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Undisciplined History: Creative Methods and Academic Practice

by Alison Twells, Will Pooley, 
Matt Houlbrook and Helen Rogers

Greg Denning has described history as ‘the past transformed into words or paint or dance or music or play’.¹ While this work can be undertaken by many practitioners – novelists, narrative historians, playwrights, biographers and memoirists, genealogists, museum professionals and community historians, film-makers, artists and musicians, librarians, teachers, politicians, journalists and the general public – it is academic historians who find themselves most engaged by the actual process of transformation – the process of making histories. A substantial body of scholarship now exists about the historical novel, the museum, and other forms of creative and public history.² But while keen to write *about* the practice of others, academic historians often stand in a difficult relationship to it, finding themselves deeply uncomfortable with – and drawn to criticize – history fashioned in the public and creative realms.

And yet all history – in the sense of the work of understanding and representing the past – is creative. The past existed; histories are made.

Our interest in this essay in the relationship between history – as an academic discipline – and creativity is shaped by a body of innovative historical practice, strands of which have often developed in parallel, without explicitly addressing one another. These include forms such as ego-histories or memoir as history, art as public history, blogging and social media, and the historical novel, as well as the recent popularity of historical graphic fiction, ‘theatre of the real’, history walks, games as history, and what Claire Lynch has termed ‘biogravision’ – the blend of reality TV, documentary and history – in shows like *Who Do You Think You Are?*³ These pioneering approaches have forged different ways of making histories, as what we now call public historians have long recognized.⁴ It is one thing to acknowledge these forms as ‘public history’ and another for academic historians to make the move to producing histories as performances, or graphic novels, or Twitter threads.

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Over the past three decades, academic historians have made significant forays into this field, creating imaginative, poetic, and unconventional histories. Robert Rosenstone, a founding co-editor of the journal *Rethinking History*, abandoned the omniscient voice in his story of three western men – a missionary, a scientist and a writer – in late nineteenth-century Japan. Instead, he chose to write in the present tense, and from several different perspectives, occasionally speaking directly to the reader and even the characters in order to ‘render their lives, to get close to them, to suggest the interactions and moments, the sights, smells, tastes, and feelings that underlay the shift in their perceptions and values.’⁵ In her *Autobiography of a Generation*, Luisa Passerini interwove oral testimonies of political activism in 1968 with reflections on her rebellion against a suffocating femininity and sexual conformity, as well as her psychoanalysis in her present-day life.⁶ Jonathan Walker, in a book described by Iain McCalman as ‘the first true work of “punk history”’, deploys comic strip illustrations, gleeful descriptions of violence and modern-day conversations on a pub crawl in Venice alongside a more conventional account of a nobleman hanged for high treason in April 1622.⁷

There is a familiar circularity to discussions of the relationship between creativity and history, and to recurring calls for historians to think differently about the ways in which they tell stories about the past – whether those calls are phrased as manifesto or provocation.⁸ Although it is grounded in much longer traditions, we argue that there has been a recent turn to ‘creative histories’ which is marked by more self-conscious considerations of form, genre, and the reflexive processes of making history. If this field or set of practices is not entirely new, they have nonetheless grown more clearly articulated, and, in some contexts, coalesced in the use of the phrase ‘creative histories’ to identify, characterize, and name a newly discrete field. Despite some discomfort the language of creativity has spread in academic history, appearing in the titles of research centres, such as the Raphael Samuel Centre for Public and Creative Histories in London, the ‘Creative Histories’ node of the Australian Centre for Public History in Sydney, and the ‘Creative Histories’ research cluster at the University of Bristol.

Even without explicit use of the word itself, creativity is evident in imaginative work at the intersection of autobiography and history by scholars such as Barbara Taylor and Alison Light, as well as in Julia Laite’s inspired adaptation of the choose-your-own-adventure format, the collaborative blogging of *The Many Headed Monsters*, and innovative forms of co-production facilitated by Laura King and others.⁹ In *Mother: An Unconventional History*, Sarah Knott develops a narrative style that is ‘verb-led, based on anecdote, and composed in the form of a first-person essay’. Knott’s style reflects the fragmentary sources underpinning any history of mothering and echoes the experience of mothering as an activity beset by interruption and disruption, exemplifying her argument that mothering and the practice of history are entwined.¹⁰ Saidiya Hartman’s *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, similarly, explores the possibilities for understanding the lives of black women in early twentieth-century America by imaginatively

liberating their 'waywardness' from sociological work that defined them as a problem.¹¹

How should we characterize and understand this apparent impulse to explore creative ways of representing the past? For a start, we should recognize a reciprocal movement among creative practitioners embracing the phenomenon that David Shields calls 'reality hunger': the boom in memoir, documentary, lyric essays, and even reality television.¹² This suggests a more bottom-up and open-ended process than the definition of creativity proposed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, which emphasizes 'a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognize and validate the innovation.'¹³ The inherent elitism in this definition fails to capture imaginative work that involves many individuals, groups, and organizations and that is 'everyday' rather than authenticated by specialists.¹⁴ Creative innovations of the kind we have been identifying are often more about the reconfiguration of existing conventions than about absolute novelty.

