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Meet Me at Lennon's*: Historical biofiction as a self-conscious narrative device in historiographic metafiction*

Abstract:

Meet Me at Lennon's is a self-conscious work of historical fiction or what Linda Hutcheon (1988) terms "historiographic metafiction". The novel is structured as a contemporary frame story in which a series of historical "bio-tales", set in Brisbane during the Second World War, are embedded. Though fictional, the bio-tales are based on experiences of real women as recorded in commemorative publications, memoirs, oral and popular histories. *Meet Me at Lennon's* uses the contrivance of "faux" historical bio-tales or "microhistories" as a narrative device to expose how authors use textual relics and invention when writing historical biofictions, thereby spotlighting the ethical dilemmas such authors must grapple with when representing the imagined subjectivities of real historical people. The novel aims to re-imagine the Brisbane home front as a site of historical and narrative contention, gendered resistance, collective memory, nostalgia, and place, while exploring both the potential and limitations of historical biofiction as a restorative or correctional narrative device to history's omissions and misrepresentations. This article discusses the use of the novel's bio-tales as a narrative device in relation to the goals of both historical biofiction and historiographic metafiction, and in the space where these two genres collude and collide.

Biographical Note:

Dr Melanie Myers is a sessional academic and independent researcher. Her work has been published in *Kill Your Darlings*, *Arena Magazine, Hecate, Overland,* and *Griffith Review.* She is the former Artistic Director of Reality Bites Nonfiction Festival. Her doctoral novel *Garrison Town* won the 2018 Queensland Literary Awards Glendower Award for an Emerging Writer and was published by UQP as *Meet Me at Lennon's* (2019). *Meet Me at Lennon's* was shortlisted in the 2020 QLA for the Queensland Premier's Award for a Work of State Significance and the People's Choice Award.

Keywords:

historical biofiction, World War II home front, women's stories, practice-led research, historiographic metafiction

Introduction

From December 1941, when the Pensacola Convoy arrived at Hamilton Wharf in Brisbane, following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and the USA's entry into the Second World War, there was a rapid build-up of American troops in Australia. By August 1942, Brisbane was a virtual garrison town with over 66,000 (two thirds) of the American land forces in Australia stationed in and around the city and half of the remainder stationed elsewhere in Queensland (Taylor, 1983; McIntyre, 1989). That number rose to 85,000 in 1943 and, in total, it is estimated that around one million American troops passed through the Queensland capital during the Second World War (Fitzgerald, 1984). Brisbane, as Taylor asserts, felt the "uncontrollable and rapid impact of the invasion of the American forces" (1983, p. 6) more keenly and completely than any other Australian city. The influence of the Americans was, as Hennessey says, overwhelmingly social and cultural "and initially impacted on young Queensland women of the era quite possibly more than any other group" (1994, p. 61).

It was the impact of the "friendly invasion" of American troops on young Brisbane women that I set out to investigate in my metahistorical novel *Meet Me at Lennon's* (2019). The aim of the work was to re-imagine the Brisbane home front as a site of historical and narrative contestation, entwining discourses of gendered resistance, the representation of women, place, collective memory and nostalgia, while also considering how "the appropriation, revision, and transmission of history" (Nünning, 2004 p. 364) might manifest in the novel itself. While engaging with Brisbane's wartime historiography and the challenge of writing realist historical fiction, my intention was to present "a moment in history" – the Brisbane home front of World War II – "both as a believable representation and as a discursive narrativized [sic] construct" (Nicol, 2009, p. 103), which, by necessity, also meant drawing attention to the "inescapable textuality" (Hutcheon, 1989, p. 11) of both fiction and history.

To do this I created a series of small "bio-tales", or "microhistories" (Brien, 2015, p. 11), about six (fictional) women during wartime Brisbane, that mimic in their creation the methods used by authors of historical biofictions. That is, each story takes a "real" historical textual trace (embedded in the contemporary frame-tale of the novel) as a building block for the author – the protagonist of the contemporary framing narrative – to create what appears to be a series of individual microfictions; like real historical biofictions these are, as Collins suggests, "characterised by creativity, invention, and imaginative exploration" (2021). The purpose of this mimicry – of building these biofictions into the structure of the novel as a metafictional device – is to draw attention to the decisions authors make in the process of writing historical biofictions, and the ethical dilemmas they may come up against in the spaces where "creativity, invention and imaginative exploration" are used.

