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HOME FROM HOME: AN AUTO/BIOGRAPHICAL NARRATIVE RESEARCH PILGRIMAGE

“The struggle of man (sic) against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting”

(Milan Kundera, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*, 1980).

ABSTRACT: The paper embodies a kind of research pilgrimage: informed by actual pilgrimage and the power of metaphor and expressive writing. The starting point is hesitant first steps under the gaze of scientific literalism as well as youthful conceit. It encompasses historical research on Richard Henry Tawney – a key figure in workers’ education. It was followed by conventional psychological research in the 1980s into working-class student experience, but this was challenged by those at its heart: listen to us for a change, they said. Eventually, there were steps towards what I now call auto/biographical narrative research, and the influence of European colleagues and feminism was important in finding a good enough research home, and eventually more authenticity and depth. The journey in fact became an explicit, joyful play of metaphor, intimacy, cultural politics, and narrative dialectics. It included a subjective journey home, encompassing different ways of seeing, literature, subjective and unconscious life, a vulnerable yet resilient humanity, self, other and otherness. And, in the context of the contemporary rise of racism and fundamentalism, a reconnection with parents and the gifts and goodness of a lost, agentic working-class culture. The paper is a kind of meditation on research and how it can help in the fundamental work of memory, to build a better, more socially just, inclusive, and reflexively conscious world.

KEY WORDS: scientific literalism, metaphor, myth, feminism, psychoanalysis, the poetic.

Introduction: research as pilgrimage

Nowadays I think differently about research – more of a pilgrimage or quest: an idea that would have seemed vaguely religious and strange back then when I started out. The antithesis of science, maybe, both in method and epistemological assumption. But pilgrimage can speak in both literal and metaphorical terms: as metaphor for uncertain, messy, unpredictable journeys in which roads are wrongly taken, there is the occasional impasse, and encounters with the unexpected. And a realisation of how important a relational sensibility can be in research. There are epiphanies too: turning points in how research is experienced and understood. A pilgrimage that encompasses a degree of organising, planning, and charting a route, but always provisionally. We cannot know in advance of the unexpected or how we might learn from experience.

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Quite fundamental epistemological and methodological questions raise their heads. Then again, we encounter other pilgrims, some as potential guides and sources of inspiration in dialogue. The language I now use seems quite different from conventional social science writing. The latter can over-emphasise pre-ordained routes and styles of communication that seem stolid, dry and emotionless. Words like beauty, awe, mystery, yearning, and wonder are absent. If surprise and divergence are possible, they belong to the highly experienced and exceptional.

Yet words like awe, mystery and yearning have crept into my language. Doing research is more human, potentially radical, and certainly anti-bureaucratic. It is a creative living process, not instrumentalised conformity, as philosopher, neuroscientist and student of literature Iain McGilchrist puts it. Quite different, in fact, to Enlightenment rhetoric of detached reason as the prime vehicle to meaningful truth (McGilchrist, 2021). We must rid ourselves, so this argument went, of superfluous language, superstition, magical thinking, religious dogma and even subjectivity. Facticity not rhetorical or emotional games were essential after a century or more of religious wars (West, 2022a). Truth lay in penetrating nature or society's secrets using the scientific method, unblinkered by prior assumption. Knowledge was to arise 'from the rigorous logically sequential unfolding of whatever follows securely from predictable procedures by calculation according to fixed laws' (McGilchrist, 2021: 422). Reason and calculation as guiding lights towards the Holy Grail of monocausality. This became a normalising myth in science: but you can't even start on the scientific method without making assumptions and using insight and creativity, hunches, and vague impressions.

Conventional scientific language also falls short in representing our objects of interest: when wrestling, for instance, with the riddles of the quantum world let alone the perplexities of human motivation, sexuality, or the psychosocial and cultural parameters of learning. Our representations – contrary to the Enlightenment dream – are never simply coterminous with the thing itself. Hubris follows when we muddle representation and reality, however sophisticated our modelling or rigour. Instead, we realise the difficulty of finding the right word, formula, or any word at all. Neils Bohr, the quantum physicist, thought conventional scientific language fell short in seeking to chronicle quantum 'realities'. A language more like poetry was required, he concluded, in the face of the mystery of objects that could be, at one and the same time, particles and waves. A deeply relational 'reality' was suggested in contrast to a clearly delineated objective one (McGilchrist, 2021: 1225). If true of physics, how much more so of cultural, social, historical and psychological research.

Notwithstanding, more conventional ways of doing science, research and writing remain powerfully seductive in their capacity to confer respectability. Sigmund Freud, for instance, wanted to be the good scientist and to establish psychoanalysis as science.

He only reluctantly fell back on the language of the Romantics, myth, and tragic literature as second best (Formenti & West, 2018; West, 2022a). Freud was to realise that a more reflexive, imaginative, eclectic, poetic, mythical as well as scientific literacy was required. The Greeks understood the importance of mythos not as the alternative to logos, or reason, but as complement. Yet we continue to wish our truths to be clear, precise, impersonal, and logical. This might be appropriate for making efficient weapons or building bridges, less so for social and psychological inquiry.