If all histories are creative, as many historians now acknowledge, some are more engaged with creative methodologies and practices than others. The focus of the academic historian on the provision of content in the form of evidence and interpretation and its marshalling into argument, we contend, is only one part of what historians defined more broadly actually do. Alongside the historian's craft as traditionally understood, the creative histories we explore here experiment with different representational forms, or with issues of voice, or with activist methods of working towards a desired future. This often involves self-conscious deployment and exploration of techniques of collaboration, reflexivity, genre, process, and imagination. As such, these creative histories are more than 'unconventional'.¹⁵ To use Ann Rigney's words, they are 'undisciplined' and 'artistic variants' of historical practice, 'not merely failed versions of "disciplined history" (though they may also be this, of course), but something of a different order.' As Rigney argues, a focus on deliberately undisciplined variants opens up the multifarious ways in which people who are not bound by academic discipline 'relate to the past', via performance, re-enactment, identification, pleasure, and more.¹⁶

For our part, we are all involved in producing creative histories, in different ways, and have together organized a series of events in Sheffield and Bristol, and panels on 'creative history' at the Modern British Studies conference in Birmingham and the European Social Science History conference in Valencia. These events have been accompanied by online discussions and a virtual reading group coordinated through the blog *Storying the Past* and hashtag #storypast.¹⁷ Reflections on some of the creative histories presented at the events in Sheffield and Bristol accompany this article in an online feature at Paper Trails, a new open access platform with UCL Press, related to the Special Collections held by University College London. Described by its editors as 'a living book', Paper Trails uses the Book as Open Online Content (BOOC) platform to bring together and amplify digital versions of archival activities and objects alongside interactive

conversations between archivists and scholars, students and members of the public, community groups and collaborative history teams.¹⁸ This innovative platform, aiming to break down the barriers between scholarship, archives and non-professional consumers and makers of history, developed out of the academic conference ‘Paper Trails’ which included a hands-on workshop for schoolchildren using UCL’s Special Collections.

As this implies, we are approaching the relationship between history and creativity from a particular intellectual, institutional, and geographical perspective. As academic historians of nineteenth and twentieth century Britain and France, each of us works primarily from university history departments in the United Kingdom. Our collaborations with educationalists, heritage organizations, community groups, theatre and arts organizations, and filmmakers and songwriters are thus often rooted in places or communities which are local to us, or which reflect the ongoing professional relationships we have forged through our work as historians. The implications of this are twofold. First: although the article ranges widely over a broad historiographical and theoretical terrain, its centre of gravity and the examples on which we draw reflect our own expertise and interests. Second: in making the case for histories which are undisciplined or ill-disciplined, we write from a position of relative privilege. As we explore further below, however, a turn to creative methods has often formed part of the challenge to Eurocentric structures of power and disciplinarity made by postcolonial scholars or those otherwise working on marginalized histories. What is at stake in making such a move is, then, very different depending on one’s historical field and position within the academy.

In this article and the online features with which it is in dialogue we explore the relationships between scholarly practice and the growing field of creative histories. Drawing on examples from the United Kingdom, we seek to unsettle dominant approaches to creative methodologies within our discipline and suggest what these more playful and experimental approaches might add to our practice as historians. Prompted by our encounters with the rich and vital histories made by schoolchildren, community groups, filmmakers, and songwriters, we are interested in the potential of these imaginative and less constrained engagements with the past to enrich academic history. In surprising and unpredictable ways, these histories have inspired, moved, and challenged each of us. Yet just as often we have been left unnerved and confused by versions of the past that sit awkwardly with the practices and conceptual frameworks in which we are trained.

In the first section of the article, we discuss some of the difficulties academic historians have with creative history, locating these within the post-enlightenment development of our discipline and its commitment to rigour. We argue that, despite numerous challenges within the profession, academic historians are particularly stringent in their enactment of what Christine de Matos calls ‘boundary maintenance strategies’.¹⁹ ‘If history was thought of as an activity rather than a profession,’ Raphael Samuel commented in *Theatres of Memory*, ‘then the number of its practitioners would be legion.’²⁰ While humanities subjects generally accept alternative ways of knowing – creative, imagined, embodied, and so on – professional historians have been reluctant to concede

there are other ways of knowing *history*. Acknowledging the existence – even the legitimacy – of these many voices has not dissolved the lines between the different practitioners of history or prompted a rethink of the methods, forms, and conventions of academic history.

In the second section we discuss how freer and more imaginative forms of history-making can help us interrogate and disrupt the disciplinary constraints of academic history. We consider some of the themes that emerge from the online reflections of film-maker Virginia Heath, archivist Iqbal Husain, cultural historian Joe Moran, community historians Openstorytellers, Sally Rodgers and Laura Alston, and educationalists Paul and Gertie Whitfield, as well as our own turns to creative history. Thinking about the moments of resonance and dissonance within our own practice as academic and creative historians, we suggest, prompts us to envision ‘new conceptual resources and novel forms of representation that might be useful in deepening the possibilities of history as a discipline’.²¹

None of these reflections are meant to imply that established forms of academic history are somehow lacking in creativity or that the third-person voice cannot be authoritative and engaging in equal measure. For many readers, there are real pleasures in, for example, the accumulation of detail or striking anecdotes that characterize much of the most popular work in military or diplomatic history. The historian’s craft is always underpinned by the practised imagination necessary to connect case studies, marshal examples, shape argument or analysis, or create a compelling narrative. In foregrounding the particular version of creativity we have characterized as undisciplined history, then, our aim is twofold. First, as the discussion above suggests, thinking critically about form, genre, style, or voice might offer a starting point for a more wide-ranging reappraisal of the substantive work of history. Second, moving across the borders between different forms of history-making in a way that is self-conscious or deliberate opens up new ways of thinking about the work of the historian. In the guise set out below, committing to collaboration requires a parallel commitment to a politics of inclusion and mutuality. Embracing the possibilities of undisciplinarity – or, at least, embedding them in doctoral training programmes and learned societies – might foster a more open version of professional identity and community. Set against the conflictual labour relations within the contemporary university, deteriorating conditions of work, and a contracting academic job market, this move has the potential to equip a new generation of academically-trained historians to deal with the challenges of our contemporary conjuncture.

HISTORIANS, CREATIVITY AND RIGOUR

Talking of ‘creativity’ in academic history can invite misunderstandings. But to say that histories are ‘made’ is not the same thing as saying they are ‘made up’. The literary journalist Gay Talese writes that his nonfiction is ‘[c]reative, not falsified: not making up names, not composite characters, not taking liberties with factual information, but getting to know real-life characters through research, trust, and building relationships.’²² The creativity involved in making histories is perhaps more akin to the collage techniques of ‘found object’ art,²³ the ‘verbatim’

methods of the so-called ‘theatre of the real’,²⁴ or the techniques of quotation and rewriting in contemporary poetry,²⁵ than to pure invention.

