WEBBER STREET: A Collection Of Poems Based On The History Of A Social Housing Estate

Part 2: The Critical Reflection

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WEBBER STREET

Abstract

This thesis is a reflective account of the process of a practice based research project to write poems from materials related to the history of the social housing estate I live on. I wanted to explore 'where I am located' in this way to be able to develop my own actual spoken voice and be able to use it more within my poetry. I decided that the route into this might best be sought via social history, as that has, over the last fifty years or so, developed a better relationship with working class subjects than lyric poetry, which is the 'tradition' that I write in.

The voice for working class women, as characters in literature, has tended to be either faux naif or crude. Tony Harrison has identified this as being also problematic for Yorkshire men the ones 'Shakespeare gives the comic bits to' (2006: 107). This restricted me in my range as a writer of working class origin and I needed to find ways to overcome it. Having been involved in my local community, both as a poet and participant, in local heritage or community history projects, I felt that there was something to learn about how history treats the working class voice.

There are six chapters in the theses. Chapter One is an introduction explaining the research and background to the problem. Chapter Two is about the actual flat and the estate that it is part of, which is considered against a backdrop of ideas about homes and the imagination by Gaston Bachelard and Juhani Pallasmaa. Chapter Three explores ideas and process involved in archival research. Chapter Four is about voice and memory, comparing the intersections between contemporary dialect writing and oral history transcripts and looking at how memory is considered in both. Chapter Five considers history as a discipline and the referenced essay as a definition of what history is. Chapter Six concludes the whole.

The thesis argues that in working in this way, I have managed to find a way that I can feel confident using my own spoken and actual voice as part of the range available to my 'writer's voice'. I also conclude that during the time of this research, things have changed in contemporary poetry and that means there is a bigger audience willing to engage with this kind of writing.

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Chapter One – Introduction

Webber Street is a poetry collection written using historical sources from archives that hold materials relevant to the history of the housing estate I live on. The estate was built in the early 1900s, in Waterloo, just south of the Thames. The archives holding material about the estate are largely, but not exclusively, Lambeth Archives, who hold local government and Lambeth parish records and Church of England Archives, who hold the records of the original landlords of the estate, The Ecclesiastical, later Church, Commissioners. I have also used oral history accounts and conversations about memory, as well as photographs that are in my own possession to produce some of the poems. These poems also explore aspects of the histories of working class women, who tend to tell their lives as a series of short-story narratives (Heron, et al., 2012: 302).

Working class women have often found themselves excluded from both history and poetry. American poet Laurel Richardson recently argued that there is 'a crisis of representation' within history for working class people (Hanauer, 2010: 5). However, historians have tried to address this 'crisis of representation'. There is over half a century of work by historians attempting to 'rescue' working class people from the 'enormous condescension of posterity' (Thompson, 1980: 12). Arguably there is more of a 'crisis of representation', or even simply presentation, in contemporary lyric poetry, which is still dominated by an upper middle class diction. My hypothesis is that the creation of poetry using historical materials from both archival and oral sources helps with presenting working class women's voices and witnessing (Forché, 2011) our lives in contemporary lyric poetry. Community and social histories have provided working class women with active participation in the telling of their lives and community histories, and potentially using those same methods could enable working class poets to participate in and shape a literature by and about ourselves.

This project, exploring the intersections of poetry and history, emerged from my own search for my voice as a writer in the last decade of the twentieth century. As a result, I will be discussing much of this search autobiographically, as I want to demonstrate that the process was, and still is, an experiential one. When a writer starts out, those who encourage you talk about 'your voice', meaning aspects of tone and written diction that make your writing distinctive. It is there in both raw drafts and more developed

writings. When I had been writing and attending poetry workshops for under a year, others started to say I had 'found my voice'. Gradually, I became uncomfortable with this voice, because I began to notice that whenever I used 'demotic' language it was usually problematic for the reader, who at this stage of my writing life was usually another poet workshopping with me. These other poets were nearly always also using demotic language although in more middle-class voices. It seemed that if I voiced a narrator as a London working class woman and she said something interesting or intelligent, people would say, 'she wouldn't say that'. If I voiced her as being more true to perceived type, fellow workshoppers would question the point of it; 'where's the poem?' was a typical comment.

Even the rhythm of my spoken voice presents problems. Iambic metre is said to be the pattern that is 'closest to the rhythms of English speech' (Poetry Foundation), with a pattern of stressed and unstressed alternate syllables in a rising rhythm – de DUM, de DUM. It is certainly the most common rhythm for poems in the English canon and was extensively used by twentieth century poets such as Robert Frost to develop a conversational tone in his poems. However, for Londoners, as for some other Anglophone urban accents, the stress patterns fall differently to that. Londoner's speech tends to be either trochaic, as is London itself – a falling rhythm – DUM de, DUM de, or in triple meter DUM de de or de DUM de. These things were all aspects of a concern I was developing that I was being false to an important aspect of myself, that of my birth class, and an equally important aspect of my speaking voice, that of my more energised and impassioned self and my own equally valid music.

Eliot's Lil

After I had been writing for over a decade and had been featured in several 'new voice' anthologies, American poet Alfred Corn came to London and taught a course for the Poetry School on urban poetics called 'Poet and the City'. During this course, Corn presented a reading of TS Eliot's 'Game of Chess', which is the second canto of *The Wastelands*. The first half is voiced by an unhappy and slightly self-conscious educated woman. The second half takes place in a pub. It is an overhead conversation voiced in London working class accents about a woman called Lil who is perceived by the others as behaving in a way likely to damage her marriage. In the narrative, the reader is told that Lil has had an abortion and the medication necessary to 'bring it off' (1940: 33) has

led to her losing her teeth and although her husband has given her the money to have dentures made, she has not done so. The thing that bothered me was not so much in the text itself but that all except for three of the fifteen or so participants thought that the text was extremely funny and that Eliot had meant it to be so. The three of us who did not, and who had found the whole exercise of listening to it through the laughter of the others extremely difficult were all from working class backgrounds and had enough knowledge of our own history, to know that having dentures is not so you can appear in your own real life seaside postcard, but was a regular part of managing dental expenses for working class people prior to the creation of the National Health Service in 1945.

The women who laughed, although they were middle class, were all at university in the late 1960s and 1970s. In addition, all fifteen of us were early to mid-career poets, rather than beginners, so it is arguable that they ought to have been more aware of the textual nuances present. The three of us that had not laughed discussed our discomfort at the laughter within the session and the debate that ensued was enlightening. It was felt by those that had laughed that the accents themselves were the prompt for laughter; that all cockney women in literature are there as light relief. This was profoundly disturbing and reminded me of an incident a few years before in another workshop when a young middle class woman had told me 'You sound like a comedian!' This added to my disquiet regarding my ability to be taken seriously as a contemporary lyric poet.