In fact, in doing research, we learn the limits of logos. And how to learn from fellow pilgrims like Freud; and of the creative potential in straddling boundaries between fact and fiction, not least to give voice to the silenced, and eventually to self. And when learning to research dialogically and narratively under the challenge of marginalised peoples. We learn how essential finding a good research home is, in my case a European auto/biographical narrative community. I could then experiment, for example, with the complexity of single case studies and an explicit use of literature and myth. There was also, eventually, a journey back to a different 'home': to the working-class culture in which I was born and to see this and my family of origin in a new, more celebratory light. And to realise that some earlier work was framed by fragile, occasionally arrogant, adolescent defensiveness. Myth and good literature helped, as it did for others, to wrestle with the elusive, puzzling, obscure, labyrinthian regions of the human psyche, culture, history, and behaviour in dynamic interaction. Shakespeare, pre-eminently, offers the deepest insight into the tragic as well as potentially transformative qualities of our actions – in a play like *A Winter's Tale* – if we are open to eclectic ways of seeing and being (Chapman Hoult, 2014).

Metaphor matters. It was Paul Ricoeur (1975) who reminded us that language is inevitably steeped in metaphor. Metaphors liberate hearts as well as minds, intuition, and the wisdom of the body, in perpetual struggles for consciousness, meaning and memory.

Defiance

We can still feel anxious when traversing boundaries between fact and fiction; or in turning to film and Shakespeare as 'evidence'. Is this what researchers are supposed to do in an evidence-based world? Using Greek myths, surely not? Sigmund Freud concluded only reluctantly that not a single conventional hypothesis penetrated the murky depths of human sexuality (Symington, 1996). He turned to in-depth case study and mythic as well as literary hermeneutics. Arguably, these powerful myths illuminate 'normal' as well as pathological life, as Freud suggested. Hubris, for instance, knows few boundaries in politics, research or learning lives.

We might also learn to employ literary tropes when exploring lost or illusive ‘truths’ of experience: like those of female slaves in the antebellum American South. Their stories are largely missing from the historical record while those of slave owners are chronicled in self-justifying myopia or, recently, in a present generation’s ‘*mea culpa*’. We have gruesome archives of buying and selling enslaved people but know little of the individuals at their brutal heart. In an act of imaginative and democratising defiance, historian Tiya Miles (2023) takes a remnant of cloth that once belonged to a female slave and invests it with truth-seeking vitality, over the generations. She draws on the limited memoirs we have to imagine female lives of suffering, tenderness, resilience, and resistance, intergenerationally, in one family. She uses words like *imagine*, or perhaps, or is this ‘too much of a stretch?’. ‘Truth’ consists of the literary power of verisimilitude and authenticity – more narrative than strict historical truth – appealing to our visceral, empathic capacity to connect with and understand these women over time.

Or we can spend time, as I did, researching the lives of marginalised, abused women in struggling communities. Women participating in ‘family learning programmes’, like Sure Start in the United Kingdom or Head Start in the United States. Programmes designed to concentrate professional resources on the most ‘difficult families’ by mobilising agencies to work more closely together to counter intergenerational ‘cycles of deprivation’. Governments, prime funders of the programmes, demand precise, evidence-based measurement of child development or family well-being rather than contextual understanding or research giving space to family, especially women’s voices. The evaluative language must embody clear outcomes, cost-benefit analysis, and the supposed objectivity of number. Whole human beings, in context, are lost.

Furthermore, deficit models lurk within the rationale and design of these projects: ‘deficient’ families and communities requiring corrective action. But there are more rewarding ways of doing research. We learn to listen to the women’s and men’s life stories (and children’s) and place programmes in broader political, economic, cultural, and existential settings. Some Sure Start pilot programmes had more of a bottom-up collaborative approach, working with communities: local women and men engaged in agreeing what was done and participated in project management. Some women took on leadership roles: a huge step in particular lives. Learning to talk back to power, including to arrogant local officials, when given sufficient support and encouragement. They began to experience agency, and even forms of participative, inclusive democracy (Merrill & West, 2009). There were subtle, beautiful changes in the quality of relationship between specific parents and children that only nuanced, narrative forms of inquiry could illuminate. There were subtle changes in the research relationship too: more collaborative, where finding voice was auto/biographical, as we draw on our own experience to make better sense of the other.

Critical theorist Axel Honneth (Honneth, 1995; 2007; 2009) argues philosophically that we better recognise others when we feel recognised ourselves. As researchers, we learn to fulsomely witness subtle intersubjective and subjective change. Boundaries are then crossed – between historical and narrative truth, literary and academic writing, psychology and sociology, art, poetry, and science, as well as self and other. We cross boundaries on actual pilgrimages too: between clear plains and cavernous depths, lowland and startling heights, grassland and impenetrable forest. We learn to notice and think about difference and how best to manage the highs and lows, ecstasy and despair, pain, and exhilaration of a journey. We learn to recognise beautiful moments, and beauty herself. In research it could be the moment when a young, abused woman talks back to the powerful, or finds some resolution to trauma in creative sculpture (Hunt & West, 2012). We can learn poetically to honour beauty and ourselves. The poetic not, as Simon Wilson (2024) puts it, in hastily scribbling verse, but in attentiveness to the something else in and surrounding us, to the other in the world and self, and in profound changes of perception of what research can do. Finding depth in a moment evoking our own potential for depth.