Historians have generally moved away from the high-handed dismissals of public and creative history that were prominent in the 1980s and 1990s.²⁶ Driven in part, in the United Kingdom, by the ‘impact’ agenda within the Research Excellence Framework, a funding-driven census of academic research which now seeks to measure both the ‘quality’ of scholarly research and its effects – ‘impact’ – on policy-making and public life, we are now accustomed to looking beyond the university to interact with the wider world in history-making. Nevertheless, there is plentiful evidence of resistance to and anxiety about this process, generated by the potential risks involved in community collaborations, fears about our qualifications for such an endeavour, or possibly our reluctance to cede power in the co-production of history.²⁷ Such reservations sit alongside more fundamental contradictions in the ways that public histories are conceptualized. Important political and ethical imperatives behind the emphasis on ‘public engagement’ and ‘knowledge transfer’ pervade contemporary higher education, yet we might be wary of how institutions and funding bodies have often turned such initiatives into commodities. Many academic historians experience the conceptualization of ‘impact’ within the REF as top-down and one-directional.²⁸ Rather than treating the development of our knowledge of the past as part of a common project, the use of buzzwords like ‘knowledge transfer’ implies a distinction between ‘public’ and ‘expert’ – ‘uninformed’ and ‘informed’. Despite the democratic impulse of ‘community engagement’, too often this project gives the ‘professional’ historian a privileged position from which to speak authoritatively – to ‘transfer’ the results of their research – about the past.

The strategies of ‘boundary maintenance’ take several forms and are often most visible in the responses of academic historians to historical fiction and film.²⁹ First and foremost, their criticisms tend to focus on content. In his discussion of attitudes to historical fiction, James Goodman argues that ‘content is king’ for academic historians, who ‘are not, by and large, interested in what most interests novelists: the sound of words, imagery, the shape of the story, voice’. Instead, Goodman claims, historians ‘approach fiction no differently than they approach history, discussing what the novelist got right and what he or she got wrong, the analytic ends but not the literary means, the content but not the form.’³⁰ Behind this preoccupation with factual accuracy lies the prioritization by historians of particular ways of reading, questioning, contextualizing and analysing sources – what Sam Wineburg refers to as the ‘unnatural act’ of historical thinking – to arrive at content that is complex, nuanced, and produced through rigorous means.³¹ Of course academic history also involves particular conventions in terms of plot and character. As Curthoys and McGrath point out, many scholars follow nineteenth-century ideas of character as well as about writing and voice.³² Despite some challenges, the detached authoritative voice is still seen by many as essential to academic rigour.

The fear that non-academic narratives lack rigour is also evident in historians’ responses to TV history and film.³³ Two examples will suffice. In their criticisms

of the 2015 film *Suffragette*, academic historians focused on what was left out – northern women, black women, the NUWSS, tension over tactics – and what was glossed over – working-class politics, life as a domestic servant, and more. These reviews showed little inclination to respond to the film *as a film*, and nowhere did they provide a sense of what a ‘historically accurate’ film about the suffragettes might actually look like.³⁴ Indeed, packed full of all these issues and extra characters, it is possible it would no longer work *as a film*. Similar criticism has been levelled at Ken Burns’s popular and award-winning documentaries on American history. Burns has been berated for a range of ‘errors’: leaving things out, over-simplifying, and the ‘presentism’ of his concern with American identity today, resulting in programmes that are too close to ‘historical melodramas [...] long on misty nostalgia but short on critical analysis’.³⁵ David Harlan has called out the condescending tone of the academic historian who reacts like ‘an outraged missionary trying to pull down the altar of some savage idol’ to what they see as mind-numbing popular histories or ‘soap opera substitutes for real engagement with the past’.³⁶ Obsessing over factual accuracy and whether a production is sufficiently intellectually challenging, Harlan contends, is to ignore Burns’s ‘vital role in shaping the public’s sense of who we have been and who we are becoming’. Furthermore, it works to ‘entomb ourselves in a pyramid of irrelevance’.³⁷ Indeed, we might also ask whether this kind of public history does ‘work’ that academic history does not and, in its current form, cannot do. As Burns himself has said, he wanted his Civil War series to ‘rescue history from the academy, which has done a terrific job in the last hundred years of murdering our history’.³⁸

While it is difficult to avoid the impression that underlying some criticisms of successful creative productions lurk anxieties about professional territory being encroached upon, and maybe even envy, there are legitimate concerns about where creative approaches might lead if historical skills and knowledge are ignored or undervalued. These concerns were expressed emphatically by Inga Clendinnen in her criticisms of Kate Grenville’s novel *A Secret River* (2006), particularly over the author’s conflation of historical events and her use of ‘intuition’ and perception through feeling to empathize with historical subjects.³⁹ ‘I want non-historians to understand historians’ apparent churlishness when faced with Grenville’s insouciant exploitation of fragments of the past,’ Clendinnen wrote in 2007:

Historians have a *professional obligation* to preserve documented moments surviving from the past as entirely as we are able because such moments are precious, and fragile. They must somehow make their way into the written record, and then be preserved long enough for a *practised intelligence* to mine them for meanings.⁴⁰

Clendinnen’s ‘practised intelligence’ implies that understanding the complexity of the past, its ‘otherness’, and cultural and moral relativity, can only be achieved through disciplinary training and not through present-centred appeals to emotion, ‘commonsense’, or identification. Rather than projecting the modern self into the

past – the recurring ‘they must have felt’ moment in the popular BBC family history series *Who Do You Think You Are?* – historical analysis requires craft, experience, and the ability, by referencing evidence, to be revisited by future generations of scholars and readers. After all, as Laura Sangha argues, it was the ‘breadcrumb trail’ of footnotes that exposed the fallacy of David Irving’s holocaust denial as a credible interpretation.⁴¹