Dialect Poetry

In the literary canon, working class London women tend to have comic roles. They are crude like Mistress Quickly or faux-naïf like Mrs 'Arris (Gallico, 1969). Ian McMillan and Tony Harrison have observed that the role of Yorkshire men in literature is similar, 'Uz' being the ones 'Shakespeare gives the comic bits to' (Harrison, 2006: 107). Hence, I had thought perhaps one answer was dialect poetry because it has a tradition and canon of its own and uses the perceived languages of working class people. Although I am a Londoner, my parents were from Lancashire. As a child, I was introduced to Lancashire dialect poetry. My grandmother liked a writer called Tom Fowlds, whose comedic outpourings featured in *Bury Times* every week. She also liked poets from the Industrial Revolution, especially those active during the 'Cotton Famine' of the 1860s, such as Joseph Ramsbottom, Samuel Laycock and Edwin Waugh, who responded to their situation with consciously political voices.

The connection between these poets and the politicised working class in industrialising Manchester led to a dialect poetry for Lancashire that was less sentimental than most. In general, Victorian dialect poetry came out of folkloric tradition and was usually recited in public spaces in the same way as 'folk' songs were sung. As the nineteenth century continued, recitations in dialect became part of the urban entertainment scene. In Music Hall, songs and poems were largely humorous or sentimental. For the more politicised audiences of Manchester or 'Cottonopolis' and its surrounding areas, their expectations were different. They wanted and celebrated a poetry that represented their lives. Some poems still featured humour, such as Laycock's 'Sewin' Class Song' (ed. Hollingworth, 1977: 109), but largely they were political poems that explored poverty and exploitation. I had collected these poems as a gift for my father. In my teens, I created an anthology of Lancashire dialect writing with short biographies of the poets. The local library borrowed the books for me from Manchester Central Library. These poems were a fundamental part of my childhood poetry and gave me an understanding of a potential working class poetics.

Hence, it had occurred to me that dialect poetry might provide a solution for the problem I was having with 'voice'. However, I was stuck behind two very large questions that I could not at that stage give myself a satisfactory answer too: a) can you have a dialect poetry for London? and b) who was the audience for this? The key problem seemed to me to be a lack of a true dialect in London. According to Clive Upton, a dialect must feature special vocabulary not to be found commonly in the English-speaking world (Oxford Dictionaries). For London, it seemed to me, there was an accent that could be represented in text but no special language, no obvious vocabulary that belongs to London and nowhere else in the country. Even rhyming slang appears to be used more frequently elsewhere now, having become a 'city boy' and then general businessman language in the latter part of the twentieth century. Compared to my grandmother's 'North' it all seemed very unpromising. The second question, that of audience, was bothering because of the idea that the text in dialect is there to guide a perceived middle class reader. This reader, used to a world lived in R.P. (received pronunciation), needs words to be spelled differently in order to 'hear' the text as it should be. If the reader was genuinely from the place or class depicted, they would read the word in that accent when spelled conventionally. For example, I see horse but my head voice says 'orse. This was a common argument that I participated in and

became convinced by, that took place amongst young English poets considering dialect or accent in the last couple of decades of the twentieth century. In England, it was out of favour as a serious form for poetry. In Scotland, the Caribbean, and some other Anglophone countries, things were different.

By the turn of the twenty-first century most contemporary poets using dialect were Caribbean poets, writing in what Edward Kamau Brathwaite termed Nation language (1984: 5-6), or Scottish poets writing in Scots. Both Nation and Scots are languages, not dialects, but they both have dialects within them. Hence, Brathwaite's Barbadian Nation is different to Fawzia Kane's Trinidadian Nation, just as Doric Scots is different to Orcadian. In December 2000, I read with a poet called Helen Clare, from Bury, the same place that my father was from. She read three poems in what she described as 'a modern North Manchester dialect'. I recognised the tone and energy immediately. I asked her about these poems, and she said she was trying to express that voice without resorting to the apostrophe – which usually represents an absent unit of sound. For Clare, her dialect poems (2004) are about contemporary experience in her own geographical community. Jacqueline Gabbitas from the East Midlands (2007) and Liz Berry from the West Midlands (2014) are two amongst several English contemporary poets who are also working with language in this way, and I have been discussing these issues with them and with Barnsley poet, Ian McMillan. 'These issues' of voice and history all boil down to questions of identity and voice. For Katrina Porteous, her Northumberland dialect poetry is purely about musicality. Porteous is the only one of the poets I have discussed this with who is writing in a dialect that is not her 'own' in that she does not speak that way herself. In chapter four of this critical reflection, I discuss these conversations and these poets work more fully; suffice to say here that these discussions have helped me to shape and understand my own dialect/accent writing and also to understand that there is a serious and respectful readership for this kind of material.

My own journey into dialect poetry came through pondering history. My masters is in Public History from Ruskin College; hence my training sits within the tradition of radical history. I discovered when working at Lambeth Archives as the local history librarian, that Annie Urquhart was the first tenant of my flat in 1905. I began to think about her and decided to write a poem discussing what she and I could see from our shared living-room window. I researched what was in our street in 1905 by looking at a

Post Office directory and street renumbering file. When I sat down to write that first Annie poem, which was published in my first collection *The Finders of London* (2010), I wrote it like any other – there was a moment of stillness followed by flow that I did not consciously interfere with. It flowed out in a form of dialect or 'accent' poetry. I had not intended it to but once it was, then so it was and it felt right. When one discusses this, it is of course, 'another text'; it is not even 'figuratively' what was in my head when I wrote the poem. But, because of the aforementioned childhood understanding of dialect as a kind of poetry for 'us,' and because while I had been thinking about how to present my actual spoken voice, I had been doing a lot of concentrated listening to myself and to the people around me, and I felt I could at least try this and see what other poets I workshop with thought of it.

It was a first draft and had many other drafts along the way, especially whilst I was trying to figure out how to represent a London glottal stop to my satisfaction. I needed to find a punctuation mark that represented its presence as a relatively subtle sound. I looked at a variety of symbols that linguists and other languages use to demonstrate that. The choice of backward, upside down and un-dotted question marks in square brackets that linguists use were too heavy and too hard to reproduce on my own computer to be of use to me. The okina, the Hawaiian glottal stop is a nice elegant mark ‘ a reversed apostrophe and relatively easy to use; however it represents a particular sound, which is a harsh back of the throat glottal stop and so not really any good for representing the London stop. Poetry has a small but international readership, so you could potentially wrong foot a reader familiar with that symbol. In the end I found a symbol that is part of a computing language and also bears a resemblance to the Arabic letter Alif, which forms part of a glottal sound. It is a pipe or vertical line and looks like this |. By the time I had decided on the symbol, the rest of the poem had taken shape.

Dialect through colloquialism

As part of my journey into my own class based voice, I had been working within my own community as poet in residence to our local shopping street. This was part of a South Bank Centre project called Trading Places and was part of that year's Poetry International (2006). Kwame Dawes, a poet whose career has been supported and encouraged by Brathwaite, was coming to perform a piece he had written based on the words of older women from Sumter, South Carolina. *Wisteria: Twilight Songs from the*

Swamp Country are poems or songs made from oral history texts from working class Black women who lived out their young lives under the Jim Crow laws. My quest, as part of this project, was also semi-historic; I was searching for old phrases, sayings we no longer use – such as 'Charlie's Dead!' which means your slip or petticoat is showing, a colloquialism made redundant by the 1970s fashion of deliberately showing an inch or two of petticoat (alla Laura Ashley). It is a phrase that many believe was rooted in the English civil war (McAlpine; BBC). I had a strong memory of an older woman whispering in my ear 'Charlie's dead!' and slipping away virtually unseen in my early 1970s teens. It was a half-said thing, a whispered thing, conveying discretion and shame in a period that was challenging both those concepts for women. Hence, it is a little peek of petticoat and a little peek of social history.

