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“We need to talk”: Recovering conversations from the archive

Abstract:

Dialogue is a prominent feature of creative non-fiction used to reveal character, anchor narratives in a context and present different perspectives. But how can conversation be recovered if your subject has passed from living memory? I faced this challenge in my creative biography of Catherine Helen Spence – Australia’s first female novelist and first woman political candidate. Her public and private lives were complex and many-faceted, which became clear from a close reading of her archival record, containing letters and recollections by friends and family, and her vast literary legacy. Building on Paul John Eakin’s theory – that our lives become stories through our “relational others” – I chose to tell Spence’s life from the perspectives of those around her. I imagined oral history interviews with them, listened for their speech patterns and applied Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of heteroglossia – many voices in a text – to my investigation. Conversation is frequently cited as a signpost of fictionality, but it can also lend a sense of verisimilitude and empathy. My depiction of Spence demonstrates how life writing at the confluence of history and fiction can illuminate archival evidence to reveal character and present different perspectives of a complex life.

Biographical note:

Elizabeth Chappell’s PhD (Creative Practice)reimagined the life of early Australian feminist and political activist, Catherine Helen Spence. Elizabeth holds a BA (Communication) from the University of Technology, Sydney, a MA (Writing) from the University of New England and has had a long career in journalism, working for women’s magazines and regional newspapers. She is the author of *Celebrate the Seasons: Garden Memoirs of New England*. Her scholarly articles have been published in *TEXT Baptist Quarterly* and *Rethinking History*.

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Introduction

Conversations in life writing can illuminate characters, anchor narratives in their context and present different perspectives. But how can conversations be retrieved if your subject has passed from living memory? This was the challenge I faced in recovering the life of Catherine Helen Spence (1825–1910), Australia’s first female political candidate, first woman novelist, and journalist on a metropolitan newspaper. She was praised as a social reformer and left a vast archive of letters, newspaper articles and novels, and an autobiography. However, contradictions in her archival records led me to question the veracity of these records and re-evaluate traditional forms of biography as a means of writing her life.

Two theoretical frameworks underpinned my work and informed the way I interpreted the documented evidence. Mikhail Bakhtin’s (1981) theory of heteroglossia – the presence of many voices in a text – and Paul John Eakin’s (2019) explanation of the significance of relational others in auto/biography guided my close reading of Spence’s archival trail and influenced my decision to write her life from several points of view. Layers of interpretation within Spence’s extant documents are reflected through four of her “relational others” as first-person narrators of her story, thus amplifying both her public and private afterlives within the context of 19th century Adelaide, South Australia. Julia Novak employed the term “afterlives” to describe how notable women from history can be re-presented in biographical novels to extend their recognition in “a society’s cultural memory” (2016, p. 84). Catherine Spence’s life is worthy of such exploration. My objective is neither to eulogise nor to judge Spence, but to reimagine her character by amplifying the social forces at play and anchoring the narrative in its zeitgeist. I have chosen the terminology “creative biography”, coined by Caryl Phillips for his hybrid biographical works (Birat, 2018, p. 59), and similarly applied it to works of creative non-fiction (Gutkind, 1997). This term aligns with the emerging practice of “creative history” which informs my method, whereby experiments with form – recognising the writing of history as an inherently creative practice by engaging diverse literary techniques – are extending and amplifying “historical imagination” and exploring the interaction between research and creativity (Lindsey et al., 2022, p. 8). I employ the devices of fiction – characterisation, dialogue, imagery and setting – to delve for meaning within the documents.

Heteroglossia and the relational other

Bakhtin argued that language is rarely unitary but is the product of social and cultural development, containing many layers of meaning. Close reading reveals these multiple and stratified interpretations, demonstrating how heteroglossia gives voice to different social and historical speech types in a narrative. Bakhtin explains that such diversity is fundamental to the writing of novelistic prose which, by definition, contains a variety of language styles and multiple distinct voices (1981, pp. 262–264).

Language is stratified not only by obvious characteristics like class or ethnicity but also more subtly by social groups, generational differences and political and professional jargon to present different shades of meaning reflecting different belief systems and opinions. Bakhtin maintains that “All languages of heteroglossia ... are specific points of view of the world ...

each characterised by its own objects, meanings and values” (p. 291). His method of analysing language not only focusses on close reading of texts, particularly archival material, but also informs writing techniques for dialogue.