No one character in *Meet Me at Lennon's* is based entirely on a single historical person, and neither do I use real names. I make no pretence at writing "true" historical biofiction in the sense that it is usually understood – that is, specifically as "literature that names its protagonist after an actual biographical figure" (Lackey, 2016, p. 3), since this definition excludes novels that are based on a real historical person, but where the protagonist has been renamed by an author. I do however draw on David Lodge's broader idea that novelists might use "a real person and their real history as the subject matter for imaginative exploration" (2006, p. 8). For

each embedded bio-tale, I have taken partial stories or fragments from firsthand recollections, interviews, and memoirs featured in commemorative publications, academic and popular histories, and worked them into my characters" stories.[1] The six female characters who, in turn, each feature as the protagonist of their own bio-tale are fictional, though the degree to which I have borrowed material from real individuals to inform their characterisation and plot trajectories varies from obscure and oblique to transparent and recognisable. It is not at this level of text that I claim to be using historical biofiction as a narrative contrivance. I have, rather, used historical biofiction as a metafictional device that is built into the structure of the text itself, in order to draw attention to the connection of history to the literary, that is, "a theoretical self-awareness of history and fiction as human constructs" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 5). The text lays bare "its own processes of construction" (Nicol, 2009, p. 99) to remind the reader that history is a fictive construct that can be contested, and it is "not something that equates to "the past" but a narrative based on documents and other material created in the past" (Nicol, 2009, p. 99).

By employing this device, the novel intentionally grapples with the way history is appropriated, revised and transmitted, with a specific focus on how historical biofictions do these things, and the means by which authors of historical biofictions (re)animate the "emotional and embodied perspectives" (Van Luyn, 2019, p. 67) of their subjects. As such, the novel draws on metafictional and postmodernist narrative techniques, such as intertextuality, pastiche, self-reflexivity, and historical irony, to not only show the constructed nature of history itself as narrative, but to spotlight the imaginative space authors play in when they bring the subjectivities of real historical persons to life on the page. By highlighting the gaps between source materials such as letters, transcripts, and even oral anecdotes, the novel also provokes readers to consider the ethical dilemmas authors must grapple with when "reanimating" the dead and inventing their – often unknowable – interior lives.

"Rescue a woman from oblivion"

Ann Heilmann and Mark Llewellen note the "growing trend towards historical fiction in women's writing" from the turn of the millennium (2004, p. 137). Among others, they cite Margaret Atwood, A.S. Byatt, Toni Morrison, and Sarah Waters as examples of women authors who "have made history and their characters' personal and political engagements in, entanglements in, and possessive desires of the past a central feature of their fiction" (pp. 137-138). Parallel to this trend, Lodge, too, notes that historical biofiction "has become a very fashionable form of literary fiction in the last decade or so" (2006, p. 8). The coalescing of these two trends is particularly notable in Australia, where a number of biofictions by women authors about historical female subjects have been published within the last decade. These include Hannah Kent's *Burial Rites* (2013) [2], *Long Bay* (2015) by Eleanor Limprecht, Melissa Ashley's *The Birdman's Wife* (2016), Ariella Van Luyn's *Treading Air* (2016), Sarah Schmidt's *See What I Have Done* (2018), and *The Killing of Louisa* (2018) by Janet Lee. Biofictions where the protagonist's name has been changed from their real-life counterpart include Kate Mildenhall's *Skylarking* (2016) and *Fled* (2019) by Meg Keneally. Though by no means an exhaustive list, these examples demonstrate that historical biofiction has become a

popular subgenre of literary historical fiction to redress either women's partial erasure from and/or probable misrepresentation within the historical record, particularly women known primarily for their alleged criminality [3] (as is the case with all the novels above bar *The Birdman's Wife*). Noting this trend, one prolific online reviewer dubbed the sub-genre "Rescue a Woman from Oblivion" (Hill, 2017), demonstrating perhaps, if not outright cynicism with the proliferation of this category of historical novel, then at least some weariness with it. Regardless of its flippancy, the tagline is an apt descriptor for the thematic concerns of *Meet Me at Lennon's*, which attempts to raise questions about what novelists *do* when they voice the dead by exposing the narrative mechanisms of animating real historical persons and "rescuing women from oblivion".