Yet academic rigour itself is not a neutral term. An elusive and exclusionary metaphor – physical, moral, psychological – and in its original meaning, far from positive, ‘rigour’ was transformed in the nineteenth century through its adoption by positivist science to operate at the intersection between knowledge production, professionalization, and identities of class and gender.⁴² This was part of the same historical processes that saw history-writing move away from imagination and creativity. The best histories from before the Industrial and Enlightenment periods, Beverley Southgate has claimed, were a mixture of ‘reason and imagination, philosophy and poetry’. As historians laid claim to the ‘scientific’ development of their discipline, this earlier mode of writing the past was ‘appropriated by historical novelists’.⁴³ With ‘the dislocation of history from its literary foundations’, other ways of knowing were shut down as historians refashioned themselves as ‘analysts, not creators, and certainly not creative artists’.⁴⁴ The time might be ripe now, as Robert Rosenstone has argued, ‘to liberate history from its own history and to create forms of historical telling for today and tomorrow, forms of history suited to the sensibility of the times’.⁴⁵

The separation of the ‘creative’ or the ‘literary’ from the ‘historical imagination’ has been entrenched in recent decades, not least by the practices of research funding bodies and an increasingly competitive and precarious academic job market. In Robert Nelson’s words, ‘our universities want scholarship served cold; it needs to be tough, tight, filled with fact and source, stripped of personal intonations, aspiring by degrees to the research grant application, purged of fanciful metonymic language, humour and metaphoric inflexion’.⁴⁶ The same can be said of publishers. Rosenstone recalls endless editors and agents telling him: ‘*This is not the proper way to write history!*’ despite his insistence that ‘*everything is footnoted. It has a huge bibliography. Nothing is invented. It just tells the story a different way*’.⁴⁷ As Curthoys and McGrath note, we are often left with a style of writing which appears dry, dull and turgid to most people outside the profession, concerned solely with conveying information and analysis to specialists in the field.⁴⁸

In one of the few books dedicated to writing history in an engaging fashion, Stephen Pyne critiques ‘[t]he academic voice, so often solemn, constipated, and inbred’ and the trait of ‘pack[ing] each phrase and sentence with a connective padding of conjunctions and subordinate clauses that assures a logical sequencing but that demands exhaustive unpacking by the reader’ and what he calls ‘the literary equivalent of micro-managing’.⁴⁹ Other characteristics include the elimination of ‘everything that is innovative in form and expression’, the denial of ‘the possibility of writing dramatically or with sympathy for the subject’, which result in the ‘neutering’ of the ability of academic historians to influence public

understanding of history.⁵⁰ While such constraints operate across the discipline, they press particularly heavily on an emerging generation of postgraduate and early career historians. Entwined with increasing specialization and a narrowing of focus, academic 'rigour' has come at the cost of ceding the historian's role in public life and political debate, as David Armitage and Jo Guldi contend in *The History Manifesto*.⁵¹

This is not to say that there have been no challenges from historians inside the discipline who dissent from the idea of history as a science. These include deeply theoretical works, such as those of Hayden White, who argues that the process of transforming archival research into history 'employ[s] the same strategies of linguistic figuration used by imaginative writers', including emplotment, character development, and tropes. Similarly, Roland Barthes posited history as 'a particular form of fiction', a style of narration characterized by the denial of narration in the form a hidden narrator, by whom the historian aims 'to give the impression that the referent is speaking for itself' and thereby guarantee and enhance the privileged status of history as objective knowledge'.⁵² As part of his wider oeuvre on history and power, Foucault has also questioned the way historians try to 'erase the elements in their work which reveal their grounding in a particular time and place'.⁵³ Influenced by structuralism and poststructuralism, this body of scholarship might be characterized as historical theory or historiographical in orientation. Its impact, however, has been much stronger within literary and cultural studies than within the historical profession. In the main, historians have responded with silence, uninterest or disapproval, excepting a few who followed the 'linguistic turn'.⁵⁴

The dominant paradigms of writing history have been challenged, instead, from a different angle, by scholars working at the intersection of social and cultural history, particularly those preoccupied by questions of marginalization in terms of class, sex, gender, sexuality, and 'race'. Building on the work of the micro-historians Carlo Ginzburg and Natalie Zemon Davis, they have explored how pursuing elusive individual lives or smaller locales within or across the early modern world might provide a starting point for new forms of historical writing and, in so doing, challenge us to think differently about the shape of that world.⁵⁵ Carolyn Steedman's discussion of 'lives lived out on the borderlands' in *Landscape for a Good Woman* (1986) refuses a linear narrative and makes use of the personal voice to explore envy, desire, and exclusion in relation to the dominant interpretative devices of twentieth-century social history.⁵⁶ Malcolm Chase has written of adult educators who looked beyond academic studies in their teaching.⁵⁷ Postcolonial and subaltern scholars have interrogated the global dominance of western Enlightenment historical paradigms, developed within transnational constellations of power.⁵⁸ And, as Heather Sutherland observes, the postcolonial encounter is not only between Western and indigenous traditions, but 'between elite histories produced by academics originating from both sides of the colonial divide who nonetheless share a broadly similar educational background'.⁵⁹ The issue of the archive fetish and whether historians only ask those questions that the archive can answer has been raised by indigenous and

vernacular histories such as Bain Attwood's *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History* (2005) and is implicit in many novels, including Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987).⁶⁰ For scholars working on such marginal histories, a self-conscious turn to creative methods has been bound up with their powerful challenge to those power structures that constrain both history and the historian.⁶¹