Bakhtin’s statements are particularly relevant to re-imagining conversations. He argues that in any dialogue “a significant number of words can be identified that are implicitly or explicitly admitted as someone else’s” (p. 354). Much speech is repeating or evaluating the words of others, he says: “In real life people talk most of all about what others talk about” (p. 338). Bakhtin asserts that each layer of language style denotes a point of view and reveals the cultural system it represents. Building on Bakhtin’s theories, Francois Cooren and Sergei Sandler explore the significance of heteroglossia and polyphony in general communication (2014). Similarly, Sidonie Smith explains how incorporating multiple voices from diverse documents or interviews can situate an auto/biographical subject in a complex cultural context and location in history (1993, p. 400). Smith suggests that collaborative life writing projects which are clearly polyphonic provide an enhanced understanding of the subject.

Life writing, while traditionally glorifying the protagonist in biography (Smith, 1993, p. 393; Tridgell, 2004, p. 103), inevitably involves contact with other people – family and community members, colleagues or opponents – who help contextualise and situate a life story. Eakin (2019, p. 43) posits that all life narratives are relational and that relational identity is characteristic of auto/biography: “The relational dimension is fundamental to all human experience” (p. 57). Eakin draws attention to the collaborative nature of identity developed by the surrounding conversation and reflection of others, “the story told *of* and *by* someone else”, thus blurring boundaries between genres by narrating not only the autobiography of the self but the autobiography and biography of the other (p. 58). “The identity-shaping environments are nested one within the other – self, family, community – set in a physical and cultural geography, in an unfolding history”, he says (p. 85). My creative biography of Catherine Spence utilises this concept of relationality by engaging multiple narrators and reimagined dialogue. The opportunity for biographical fiction to embellish its narrative with contextual and sensory details, which are not usually included in archival records, enhances its ability to position a narrative in a particular historical and cultural context (Saxton, 2020, p. 136).

Underpinning my narrative is an awareness of 19th century Adelaide in which Catherine Spence lived, when trams were drawn by horses, streets were unsealed, and women were laced into whale-boned corsets. These were things no one wrote down because everyone knew them at the time, as Margaret Atwood (1998, p. 1514) points out. Such contextual material situates the narrative in its zeitgeist and fosters empathetic interrogation of the archives by providing sensory detail and verisimilitude.

Reimagining conversations

Reimagining conversations from the past is problematic for writers and even more difficult for historians. Kate Grenville’s musing on the difficulty of creating dialogue for characters from

colonial Australia in *The Secret River* (2006a, 2006b, p. 202) prompted Inga Clendinnen to reflect that:

Historians can’t do conversations at all ... They can sometimes make monologues out of formal speeches or secret diaries or confessional statements. But the informal, verbal interactions of daily life? No. They are lost to us ... Simulation of appropriate speech styles is an enduring problem for novelists. It is not a problem for historians because either they are using their own ordinary language, or quoting directly from contemporary documents (2006, p. 18).

Dialogue is regarded by some narratologists as a demarcation between fiction and non-fiction. Dorrit Cohn considers “utterance” as one of the signposts of fictionality in narrative (1990, p. 778). However, Novak points out that creative non-fiction relies heavily on the imaginative creation of conversations (2017a, p. 9). Dialogue can provide opportunities for character building and revelation, as Lee Gutkind explains: “By recording conversation, the creative non-fiction writer captures reality. This is how people communicate in real life ... As in fiction writing, dialogue enhances action and characterisation, while eliciting reader reaction through humour or tragedy” (1997, p. 23). Donna Lee Brien uses the term “literary ventriloquism” for the way readers perceive voices from the past in imagined dialogue, which she indicates is a feature of both fiction and biography (2014, p. 8).

Life writing genres at the confluence of fiction and history face a challenge in reconstructing credible dialogue. Authors such as Grenville (2006b, pp. 201–206) and Catherine Padmore (2017) discuss their difficulties in creating a suitable conversation style for their characters. Padmore concludes: “[Speech] is an aspect of the past that cannot be retrieved”, explaining her decision to choose plausible “authenticity effect” over historical accuracy in writing conversation (2017). Grenville similarly opted for a “scattering” of idioms from the past: “My job as a novelist wasn’t to reconstruct the authentic sound of 19th century vernacular. My job was to produce something that *sounded* authentic”, she says (2006b, p. 206). “Authenticity is a negotiation between the evidence available to the writer, the reader’s existing understanding of the period and the imaginative power of the author, which combined, can only present the spirit of an era, rather than its actuality”, claims Bryony Stocker (2012, p. 310). Roland Barthes describes the process of striving for authenticity as the “reality effect” whereby insignificant details, along with “auditive” history – “it is speech which in a sense moulded history” – are used to contextualise a narrative in its period (1986, pp. 148, 150).