The inescapable "meta" in historical biofiction

"The literary nature of historical texts" (Curthoys & Docker, 2006, p. 191) as a hallmark of postmodern theory can be attributed to historian Hayden White who "provocatively argued that historians inevitably write a certain kind of fiction", which includes "narrative strategies and techniques, their use of plot and character, voice and tone" (Curthoys & Docker, 2006, p. 191). Unlike historians who have traditionally failed to recognise their dependency on "fictional techniques to narrate the past", and to "seem to believe that they have found the form of their narrative in the events themselves", Ann Curthoys and John Docker argue that writers of fiction – and particularly writers of historical novels – are "highly conscious of their techniques and narrative strategies" (p. 191). Moreover, suggests Alan Robinson (2011, p. 3), historical fiction shares "several fundamental issues" with historiography itself, including the "imaginative and cognitive experience and narrative handling of time, particularly anachronism which characterises historical consciousness". By virtue of its "necessary anachronism", as Georg Lukács calls it (1937/1983, p. 63), the historical novel is "a self-conscious and self-reflexive form that implicitly communicates to the reader its illegitimacy and inauthenticity" (de Groot, 2016, p. 217). As such, Jerome de Groot, perhaps contentiously, argues elsewhere that "if an historical novel is not self-aware, interested in undermining its own authority and legitimacy, then it might be failing in its duty to history, as it might open itself up to obfuscation and untruths" (2010, p. 108). Accordingly, he says, "the modes of postmodernism might be seen to be necessary, indeed fundamental, to the project of historical novel writing" (2010, p. 108).

Since Linda Hutcheon coined the term in the 1980s, historiographic metafiction (HMF) has been used to describe historical fiction that, through the "modes of postmodernism", playfully and self-consciously undermines its own legitimacy. These historical novels are usually characterised by "intense self-reflexivity and overtly parodic intertextuality" and have an "added self-conscious dimension of history" that distinguishes them as a "paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 3). Hutcheon (1989) refers to a clutch of, now classic, examples of the genre that includes John Fowles's *The French Lieutenant's Woman* (1969) and Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980). As firsts of their kind, these novels lean towards explicit metafictive devices "to overtly thematize [sic] and explore epistemological, methodological, and linguistic problems connected with any attempt to construct coherent accounts of the past" (Nünning, 2004, p. 364). Ansgar Nünning

differentiates between explicit and implicit HMF, arguing that the latter "incorporate[s] its metahistoriographic concerns formally in the structure of the novel" (p. 365). Later HMF novels, such as Ian McEwan's *Atonement* (2001), Margaret Atwood's *The Blind Assassin* (2000), and Peter Carey's *True History of the Kelly Gang* (2000) thematise the nature of truth and history more implicitly as part of their structural framework. What both forms of HMF deal with, however, is not "historical facts" so much as "the epistemological problems attached to the reconstruction of historical events and the writing of history" (Nünning, 2004, p. 365). How then does the "paradoxical beast" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 3) of HMF collide and collude with historical biofiction?

Michael Lackey (2016, p. 5) highlights this tension of "reconstruction" in biofictions based on figures from the past, pointing out that one of the problems in defining biofiction "in relation to the goals and techniques of biography" is that "most authors of biofiction explicitly claim they are not doing biography".[4] Despite this paradox, many historical biofictions, like traditional or even revisionist historical novels, tend to lack the "elements that break the aesthetic illusion and thus foreground the fictionality of the text" (Nünning, 2004, pp. 361-362). None of the biofictions about historical female figures listed in the previous section, for example, employ postmodern or metafictive devices to expose them as imaginative explorations of the lives of real historical persons. Of the classic HMF novels listed in the previous paragraph, only Carey's "imaginative exploration" of the life and voice of Ned Kelly in *True History of the Kelly Gang* is a work of biofiction that also employs metafictional playfulness. Many of the aforementioned biofictions, however, include author notes at the end of the novel, which, though placed outside of the text, can be read as a self-conscious acknowledgment of the biofiction's fabrication – undoing, to some degree, the effort to disguise the seams between fact and fiction, and ultimately telegraphing the novel's "illegitimacy and inauthenticity" (de Groot, 2016, p. 217). Lee, for example, opens her author's note with the disclaimer that "*The Killing of Louisa* is a work of fiction based on a true event" (2018, p. 262). The real Louisa Collins was "tried four times for the murder of one or the other of her two husbands" and was eventually hanged on 8 January 1889, at Darlinghurst Gaol (p. 262). Lee describes her novel as:

