar to this: 'I just couldn't . . . spend much time in the main text. It was

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<sup>57</sup> See Dyer et al. (2015).

<sup>58</sup> A full list of awards, with external web links, is at: <http://www.anneliesemackintosh.com/#!/awards/cuf0> [accessed 31 August 2016].

uncomfortable . . . frankly, there are sentences I wrote and never reread; there are pages I never looked at again'. In spite of the awkwardness that can come with writing about trauma, I truly believe that writing the book has transformed my life. When I began to write the book, I was challenging myself. How much of my soul did I dare to bare to the outside world? How much of myself *was I able* to lay bare? Were there any literary techniques I could employ in order to bare my soul more effectively? By the end of the writing process, a new question emerged: could the process of laying my soul bare help to heal me? In my case, it did help. I stopped torturing myself—and those around me—with terrible tales of past woes, and I found a sense of peace that was previously foreign to me.

However, the book has not just been important to me on an emotional level. As an artist and academic, I see my creative work as practice-based research. Patricia Leavy (2014: pp. 1-2) writes in *Method Meets Art: Arts-Based Research Practice* that:

Arts-based researchers are not “discovering” new research tools, they are *carving* them. And with the tools they sculpt, so too a space opens within the research community where passion and rigor boldly intersect *out in the open*. Some researchers have come to these methods as a way of better addressing research questions while some quite openly long to merge their scholar-self with their artist-self. In all cases, whether in the particular arts-based project or in the researcher who routinely engages with these practices, a *holistic, integrated perspective* is followed.

Leavy (2014: p. 25) says of narrative creation and storytelling: ‘Writing is, and has always been, an integral part of social research, as it is necessarily entwined with the construction of knowledge’. I believe that with *Any Other Mouth*, I have ‘merge[d] [my] scholar-self with [my] artist self’. Opening the book with the statement that ‘68% happened’ (Mackintosh, 2014: p. iii) establishes the book’s hybrid form from the very first page, and each story within

the collection is a new attempt to represent my life on the page, while exploring notions of aesthetic truth, trauma, and recovery.

Coming to understand *Any Other Mouth* as a hybrid memoir has given me new ways of understanding my ongoing creative practice. My debut novel, *So Happy It Hurts*, is due for publication with Jonathan Cape in July 2017, and is a completely different type of hybrid memoir. I have not discussed the novel in the body of this exegesis given that I am still editing and refining it, and am not sure what the final format of the book will be, but it came into being when I found a box of old letters from my sister. I want to create a text in which I insert those documents, providing an accurate and authentic portrayal of my sister's struggle with Asperger Syndrome, while creating a fabricated narrative surrounding this portrayal. As I write the novel, I believe the hybrid memoir form is enabling me to retain a level of authenticity, while at the same time asking myself new and difficult questions about how to build real documents into a fictional storyline with an engaging narrative arc. As with *Any Other Mouth*, the book is a method of practice-based research for me, and, once the novel is complete, I will be able to use these findings to go on to develop my practice.

Naturally, throughout this Ph.D., there have been limitations to my research. My own creative practice is of course limited by my capacities as a writer. The subject is, moreover, extremely personal to me, and other writers engaging in similar research questions may discover completely different answers. In this exegesis, I have suggested (and defined) the term hybrid memoir to describe a type of text that interests me. I have also acknowledged the complexities of my terminology, and the field remains open for scholars to engage with and categorise this work. Nonetheless, I believe that my contributions provide valuable insight into the subject area, as a writer who has written a hybrid memoir. In comparing my own book with Vann's *Legend of a Suicide* and Eggers's *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius*, I do not attempt to claim their 'genius', but I have reached conclusions about the

ways in which the hybrid memoir form provides authors with a method of conveying strong emotions, particularly following trauma and bereavement, in ways that can be transformative. It would be interesting to see more critical work in this field in relation to Eggers and Vann. Elise Miller (2011: p. 1002) notes that to begin with autobiography and trauma critics ‘took no notice of Eggers’s work’. *Legend of a Suicide* has been largely neglected from the realms of scholarly criticism, and yet I believe it provides an extremely valuable contribution to studies of grief and bereavement, as well as relating to questions of how to imaginatively present autobiographical detail within a work of fiction.

While I have reached conclusions about the hybrid memoir’s effectiveness throughout this exegesis, I by no means attempt to position it as a superior genre to the standard memoir. I have read many conventional memoirs which I have found clever and moving, and which I have admired. Several of these made a strong impression on me when I was starting out as a writer, including André Gide’s (1924) *Let it Die*, George Orwell’s (1933) *Down and Out in Paris and London*, and Jean-Dominique Bauby’s (1997) *The Diving-Bell and the Butterfly*. Critically acclaimed memoirs have been written by J. M. Coetzee, Joan Didion, Ernest Hemingway, Mary Karr, Vladimir Nabokov, and countless others. A comparison of hybrid memoirs with more conventional memoirs on similar themes might be worthwhile—for instance, Simone de Beauvoir’s (1966) detailed, chronological account of her mother’s terminal illness in *A Very Easy Death* might be examined alongside Nancy K. Miller’s (2000) *Bequest and Betrayal: Memoirs of a Parent’s Death*, which employs a mixture of introspection and literary criticism in relation to the author’s mother’s death. However, I have preferred to focus on what the hybrid medium can offer writers, rather than pitting it against other genres. There are many ways to live a life, and many ways to tell a good story. What I have found, though, is that the hybrid memoir is something I have been—and continue to be—attracted to, as an author, and furthermore as a reader.

This leads on to the next obvious place for the research in this exegesis to go. As discussed at the end of Part Two, an examination into readers' reactions to hybrid memoirs would no doubt prove illuminating. Reactions to *Any Other Mouth* have been polarised, ranging from 'a glorious genre-bending feat of honesty and humanity' (Jones, 2014) to 'depressing and bizarre' (The Raving Pleb, 2014). I am interested in whether these varying responses are caused by readers coming to the book with different expectations, or whether there is something inherent to the hybrid memoir that divides opinion. My suspicion is that the latter may be applicable, and that it relates to Linda Hutcheon's study of what she terms 'narcissistic narratives', describing metafictional texts where 'process [is] made visible' (2006: p. 6). According to Hutcheon (2006: p. i), the paradox of narcissistic narratives is that 'Contemporary self-reflexive novels demand that the reader participate in the fictional process as imaginative co-creator. At the same time, they distance the reader by their textual self-consciousness'. This would require further interrogation, and examining reviews of Eggers's and Vann's work alongside my own would be a good place to start. As I mentioned in Part Two, I believe that an examination into the hybrid memoir from a feminist perspective, to name but one critical framework, would also yield interesting results.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, I believe it would be worthwhile for artists to continue to provide practice-based research that both supports and challenges Shield's 'manifesto' in *Reality Hunger*. If Shields's (2011: p. 72) notion that the 'mongrel form is about as exact an emblem as [he] can conceive for the unsolvable mystery at the center of identity' is correct, then this unsolvable mystery is certainly worth continued exploration, even if, by its nature, it can never be truly solved.

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<sup>59</sup> A starting point for this would be Diane P. Freedman's (1992) *An Alchemy of Genres: Cross-Genre Writing by American Feminist Poet-Critics*.

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