Auto/biographical and narrative research

The kind of research I now do – auto/biographical narrative research – draws us out, moves and challenges us, satisfies, frustrates, inspires, and occasionally enraptures (West, 1996, 2016; Formenti & West, 2018; Merrill & West, 2009). We enter a border country between disciplines, and different ways of knowing; between self, other and otherness; and in the spirit of American sociologist C. Wright Mills (1959), into the complex interplay of intimate, meso (of families and diverse institutions) and macro worlds. In witnessing, for instance, the intrusions of the macro dynamics of power, patriarchy or colonialism in the stories people tell. And in crossing a border from standard, ‘scientific’ social research into a realisation of just how important dialogue and listening can be.

We discover the importance of self-knowledge in encounters with the other and the workings of power as well as unconscious processes. There is the perpetual danger of projecting parts of our self and experience onto the other, and her story, in what depth psychologists call transference. But we can learn to deepen our appreciation of the other’s richness through carefully drawing on our own experience, reflexively and auto/biographically. We have all, to repeat, experienced degrees of loss, rejection, belittlement, abuse, marginalisation, if only to an extent, alongside the potential joy of seeing something afresh. This can deepen our understanding of the other, and ourselves. It is making explicit the ‘auto’ in forms of research which challenge what

feminist sociologist Liz Stanley (1992) called the objectivist conceit of much male biography, in which the narrator somehow transcends himself and his culture to attain the objective truth of someone else's life, and nothing but that truth. Rather than, in fact, acknowledging the inevitable imprint of ourselves in our texts and in giving voice, for good and ill, to another.

But the noise of the bureaucratic norm of transcendental objectivity never entirely dissipates. We are constantly challenged about subjectivity and inter-subjectivity in research. Yet feelings of authenticity can emerge in the good and dialogic company of other researchers as well as through learning from experience. The paper in these terms is a kind of relational allegory of deepening meaning for self, the other and in giving of voice. It is more William Blake than Isaac Newton: seeing the whole context and perceptual eclecticism rather than scientific literalism's single vision. Blake, the Romantic poet and visionary called on 'God' to protect us from such literalism if we are to appreciate our humanity, or a tree, sunflower, blade of grass and snowflake in their uniqueness and inward beauty (Johnson & Grant eds., 2007). It is more John Dewey too in emphasising research as learning from rather than about experience; more Paulo Freire and Raymond Williams in struggling for social justice for the marginalised. More Romantic Freud than 'scientific', or behavioural psychology (Formenti & West, 2018); and more Hélène Cixous than Pierre Bourdieu in its sensitivity to the feminine economy of gift and reciprocity in education or research, in contrast to Bourdieu's constraining, masculine, capital accumulation (Chapman Houlst, 2014).

Roots

A research pilgrimage has inevitable autochthonous roots. Mine begins as the only child of working-class parents in a once industrial city, Stoke, 'post-industrial' now, in the English Midlands of the United Kingdom. A child of an extended family which, on its margins, contained some awkward, questioning, autodidacts (West, 2016). My family, like all families, was historically and psychosocially complex. Mother lost her father at a relatively young age, partly no doubt because his pottery business was lost in the Great Depression. History intruding into intimate lives as he suffered depression and turned to drink, even occasional violence against my maternal Nana. Mum was born in 1913 at a particular moment – unique and general – of war, economic instability and limited educational opportunity for working class women. The Second World War, more so than the First, widened the theatre of suffering yet also generated resources of sacrificial hope for building a better social order. Hope for me too, born after war's end in 1946. There was inevitable projection of mother's frustration onto me, her only

child, in the confluence of intimate, meso and historical dynamics. Historical trauma inscribed uniquely and non-deterministically into a life.

This mix of trauma and frustrated desire fed into my muddled motivation, including a need to please, even to ape certain kinds of people at university. They included New Left bourgeois critics of Richard Henry Tawney, so confident in their disdain for Tawney's alleged pious, atheoretical Christian socialist idealism, and the constraints this imposed on workers' education. It was the 1960/early70s, after all, with a full employment economy and youthful challenge to cultural deference. We could afford to criticise previous generations from the security of the welfare state and enhanced educational opportunity (West, 2016; 2017). Much later, through the lens of neo-liberal hegemony, I revisited my family history in quite different ways. Dad, I realised, was born on the wrong side of the tracks: working class and marrying into what sociologists Brian Jackson and Dennis Marsden (1969) called a sunken middle-class family. I began to understand more of why I strove to escape a working-class background, and even my Dad. But from 2008 onwards, when researching racism, fundamentalism and workers' education, the quest became, in part, a kind of reconnection with him and his story. And a deepening awareness of what he, Mum, and their generation had achieved.