Giving voice to “relational others”

Unlike most women of her era, Catherine Helen Spence (1825–1910) was not hidden by history but left a significant collection of primary documents from which her life can be reimagined. As I read more about Spence, I became aware that most sources, including her autobiography, completed posthumously, were the mediated impressions of others offering different perspectives. An unpublished memoir by her niece, Lucy Spence Morice (1938), presented a character assessment and emphasis on life events that varied from the hagiographic biography by Spence’s political colleague, Jeanne Young (1937), who also completed Spence’s

autobiography after her death (1910). Significant activities in Spence’s life were given little attention in Young’s work, and Lucy Morice, who worked with Spence in philanthropic ventures, was barely mentioned. Helen Jones (1987; 1988) and Susan Magarey et al. (2005, p. 4, p. 213) drew my attention to the dispute over Spence’s literary legacy, including her diaries and arguments over who should complete her autobiography, indicative of earlier tensions. My creative work used Morice’s memoir as a “spine source” – a referential document with historical legitimacy which functions as comparison with other sources (Lindsey, 2018, p. 6) – because of its frank character assessments of family relationships and others in Spence’s life. How Spence was remembered depended on who was telling her story. This ignited my idea of writing her life from multiple perspectives.

Spence’s archival collections revealed conflicting expectations among her “relational others”. Her niece Lucy Morice grew up with opposing role models – her outspoken and independent “Auntie Kate” and her mother who believed it was not “nice” for women to speak in public forums (*Mail*, 24 July 1943, p. 11). Lucy Spence Morice enjoyed financial and intellectual independence but still judged other women by traditional standards, for example, writing about her aunt’s colleague, Jeanne Young states: “the home and the children were neglected and the husband led a sorry time” (Morice, 1938, p. 3). Ellen Gregory, Spence’s housekeeper/companion, epitomises the narrow and financially dependent life of 19th century “spinsters” without private income. She carried the domestic load, including the care of three separate families for whom Spence became official guardian. Editor of the *South Australian Register*, John Finlayson, recognised Spence’s intellectual prowess and offered her employment on his newspaper despite her gender, but had difficulty reconciling her with his idea of womanhood. It is these divergent points of view on Spence’s disruption of the accepted female role that my creative biography seeks to explore. Narrating Spence’s life from the first-person perspectives of four of her “relational others” – a family member, her companion/housekeeper, her newspaper editor and one of her political colleagues – exposes layers of interpretation within her extant documents. These not only offer a nuanced portrayal of her complex and often conflicted life but also highlight how those conflicts still resonate with women today.

Letters and diaries

Magarey’s biography *Unbridling the Tongues of Women* (2010 [1985]), together with Magarey et al., *Ever Yours CH Spence* (2005), a republished and annotated version of Spence’s autobiography and selected correspondence, provided foundational research to underpin my creative work. Spence’s extant letters, relaying news and some criticisms of her family circle as well as her public activities, gave me further insight into the Spence household (Spence to Scott 1893–1913; Spence to Henry 1900–1910). From these I have recovered the voices of others in Spence’s life to explore its many facets and the competition and conflict between those close to her. While I have engaged with the same primary sources as Magarey, I have revisited these with close attention to the relational others in Spence’s life. The voices of her extended family, and friends like Rose Scott and Alice Henry, speak back through the letters Spence wrote to them and provide fresh perspectives.

Personal documents such as letters, diaries and notebooks, most often kept by women, can reveal “micro” views of historical events from a personal point of view, or a number of points of view. Maria Tamboukou maintains that a document should be considered in the context of its creation, its genealogy: “In working with stories as multiplicities, I am obviously not interested in capturing *the truth* about [the subject’s] life or even recording her as an historical subject. My task as a genealogist is to excavate layers of *regimes of truth* in the construction of stories” (2008). This concept of uncovering “layers of truth” informed my reading of Spence’s archive: her speech notes, draft newspaper articles and especially her epistolary corpus.

Although Catherine Spence’s diaries, which provided the basis for her autobiography (1910), have been destroyed, except one for 1894 (SLSA PRG1398/2), a significant corpus of her letters to Rose Scott, Alice Henry and her extended family is extant. In interpreting these and including excerpts from them in writing Spence’s life, I considered both the mediated nature of personal correspondence as explained by Tamboukou (2017a) and its power as an intertextual device, highlighted by Malcolm (1994, p. 110). From these letters I have extrapolated the recipients’ interpretations and reactions. Erla Halldorsdottir points out that the purpose of letter writing is more than exchanging facts: letters maintain relationships with “significant others” and reinforce self-understanding and identity (2010, p. 43).