> [P]erhaps another layer of that story, one that could possibly fit parts of the record, or that I hope causes no offence to any living relative of the historical figures on which some of the characters are based. I have imagined interactions and conversations, trying not to stray too far from the known or reported events, but straying nevertheless. (p. 262)

Lee's admission to "imagining interactions and conversations" and "straying" from "the known or reported events" while hoping to cause no offence, represents one source of unease authors of historical biofictions contend with in their efforts to "voice the dead". Padmore delves further into this unease when discussing the process of writing her own work of historical biofiction on Amy Dudley to consider the subject of the work herself. Amy, whose body was found "at the bottom of a flight of stairs", was the wife of Robert Dudley "who later became the favourite of Queen Elizabeth 1" (Padmore, 2017). In raising Amy up to "let her speak", Padmore acknowledges that it is "both possible and impossible to write the dead, that to write historical biofiction is to hold opposing ideas together, to let the impossible be" (2017). While

speaking for Amy – an ostensibly noble act ("who else will speak for them [the dead] now?") – the paradox is the risk, Padmore admits, that she will be "inserting [her] voice into the space where Amy's used to be", and "the dangerous assumption of empathy between bodies dislocated in time and place" (2017, abstract). The author's voice coalescing with their subject's may not be made explicit at the level of the text, but any paratexts – whether in the form of forewords, epilogues, interviews, articles – that acknowledge the author's subjectivity, bias, or unease with the assumption of their subject's voice introduce a reflexive metatext that exposes the fictionality of the work.

Van Luyn, in reference to her historical biofiction *Treading Air* based on "petty thief and sex worker" Lizzie O"Dea, further suggests that "symbolic harm can be done through the reinforcing of cultural memories that are harmful, using a character to serve an author's own cathartic ends"[5] (2019, p. 72). One solution, she posits, to "avoid harming the legacy of biofiction's subjects is to draw attention to the fictive (and sometimes playful) nature of the invented representation, and the presence of a contemporary author in the construction of the subject" (p. 72). Van Luyn presents an ethical argument here for revealing the seams between fact and fiction that goes beyond ironic acknowledgement of the mutual uncertainty of historical truth in both history and fiction. By playfully snipping at the metaphorical threads where the voice of the author and their subject coalesce – at the "assumption of empathy" (Padmore, 2017) between them – an author, in a roundabout way, may restore some agency back to their subject. Another solution to dealing with the potentially harmful f(r)iction of an author assuming the voice of their subject, Barbara Mujica suggests, is "to accentuate the subjective element ... by inventing an unabashedly opinionated narrative voice" (2016, p. 11). Explicit metafictive devices to achieve these ends, within the text, however, are inimical to the goal of believability or the illusion of realism, and may not appeal to all authors of historical biofictions for that reason. *Meet Me at Lennon's* employs both metafictive playfulness and an opinionated narrative voice (though they are only evident retrospectively) to accentuate author subjectivity in the process of writing historical biofiction. The novel is not intended to be prescriptive in the sense of telling authors how they should negotiate their own subjectivity when "voicing the dead", but rather to raise questions about author subjectivity for readers of historical biofictions.

Historical biofiction as metafictive narrative device in *Meet Me at Lennon's*

Through a cyclic process of research-led practice and practice-led research, I came to employ an organisational structure for *Meet Me at Lennon's* that embeds a series of faux "microhistories" into a contemporary frame narrative. Donna Lee Brien (2015, p. 5) defines microhistory as "a detailed historically-based investigation of a small-scale subject or topic – such as a single event, community, family or person". By "faux", I mean that these "microhistories" are not based on specific individuals, though I do "borrow" story fragments from real people and assign them to fictional characters (as discussed below). Rather, I have attempted to make it seem as though the microhistories or bio-tales (as I will refer to them from here on) are those of real people whose stories have been reconstructed through the textual relics they have left behind. By employing such a self-conscious narrative device, I hope to

draw into the work, by implication, the inherent ambiguities and ethical dilemmas of historical biofiction for readers to consider for themselves, thereby adding an element of self-reflexivity to the novel and, also, marking it as a work of HMF. Additionally, the novel seeks to explore, "the present's relationship with the past and the inescapability of the historical in the contemporary" (Heilmann & Llewelyn, 2008, p. 138), by opening up the past "to the present, to prevent it from being conclusive and teleological" (Hutcheon, 1988, p. 110).