Dad, I realise, was, in his own way, a principled and courageous man: a firefighter in the Second World War which we rarely talked about. Men's encultured discomfort with emotional intimacy embodied in a particular father-son relationship. I lived until recently in the county of Kent, in South East England, where Dad was stationed in the Second World War. He volunteered to join the new National Fire Service concentrated in areas suffering the worst of the Luftwaffe's Blitz. My home until 2024 was in Canterbury, a place of historic pilgrimage and bombing. Canterbury was badly fire-bombed in 1942 by the Luftwaffe: Dad, I worked out, was probably there, as firefighters from all over the county came to protect the historic Cathedral. I know this through a talk by a historian who researched the chaos at the heart of the bombing: the gauges on hosepipes were non-standardised and it was difficult to connect to the standpipes. I look at the Cathedral today, preserved in all its beauty, partly because of someone like my Dad.

In the 1970s, as I now understand it, I was driven by an unconscious compulsion to right the wrongs of a family's lost status. In the 2010s, and beyond, I reconnected with my working-class roots – through the lens of a dystopic present. This is not to idealise the past but to appreciate afresh the sacrifice and values of working-class community. And of international solidarity in places like Stoke, and of dialogue and hope created in workers' education. Working class auto/biography like mine has become more emotionally and psychically charged than the stolid, emotionally light male sociological writing of earlier times (West, 1996). More recent auto/biographical writing

in fact challenges – not least in inspirational feminist writing (Steedman, 1986) – the gendered myopia of earlier biography. We instead enter the beating, often idiosyncratic hearts of working-class women and men in shared but also unique desire, fantasies and achievement. Carolyn Steedman's Mum liked to feel 'classy' in going out dancing and dressing up. Steedman's is a feminist story challenging working-class women's assumed passivity and subservience. My Mum liked dancing too and found agency in similarly idiosyncratic ways. People make history if never in conditions of their own choosing or according to narrow progressive formulae (West, 1996; Formenti & West, 2018).

The family, as mentioned, included autodidacts. They were driven by a non-conformist spirit, constantly questioning orthodoxy – religious, political, or otherwise. Free spirits, seeking their own way, forming their own communities in what theologian and social radical Martin Buber (Löwy, 2017) called the quest for elective affinity. The latter embodied new and different manifestations of Tonnie's *Gemeinschaft* in workers' education. The yearning for community has strengthened in our neo-liberal, individualistic era (Centenary Commission on Adult Education, 2019). Communities like those of workers' education in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Here, as I now understand, lay powerful aspirations to create an educated, participatory democracy in contrast simply to a parliamentary, representative, and inevitably hierarchical one in which the centre thinks it knows best. Raymond Williams's elective court, in short. Workers' education offered space where dialogue, self/other recognition, and structures of democratic feeling materialised in diverse ways. Where resources of hope were generated in a kind of collective dialogical pilgrimage (Williams, 1989; Goldman, 2014; Rose, 2010, West, 2016).

Nowadays, adult education is deeply compromised, like the broader notion of education, as a means to build an educated citizenry. Education has become commodified, often reduced to its exchange value in the marketplace; and, if less explicitly so, to disciplining populations into social conformity in the face of capitalism's monstrous aggressions and disturbance (McCarragher, 2019). But the decline of workers' education began earlier in the 1950's rise of consumerism and the cultural fragmentations of working-class life. Later, neo-liberalism became the handmaiden for a return to social precarity for the many. A new, anxiety-ridden politics created space for rightist populism, fascism, and scapegoating of the other, the outsider and marginalised. Scapegoating within a fragmented multi-culturalism too whose potential for self/other learning gets lost in the excessive individualism of contemporary life (West, 2016, 2022b).

I now look forward with history in my sights (Hake, 2021). The history of workers' education and how earlier generations of working-class students coped with dissonance, difference and turbulence in politics, economics, and society. How were democratic or elective affinities actually learned in these earlier experiments? How were more

participative forms of democratic life created: what we can call, echoing Raymond Williams again (Williams, 1989; West, 2022b), structures of democratic feeling? Learning meaningful participative democracy, if you like, in contrast to the passive, worst-case experience in schooling of induction into occasional voting for an elected court, or citizenship obligations reduced to litter collection.

I was helped in this part of the pilgrimage by historians like Lawrence Goldman (2014) and Jonathan Rose (2010). They addressed, in different ways, overly dismissive, reductive Marxist scholarship of the post-1968 years. Rose's (2010) work on *The Intellectual Life of the British Working Classes* inspired me to reimagine how and why workers' education offered a model of collective learning, elective affinity, and community building (West, 2016). Rose drew on the testimonies of worker students themselves – diaries, diverse memorabilia, books, life writing etc. – to illuminate how students progressed into leadership roles in the wider workers' movement rather than an imagined incorporation into middle class life and values. Agentic not passive, independence of thought, not indoctrination. Co-creating a relatively vibrant working-class movement eventually to shape the post-second world war settlement. These issues, I realise, have less to do with clashes between Marxist and Christian Socialist perspectives, and more with the openness of students to others, otherness, and their own uncertainties. Here is the fundamental chasm between democratic education and indoctrination: between conformity of whatever kind and the struggle to find more of one's own way in the company of others.