The project idea had come to me because I had thought that one key to finding my voice as an older working class woman might be found within colloquialism. Women older than me in my geographical community are frequent users of colloquialisms. They have a common set of these that they almost all use and that are similar but different to common London colloquialisms; in other words, they are local variants. For example – the East London phrase 'think I come up with the banana boat?' is expressed locally as 'think I come up with the vinegar boat?' There are many websites that discuss the origins of colloquial phrases, but none of them have the vinegar boat phrase, which makes the claim for localisation a strong one (there are close to five million Anglophone slang dictionary websites according to Google, many of which are devoted to dying forms of London slang). Hence, it seemed to me, despite London having lost a lot of its unique vocabulary, these colloquial phrases might present something of a dialect. According to Barltrop and Wolveridge in their book *Muvver Tongue,* 'Cockney' dialect is largely composed of phrases. Not rhyming slang, so much; according to Barltop and Wolveridge, the extent to which 'cockneys' used that has always been overstated (1980: 11); but they reflect on a lot of colloquial phrases and words that have come from shortened phrases. Although Waterloo is not East London, it is an area that Barltrop and Wolveridge refer to as 'fringe cockney'; the population has traditionally had strong familial links to East London. All of this strengthened my growing interest in finding a way that I could write something of a dialect poetry for myself and my voice with more confidence.

Memory

Memory is a hugely important factor in literatures that represent or present older women's lives. The collection and interpretation of the 'lost phrases' was an attempt to remember the colloquialisms of a recent but historic past. It was a way in to a local working class speech.

Maurice Halbwachs in his writings in *On Collective Memory* described remembering the past as 'the true occupation for the old' (1992: 48). In addition, whilst they are remembering the past as individuals, they are also doing this collectively.

> Old people ordinarily are not content to wait passively for memories to revive. They attempt to make them more precise, ask other old people, go through old papers, old letters; above all, they tell what they remember, when they do not try to write it down. In short, old people are much more interested in the past than are [younger] adults. (1992: 48)

In Waterloo there is a peculiarity about our sense of time. The elderly do remember, but, perhaps because they make it a 'fine art', or because the working class community of Waterloo may well not exist as a community in a few decades due to the lack of social housing, younger people have also developed the skill of telling stories woven from memory. They have learned this from older people, but are typically engaging in this kind of storytelling 'before their time'. This is a phenomenon I am exploring; however, the fact remains that the elderly are best at this and for the reasons that Halbwachs states, they have the time, the collective impetus and are encouraged to do so.

I have been conscious of the importance of the memories of the elderly in Waterloo, since I moved here as a 21-year-old in 1981. The elderly were the people who gave the right to belong through connection with them. There exists, in Waterloo, a strong 'myth of permanence'. In my experience, it is rare to find this in Central London. My parents came to London for that very reason, from a small town in Lancashire, to live somewhere where 'no-one knew or was interested in your business'; that is how my

mother put it. To be a local, to belong, has been defined by some older residents as being in the area ‘going back three generations’, but some who have told me this do not themselves go back that far, only forward through their children or grandchildren, although few young adults can afford to stay in the area now. You can become an honorary ‘local’ by learning to repeat the stories, by becoming a storyteller and helping to impart this socially constructed collective memory.

> Society, by giving old people the function of preserving the traces of its past, encourages them to devote whatever spiritual energy they may still possess to the act of recollection. If one sometimes makes fun of those who take this role too seriously and abuse the right of the old to tell of their past, this is only because every social function tends to have a tendency to become exaggerated. (Halbwachs, 1992: 48)

Memory is not perfect of course and myths develop – but myths are not lies and neither are stories that appear entirely untrue, at least not always. Alessandro Portelli invented the term uchronic dreams to describe what happens when a person imagines how a set of events ‘should have happened’ and when in their memory a slippage takes place and it becomes, for them, how an event happened. (Portelli, 1991: 99-116) This is a phenomenon in oral history collection that is fairly common especially in storytelling. ‘I should have told him’ becomes ‘I nearly told him’ becomes ‘I told him!’ All these factors in reminiscence story telling; narrative, myth, truth, have been present in my history poem narratives throughout my writing life. A series of prose poems I wrote for my first collection, *Finders of London,* demonstrate that. Called ‘Portraits of Women: East London, 1888’ each of the five poems is about one of the victims of Jack the Ripper. Each poem contains physical description and something about how they lived that is factual. The poems also use the mythologies that the women’s friends and neighbours told the press, police and coroner in a state of shock after their deaths. I have used this material despite knowing that some of it is untrue. For example, I say that Annie Chapman’s ‘daughter has run away to the circus’ (2010: 25). She had not; she was living with two aunts who were active members of a temperance organisation (Sheldon, 2001). I knew this, but chose to stay with the myth because it was something that interested me. Annie Chapman’s alcoholism was important to her, it had killed her husband and she had kept faith with it, and to her it was important that people did not know that she had lost her child to ‘temperance’ but to something more exciting.

Our memories may or may not be literally true, but they are an important part of the way we tell our history. Big, political, macro history also has a lot of self-conscious myth making within it. Autobiography and institutional history written with an eye on posterity are often used to construct these histories and even when this is done with a critical eye, it still gets to be part of what is said about the past. Even radicals do this; the Women's Suffrage and Political Society (Suffragettes) were hugely conscious of their role in history and constructed their own account of events while they were still acting them out, with Sylvia as chief historian in the early years of the movement (Holton, Purvis, 2002: 8). I am interested in the ways in which memory narratives are used in local history. As Natalie Zemon Davis has said in her discussion of narrative in pardon tales, fiction comes from the root 'fingere' which is about 'the crafting of a narrative' (1987: 3), not its lack of factualness.

Class

A phrase that has ricocheted round my head since I first read it in 2002, in Raphael Samuel's *Theatres of Memory,* is particularly pertinent. I am from a family that is both 'geographically mobile and sociologically orphaned' (2012: 356) as I discovered when I researched our family history; there is no graveyard in Britain where more than one of my family is buried, except for one with three seventeenth century graves, in a strange cold landscape just south of Hadrian's Wall, and these three are ancestors of my mother's birth mother – who 'gave her away' for adoption. Our identity is not clear-cut to the contemporary 'outside world'. According to sociological categorisation, the members of my generation of my family are not of one class, I am the only professional (according to the new definitions of the UK Office for National Statistics) placing me group two, my sister, who works in an office in a small company is in group four, our cousin Tony is a long distance lorry driver (group five), and the rest are currently unemployed – some long term through illness (groups seven and eight). However, we are one family, and we see our fortunes, heritage and identity as being intrinsically bound up and in practice they are, as we are the kind of family that tend to come together to deal with crisis and celebration alike. That is why I, as a technically middle-class university lecturer, still self-identify as working class. At work, I have a middle-class role, but at home and as a poet, I am working class. I was brought up to think of myself that way, and all the people that form my domestic sphere are actually working

class. My spoken voice does slide a bit, as many people's do, in reaction to a situation, perhaps sub-consciously – to fit in or not. It also reacts to my energy levels; I become more 'London' with excitement or anger, for example. All in all, however I speak these days most of the time, this search has been about an aspect of self and identity that I need to be able to reflect in my writing.