Archival documents like letters and diaries play an important role in researching and writing a life, often capturing experiences across class and gender. Greg Denning describes such documents as “texts of lived experience” whose significance is visible through imagination (1998, p. 208). Letters, explains Tamboukou, are a record of everyday life written in the present with no foreknowledge of the future, unlike the retrospective narrative of autobiography (2017a). They can provide multiple perspectives on the same event, recount the comments and conversations of others and reveal multiple layers of meaning (2017a). Tamboukou draws attention to the significance of what is left unsaid in letters and lacunae in an epistolary corpus: “They are full of silences, secrets and gaps. They are stories that respond to the world rather than represent it” (2017a). I read Spence’s letters with attention to details about her relational others: who was mentioned, who was left out, when and possibly why? Halldorsdottir asserts that gaps and silences in correspondence, either because of lost sources (as in letters received by Spence but not preserved) or intentional silences (those people and events Spence omitted from her correspondence) can inform a narrative (2010, p. 38). Spence’s epistolary corpus, although mostly from the last two decades of her long life, provides a window into her family and friendships and their competing demands. As Tamboukou points out, letters capture communication between women and significant others in their lives, providing documentation of relationships and multiple interpretations of life events (2010, p. 175).

Letters, or fragments thereof, are a common intertextual device in both traditional and creative biography. Anna Funder based *Wifedom: Mrs Orwell’s Invisible Life* (2023), her imaginative biography or “counterfiction” of Eileen O’Shaughnessy, on six previously unpublished letters, using intertextual quotations from the letters blended with biographical information and fictional scenes. Jay Parini includes letters from members of Tolstoy’s household in *The Last*

Station (2007); Michael Cunningham opens *The Hours* (1998) with Virginia Woolf’s suicide note; Kathy O’Shaughnessy (2020) includes correspondence and diary entries in *In Love with George Eliot*. Janet Malcolm notes in writing the life of Sylvia Plath that: “Letters are a great fixative of experience ... They are the biographer’s only conduit to unmediated experience ... only when he [sic] quotes from the letters does he share with his readers a sense of life retrieved” (1994, p. 110). While letters represent a window into the life of the writer, I would argue that they are not always unmediated communication, but that the author is mindful of the recipient’s reaction, unlike a diary, which is written for the author’s own record.

Letters between women also foster a dialogue about the role of women in society and serve to create a female community, as Diana Barnes explains (2015, pp. 570, 580). This is the case with Spence’s epistolary corpus, which provides significant background not only on Spence’s political activities but also her social networks. Spence’s letters to her close women friends are rich with personal details and comments on mutual acquaintance: “Mrs Birks is in bed but hopes to be better soon – I think it is the climactic with her – the time of life which tries many women severely” (Spence to Henry, 24 June 1903), which serve well as conversation. Spence’s autobiography, however, is a mediated account of how she wished to be remembered. Because the text was completed after her death by her colleague, Jeanne Young, it is uncertain whether the authorial choices are those of Spence or her “ghost” writer.

Intertextual insertions of letters, diary excerpts and similar materials can provide direct access to alternate points of view, as Bakhtin explains: “All these genres ... bring their own languages, and therefore stratify the linguistic unity of the novel and further intensify its speech diversity in fresh ways” (1981, p. 321). I suggest that in biographical novels and traditional biographies, the same effect applies and indeed is more powerful when it is portraying real people. I have included excerpts from Spence’s letters in my creative work, but interpreted them against the grain to narrate from the point of view of the recipients: Rose Scott and Spence’s extended family. Where only one side of a correspondence is preserved, Halldorsdottir observes the “thoughts and feelings [of the recipient] are therefore only found as an echo in the letters of others who either write about her or to her” (2010, p. 42). This applies to Spence’s relational others, although the letters Spence wrote to them provide a valuable insight into her domestic and public life and relationships. Halldorsdottir explains how imaginative reconstruction of the answering letters, requiring diligent research, provides an understanding of both parties (p. 47).