Meet Me at Lennon's opens with the contemporary frame narrative in which protagonist Olivia – a PhD student writing her thesis on women's wartime writing – is disheartened by her quest to discover a rumoured lost manuscript by Gloria Graham: a now-obscure writer and feminist with many ahead-of-her-time opinions. Olivia instead begins gathering, more by accident than design, fragments of other wartime "herstories" in the form of letters, photos, radio transcripts, documentaries, commemorative publications and family anecdotes, which she will eventually use to try to solve the murder of a young woman in 1943, whose body was found in the mangroves on the banks of the Brisbane River. The embedded bio-tales are ordered within the frame narrative in such a way that the reader is meant to know more than Olivia; at least, that is how it appears. The first embedded bio-tale begins with the discovery of the young woman's body by Dolly, who will later go on to become a respected Brisbane stage actress. The young woman's murder, the reader is informed, was never mentioned in the newspapers at the time. Her name, her life, her narrative do not exist in the public record. Her death, though literal in the story, is intended as a metaphor for women's erasure from history. Olivia is alerted to the girl's "muddy death" (Shakespeare, c.1603, *Hamlet* 4.7.158b) and the curious lack of press coverage, first via a letter, and then a radio transcript of an interview that Dolly – or Gwen as she is later known – gave in the 1970s when she played Gertrude in a production of *Hamlet*.

For the reader, these epistolary and documentary inclusions are usually placed as resolutions to the embedded bio-tales – the reader finds out what happens to the characters post-war. Like history itself, however, they do not tell the whole story, but rather reinforce that "history is only accessible to us via textual forms, as there is nothing which remains of the past except text" (Nicol, 2009, p. 102). Each embedded bio-tale is constructed from an imagined textual relic of some kind, thus mimicking in their construction techniques associated with historical biofiction, whereby a novelist takes newspaper articles, letters, court records, or other historical documents and fills in the rest – the "lacuna", which Padmore describes as "the most compelling aspect of this historical moment" (2017) – through narrative techniques such as interiority, imagery, and dialogue. Rather than hiding, or blending into the text, the (often scant) historical fragments from which a novelist might construct a biofiction of a real historical person, the fragments Olivia uses to construct her bio-tales are hidden in plain sight, as it were, throughout the novel, thus exposing the architecture of her bio-tales. The reader, therefore, becomes privy to the way writers of historical biofiction – in this case Olivia – fill in the gaps left by the spaces in the historical record. The past is always present in the contemporary frame-narrative, consistently reinforced via its references to textual traces of the past (letters, transcripts, photographs, postcards and even oral storytelling) that are found by Olivia and that she uses, as previously mentioned, as the catalyst for her reconstructive bio-tales. Robinson's (2011, p. 7) assertion that textual "relics remain inert matter until we breathe our reanimating

life into them, mute until we give them a voice by projecting an interpretation or assigning meaning to them" could well be the organising principle for the novel's structure.

For example, one bio-tale – Edith's – is based on a mention by Clio to Olivia that her grandmother witnessed the Battle of Brisbane [6] "[f]rom an upstairs window in the Red Cross Building" (Myers, 2019, p. 118). In response to this revelation, Olivia remarks, "Did she really?", to which Clio replies, "I don't know for sure. It's just something I remember Dad saying" (p. 118). The subject isn't mentioned again and is intended to read as nothing more than an off-hand comment, suggesting the details – if indeed Edith actually did witness the infamous riot at the intersection of Adelaide and Creek Streets – have long since decayed from the retelling of this family story, along with Edith's subjective experience of it. In Edith's bio-tale, three chapters later, her subjectivity is playfully restored via Olivia's reconstruction of the Battle of Brisbane through what she imagines are Edith's eyes. The metafictive irony lies in the fact that in order to reconstruct "the battle", Olivia – standing in for myself – had to base what Edith saw on real eyewitness accounts (as collated in secondary sources such Thompson and Macklin's *The Battle of Brisbane: Australians and the Yanks at War* [2000]) in order to make Edith's subjective experience as accurate as possible. By self-reflexively attributing authorship of this subjective reconstruction to Olivia, rather than myself, the reader, by turn, has a heightened awareness of how authors of biofictions conjure the interior lives of their subjects from historical fragments, and can thus make their own judgements about the ethics of that process.