As academic historians, then, we find ourselves operating within competing frameworks. We no longer assume we can access an unmediated past, and we accept the existence of a plurality of voices and the situatedness of knowledge. Yet simultaneously, and somewhat problematically in a discipline characterized by uncertainty, we cling to notions of academic rigour and to a style of writing which remains heavily invested in a range of academic 'authority moves'. These include, according to Elizabeth Chapman Hoult, 'the adoption of an omnipotent, authorial voice; a deferential (or contemptuous) use of quotations from generically similar texts; employment of a linear structure of rational arguments that build from one paragraph to the next; an assumption of transparency...; and a commitment to literality rather than symbolism in the choice of language'. Hoult describes such writing as lacking in 'warmth' and feeling 'dishonest', arguing that it obscures subjectivity and covers up more than it reveals. It is, she claims, a 'sham'.⁶²

The functions of academic writing aside, readership of articles in refereed journals and academic monographs can usually be counted in the scores or hundreds. The audiences for historical documentaries like *The Vietnam War*, films like *The Favourite*, mini-series like *The Crown*, and online genealogy resources like Ancestry.com, by contrast, range from hundreds of thousands to millions. As much as historians might contribute to or engage with such diverse forms of historical storytelling, this dissonance marks a crisis in the historian's position in public life and popular culture. As David Harlan argues, 'historical consciousness in the future' will not be shaped by professional history, but by the 'yet-to-be defined relationship between its own highly specialized representational strategies and the unconstrained profusion of popular histories that are being thrown up by various indigenous cultures around the world'.⁶³ Rather than entrenching ourselves behind a disciplinary line, we – and our students – need to be able to find our way between divergent and often creative modes of historical representation, to explore how historical academic practice might fruitfully engage with other – creative, imagined, embodied – ways of knowing history.

THE ONLINE SPECIAL FEATURE

The online special feature accompanying this article takes up this challenge by presenting a series of short creative historical pieces and reflections, as well as accounts of our own 'turns' to creative history. These pieces shed light on the paths that different creative historical practitioners have taken, often for personal and/or political reasons, from a sense of frustration, or marginalization, or a sense that academic writing could, in Alison Twells' words, benefit from more 'emotional investment' and resonance with *now*.⁶⁴ But if these paths to a more creative history are idiosyncratic, we argue that creative histories have more in

common than simply their own diversity and heterogeneity. Many of them draw on a shared pool of techniques of collaboration, reflexivity, genre and art, and imagination to self-consciously explore the different forms and genres within which histories might be made and stories about the past might be told.

Collaboration

Writing of the plays emerging from his partnership with Tamasha Theatre – ‘a dedicated home for both emerging and established Global Majority artists’ – and historian Rozina Visram, the archivist Iqbal Husain notes that ‘this kind of work is impossible without collaboration’.⁶⁵ Creative histories often echo or build on ideas of co-production developed by public historians.⁶⁶ Laura King and Gary Rivett, for instance, have recently written about revitalizing a “bottom-up” approach to engaging with the world beyond the campus, in which publics, partners and academics come together to negotiate the value of different ways of working’ and making histories.⁶⁷

Negotiation brings different voices and needs into the work of making histories. A performance about the eighteenth-century young woman Fanny Fust, for example, was developed by people with learning disabilities and autism in collaboration with the charity Openstorytellers and researchers from the University of Bristol. Openstorytellers ‘supports people with learning disabilities to find their voice and use it’, building on the powerful idea that ‘stories are what make us human, they help us make sense of the world, making friends, and take part in society’.⁶⁸ Asked what they enjoyed about the project, those involved talked about gaining insights into the constraints and freedoms in the life of a historical individual with learning disabilities, who was not considered fully responsible, and was forcibly abducted by a suitor who wanted to marry her for her fortune.

Collaborations of this kind forge new connections between audiences, history-makers, and implicated communities. In their contribution to the online feature, the educationalists Paul and Gertie Whitfield describe their work as Whitworks Adventures in Theatre with historian Matthew Stibbe and Sheffield schoolchildren on the city’s German community during the First World War.⁶⁹ Not only did the project awaken an interest in this history among the students, it led to new partnerships with historian Claudia Sternberg and a German Saturday school in Leeds. The importance of forging new connections like this through creative work is underlined by Sally Rodgers and Laura Alston in their piece describing collaborative historical projects in Heeley and Tinsley, Sheffield. Rodgers and Alston, a Community Heritage Manager and historian respectively, write of developing an ‘accessible, egalitarian practice that doesn’t separate the historian from the community’. They continue:

Community Heritage is an inflexible term to describe what has been so far a complex, multi layered, subtle and dynamic body of work . . . In every place there are lots of communities and lots of aspects to heritage. Just because you live in a place doesn’t mean you feel part of, or would identify yourself with

any of its communities; or you may be part of many. We have found that using creative practices and co-production can facilitate as many people as possible to engage with their heritage, enhance their experiences of the community and to promote community cohesion.⁷⁰

This focus on collaborative techniques among public historians and heritage professionals finds an echo in changing academic working practices. As our own reflections in the online feature emphasize, Twitter, blogging, and the virtual reading group shaped the development of our creative histories events, and put us in conversation with a broader range of participants.⁷¹

Reflexivity

Collaboration is often paired with reflexivity in creative historical practice. Openstorytellers' projects, for example, are always about community in the present. From this perspective, their creative historical work becomes a way to build relationships and to explore a 'personal sense of identity'. Sue from Openstorytellers reflects on how the story of Fanny Fust made her feel, as someone living with disabilities, and how it led her to reflect on her own experiences: 'I know this boy who I used to go out with at school and he used to control me like I was Fanny. He was like Henry Bowerman, he used me in all sorts of ways but that's the way I relate to that story.'⁷²

Like other common features of creative histories, the turn to reflexivity draws on a longer tradition of historians whose self has been part of the story they tell.⁷³ They share with the 'Historic Passions' feature in *History Workshop Journal* a desire to frame history as 'a form of imaginative inquiry' that is 'personal'.⁷⁴ In his collaboration with filmmaker Virginia Heath, discussed in the online feature, the musician King Creosote drew on his memories and family history as a resource for their collage of historical film, set to his original music.⁷⁵ In his autobiographical contribution to the online feature, the cultural historian Joe Moran makes his position in the history he is telling a central concern. Exploring how universities have made 'interlopers feel unwelcome', he describes his own father's experiences and his own.⁷⁶