This state-imposed sense of abruption to our class identities is not something we 'feel' in a day to day sense, but occasionally makes its presence felt in our collective lives causing confusion and a sense of alienation that a poetics might help to discuss. When I worked in the print industry, my colleagues and I would frequently read and talk about the latest poem on the underground on the way home from a night shift. One particular favourite with my fellow workers was a poem by Adrienne Rich called 'Aunt Jennifer's Tigers'. The poem studies Aunt Jennifer's hands as she works on a needlecraft project. The poem describes her tapestry and then her fingers working it – then we get the lines 'The massive weight of Uncle's wedding band/sits heavily upon Aunt Jennifer's hand.' These lines were a way that the group of mostly male printers and finishers found to discuss its meaning and the way that their mothers and aunts were treated by their fathers and uncles. It gave us a way of understanding an aspect of oppression and talking about it (eds Benson, Chernaik, Herbert, 1999: 109). It was something we could all identify with as an aspect of oppression we had witnessed. The existence of a poem we could understand in relation to our lives and those of the people around us had a profound effect. The poems I am ambitious to write would have that dynamic of presenting lives that are hard because that is how they are. As Brathwaite has said of the poetry of EM Roach, in comparing him to Derek Walcott, 'the poverty that distresses Walcott… is seen by Roach for what it is: a fact: a part of his heritage' (1986: 8). The aim of this poetry collection is to get somewhere along the line towards that goal: a poetry that presents my voice and the people who gave me it, my heritage.

This PhD

The creative part of the PhD consists of a collection of poems, which fall into four categories:

1) poems about the flat, block and estate, that reference its architecture and condition;
2) poems that explore materials referencing the history of my flat and its occupants;
3) neighbour poems voiced in dialect;

4) poems about essaying and referencing.

This accompanying critical reflection consists of six chapters: this introduction, four chapters based on those categories ('The Block', 'The Archive', 'Voice and Memory' and 'Referenced Histories') and an evaluative conclusion.

In Chapter Two, 'The Block', I discuss the process of writing poems about the flat, block and estate through a filter of the ideas of Gaston Bachelard in *The Poetics of Space*. These are poems that reference its history, architecture and state of repair from the context of the experience of living in that space. The historical research I have undertaken focuses on my flat, its architecture, history and context as Edwardian social housing built to a Victorian model. This has included research on social housing, working class demographics and housing need, the development of the Waterloo area, the flats and cottages that occupied the area before the estate, the Ecclesiastical Commissioners as property developers and landlords, and Octavia Hill's ideas of 'landladyship'. I have considered what architectural concerns were voiced in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, when the blocks were planned and how those ideas changed in the mid twentieth century, when the tenements were converted to flats of varying sizes.

I have been looking at how other poets have explored aspects of these same concerns. I have explored poetry written about flats – in particular Roy Fisher's city poems, and work by Stephen Watts, Derrick Porter, Michael Hoffman, Piotr Summer, and the Dutch poet, Esther Jansma, whose poem 'Mrs Neighbour' was influential in an earlier stage of my quest for context and voice.

In chapter three, 'The Archive,' I am reflecting on the process of writing poems from archival materials. Most of these were discovered whilst I was researching the previous tenants of my flat and their lives, for example, Annie Urquhart, as mentioned before. She was a widow of a print worker who lived with her older sister in my flat when it was first built, around 1905. Using local archive material from Lambeth Archives, I discovered her family and something of her tenancy history. This is contextualised in my reading via a study of working class life in early twentieth century Lambeth, *Round About a Pound a Week* (Pember Reeves, 1994), *Growing up in Lambeth* (Chamberlain, 1989), Octavia Hill's letters, my own collection of oral history transcripts from tenants,

a variety of autobiographical pamphlets published by a local history project in the 1970s and 80s, and The Housing Office archive.

Chapter four, 'Voicing Memory,' is already referred to above. It discusses my neighbour poems, some of which use a form of dialect poetry with rules I have devised, as stated above. The oral materials are derived from a mixture of sources, oral history interviews – some conducted by me and some by other people. These other interviewers were connected with two local projects, one run by a local history group at Morley College in 1981 and presented as a slide-show with edited highlights of the recordings, and a more recent project called Waterloo Sights and Sounds run by Coin Street Community Builders. Some of the interviews conducted by me were from an earlier project to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the estate in 2003, and some are recent interviews for this PhD.

There is also a layer of thinking in these poems about the 'voice of the archive', as discussed by Portelli (1991). This archival voice is either a professional voice or a letter writing best-voice, perhaps comparable to a 'telephone voice' in the case of letters to a bureaucracy. I have written poems using archival materials that play with that, and with what happens when it breaks down – because the writer has become emotionally aroused in some way.

In chapter five, 'Referenced Histories', I am reflecting on the process of writing poems that engage with the idea of essaying and referencing checkable facts in essay writing. Essays are primarily defined as 'an attempt' (OUP, 1985: 329), an attempt at discussing a central argument of some sort. Ian Mabbett in his book *Writing History Essays* argues that 'A history essay is history', that the process of arguing, debating, selecting and organizing the materials of history are the thing in itself (2016: 1). Facts are evidenced by referencing them. 'Your citations map the space of your discipline, and allow you to navigate your way through your chosen field of study, in the same way that sailors steer by the stars' (University of New South Wales: 2016). The history essay is a referenced thing, even if it is not written for academic purposes. Carlo Ginzburg has compared the job of the historian with that of the judge in *Judge and the Historian: Marginal notes on a late-twentieth century miscarriage of justice* (2002). An argument is made and evidence is selected to back that up. In a reasonably well written poem the author has

authority; therefore we only need to sound convincing. However, if the poems want to stand up as little histories, we need to consider referencing.

The two main types of referencing in academic writing are Harvard Referencing, also known as parenthetical referencing, and a form of referencing using footnotes, as discussed in the MHRA style guide (2013).

Harvard Referencing or Parenthetical Referencing provides an interruption in the flow of a text in order to reveal the source. American poet Jorie Graham uses parenthetical asides in her poems frequently. She has said the purpose of this is to 'complicate'. So, her writing process involves writing something, and then, with each re-write strengthening that idea by unpacking it further through additional observations in parenthesis. Graham is a Harvard academic, the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory. This is a co-incidence. Her post is somewhat independent of the day-to-day business of Harvard University and also Harvard does not traditionally use Harvard Referencing. However, I have explored Graham's use of parenthesis in her selected poems, *The Dream of the Unified Field* (1996) and experimenting with Harvard parenthesis in my Harvard Referencing poem.