Lawrence Goldman's (2014) work on Tawney celebrated the elective, fraternal qualities of workers' tutorial classes as they developed out of what could be the more passive characteristics of University Extension lectures. The latter were delivered by university tutors to students, oftentimes to predominantly middle-class women in university extension centres in diverse areas of England. The workers' classes were more strongly characterised by discussion-based learning, inclusive debate, as well as the intense study of politics, economics, and later literature, over years. Conviviality mattered in how difference and dissonance were managed – between, for example, hard-nosed, Marxist economism among some and Tawneyite idealism among others. Taking tea together, sharing food, poetry and song evoked a common humanity and a communion of fellowship.

The building of an educated democracy was, as Richard Henry Tawney (1964) framed it, the *raison d'être* of this crucial alliance between progressive elements in universities and workers' organisations. The language of Christian socialism rather than Marxism permeated the movement, if not exclusively so. A 'Kingdom incarnate', as Tawney understood it, bringing echoes of the early Church (Tawney, 1964; Goldman, 2014). Here egalitarian ideals and spiritual quest were incarnated in a model of a socially

just fellowship of learning. There were hints of such vibrancy in my earlier research – delving into Oxford University’s workers’ ‘tutorial classes’ archives and reading student essays and tutor responses – but I failed to see the significance. The problem is not what we look at but what we see, in the words of Henri Thoreau (West, 2022b). Seeing, like learning, depends on heartfelt openness to experience, self and other awareness, a reflexive, imaginative as well as critical spirit, and the capacity, among researchers, to re-present people’s history in authentic, living detail.

Stumbling home

There were other false steps on the journey. When studying, for instance, experiences of working-class women of different ethnicities in Oxford and elsewhere in the 1980s. They were part of a new ‘Second Chance’ adult education project (Lalljee, Kearney & West, 1989). The idea was incubated in the WEA (Workers’ Education Association) to reinvigorate working class adult education. Second Chance offered a relatively well-resourced framework, grounded in values of mutual self-help, dialogue, experiential learning and critical spirit. Topics for study were generated from learner experience, while weekly seminars were combined with individual tuition and residential time at Ruskin Workers’ College in Oxford.

The WEA in Oxford collaborated with Oxford University Department for External Studies to research student experience: combining the use of psychological instruments with open-ended interviews. One course was taught by some committed feminist tutors who encouraged the women to think about their lives, and the experience of being researched. Did they feel validated and satisfactorily represented in the research? We used well-validated psychological instruments to measure changes in health, well-being and the ‘locus of control’. The latter refers to how much we feel authors of our lives or at the whim of powerful others. The women, we hypothesised, would feel more in control, happier and better in themselves because of the programme (Lalljee, Kearney & West, 1989).

The instruments were administered at the beginning, the middle and towards the end of the project. ‘Hang on a minute’, some of the women said in the second round: ‘it’s a lot more complicated than this. In some ways we feel more in control and alive – thanks to the group and our tutors – but in other ways we are more aware of how society works to constrain women like us. As for feeling better, we often feel worse: even though we realised, one or two of us, that we had to escape a deadening marriage. Listen to us for a change and our experience’. It was, I realised, a further injunction to ground methodology in the complexities of student stories, in auto/biography and an eclectic repertoire of interpretive ‘psychosocial/psychocultural’ interpretative perspectives. I then

moved to a new role at the University of Kent and received funding for what I began to call 'biographical research'. But I needed a good enough home – a research family – to learn about the potential and complexity of auto/biographical narrative research.

I found a home in an expansive multi-disciplinary trans-European research community. I learned that biographical research could be grounded in deeply relational methodology as well as eclectic ways of knowing, drawing on sociological, psychoanalytic, embodied, aesthetic, gendered, material, spiritual, religious as well as pedagogic perspectives. Both/and rather than either/or (Formenti & West, 2018; Bainbridge, Formenti & West eds., 2021). The *European Society for Research on the Education of Adults* (ESREA) Life History and Biography Network provided the supportive, diverse, dialogical as well as challenging family where I could flourish. I had begun an intense period of psychoanalytic training too and ESREA introduced me to colleagues with similar interests like Walter Mader (1995). He was a psychoanalyst who used psychoanalytic ideas in framing the theory and practice of biographical inquiry.

There were colleagues with different theoretical lenses, like sociologist Peter Alheit (1995). Peter developed the notion of biographicity which suggested that on the one hand we can be inspired, in the cultural fractures of the contemporary late modern world, to craft a life on more of our own terms. On the other, power, structural forces, and human contingency (losing a job, sickness, loss and finally death) conspire against us. Pierre Dominicé (2000), another colleague, coined the term educational biography in developing professional training programmes to understand clients' lives. To do this required professionals to make sense of their own lives. The work of Alheit and Dominicé was located within a wider turn (or return) to biographical inquiry across the social sciences (Chamberlayne, Bornat & Wengraf eds., 2000). The turn was partly in reaction to the long, deadening *durée* of positivism and the lost human subject in social science.

I began to imagine forms of research giving space, time, and encouragement to marginalised peoples to tell their stories, to do memory work and participate in interpretation. A kind of democratic relational practice to challenge and reshape the historical and contemporary record. Here was a research family in which the complexity as well as the potential of biographies and narrativity could be fully recognised. Attention was also paid to the complex relationship between here and now and there and then in research. Power and unconscious processes shape stories: research is always a co-creation in which the autobiography and presence of the researcher affect the other, for better and worse. Power circulates in research to inhibit and/or to legitimise storytelling. I was moving towards a more reflexive auto/biographical narrative stance in which boundaries between self and other, fiction and fact, conscious and unconscious life, there and then, and here and now were becoming blurred (Merrill & West, 2009).