Making the personal historical is also a call for new forms of writing. Moran points out that:

Academic writing, for often good reasons, urges us to erase our voices: we have to sound anonymously professional, like every other scholar. But what really sticks sentences together is voice. However fragmentary the writing, it should feel as if it has come from a single, navigating intelligence. Voice is the adhesive force that picks up all the strands of fugitive information and makes them seem part of the same piece.⁷⁷

Reflexivity about these processes involves imagining other ways histories can be. As Matt Houlbrook adds in his reflections: 'Sharing struggles that historians often prefer to keep private, I think, demystifies what we do to those who might read

our work and encourages them to think about how history is worked on and written.⁷⁸

Genre and Art

Collaboration and reflexivity call forth new forms. In his reflections Will Pooley asks which specific creative techniques we can incorporate into academic work and writing. ‘How might a monograph or an article be more ‘poetic’ or ‘theatrical’? What forms and genres can historians borrow that better suit our functions?’ ... ‘What does it mean to write a poem as a piece of historical research?’⁷⁹ Joe Moran describes how his practice of using fragments has been a way to do history by ‘stealth’, ‘treating a smaller subject (motorways) as a lens through which to view a larger one’ (in his case postwar British history). Moran’s contribution draws on the lyric essay, a form that depends on ‘suggestive arrangement rather than coercive connection’.⁸⁰ Other writers are producing history as poetry, such as M. NourbeSe Phillip’s fragmented and fragmenting poem about the deliberate drowning of over one hundred and thirty enslaved Africans by the captain of the *Zong* in 1781, and Jay Bernard’s hybrid exploration of the 1981 New Cross fire, *Surge*.⁸¹

Virginia Heath’s collaboration with King Creosote in their film *From Scotland with Love* takes a similarly iconoclastic approach to established genres. The method of combining found archive footage allowed them to produce a piece that draws on the visual strengths of film as a medium:

As we edited groups and communities passing in front of the many different camera lenses, we couldn’t help but distinguish specific details, individual gestures and facial expressions. The marchers carry banners of famous figures from Scotland’s radical past from Rabbie Burns to Keir Hardie to John McLean, but we can be just as fascinated by the near washed out figures of women marching in their hats and coats and carrying babes in arms.

Heath emphasizes that the project blurs genres and possibilities, inspired by Ingmar ‘Bergman’s idea of “film as dream and film as music” – a progression of moods and feelings that would take the audience on an emotional journey into our collective past’. Their collaboration allowed King Creosote and Heath to do things that other forms of history struggle to do – to present big historical changes with intimacy:

it became clear that we both shared a desire to portray the broad sweep of twentieth-century Scottish experience – themes of community, love, loss, resistance, war, emigration, leisure, work, industrial and rural life – without sacrificing the ability to depict that story in an emotionally meaningful and often quite intimate way. This meant taking liberties with our material, mixing time periods, colour and black-and-white footage, in order to create a film which reflected our broad thematic approach.⁸²

Perhaps the most radical aspect of this genre is the sense that creative histories are not what they produce, or leave behind – a poem, a performance, or an essay – but the process-oriented approach that underpins their making. They are projects, not outputs. The importance of what they do is as much about the humour – like the jokes about the piano in the Whitfields’ project with schoolchildren – and the enjoyment of the process itself. The pleasures of telling stories about the past is reflected in striking ways in how the Openstorytellers talk about performing in the play they co-produced. Bradley expressed it like this: ‘I enjoyed reliving history, understanding about things that happened back then to what could happen now.’ This is the joy of re-enactment, of discovering that everything from clothing, to language, to bodily experience was different in the past.⁸³ It takes place in what Rebecca Schneider has called the ‘syncopated time of re-enactment, where *then* and *now* punctuate each other’.⁸⁴

Yet for us as academic historians, this interweaving of the then and the now can be an unsettling challenge. Set against histories of eighteenth-century Britain and of disability, the immersive and participatory performances of the Openstorytellers stand as an entirely different form, with their own practice and politics, conventions and audiences. Engaging with such versions of the past can make academic historians uneasy – conscious of how we do not have the language or framework to make sense of this material, and struggling against the deep-rooted impulse to pull it back into the realm of the familiar. As well as recurring questions about authority and relationships, this moment of dissonance forces us to think about the usability of the past, and the importance of telling historical stories for communities and individuals in the present.

This dissonance is apparent in recent work in LGBTQ histories: queer histories and theories often collapse the boundaries between then and now, yet the authority of the historian usually rests on the assumption that the past is strange, different, and unknowable. To put it differently: it is not just clothing or bodily experience that mark the difference between the eighteenth century and the present. Instead, ways of understanding the self and society – categories of difference and sameness – are themselves historically specific and change over time. This commitment to the process of making a usable past therefore crystallizes the tensions between academic historians and a range of other practitioners. Teasing out the different purposes of telling stories about the past might push us to accept the vital role of creative historical storytelling to communities and individuals today.