Foot/End notes are arguably an easy thing to use in poetry and have been used, in particular by modernists. Emily Hasler and Beverley Rowe have both written poems using footnotes to invisible text. The reader is left to imagine what text these are footnotes to. David Jones used footnotes to explain references in *Anathemeta* (1952) in much the same way we would in an essay. For my first foray into footnotes, I decided to write a short poem about a neighbour who lived in this block for just a few years, so he himself was a bit of a footnote to our history. The poem is just six lines, with a four foot sprung rhythm pattern. There are 47 words in the poem and every word is footnoted – or actually endnoted, because when I tried to footnote, I wound up with three pages of footnoted couplets, which did not work. Endnoting every word meant attaching independent meaning to even the smallest units of grammar. In poetry, we are supposed to make every word count, and this poem does that. As a lover of lyric, my tendency was to want to make the endnotes talk to each other and form a continual lyrical poem. This could be argued to be a 'cop-out' but I needed to make the poem 'sing' for me as reader, as well as writer. In the end, there needs to be a reason why a piece is a poem and not an essay.

Marginal gloss has been the most traditional and popular form of referencing in poetry and has a long tradition in the canon. It is hard to type set in conventional word processing packages such as *Office*. However, it is still used from time to time such as in Alice Oswald's *Dart* (2002), a history of a river that used oral materials from people who live or work along it.

I have used marginal gloss as a form of traditional footnoting, to simply inform the reader of a reference or additional point they might 'need to know'. Another form of reference that is more popular with contemporary poets is the epigraph. I have used a number of those in the collection and as with marginal gloss, I have used them as an aid to understanding the poem, rather than as a poetic aside, although I would argue that it is as a poetic aside that most contemporary poets use epigraphs now.

Methodology and Research Design

Practice as Research, according to Robin Nelson, 'typically involves a multi-mode enquiry drawing upon a range of methods' (2013: 99). It is a methodology of research by which artist-academics produce work and then reflect on it, seeing what they can learn to increase an understanding of their art-form and practice. I am testing my hypothesis by writing poems from a body of research that is conventionally academic, involving a variety of historical source materials. That might seem like a complication, because in a piece of history research, that research and the narrative constructed, is the point. However, in this case, the research purpose is a literary one, as discussed above. I am using history texts and methods to 'present' both my own voice as a writer and the people and the place I live in and to use that voice to tell our stories.

My research has involved different methods: historical research, literary and academic texts and interviews, the writing itself, and reflecting on the process of producing and editing it. I have conducted interviews with two groups of people: firstly, a few other, mostly older, tenants of the estate to assist me with both historical research and my thinking about local language, and secondly with a group of poets working with dialect and working class lives to inform my thinking about language, voice and class in contemporary poetry.

I conducted the historical research as if it were to be used as a conventional, albeit radical, history text. So, everything was referenced and considered as conventional social history as well as other more radical historiographical narratives. This was because I wanted the historical evidence to be present in my materials in the most flexible way possible when I came to use them in the poems. The language of that history research has become part of my body of language and so, although the poems are 'about' something historic connected with my flat and geographical community, they begin as lyric poems tend to – in their music and moment of creation.

However, some of the poems in this collection are more modernist in form than the kind of lyric I normally write. These poems are all written from items in the archives, and have taken on something of their shape and language from the archival item that I was working with. For example, the poem 'Conditions of Tenancy: 1937' is laid out as eight rules, with a commentary in one or two voices. The rules came from a Church Commissioners' rent book from 1937 that is held in Westminster Archives. The responses are written in a local accent, and the lineation varies in a way that guides the reader through the pacing. Some lines have fairly large caesura indicating space, while some are broken up across lines, like little steps:

while the boys
can sleep in shifts;
i|ll bee fine

This is to indicate speech that is broken deliberately, in places indicating irony to the point of sarcasm. Then there are long lines, which indicate longer sweeps of breathless dialogue. The poem came out this way because it was dictated by the rules and by what I as a tenant have experienced or can imagine experiencing as a result of life with those rules. I was unsure how to lineate the response part and was not happy with early draft versions. I used the lineation method that Linda Black, a poet whose lineation methods I admire, used in her book *Slant* (2016). Following feedback from poet Mimi Khalvati, I listened more closely to the poem, reading and adjusting a number of times to help the lineation to mean something more to the reader than a jerky, jagged 'slant' poem that suited Black's work and worked better for my poem than my normal form preferences, but was still far from perfect.

The research element of this kind of practice has impacted most on my ability to make more considered and informed decisions in the editing process. The act of conducting research as practice makes you pay close attention to what you are doing as an artist. As I have explained above, paying close attention has been an important aspect of my writing process and its development, but this is different. The act of practice as research means that you have to not just pay attention but be able to write about what you have learned in a document such as this. That means you need to have learnt what you now know with sufficient confidence that you can articulate it to a reader rather than just 'kind of know it' in a more instinctive way.

Chapter Two: The Block

This chapter is about the experience of living in the flat itself and the block and estate as an extension of that into a semi-public sphere. It will discuss the history of the building of the estate, the architecture of the flats and block, life lived with neighbours in both a private and semi-public realm and the relatively slim array of poems that exist about flats and neighbours. This chapter explores the phenomenon of neighbours and their sounds and smells and how the flat and the neighbour impact on our imagination – collectively and individually. The two traditional homes in the literary imagination, as told by folk and fairytales, are the cottage and the palace. The hero's journey is often depicted as being from the cottage (representing poverty and humble beginnings) to the palace (riches and success). Film is one of the few forms of literature that has embraced the flat or apartment, and this is probably because the relatively simple layout of a flat make interior filming, as a story progresses from room to room, easier. The apartments in films are often large; this is again for ease of filming, I have never seen a film where lack of space is a feature of the narrative, and therefore large, relatively luxurious flats are part of our literary imagination in film. There are a few television programmes that discuss this lack of space in their narratives; these tend to be UK made soaps and comedies. My starting point for a discussion of the home and imagination is Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* (1958, 1994 ed.), because he talks about poetic imagination in regard to the home and its interiors in a way that both includes and excludes my flat as a space for imagination.

In *The Poetics of Space*, Bachelard discusses the house, the hut and shelter as being the home of dreams and the imagination. The shelter is the safe space in which we can attend to our memories and imagine and reimagine our lives (1994: 3-37). For Bachelard, the ideal house for the poetic imagination to flourish is no Parisian garret but a simple three storey house, with cellar, living space and attic. The living spaces, living room and bedroom in particular, represent the homes of our dreams. The attic is the space to which our dreams lift. It is, perhaps, the ivory or skyward tower, or at least a more tranquil place a bit closer to the sky but protected from its elements (1994: 26). The cellar represents our fears but it is also the location of the labyrinth, through which we can learn something fundamental, should we succeed in passing through and out again. The cellar and the attic are fundamental to creative dreaming. Bachelard quotes the French surrealist poet Joe Bousquet: 'He was a man with only one story: He had his

cellar in his attic' (1994: 26). The implication is that this person's imagination was restricted by that lack.