Quotations from personal or historical documents can reinforce a sense of authenticity by their reference to real-world characters and events (Novak, 2017b, p. 225). Letters and diaries, whether real or fictional, not only contextualise life writing in a period of time but can also highlight the incomplete nature of accounts of the past. “Conflicting viewpoints are invoked in diaries, letters and other addressed accounts to emphasise that traces of the past are fragmentary, incomplete and contradictory”, says Kym Brindle (2010, p. 42). She sees this as an opportunity to investigate “unresolved contradictions” through multi-voiced representations (p. 24), which I have also explored in writing Spence’s life, such as the conflict between Spence’s niece Lucy and colleague Jeanne Young over who would complete Spence’s autobiography: “Mrs Young now refuses to give the diaries up. She gave as her reason that they

were too private for any eyes but hers” (Lucy Spence Morice to Miles Franklin, 7 September 1937). I have used direct quotes from Spence’s published work and letters, such as sentences from her newspaper articles as lines of dialogue with her editor, together with extracts from Young’s and Morice’s memoirs of Spence, both as intertextual excerpts and as the basis for reimagined conversations, to highlight different perspectives on Spence’s activities and motivations.

Diaries are traditionally associated with the confessional female voice (Brindle, 2010, p. 35). The content of Spence’s missing diaries hovers like a question mark over my writing of her life and also the work of previous biographers. Extensive investigations by Magarey et al. (2005, p. 214) and Jones (1988, pp. 165–166) concluded the diaries had been destroyed sometime after 1937 by either Jeanne Young or her associates. Spence’s only surviving diary (1894, SLSA PRG1398/2) contains brief entries cataloguing daily events and encounters together with frequent longer narratives recording impressions of people she had met, including some reported conversations, her public lectures, reading matter and letter writing. The everyday remarks about losing her spectacles or washing her hair and asides such as “I coughed a good deal but Mrs Maule had sent me a little bottle of Powells’ Balsam of Anniseed (sic) and I took a dose which kept me quiet at night ...” (Spence, 1894, 19 June) are plausible as dialogue and provide precious detail for my creative biography.

Magarey speculates it was not any personal information about Spence that made Young resist handing over the diaries, but Spence’s criticism of Young’s marital relationship. She cites this extract from correspondence by Spence to Alice Henry, which in the creative work I have used in conversation between Catherine and her niece Lucy: “That husband of hers is in every way so difficult and so exacting that she always has far too much to do ... I have once ventured to speak to him about it but it had no effect” (Spence to Alice Henry, 24 October 1907). Spence’s letters to Alice Henry and Rose Scott are chatty and frank, making credible dialogue. Outspoken comments about the health and emotions of those close to her in letters to a third party indicate that Spence’s diaries, as unmediated reflections, would have been equally or even more explicit. Following Adriana Cavarero’s description of the narrative being characteristic of female friendships (2000, p. 74), I have used extracts from Spence’s epistolary corpus such as: “My article in the Melbourne Arena deals with my young days and I hope my family will not object that it is too personal. One’s family, or a small number of them, are so supersensitive,” (Spence to Rose Scott, 31 August 1900) to reimagine her conversations with her family and colleagues.

Tamboukou’s analysis of the content and form of diaries describes them as a cultural practice at the interface of life and literature, defying genre boundaries. Their temporal timeframe can validate the knowledge they contain (2017a). Furthermore, Tamboukou observes that the material aspect of diaries – their wear and tear, ink colour and possibly drawings or memorabilia attached – makes their contribution greater than the written words: “The diary is therefore not simply a collection of memories or thoughts, a text or an image but a living body, an assemblage of space/time/matter components that keep making connections with the body of the diarist as well as that of its multiple readers” (2017a). Spence’s single surviving diary is,

Magarey says: “a rich and detailed record of her days, her work, her feelings, her conversations and the people she met and spent time with” (2005, p. 215). When I held that simple cloth-bound book I viscerally experienced the tremendous loss that the destruction of its approximately sixty companion volumes had made to our quest for understanding what motivated Catherine Spence’s tremendous energy.

Novels as a cultural reference

Works of fiction, both Spence’s own novels and those of her contemporaries, such as George Eliot, William Thackeray, Charles Dickens and the Brontë sisters, provide an indication of how she and her circle may have spoken and the vocabulary and idiom they might have used. Similarly, in *Iris*, her biographical novel set in 1930s Sydney, Fiona McGregor explains: “The vernacular voice that drives this narrative was crafted from literature on and about the times ... close attention was also paid to language used in the media” (2022, p. 440). We look to fiction as a cultural reference for writing the past because, at its best, it endeavours to record the everyday, the character details and minutiae of life absent from non-fiction accounts (Barber, 2010, pp. 166–167).