Beyond Fragments

I sought to connect intimate experience with meso and macro forces in studying the motivations of adult learners in Access to Higher Education programmes, leading to my first book (West, 1996). Its framing drew on diverse conversations with various colleagues in the ESREA community. The study began with a reaction against what I saw to be the epistemological reductionism of survey methods or for that matter empirical psychology. An erroneous distinction was drawn in the literature between personal and vocational motivation, for instance, as if the personal was not implicated in the vocational choices we make.

I realised that there was no single path towards legitimacy in biographical or narrative research: in some sociological contexts the intention was to build reliability in evidence through minimising the presence of the researcher, and finding a 'truth' that other researchers, using similar procedures, would discover too. In feminist forms of inquiry, more emphasis was given to building equality and empathy in the research relationship. The researcher could even share her story (Merrill & West, 2009). In fact, I shared aspects of mine with specific students at the heart of the book, *Beyond Fragments* – including someone I called Brenda. It took time and happened spontaneously, changing the research dynamic in an egalitarian way. Brenda, in a later interview (the work was longitudinal) talked of her family and the influence of her mother. I said something about mine, worrying later that I might have transgressed. In fact, it worked in an opposite, empowering way. Brenda said she felt less inhibited and realised that she often gave the answers she imagined men wanted. Men like me. Students like Brenda continue to interest in their complexity and in questioning the fetish of big samples: the depth, nuance, courage and beauty of a life – in such a case study – can illuminate the murkiest areas of human motivation. Relatability, verisimilitude and aesthetics, like good literature, became the leitmotifs of the work.

I was interested in psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's (1971) ideas on transitional space and the dynamic, contingent and developmental qualities of selfhood (in contrast to an essential pre-given subjectivity). A self forged in changing qualities of relationship with actual people, culture, and the symbolic order. We can imagine Winnicott's notion of transitional space as therapeutic and/or something like the quality of space in a Second Chance or Access to Higher Education programme. If people feel encouraged to tell and develop their stories and can play with interpretation, space opens for the experiencing subject, and narrative depth. Transitional space and new 'object relations' (with actual people or symbolically) are created and the work of memory, in Kundera's terms, is beautifully enhanced.

Brenda learned to take risks even in the face of a husband's betrayal and her children fleeing the nest. One of the children successfully completed university herself and encouraged Brenda to do the same. They formed a stronger relationship. Empathically attuned tutors helped as did finding symbolic friends in literature. Like the prostitute in Guy De Maupassant's *Boule de Suif* who resisted unwanted attentions from two Prussian army officers in the back of a coach (the novella is set during the Franco-Prussian war). Here, Brenda recognised a woman disparaged and abused like herself: we can interpret this intersubjective, emotional life in Winnicottian language of projective identification and object relations, where boundaries between actual or imagined characters and self blur. Brenda strongly identified with the prostitute and admired her courage in fighting off abusers. The other's resilience could be internalised. Brenda felt 'alongside' the prostitute, in visceral ways. Her narrative illuminates how processes of projective identification and introjection evoke a kind of existential, vibrant solidarity across time and place, fact and fiction, self and other bringing the gift of new life (West, 1996; 2023; Chapman Hoult, 2014).

Family matters

Families matter, in diverse ways. As in the lives of another group of working-class women participating in 'family learning programmes'. The latter were designed to provide support for them and their children. The women talked – once the research relationship was good enough – about the quality of support received (or not) from empathic (or otherwise) professionals. They were encouraged to tell stories in specific women-only groups as well as to use art, sculpture etc. to represent painful experience. A young woman I called Gina used chicken wire and plaster of Paris in sculpting her pregnancy. 'People might not get it', she said, as it symbolised her anger at getting pregnant and desperation with her life. There was no head because she couldn't bear to think about it, and the belly was flat in a kind of denial. Yet through realising her talent as an artist, and in new qualities of relationship, she was beginning to turn her life around. She was planning to go to college and was being helped to apply by the group leaders (Hunt & West, 2012; Merrill & West, 2009). Projective introjection functioned here too: messy, confused, even violent feelings channelled into creative acts, celebrated by others, and slowly by self.

Much later I chronicled similar processes in a study of the distressed city I once called home (West, 2016). A location of loss: with industry largely gone, social democratic politics weak, workers' education and the autodidacts lost, like the wider ecology of self-help institutions working class people once created. Racism and fundamentalism entered the void, with many locals resenting how their home was represented

by elites in the mass media and politics. There has been a profound cultural shift in representations of working-class communities: from Alan Sillitoe's 1960's begrudging respect for working class life in *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (Sillitoe, 1958) to contemporary television's *Benefit Cheats* and tabloid newspaper caricatures of people glued to Sky television, living off 'benefits'.