The ideal house should be not so simple that there are not 'nooks and corridors' as odd shaped rooms such as these give 'refuge' to our memories and help to delineate them (1994: 8). This ideal simple house is both actual and oneiric. Our memories of living, dreaming and daydreaming in our 'childhood' house form our understandings of poetic imagination, in particular that which impacts on our memories for the rest of our lives (1994: 12). Extra floors of living space, Bachelard argues, make the house too complex to map onto the oneiric house. He cites Baudelaire as saying that in the palace, 'there is no space for intimacy' (1994: 29). The many large rooms eradicate the necessary sense of comfort needed to allow dreams and daydreams to flourish. As for the flat, Bachalard's thoughts on Paris' 'superimposed boxes' (1994: 26), built on asphalt for greater strength, would appear to make dreaming impossible.

Perhaps Bachelard never lived in a flat. He cites poet Paul Claudel and theologian Max Picard as discussing Paris and its flats as 'mechanical' and unintimate (1994: 27), unintimate because of their brute strength and the way they separate us into units. Despite the fact that noise in blocks of flats is almost always discussed as a bad thing, the fact that they are notorious for their lack of silence and privacy means we are not entirely separate living in flats nor unintimate with each other. As buildings, they are as noisy as houses: doors slam and creak, walls groan, windows let in noise and modern double glazed windows hold interior or neighbour noise and multiply it, intensifying noise from other flats within a block (a friend once described it as 'like putting your head in a drum-kit'). For those of us that live in them, those noises can only really be interpreted in our imaginations because we cannot be downstairs listening to noise through the ceiling and in the room at the same time seeing what is happening; we can only guess through the aural clues we are given.

In Bachelard's simple house, we will know our real cellar and attic, be able to visit them whenever we choose in our waking and non-day-dreaming lives. This is, arguably, the key difference between the flat and the simple house. We might have been in our neighbours' flats, but we will not have spent enough time in them to daydream or dream. I have not experienced, existentially, my upstairs neighbours' flat as my attic. I have been up there a few times and know that above my bedroom is their kitchen. I

might know this anyway, as every Saturday morning I am woken by the spin cycle on their washing machine. However, there are considerable amounts of time, through the night or the occasional working day, that I do not hear them, and it is then that their living space becomes more fully the attic of my imagination overlaid in some way with what I know of their actual kitchen. Their kitchen is to me a sunny, airy, peaceful space where I could read and write with no interruptions much like Bachelard in his oneiric attic.

Stephen Watts creates oneiric space in his block of flats in his epic poem 'Birds of East London' from his collection *Ancient Sunlight*. There is a repeated question throughout the eight-page poem – 'is that a dream?' 'is that also a dream?' 'is that not a dream and/ is life only a dream?' (2014: 42). Watts lives on the 21st floor of a tower block in East London, but it is interesting that he does not call it a tower block but a tower. In this poem his council flat and the block it is in, are dream structures, oneiric living spaces. The birds and their space fill an alternate universe that belongs to dream and daydream.

In the same way that I lack an actual attic, so I also lack a cellar. There is no cellar in my home. My flat is a ground floor flat. I, my flat and my noises, am the cellar for the family upstairs. The father of the family upstairs took over the flat from his brother and his brother before him. For the eldest son of that older brother, who is now a young man, a cat I had at that time is part of his oneiric house. On rare visits to his uncle's young family, he talks about her to me, a quiet, friendly but utterly alien being who moves about in his dream space. For me, the cellar is the floor beneath my floor. Unlike Claudel's Paris flats, ours are not built on asphalt. I had previously supposed the underfloor as cement, as it supports a three-storey block and I do not know how to build a block of flats. However, in a poem first drafted in 2011, I had imagined it like this:

> Under the unhoovered carpet – floorboards
> spitting nails, and under them, mice
> scratching earth, tunnelling down and out
> through the dark, towards the living marsh. (Robinson, 2014: 27)

In 2015, my bedroom floor was found to have dry rot, and substantial work was carried out to replace the floorboards by the housing managers. I got to see what was under the space in which I dream. My imagination was closer to correct than my more

consciously worked out idea; it was not concrete but earth. Between my bedroom floorboards and that earth is about five feet of air. I am five feet two inches tall, so this space allows room for me to sit in an imaginary nook. I could crawl through the labyrinth of my underfloor and, in my dreams, do from time to time. That is my oneiric flat and its block.

Our Block

The historical and architectural 'facts' of the flat I live in are outlined here. Our flats began to be built in 1903. The original plans were drawn up in 1901. The Ecclesiastical Commissioners, later Church Commissioners, were the long term landowners. They had traditionally let the land on long leases to builders who had built cheap housing that had frequently been poorly maintained and overcrowded and had quickly become slums. The development was managed by Octavia Hill, the Victorian social housing pioneer. It was her last housing development before her retirement. Just prior to the building of the estate, she had taken over management of an Ecclesiastical Commissioners' estate in Walworth and turned it into a functioning housing estate rather than the slum in waiting it had been (Hill, 1933: 45).

The original 1901 plan for the estate was drawn up by surveyors working for Cluttons. The plan included the shops on the south side of The Cut and, in addition to the housing, was to incorporate a public library, play park, and two Church of England missions. The housing was to consist of 36 tenement houses and 24 cottages. Within the process of building our new estate, one road was to be lost to give more space and substance to the new buildings (CC. 79639/1). According to the *Daily Express* (April 13th, 1901), '213 houses are to be demolished, displacing 277 families - altogether 630 adults'. It was estimated that the average occupancy rate of the new tenements would be five to a household. The public library was soon dropped from the plans as were any buildings on The Cut or north of Mitre Street (soon to be renamed Mitre Road). A plan dated 19th November 1901 no longer shows either the library or intentions for shops on The Cut (CC. 79639/1). The ambitions for the estate as containing everything a community could need were being whittled down to just what was necessary, given that the estate was being built in a busy area with its own infrastructure, which included a public library.

The area that our estate was to occupy had been reported in the Booth Survey of 1898 as being light blue, which meant poor but not the very poorest. It was surrounded by a purple belt that indicated a mixture of poor and better off; Webber Street, where my flat is, and The Cut. In 1899, a Booth surveyor gave an update to that report, which said that the area was poorer than it had been a year before, with Caffyn Street (the street that was eradicated in the building of our estate) being the poorest. The housing units were largely two storey cottages, with a lot of overcrowding. The 'worst part' of the area was the first street to the south of our estate, Gray Street, whose western half was so rough that the ladies from the local charitable University Settlement were not allowed to go there, not even to give poor relief (Booth, B363: 1).

The demolition of the former streets was gradual so that families could be rehoused in either the new tenements, if they had good tenancy records, or elsewhere if not. This was Octavia Hill's idea, although not unusual for philanthropic landlords from the mid-nineteenth century. It was also in the interest of the previous 'landlord' leaseholder. He was having trouble getting people to pay their rent as they were about to become homeless anyway, but Hill managed to convince them it was in their interest to keep paying if they wanted good records to secure decent tenancies elsewhere (Hill, 1933: 45).