Bakhtin points out that novelistic language contains diverse speech types signifying different social classes, generations and ethnicities:

The novel orchestrates all its themes ... by means of the social diversity of speech types and by the differing individual voices that flourish under such conditions. Authorial speech, the speech of narrators, inserted genres, the speech of characters are merely those fundamental compositional unities with whose help heteroglossia can enter the novel. Each of them permits a multiplicity of social voices (1981, p. 263).

Bakhtin’s principle is applicable to a wide range of texts and valuable in both the interpretation of archival documents and reimagining dialogue from the past. Life writing theorists have applied Bakhtin’s theories to cross-genre and non-fiction texts (Cooren & Sandler, 2014; Kremmer, 2015, p. 1), and historians have similarly explored plurality in narratives (Denning, 1992, 1998; Lindsey et al., 2022). In reimagining the conversations of Spence’s relational others, I have been mindful of how their speech and vocabulary might have been influenced by age, gender and social standing, for instance in the use of formal forms of address: Ellen Gregory, Spence’s companion/housekeeper always refers to her as “Miss Spence” while Jeanne Young finds it difficult to use Catherine’s first name when asked, but Rose Scott and Spence “called each other by their Christian names as unaffectedly as girls” (Franklin, 1988, p. 105).

Two of Spence’s “relational others” have left written recollections of her; others have kept her letters. Jeanne Young’s (1937) tribute provides some approximation of Spence’s conversations. Lucy Morice’s brief memoir of her aunt reveals an echo of her voice (1938). Ellen Gregory, Spence’s “lady’s companion”, gave evidence at the inquest into the suicide of Spence’s ward, Kitty Hood, providing the only available glimpse into her style of expression (Police Reports to the Coroner, 1904). I have looked to characters from Spence’s novels to illustrate the

indeterminate nature of Ellen Gregory’s position within the Spence household and her possible idioms.

Each character’s speech displays its own belief system, thus introducing social heteroglossia (multi-voicedness) through dialogue and intertextual inclusions, Bakhtin explains: “A potential dialogue is embedded in [speech patterns], one as yet unfolded, a concentrated dialogue of two voices, two world views, two languages” (1981, p. 324). He asserts that the dialogue invented for a character encompasses their interior perspectives, their social and emotional contexts. Jeanne Young, for instance, discusses Spence’s affiliation with the Labor Party by exclaiming: “I blame the influence of that niece, Mrs Morice, and her husband. They are very outspoken on the rights of the working man, despite living in one of the best houses in Glenelg and sending their son to St Peters College”. Meaning is “orchestrated” by including such speech diversity (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 371).

Stocker observes that verisimilitude in dialogue can signify the author’s understanding of an historical period (2012, p. 308). She examined various strategies employed by historical novelists to present conversations evocative of their time, concluding that historians [and historical novelists] use documents such as letters and diaries as a substitute for recorded speech and the formal language as representing everyday speech, which can sometimes be misleading (Stocker, 2012, p. 310). Personal documents and newspaper articles can, however, inspire scenes and reimagined conversation. In *Beyond the Sky*, a biography of Millicent Bryant, James Vicars used a newspaper account to imagine a social scene. He found “Creation of dialogue built more fully drawn relationships” (2016). I have followed a similar strategy by taking direct quotations from Spence’s letters and newspaper articles and replaying them as conversations with her family and colleagues, for instance by having Spence’s niece and brother read aloud and discuss her letters, recognising that this technique is a compromise between historical accuracy and authenticity of conversational speech patterns.

Immersion in the syntax and vocabulary of a past era is a method Stocker advocates to simulate language of historical characters, but this is most applicable to events and people within living memory and when sound recording was available. She cautions that terms must be familiar to the modern reader, or a glossary is needed (2012, pp. 312, 315). A hybrid approach, using modern grammar and phrasing combined with words and idioms that signal a time past, places dialogue in a historical framework. For this, Stocker appropriates the term “bygonese” from David Mitchell (Stocker, 2012, p. 313). This, she points out, is the technique used by Mantel in the Cromwell trilogy. Authors need to do sufficient research to ensure the language they use, and the objects it describes, were current in the time of their narrative (Stocker, 2012, p. 316). The challenge, Stocker concludes, is to create historically plausible dialogue that a modern audience can comprehend (p. 316).