I was also able to chronicle stories of women like Carol: stories that challenge a reductive, ungenerous judgementalism. Carol's story was of her depression and hospitalisation when the last coal mine closed and her husband, a miner, lost his job and died unexpectedly. She despaired at the neglect of her city and turned for a while to the fascist British National Party because they were there on the ground and dealt with the 'druggies'. But she was to find more generous and resilient hope and agency in the conviviality and creativity of a sewing class; and in the gift of self/other recognition with a child, when listening to him reading to her in her volunteer work in a local primary school. There is a mythic, transformative quality in the innocent joy of a child's progress and appreciation, as Carol felt recognised as did the child. A gift from a child working in harmony with the conviviality and stimulus of adult education enabled Carol to progress into a leadership role in her community. When like Carol we feel recognised, including in research, we are better able to recognise others (like the asylum seeker who lived on the other side of the street who Carol could embrace in more generous ways (West, 2016).

The language and concepts we use

Auto/biographical narrative inquiry inevitably leads towards considering the adequacy of our language and concepts. How best to convey and interpret the spirit by which lives are lived and sometimes transformed in cases like Gina, Brenda, and Carol. Liz Chapman Houlton (2014) develops a literary and poetic sensibility in her research on learning lives. Her text is emotionally and interpretively vibrant as she deconstructs the supposed ideals of distance and objectivity in conventional social science. She draws in her journey on gifts from intellectual and creative sisters like Virginia Woolf and Hélène Cixous. Woolf wrestled with the problem of bringing a mother into her writing, which she considered crucial to women's experience. Cixous enables Chapman Houlton to re-experience, reinterpret and energise themes of loss, pain, life and death, alongside intergenerational survival and resilience. She animates the narratives of two resilient working-class women, Chapman Houlton, and her mother, in dialogue. She puts ferocious love at the heart of recognition – of mothers, their learning and of literature. Bourdieuan labels like social capital fall short. We need more than that, Chapman Houlton insists, in our writing on mothers, daughters, the death of a father, or the imprints of class and

gender in learning lives. We need different qualities of language from the malestream to convey the power of love in adult education. We need poetry.

Hélène Cixous says of the feminine writer, 'her discourse, even when theoretical or political, is never simple or linear or objectivised: she involves her story in history... using poetry, fiction, and the theoretical idea of the gift in a feminine economy' (compared with Bourdieu's capital, which she terms part of a masculine economy). Gifts bring superior possibilities: 'the genuine gift is admissible in the feminine economy', writes Chapman Hoult, 'because of the ability of women to accept and accommodate the other, libidinally and reproductively, without violence'. Cixous's feminine giver seeks no direct return or profit but to establish vibrant, life-affirming relations in the giving and receiving of gifts (Cixous, 1986; Chapman Hoult, 2014: 16-20).

Chapman Hoult challenges the constraints of overly masculinist, rationalist adult education research and mantras of evidence-based inquiry. Space must be found for the life-affirming energies of writers like Shakespeare and Bernard Shaw as well as for myth and the poetic. Shakespeare's *A Winter's Tale* is an allegory of transformed life in the character of Leontes who moves from a living death of misrecognition of his wife, Hermione, to fulsome recognition in her death. For her life to return he must learn humility. The character of Paulina helps wake Hermione with the gift of music. She, like the good enough teacher, works to transform the object for Leontes, the reluctant learner. Chapman Hoult writes of walking naked into the text, drawing on Cixous' language. She does not hide feelings of desolation in death or when confronting the existentially vacuous, overly abstract academic language of many conventional, comatose tales of adult learning.

Chapman Hoult's struggle for authenticity and recognition gives birth to new and startling writing. It necessitated learning to write, and to dialogue with authors like Margaret Atwood whose protagonists, she notes, are drawn back into a search for origins, as if looking for missing pieces in a jigsaw (Chapman Hoult, 2014: 170-171). Drawing pieces or fragments of memory together in working class lives, intergenerationally, over time, in a gift of empathic, evocative recognition. This is an act of resistance against the sometimes deadening and reductive surveillance of an academic, social scientific management system. Strong, compelling, life affirming words.

There is, I think, music and poetry, pain, and resurgence in these stories, if we bear good enough witness. They are there too in our dreams and the unconscious. Nurturing the poetic involves recognising desire and the yearning for knowledge and meaning. There is always more, something else too beyond us in the depths and mystery of otherness. A depth and mystery where, Simon Wilson (2024) argues, we might find our profundity. Neils Bohr, the quantum physicist, as mentioned, thought poetic language was required to make sense of the depth, complexity, and relationality

of the quantum world. Analytic reasoning, classical mechanics and ordinary language fall short. A poetic turn among scientists struggling with the ultimate nature of reality, beyond scientific literalism. Eclecticism and the poetic can be born in every one of us as students of human, cultural as well as physical realities. Contemporary academic language 'can be excessively dismissive of intuition and feeling *and* of reasonable argument – hyperrationalistic and overheated at the same time' (McGilchrist, 2021: 721). Researchers of many kinds face the perceptual gap between language and what lies beyond our grasp, whether in quantum or inter/intrasubjective worlds. Poetry, a literary and mythic sensibility become a necessity rather than a negation of 'science' in our yearning to do justice to experience.