A local building firm, Newton, of 93 Southwark Bridge Road, supplied the lowest quote for the first stage of the build. They estimated £9,375 to build a row of cottages. £10,000 was requested as a working budget from the Ecclesiastical Commissioners (CC. 79639/1). By the end of May 1902, three more cottages were proposed and the building work in Ufford Street commenced, 26 cottages in all. The plan consisted of twenty four-room (plus washhouse) cottages and six five-room (plus washhouse) cottages. There was a W.C. in each yard. That first part of the estate abutted Gray Street, the aforementioned street with the bad reputation.

The tenements, which comprised the whole of the rest of our estate, consisted of two or three room units (mostly six to each block) with W.C.s and washhouses on each landing to be shared between usually two households. The first tenement blocks were built on the north side of Ufford Street, four blocks. When Ufford Street was completed in 1903, Caffyn Street and Mitre Street were closed and the houses demolished. The tenants for the 29 cottages moved in from March 1903. At this point, three tenements in Short

Street had been completed, and the tenements on the north side of Ufford Street were nearly ready. Webber Street's three blocks, where I live, were the last to be built. They were finished in 1904 and the first tenants began to move in. See Figure 1.

Tenancies went to people with good references from their landlords and who came across well in interview (CC. 79639/2/1904). Things did not always work out however, as this complaint to the Commissioners about Miss Hooker, the first of Octavia Hill's assistant housing managers on Our Estate, demonstrates. A couple, with a local business and a good reference from their landlord, wrote to the Commissioners accusing Miss Hooker of being unfair in not offering them a tenancy. The Commissioners referred the complaint to Octavia Hill, who investigated by asking Miss Hooker the reasons for her decision.

In the letter Miss Hooker wrote to Octavia Hill on 2nd June 1904, she justified her position in refusing a tenancy to Mr and Mrs Poole. There are three reasons she gave; firstly the couple have an industrial business in the Lower Marsh and are '<u>never</u> at home' (her underlining) and 'simply use their rooms to sleep in'. She goes on

> my experience is that with people like these, in a flat, they never do their share of cleaning stairs, washhouse etc., and I have continual complaints from other tenants in consequence (CC. 79639/2/1904).

Her second reason for finding them unsuitable tenants was that she had earlier housed their son and his wife and found them unsuitable, due to not cleaning shared areas and other reasons and had already 'given them notice'. Thirdly, the landlord of the address in Westminster Bridge Road that they had been living in had given good references to other tenants that had proved 'most unsatisfactory, the landlord's reference being quite untrustworthy' (Church of England Archives 79639/2/1904).

One can see straight away that this couple was not a good candidate for an Octavia Hill managed estate. Regardless of their dubious family links or previous neighbours, even if they had been perfectly 'nice' (and Miss Hooker says they were not), they did not apparently have the time to commit to the co-operative life style that was a feature of Hill's housing management from the very beginning due to the requirements of their working life. That co-operative lifestyle involved a shared responsibility for upkeep in

the ‘communal areas.’ These areas were the backyards, hallways, lavatories, and sinks. A system of rotas was established for the cleaning. This lasted into the first four years of the twenty-first century. Each landing (two flats usually) was responsible for the upkeep of that landing and its shared facilities.

Shared space, both exterior and interior, has always been an important part of the working class (and pre-working class, poorer peasant) idea of home. Octavia Hill had believed that the lack of communal space in Central London working class communities was a fundamental part of the social problems she observed, which largely consisted of aggressive disputes between neighbours and the neglect of the more vulnerable members of society. To her, that communal life, with its added health benefits of good air, was to be found outside. She argued that communal outside space was ‘a gift’, that to ‘most men [it] is an inheritance to which they are born, and which they accept straight from God as they do the earth they tread on, and light and air, its companion gifts.’ (Hill, 1875, in Hill, and Mearns, 1950: 90).

The collecting of water, doing the laundry, and the grazing of animals are examples of domestic tasks undertaken, traditionally, in the public sphere. In our area of London, water was collected directly from the Thames, in buckets, until Bazalgette’s sewers were built in the 1860s. There was not even the stand pipe in Waterloo, a feature of ‘town centres’ in other parts of London (Thomas, 2010). The bulk of the laundry was done in a public laundry, locally, as in much of working class London, and laundry day, Monday, was regarded as something of a social occasion (Chamberlain, 1989: 24). In my grandmother’s rural village, laundry was done in the more private sphere of the farm house, but the farmer’s wife and her maid (my grandmother) would do the laundry of all the farm hands, so not ‘airing your dirty laundry in front of others’ was not an option for many, or even probably that important then. Social occasion or not, the initial soaking and scrubbing of any stains meant a more liberal view of other people’s body fluids was essential. In the tenements, stain soaking could happen in the relative private space of a bucket of water indoors, but scrubbing would happen at the sink, in potential view of the neighbours.

The tenement’s communal life was more about domestic utility than an idealised notion of community. The idyll of the ‘village green’ and ‘village hall’ were an important part of the romanticism of Englishness and tradition by ‘Folk’ revival groups (Boyes, 2010).

Octavia Hill pioneered the idea of open spaces for city dwellers. Her views on the importance of communal outdoor space lead to her single-handedly clearing gravestones from the graveyard at St John's church at Waterloo to create a play space and to having small recreation grounds included in the building of new estates, including ours, her last project. Nationally, she was, of course, a founder of the National Trust (Hunt, 2012, National Trust). Although utterly committed to enabling city dwellers to enjoy fresh air and rural views, Octavia Hill and many other contemporary charity workers parted company with many of the romantics involved in the folk revival movement in their more extreme 'merrie olde England' ideas. Hill and her ilk did not tend to be especially backward looking. She was not trying to recreate a lost world with her housing estates, simply enable functional communities to happen. It is true that she did think that 'beauty' and space for communities to gather together were important aspects of a 'good life' (Hill, 1933), but she also argued that it was Londoners' deprivation in regard to areas to relax and breathe together meant that it was easier to provide for this relatively cheaply because our expectations were so minimal (Hill, 1875, in Hill, and Mearns, 1950: 90). Shared indoor space, when that could be afforded, was not for the imposition of a faux English country dance 'tradition' in her tenants' halls, just space for them to inhabit in any way that would be productive to good community.

Romanticism and communalism aside, there were two aspects to shared space in early twentieth-century working class London. That divide was not between outdoor and indoor space so much as one between shared domestic space (hall, landing, WC, water closet, yard, doorstep) and shared social space (wider street, market, church hall, community centre). The oneiric domestic space for us flat dwellers contains something of that. I have a recurrent nightmare that I move house – always to another flat. Bachelard is, in my view, correct about storeys and dreamscape. My oneiric house is always linear. I have never lived in a house. In my nightmare, I am exploring the new flat with its nooks and possibilities when I discover to my horror that there is no outdoor space. That induces a sense of panic whereby I try to return to where I have come from. On telling this to another local artist, who also is a life-long flat dweller of working class origin, I learned that she has similar dreams.