Alice's bio-tale is an example of where I have taken story fragments from a real firsthand recollection and worked it into a character's story. The "small memoir piece" Olivia reads about "a waitress at Lennon's [who] claimed to have a bought a coat from McWhirters with the generous tips she received waiting on American brass" (Myers, 2019, p. 3) is the "real" textual trace upon which Olivia constructs Alice's bio-tale. The "small memoir piece" (Myers, 2019, p. 3) from which Alice's story is derived comes from a first-person piece included in *Yandina Women Remember* (1995), which was published as part of the *Australia Remembers* series commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the end of World War II. In Marj Stone's (née Buckland's) 400-word account there was one particular paragraph that interested me:

> I was a waitress in the dining room, where tips were very generous – two pounds or three pounds a time. The waitresses found they could live on the tips so we often did not collect our pay for some time. I bought myself a fur coat for fifteen pounds from McWhirters and felt very smart indeed until I realised that American servicemen bought fur coats for the girls who favoured them. I decided to burn it. And burn it I did but had my photo taken in it first. (As cited in Blyth, 1995, p. 69)

The caption beside the photograph of Stone in her fur coat says "without regret, I burnt it" (p. 69). I found Stone's defiance, recalling this memory some fifty years later, intriguing. Burning an expensive fur coat struck me as an extreme measure to dissociate oneself from women whom American servicemen "favoured", yet it is a *real* historical illustration of the narrative that women were considered to be either "decent or decadent": an oft-repeated and sexist platitude used by Australian men to suggest there were only two types of women (Campbell, 1989, p. 72). By ascribing to this decent/decadent binary in a move of "moral one-upmanship",

Australian soldiers reassured themselves that they attracted the former, Americans the latter (Campbell, 1989, p. 72). Stone's wish to be photographed in the coat before she burnt it is also a curious adjunct to her story, the narrative potential of which immediately appealed to me. When did the young Marjorie Buckland realise that "nice girls" – "decent" women – do not wear fur coats? Was there a particular incident that precipitated the moment of realisation? And why not just give the coat away? Implicit in her account, though not directly stated, were feelings of deep shame, I felt, which is what I set out to explore in Alice's story. In using Buckland's fur-coat anecdote, I also experienced the same unease other authors of biofictions have expressed. By taking Buckland's account and assigning it to a fictional character, am I honouring her experience or simply appropriating it for my own ends, thus causing symbolic harm to her memory? The answer could well be both, but the dilemma is one all authors of historical biofictions – if not all historical fictions – must wrestle with in their own way.

In the case of the fictional Alice and her fur coat, the textual relic in the artefact that inspires her bio-tale foregrounds the story to follow. In other cases, the textual relics or traces follow the stories they inspired, so that they are cast instead as resolutions, or postscripts. Once the reader understands that Olivia is the author of the novel, these "textual traces" can be retrospectively recast as the original impetus for her reconstructive bio-tales. This device is calculated to not only highlight the process of historical reconstruction itself but "the protagonist's consciousness of the past" (Nünning, 2004, p. 364), and "the ways these events are grasped and explained in retrospect" (Wesseling as cited in Nünning, 2004, p. 365), but to reveal the author's hand in these invented representations. By the final embedded bio-tale – Gloria Graham's story – it should hopefully be clear to the reader that the "real" textual traces found in the historical record are the catalysts or inspiration for the bio-tales, and the rest is an imaginative filling in of the gaps by Olivia (acting as a stand in for myself). It is here, also, that the reader may see that an author's decision to represent the past as they see fit is potentially fraught and not without "the possibility of misrepresentation" (Mujica, 2016, p. 11).

If Olivia's conclusions seem tenuous, her connections far-fetched, and her assumptions too convenient, then perhaps they are. In this way, the reader becomes complicit in Olivia's desire for narrative restoration and retrospective justice for an unnamed woman who was raped and murdered, her body left in the mangroves by a man who was never convicted, let alone arrested and tried for his brutal, callous crime. At this point, reader and Olivia alike are confronted by both the potential and the limits of historical biofiction when recuperating and reviving the presence of women and their voices to history – the women, like Olive (the young woman whose body was found in the mangroves), whom history has erased, censored, or mispresented. Does (re)writing and (re)interpreting history using the hindsight of the present – "necessary anachronism" (Lukács, 1937/1983, p. 63) – change anything? Historical biofiction, the novel suggests, gives authors permission to fill in the gaps, as it were, and to restore women to history's pages, but what of its limitations, ethical dilemmas, second guessing, and very likely interpolation of the author's voice over the top of her subject/s? And indeed, the novel's twist – if it can be described it as such – is not whether Olivia successfully "solves" the cold case of Olive's murder (for she is no detective), but whether narrative, or story, has the power to deliver a form of justice in undoing Olive's, and by extension, other women's historical erasure.