Despite the pitfalls in creating dialogue evocative of a time past, Michael Lackey claims that readers expect language to echo the way people spoke in the era being depicted (2014, p. 6). Reimagined conversations between Spence and her relational others are significant in my creative biography. Where possible, following the style of Parini (2007 [1990], p. 371), I have

taken lines from her novels and letters. For women like Ellen Gregory, who left a scant imprint on the archive, I have followed Susanna Scaparo’s advice: “In the absence of historical records their stories – if they are to be told – have to be invented. The stories of the invisible can only exist through fiction” (2005, p. 90). I have imagined dialogue, inspired by similar characters in Spence’s novels, to recover voices lost to history (Stocker, 2012, p. 309; Scaparo, 2005, p. 90). In close reading of Spence’s archive, I looked for conflicting opinions and personal observations from others in her life to recover different voices, necessarily imagined because the people have passed from living memory, weaving together fragments from letters, memoirs and newspaper articles.

Gendered differences in communication translate to differences in life writing style between men and women, maintains Cavarero (2000, p. 62). She explains that women are more likely to tell life stories – their friendship groups and conversations revolve around life and family events rather than an exchange of ideas – whereas male friendship is rarely of a narrative style and their conversation is more likely about things like sport or cars or occupational discussion than about “who” they are. Cavarero emphasises the “narrative character of female friendships”, suggesting that as both writer and reader “the autobiographical text replaces the storytelling friend” (p. 75).

In collaborative or multi-voiced life writing the control of the author is backgrounded and the authority of the first-person narration is queried. “Thus both the author and subject are decentred”, Smith says, enabling us to know the subject in multiple ways (1993, p. 400). She explains that a multi-voiced narrative encourages the reader to listen for a polyphony of voices and thus debate the various perspectives, “truth claims” and interpretations (p. 402). Smith’s statement on biographic writing aligns with Bakhtin’s theory on the power of heteroglossia for decentring characters in a novel.

In the wake of Hayden White’s (2016 [1976], p. 245) postulation that writing of history shares many characteristics with the novel because it is essentially narrative and selective, and interpretation is inherent in language, Peter Burke called attention to conflicting points of view in documented records (1991, p. 6). He advocated that by “following the model of the novelists who tell their stories from more than one viewpoint ... to allow the varying and opposing voices of the dead to be heard again, the historian needs, like the novelist, to practice heteroglossia” to make past events more comprehensible (pp. 238–239).

Traditionally, historians saw their role as establishing a connection between the past they wrote about and the present in which they are working by imposing an order onto unstructured and fragmented information. Post-modern theory opposes the concepts of unity and closure as limiting interpretation (Hutcheon, 2002, pp. 66–68). Hutcheon describes the “doubleness that characterises all historical narrative” – the separation of the “facts” from the narration and interpretation that underlies them – as dependent on the cultural and social context of their reporting, as is demonstrated by women’s recordings in the past (2002, p. 72). By actively seeking out and giving voice to multiple, and often opposing, perspectives, both written history and works of fiction can deliver a richer, more nuanced depiction of past lives.

Interrogating the archives

Authors of biographical novels can engage in the same level of research, often using the same sources, as traditional biographers and historians. The difference is in their methodology and interpretation of the documents (Brien, 2015, p. 4; Scaparo, 2005, p. 75). Writers of biofiction often develop a close relationship with their subjects, which prompts intensive research: consulting other biographies and histories, and revisiting documentary evidence with more imaginative techniques than traditional biographers. According to Ina Schabert: “They go back to the evidence, sift it anew, dwell on it ... thus sometimes discover facts that have escaped the scholars” (1990, p. 23). Funder describes how she read seven previous male biographers’ portrayals of George Orwell, then “went to their sources and found other facts and other people – those that had been left out” (2023, p. 20) to recover the life of Orwell’s wife Eileen, explaining, “I trained myself to read under the passive voice and omissions” (p. 335). Tamboukou posits that personal and political stories are embedded in documents that draw on lived experiences and call for careful reading (2017b, p. 5). She describes her archival research process as “paying attention to unimportant details, trying to discern unheard voices” (2003, p. 4). Kiera Lindsey similarly advises biographers to be aware of overlaps and contradictions as well as gaps in documentation: “A careful examination of the existing sources, however sparse or abundant, is likely to reveal reoccurring clues that can be used to shape how we image and construct our subjects” (2018, p. 1). Stories can be fragmented, discontinuous and incomplete but capable of revealing opinions on, and emotional responses to, events of their time. In my reading of Spence’s documents, I looked for references to her “relational others” and wondered how they would have responded. I imagined them recounting these impressions in the style of an oral history interview. Jeanne Young recalls Spence’s difficult handwriting: “I heard the compositors calling the dear lady everything, when they could not read her awful scrawl” (1937, p. 32). Lucy describes her “Auntie Kate’s” first public speech: “I was rather awestruck to see my everyday Aunt as so important a person” (Morice, 1938, p. 2) and other narrators frequently preface their comments with “I remember ...”.