Imagination

If re-enactments are exercises in historical imagination, they are also close relatives of the ‘imaginative incursions’ that speculative biographers employ to ‘smuggle vitality into the absences’ of many archives, especially those of women, the poor, and colonial subjects.⁸⁵ Virginia Heath and King Creosote’s film stages this work of historical imagination, inviting viewers into the gaps on screen:

we took the risk of setting out to let the archive material speak for itself through images, soundscape and music. We wanted to create cinematic spaces in the film which would allow the audience to reflect. There's a sensation we feel when looking back at archive film, that flickering, grainy footage. It is almost like a dream. We are transported into the past and yet it feels very contemporary. We recognize ourselves in the people in the footage – what they are feeling, what they are up against, their struggles, hopes and dreams.⁸⁶

Where is the line in this imaginative work between fact and fiction? There can be no blanket answer. Longstanding discussions of the relations between history and historical fiction often present these as dichotomous, and mirror recent furious debates over 'fake' memoirs.⁸⁷ Practitioners of creative histories often refute such a stark contrast between fiction and history, not because they are uninterested in facts, research, and verifiability – as the online features demonstrate – but because they take the view that, as Hilary Mantel puts it, 'audiences do not need to be protected from stories; they know when they enter the fictional space.'⁸⁸ Helen Rogers notes in her contribution to the online features that historians who embrace 'story-driven narrative often comment on the importance of gaining the reader's trust by establishing what can be known, what has been embellished, and what must be speculation'. Yet in writing about multiple lives crafted out of myriad fragmentary sources, Rogers discovered that 'too much qualification and the fragile stories I piece together would collapse under the weight of scholarly concerns'. While remaining true to archival detail, she uses literary techniques such as foreshadowing and reversal, irony and juxtaposition, and patterns of imagery to hook readers, keep them guessing and help them make connections. Drawing confidence from readers' responses to her blog, she reminded herself to 'Trust the readers. They may not know the history but they understand how story works'.⁸⁹

Arts-based researchers have highlighted that while truth in research is often seen as 'single, shareable and indisputable', in art it is 'multiple and contested'.⁹⁰ As Patricia Leavy has suggested, 'trustworthiness' rather than 'truth' is the goal of the arts-based researcher. Before academic historians express exasperation at such slippery definitions, they might consider the criteria for assessing rigour, developed by arts-based researchers such as Leavy, that include methodological thoroughness, coherence, congruence, internal coherency, and transparency.⁹¹ Likewise, reflexive and imaginative historical work wears its commitments openly. As Matt Houlbrook has written in his recent anti-biography of an elusive con-man: 'Sometimes I tell stories rather than set out arguments, suggest lines of thought I do not pursue, present plausible alternatives and invite you to make up your mind.' Here Houlbrook gestures towards the words of the geographer Fraser Macdonald who posits that analysis 'does not always [have to] declare itself as such. It can find expression in allegory and be tucked away in the shadows of significant narrative detail'.⁹²

Yet imagination can provoke unease. The turn to creative methods can be a reminder of the ability of academic method 'to teach us what we cannot see'.

Academic historians recognize ‘the seductiveness of coming to know people in the past by relying on the dimensions of our “lived experience”’, to acknowledge that an unreflective flow of empathy can inhibit understanding.⁹³ And what are the politics of this historical imagination? Laura Sangha has written of the audacity all historians show in invading the lives of the dead, an audacity that is particularly striking when their subjects’ lives are turned into art, or into entertainment: ‘Is it’, she asks, ‘a human right to be forgotten?’⁹⁴ Creative historians – like any historians – should consider what harms their histories might do in the present. As Gertie Whitfield points out while reflecting on their work with schoolchildren on British attitudes to German aliens in the First World War, the reactions of children are not always what we might hope for. One child remarked, ‘This poster makes me feel patriotic’, for example, on a wartime poster showing a German as a fly, with the words ‘Kill That Damned Fly’.⁹⁵ Other concerns around the language of creativity and history include the worry that ‘creative histories’ are becoming part of the wider discourse of positivity and wellbeing, recently critiqued by Erika Hanna:

Sometimes I feel like the underlying ethics of creative approaches is about feeling better – the palliative potential of making something new, working with your hands, enjoying journeys imagination can take us on. In a society where people feel under increasing demands of time, money, work, creativity offers a way to demark emotional or personal space.

But I’m not sure I want to feel better.

I often feel incredibly angry about what I see around me: poverty, inequality, time and potential wasted by an economic system which funnels money and power endlessly upwards. But I also recognize that my anger is a necessary precondition for action. I suppose I’m interested in doing history which responds to, rather than dissipates, anger.⁹⁶

Perhaps one of the most important and enduring features of much creative historical work is precisely its engagement with difficult and troubled histories. In the best tradition of the History Workshop movement, arts-based research has the power to ‘unsettle stereotypes, challenge dominant ideologies, and include marginalized voices and perspectives’.⁹⁷ The online features accompanying this article deal directly with issues of class (Moran and Heath), race and xenophobia (Husain and Whitfield), regeneration and marginalization (Rodgers and Alston) and disability (Openstorytellers). Far from being a luxury, divorced from politics, creative histories are often a necessity, a way to overcome the silencing of marginalized viewpoints in history. Alison Twells frames her own trajectory as a consequence of her engagement with issues of social class, for example, while Matt Houlbrook describes drawing inspiration from the arts organization Duckie, whose Vintage Clubbing Series pays ‘homage to the London queers who came before us’.⁹⁸

Like all histories, creative histories are not just the present coming to terms with the past, but visions of possible futures. As Virginia Heath puts it in her

description of King Creosote's lyric 'Something to Believe In', the words 'can be understood in a social or political context and had a special resonance in the year of the referendum on Scottish independence – "our story has only begun".'⁹⁹

CONCLUSION

Editing the online feature at *Paper Trails*, and co-writing this essay, which frames its aims, arguments, and significance, has given us an opportunity to reflect on the interface between academic history and a range of creative practice, and to suggest a series of pathways along which undisciplined histories might move in future. More bracingly, it has forced us to acknowledge the contradictions of our position as academic scholars. To put it simply: what right do we have to speak for the educationalists, filmmakers, and community groups with whom we have been in conversation over the past five years? Tasks as simple as editing our contributors' prose, intervening to clarify the shape of their storytelling, or adding references prompt wider dilemmas which are practical, political, and interpersonal. Each imposition or editorial query on our part might be seen as an attempt to make that which is strange familiar, and to bring very different modes of storytelling back closer to the conventions of academic history. In ways that have been prosaic and powerful in equal measure, confronting these dilemmas around how to argue, punctuate, or cite evidence has underscored the relationship between power and history-making, and the arbitrary and constructed nature of the historical practices we take for granted.