Conclusion

Meet Me at Lennon's is ultimately an endorsement of what authors of actual historical biofictions do when they take an historical person and subjectively (re)present the life that person lived from the inside out; however, it is not without caveats. At the end of the novel, only after Olivia gets approval from her friend Clio, whose grandmother and great aunt are both subjects of her bio-tales, does she send her thesis ("Meet Me at Lennon's: a Narrative Reclaiming of Women's Lives and Voices from World War II Brisbane") to her supervisor, and then "hope[s] for the best" (Myers, 2019, p. 259). Olivia's desire for approval from a living relative of her (re)presented subjects suggests authors of historical biofictions have a duty of care to their subjects (and their living descendants), which means getting things "right" as far as they can. The ending suggests, too, that a real historical person is not a carte blanche on which an author paints their reimagined portrait while "rescuing them from oblivion", while paradoxically acknowledging that cannot be completely avoided either; the antidote to which is for authors of historical biofictions more broadly to acknowledge, in some manner, the uncertainty of their craft. As more writers continue to embrace the comparative freedom of historical biofiction over the strictures of classic biography – which will likely lead to more experimentation with form, along with ongoing fluidity between the boundaries of fact and fiction – discussions about the ethical representation of their subjects are only going to intensify.

Notes

[1] This method resonates with Sara Read's approach to developing fiction from the life stories and archival traces of early modern midwives (2022).

[2] Kent describes her novel *Burial Rites* as "speculative biography" which, she says, while "anchored to research ... nonetheless offered a foray into the unknowable emotional lives of my characters: ... a work not of uncontestable historical accuracy, but one that contested the understanding of infallible historical truth, and in doing so, suggested the possibility of multiple interpretations" (Lit Hub.com). Though beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the differences, if there are any, between speculative biography and historical biofiction, Brien (2015, p. 4) posits that "beginning with the historical evidence, the speculative biographer extends and supports the account generated from this evidence by (re)inserting into the narrative biographical elements without which the life story of the subject is incomplete" – a description which could just as easily fit with what authors of historical biofiction do.

[3] In her article "(In)famous Subjects: Representing Women's Criminality and Violence in Historical Biofictions", Van Luyn (2019, p. 67) directly addresses the ethical challenges and dilemmas of writing historical biofictions "based on the imagined subjectivities of women who commit acts of violence and criminality".

[4] In her novel *Fled*, based on the life of Mary Bryant, a female convict who arrived on the First Fleet and was "behind one of history's most daring escapes" (2019, p. 385), Keneally goes as far as to rename her protagonist Jenny to relieve herself of the burden of misrepresentation. Keneally's reasoning, aside

from claiming *Fled* is "a work of fiction", is that with "no record of her thoughts and feelings", she could "only guess, based on her [Mary's] actions, at her personality and what she felt" and that "[i]t seemed wrong to ascribe thoughts, emotions and beliefs to her ... it felt better to have a fictional character who could fully own all of this" (p. 385).

[5] Van Luyn recalls a dream she had after *Treading Air* went to print in which Lizzie O"Dea "stood outside [her] window, aimed a pistol through louvres, swore, and fired at [her]", which the author interpreted as O"Dea being "angry" with Van Luyn "for writing about her" (2019, p. 68). Though her editor reassured Van Luyn you can't defame the dead, at least in the legal sense, the experience left her rattled, and conscious of the need to explore "the question of potential harm that might be done to O"Dea's memory" (p. 69).

[6] The "Battle of Brisbane" (November 26-27, 1942) was a sustained riot between mostly US military personnel and Australian servicemen on the corner of Creek and Adelaide Streets in the city. An estimated 2000 - 5000 men were involved in the riot outside the American PX canteen the night of Thanksgiving. AIF Gunner Edward Webster was shot dead and eight men were seriously injured (Thomas & Macklin, 2000; Ralph, 2000).

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