Narration in the first-person can convey a sense of verisimilitude even when the work is clearly understood as fiction. Schabert describes this as an “illusion of authenticity” (1990, p. 93). Eakin describes the first-person narrator as “assuming the burden of history” – being identified with and taking responsibility for narrating events of their time (2019, p. 97), which is a role I have created for Spence’s relational others. Similarly, Lindsey employed the first-person voices of her protagonist, Adelaide Ironside, and her mother in *Wild Love* (2023). Because eyewitness accounts are variable and memory fragmented, Burke maintains that by writing in the first-person, “the fictional device of the ‘unreliable first-person narrator’ can be effectively used by the historian to demonstrate that his/her voice and interpretation is merely one among several” (1991, p. 239). In her multi-narrator novel *In the Time of the Butterflies* (2019) Julia Alvarez uses first-person voice for one sister, third-person for two others and a diary for the fourth. Like Alvarez’s Mirabel sisters, I have invented voices for Spence’s relational others as narrators. I sought to capture a sense of verisimilitude, or imagined authenticity, by using first-person narration together with intertextual letters and other writings from Spence herself.

In my retelling of Spence’s life, the personalities and opinions of others close to her act as interpreters of the complex and contested aspects of Spence’s long and varied public career. Women telling their own stories mimic female behaviour in everyday conversations, according to Cavarero (2000, p. 54). It is this aspect of “across the kitchen table” conversation among and about others that I have sought to capture in Spence’s life. Like other life writing at the confluence of history and fiction, my imagined voices of Spence’s relational others are based on referential evidence. For instance, Lindsey “snatched sentences in unsigned letters, transformed into urgent ongoing conversations between real people” in her speculative biography of Adelaide Ironside (2023, p. xiv); Atwood uses the first-person voice of Grace Marks to recount her own story in *Alias Grace* in the style of a witness giving evidence, echoing the trial documents that informed the novel (1998, p. 1515). Parini’s multiple narrators in *The Last Station*, drawn from several diaries of those close to Tolstoy, speak in the first-person to give often conflicting perspectives of events (2017 [1997], p. 301). My work on Spence is influenced by Parini, drawing on documented records where available and embedding archival evidence in fictional techniques such as invented dialogue. As Parini says of Tolstoy’s utterances in *The Last Station* (2007 [1990] p. 371), the words spoken by Spence in my creative biography are substantially Spence’s own, derived from her letters and other writing. This technique rendered Spence’s inner voice inaccessible to me. Her thoughts and emotions are only apparent in the reflections of others.

Commonly, traditional biographies insert quotations in block text within the narrative with source references, for example in *Unbridling the Tongues of Women*, Magarey’s biography of Spence (2010 [1985]) or *Rose Scott: Vision and Revision in Feminism* (Allen, 1994) whereas novels frequently place quoted material at the beginning of chapters, such as Walter Benjamin’s writings in *Benjamin’s Crossing* (Parini, 1998). However, in cross-genre works, practices vary according to authorial intention and stylistic choices. Funder italicises intertextual quotes from letters in *Wifedom* (2023) and distinguishes the fictional scenes through typography. Grenville includes italicised excerpts from Elizabeth MacArthur’s letters in *A Room Made of Leaves* (2020) while Alvarez uses non-fiction quotations intertextually in *In the Time of The Butterflies* (2019). I have followed this hybrid practice to situate my work on Spence towards historiography on a fact/fiction continuum (Keener, 2001, p. 181). I consider that such intertextual interventions amplify heteroglossia in the reimagined voices of Spence’s “relational others”.

Conclusion

Feminist historians refer to women’s voices that speak to us across time (Magarey, 2010 [1985], p. 9; Novak, 2017b, p. 223). This is what I sought for Catherine Spence, through the voices of her relational others, to capture the nuances of her many-faceted life. Her extant correspondence provided a rich source for reimagined conversations because of its frank, sometimes critical, and generally chatty style. Memoirs by her niece and colleague revealed not only personal details but differences and jealousies. Spence’s own newspaper articles situated her life story in its zeitgeist and supplied topics for imagined discussion on social

issues, while her novels provided a cultural context and examples of contemporary dialogue. Because Spence left a comprehensive archive, albeit with the significant absence of her diaries, recovering her story through the voices of those closest to her was facilitated by forensic reading, sometimes against the grain. The voices were there once I learned how to listen for them.

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