For academic historians, creativity might be a privilege contingent on career stage, seniority, a track record of traditional publications, and professional security. With the exception of Will Pooley, the authors of this piece each came to explore different ways of telling stories about the past long into our professional and intellectual lives. As many postgraduate and early career researcher historians have pointed out – most notably in workshops, conferences, and blogs associated with Birmingham's Centre for Modern British Studies – it can be much harder to experiment with form, voice, and method within the modes of disciplinary training that exist for PhD study in the United Kingdom. In a job market characterized by precarity and competition, strategies of boundary maintenance operate with particular force and creative history might be seen as prohibitively risky. The conditions of our labour have profound intellectual consequences.¹⁰⁰

Yet postgraduate and early career scholars have also been among the most energetic and reflective participants in online and conference discussions of creative history, eager to consider alternative ways of doing and communicating research, and discovering how to integrate these with – or transform – traditional scholarship and its relationship to the many communities interested in the past. Growing numbers of scholars now undertake their doctoral programme as part of a collaborative, interdisciplinary and cross-institutional team, many of whom go on to develop 'alt-ac careers' within the Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums (GLAM) and voluntary sectors. As we move into post-COVID recovery, the economic viability of many cultural institutions and societies is

likely to depend even more on partnerships and associated revenue injections from the education sector. In this context our professional bodies and research councils will need to pay more attention to what we mean by – and what is validated as – scholarship. How can we ensure that historians working outside the university sector are able to remain active members of the academic community? What training do our doctoral students require to prepare them for history-related careers beyond the academy? In what ways do academic career structures and appointments and promotions processes need to change so that historians who amass the standard outputs of research monograph and refereed articles do not advance at the expense of those with more diverse and less traditional portfolios? And, if we continue to audit research through the Research Excellence Framework, how will we assess the value of ‘creative’ work and reward the experimental as well as the crowd-pleasing and conventional?

In the United Kingdom, at least, the ‘impact’ agenda driving ‘public engagement’ and ‘knowledge transfer’, as we have noted, has created opportunities and funding incentives for scholars to collaborate with partners and interact with audiences beyond the academy. This brings with it responsibilities, particularly to partners working in more financially constrained organizations, who are often dependent on grant capture even to maintain employment contracts. One responsibility is to think through how both our research findings and the questions we ask are enriched and extended by creative collaborations. Academic journals have a role to play in showcasing and evaluating the creative and critical practice of such exchanges. But we also need to experiment with new forms of dissemination which can capture the process of creativity and collaboration that, we have argued, can be as – if not more – significant to participants than outputs narrowly conceived. We hope the Paper Trails BOOC, hosting the online features about the forms of history-making that inspired this article, will become a significant forum for dialogue between archivists, curators, artists, creative practitioners, students and scholars, with peer-reviewed articles appearing alongside shorter think pieces, collection profiles, and so on.

We remain convinced of the power and importance of what we have termed ‘undisciplined histories’. As this essay has argued, historians’ turn to creativity involves more than the pluralization or democratization of history-making. The exchanges between academic historians, different communities, and a range of creative practitioners are vital and on-going. Opening up the production and consumption of stories about the past to new audiences is important in its own right. That is too easy, though. Historians should be able to do more with these conversations than simply insist that different versions of history-making are equally valid. Through workshops, blogs, and the collaborations of which this essay is only part, we have sought to initiate conversations about both the relationship between creativity, creative practitioners, and academic histories, and what different partners or interlocutors stand to learn from these exchanges. For some of us, the pay-off has invigorated our commitment to writing about the past at a time when the conventions of traditional academic history leave us cold, by affording a sense of different voices and pathways. For all of us, there have been pay-offs around pushing at the boundaries of what is acceptable or

respectable in historical scholarship and drawing attention to the arbitrary conventions that underpin the production of knowledge and the production of authority.

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Matt Houlbrook is Professor of Cultural History at the University of Birmingham. He works on histories of gender, sexualities, and selfhood, the politics and practice of writing cultural history, and Britain in the 1920s and 1930s.

Formerly Reader in Nineteenth Century Studies at Liverpool John Moores University, **Helen Rogers** has published widely on crime and punishment. Examples of her use of creative writing techniques to bring social history to life are found at <https://convictionblog.com>.

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64 See Alison Twells, Matt Houlbrook, Will Pooley, and Helen Rogers, 'Creative Histories: Reflections on Research and Practice', at <https://ucldigitalpress.co.uk/BOOC/Article/3/120/>. See also Twells, 'Storying Norah's Diaries' and 'Kernels of Truth: Historians and the Imagination', at 'Socks for the Boys!', <https://norahsdiaries.wordpress.com> 6/6/2013 and 9/9/2014. Marja Jalava has argued that historians engage in very little reflection on our use of emotive words and images or on our emotional investment in our work or management of our emotions. Marja Jalava, 'Emotions in Historiography', European Social Sciences History Conference, Valencia 2016.

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69 This feature is published as Paul Whitfield and Gertie Whitfield, 'Aliens: A Play from the Archives', at <https://ucldigitalpress.co.uk/BOOC/Article/3/122/>, and Paul Whitfield and Gertie Whitfield, 'Aliens? Creative History in the Primary School Classroom', at <https://ucldigitalpress.co.uk/BOOC/Article/3/121/>. See also <http://whitworks.co.uk/index.html>.

70 This feature is published as Sally Rodgers and Laura Alston, 'Better Ways In: Creative History in Tinsley, South Yorkshire', at <https://ucldigitalpress.co.uk/BOOC/Article/3/118/>.

71 See Twells et al, 'Creative Histories'.

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100 We draw here on the ongoing conversations conducted through postgraduate workshops, conferences, and blogs at the Centre for Modern British History, Birmingham. See e.g. <https://mbsbham.wordpress.com/2017/06/01/continuing-the-conversation-modern-british-studies-pgr-round-table/>.