Yearning encompasses sacred, spiritual, and religious 'truths'. Elizabeth Tisdell (2017) in an actual pilgrimage along the Camino de Santiago in Spain writes of how North American native peoples regard the earth as sacred. She recovers a vibrancy in her own Irish American Catholic roots as she sings and opens herself to ritual and others, and to the possibility of renewal after painful divorce. She evokes the sacred, libidinal importance of ancestors, place, body, song, pain, poetry and the symbolic in creating new meaning in the company of others. Such encounters with what we might call the ineffable find further resurrection in the work of other researcher/writers. For example, Wilma Fraser's meditation on wisdom in adult learning and teaching. She enters profound dialogue with what she calls divine feminine wisdom or Sophia as well as with her own poetic ancestors who suffered in the Highland Clearances¹ in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. I refer to the Christian Socialist roots of workers' education in my own work; and, most recently to Paulo Freire's liberation theology in processes of annunciation or bringing forth new life in his pedagogy of the oppressed; and in my own troubled and perplexing narrative work among Israeli Jewish and Palestinian educators (Fraser, 2018; Bainbridge & West, 2021; West, 2021; 2023). All of which celebrates an eclectic, poetic vitalism beyond single track scientific literalism. A dynamic process linking life within and without, enabling hope and agency to materialise (Wilson, 2024).

Ethics

There are always ethical dimensions in encounters with the other and her story. Power and inequality are part of research, as are unconscious processes. We can seek to equalise the imbalances by using particular ethical codes and respectfulness as well as

¹ Highland Clearances: this refers to the forced evictions in the 18th and 19th centuries of people in the Scottish Highlands and Islands from their land and homes, forcing them to wander and migrate.

remaining mindful of our own and the other's vulnerability. I emphasise the right of the other to say no, to withdraw from a project at any time, alongside my responsibility to check out with collaborators their experience of the process. We carry a heavy responsibility not to abuse all over again: by using material vicariously for our own ends, or without the informed consent of the other. We risk an exploitative voyeurism in relation to suffering if using this simply for our own narcissistic publishing ends. We must seek reflexive honesty and agreement with collaborators at every stage of research, from initial contact through to publication. We should always feel anxious about what we do and why.

Anxiety is essential in good enough ethical research. It encourages a constant questioning of the values we work by. We must always share our ethical concerns with peers. In the ESREA biographical and life history research network, there are regular calls for formal supervision, mirroring what happens in therapeutic contexts. Supervision is a professional requirement in psychotherapy. Research is not therapy, at least explicitly, but it can be therapeutic. And the act of listening can be seductive, while the bearing of soul can be regretted later on. There are no longer-term structures of support, although we must identify what these might be throughout the process. If intimate stories are crucial for charting history's negative intrusions into memory, they can also leave collaborators feeling used. An antidote lies in constant explanation and gaining specific approval for every step, including the absolute right to say no.

The emphasis given to voice, and the liberation of voices, is also problematic. Voice, I have suggested, is a kind of co-creation between self and other, in which further abuse is possible. Ethical integrity becomes essential; and lies in being explicit about the problem and our own role in recognising it and developing good enough research to become a mutual gift. And transparently putting ourselves and process into the text and interrogating the quality of interaction (Merrill & West, 2009; Formenti & West, 2018). Good enough research is profoundly relational in its capacity to empower our subjects, and ourselves.

Conclusion: finding our way?

I have sought to chart the pilgrimage called research in all its messy as well as satisfying aspects, hoping to help you, the reader, think better about what you do and experience. It includes making mistakes, getting lost as well as meeting others and otherness to guide us on the way. A pilgrimage, in my case, includes engaging with family and cultural roots, illusions, eclectic dialogue and moments of community. And recognising the importance of not knowing, of letting go, of living in doubt and uncertainty rather than grabbing at supposed facts or seductive theory.

Roots matter greatly in memory work. We should pay attention to how we are shaped and shape, often unconsciously, our encounters with the other and ourselves. Psychoanalysis, in my case, helped alongside the gift of the putative, psychosocial theory of recognition from Donald Winnicott, Axel Honneth and others. Grasping the fragments of personal detail, psychological experience, the sacred and spiritual within historical and cultural life, matters greatly and they can be woven into a satisfying narrative whole. A story in which the interplay of the micro, meso and macro, like quantum ‘realities’, calls us towards poetry as well as continuing quest. We need a cultivated awareness of detail, like the good novelist, playwright, and poet. And of the revelatory power of particulars: how fragments and idiosyncrasy intertwine with commonality in non-determined ways. These include the ubiquitous as well as highly particular shards of class, family, gender, race, sexuality and psyche in historical processes and portraiture. Particulars are often neglected in the quest for generalisation. Imagine lives and learning as snowflakes: seemingly identical at a distance but nuanced and unique close up.

We can find a way home too in auto/biographical narrative research. To ourselves and our own depths of memory when researching other’s lives. In my case, returning to the place where I was born, historical and contemporary. A once dark Satanic mill of a city, from which I sought escape. Now I see more clearly and understand more nearly a rich if messy history that includes workers education, self-help culture, as well as conviviality and the principled struggles of learners and citizens, past and present. The research journey takes time, even a lifetime, to become fully open to the many gifts from experience, and to imagine just what it takes to create a better home for everyone.

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