In their discussion of the spaces of home, older working class Londoners tend to remember much more the outside part of their world than the interior, whether this is

the domestic or social sphere. Outside was where all but the most intimate family relationships took place. In a 1981 oral history project, undertaken by the Morley College local history group, one participant said that her family and neighbours did not spend a lot of time talking 'outdoors' because they liked each other, but because of flea infestation. It was physically more uncomfortable to be inside than out. That of course might not be everyone's recollection of the situation, but it was how this particular woman had remembered it (Bruce).

Derrick Porter's poetry collection *Voices of Hoxton* contains forty poems about his working class London childhood and early adulthood from the late 1940s on. Over three quarters of these are set in the outside world. Most of these poems are set in a shared social space: street, market, cinema, or pub for example, with some in a shared domestic space such as the public baths or the doorstep. Those that Porter places inside the home are on subjects that the closed door favours, the alcoholic and/or sleeping father, stealing money from the gas metre, and family meals. Any poems featuring Porter's memories of interactions with friends or local Hoxton characters all take place outside. Porter began to write this collection of memory poems in his seventies. Of the poems set indoors, those that take place in the family flat are short narratives that tell the reader something about his family rather than the actual space, although the balcony of the council flat is mentioned as a special space, a heterotopia where the mother can interact with nature in the form of various birds and plants (2015: 19). The language in these poems is fairly plain and conversational; it is a story telling voice, but a fairly stripped down one. A much richer tone is present in two poems, 'Children of the Blitz' and 'Thirteen Myrtle Street', where at least some of the narrative takes place in bombed out ruins where Porter and his friends played. These appear to be his oneiric house. There is a strong imaginative and dreamlike quality here not found in his home poems. In 'Children of the Blitz' there is fear of a basement 'rumoured to be haunted/ by the ghost of a girl strangled' there. In the following line the children themselves are doing the haunting – 'our favourite haunt' and that narrative ends with a child's ghostly scream as a bottle of acid he discovers 'peels back the skin of a four year-old/ like paper… his screams heard to this day' (2015: 7). That idea of one's own childhood self haunting the future is present in 'Thirteen Myrtle Street' also. Porter describes footprints that mice left in greasy frying pans as being 'like a grave crossed after snowfall' (2015: 9). In the end the house and the street also become oneiric and ghostly as the house is bulldozed

and ‘the street disappeared/ from the maps’ (2015: 9). This marks the disappearance of both the outdoor and indoor communal oneiric space of Porter’s childhood.

The Management, Caretakers and Maintenance

The estate was managed, from first day of occupancy until the Church Commissioners sold it in 2003, by a housing manager, who until the last two years of their ownership was always a woman. This was initially because it was managed by Hill and subsequent managers were either women trained by her or later on, trained in her style of management. Hill had believed that housing management was women’s work: ‘Ladies must do it, for it is detailed work; ladies must do it, for it is household work; it needs, moreover, persistent patience, gentleness, hope’ (Hunt: 2012, National Trust). In the 1980s, when I moved onto the estate, housing management in the Housing Association sector was still a female-dominated profession. Of the seven surviving Church Commissioner owned social housing estates in 1983, only one had a male manager, and that was not our estate. The rent policy was strictly adhered to. By the 1980s, our rents were paid fortnightly; this was a week in hand and a week in arrears. This also meant that technically you were always in arrears unless you had just paid. Most people paid at the rent office. If work hours made this difficult, you could post your rent and rent card through the letterbox. Rent cards had the tenancy agreement on them in a list of between six and eight rules. These varied over the years but in general included rules such as ‘Rent to be paid regularly every week’ (later fortnightly), ‘Tenants are responsible for seeing that the stairs, landings and passageways… are kept swept and clean’, and my own personal favourite from my first rent book in 1981, ‘Chickens must not be kept in the pram sheds’. I have played with these rules in a poem called ‘Conditions of Tenancy: 1937’. The rules were taken from a 1937 rent book I discovered in a box file that was thrown away when the rent office closed. The rent books were in the name and address of a tenant from a Church Commissioners Estate in Maida Vale, so I have given them to Westminster Archives. In the poem, two women discuss the rules and the impact they have on their day-to-day lives. Linda Black has considered rules for lodgers from the perspective of the landlady, playing with the language of advice books in ‘Advice to lodgers’ (2008: 22): ‘A lodger has the right to use the knocker and the doorbell’. In this poem, the list of things a lodger is and is not allowed to do becomes increasingly odd. I like the humour of this, but wanted my rules poem to be more from the perspective of a life spent living with these rules. One of the

purposes of the collection, after all, is to consider the history of the estate from the perspective of the tenants.

When you are a long-term tenant, your flat is your home and there is a sense of 'ownership'. This was not always the case. One of the rules is that as a tenant, you are responsible for the interior décor of the flat. This also was not always the case. T. Jones, an 87-year-old man who has lived on the estate since he was three, remembers that when he was a child in the 1930s, 'the caretakers used to decorate your indoors, they had a book with three sorts of wallpaper, you could choose' (Robinson, 2011: 17). He also said that people's flat décor and furnishings were extremely similar, to the extent that you could accidentally go home to the wrong flat. The first rent book I found (in the above mentioned but incomplete collection) that passed the responsibility of décor onto the tenant was dated 1969. This is in parallel with the growth of interest in interior design from the general population.

For my rural grandmother, painting (or whitewashing) her cottage interior was an annual job connected with hygiene. It was part of the spring clean. My mother grew up with this and regularly redecorated 'freshening up' rooms with white paint. It was only in the late 1960s that she began to think about colour, often saving for a tin of paint in an unusual colour from the expensive paint designer John Oliver, which she often had to water down a bit to make it 'go round'. We also attended our first Ideal Home Exhibition during this time. That exhibition had been founded by *The Daily Mail* in 1908 and the, at the time, unrelated, *Ideal Home* magazine was founded in 1935, but the demographic for these 'shop windows' and their related products was the 'mum in the street' (VAM). In reality, those that had the disposable income were the demographic of the *Daily Mail* itself, the lower middle class homeowners of London's new suburbs in the early twentieth century, described by Ben Highmore as 'the servantless middle classes' (2014: 47). Post war, the exhibition grew ever more popular with a record one million, three hundred thousand visitors in 1957 compared to six hundred thousand in 1937 (VAM). There was also an increase in media sources promoting home design. The BBC showed its first DIY series in 1962, called *Bucknell's House* with Barry Bucknell renovating a suburban house across the nine weeks the series aired (Channel 4, How TV Changed Britain, 5/5/2009). Cheaper retail outlets such as Woolworths stocked their own versions of popular designs. Working class people generally had more disposable income than they had had pre-war, and more leisure time, and this meant that more

social housing tenants began to develop a stronger aesthetic sense of what they wanted in their 'homes'. Working class men had a long tradition of making things for the home, usually furniture. T. still uses the wardrobe that his uncle made for his parents on their marriage in the 1930s. However, interior decoration was a skilled trade with a long apprenticeship, and few people did it themselves. On our estate, decoration, such as it was, was done by the caretaker and contractors. Technological developments in both wallpaper and paint production in the 1960s, made home decoration cheaper and easier to do and this was met with a willingness to 'have a go' (Highmore, 2014: 23-26).

On our estate, this social change coincided with the mass conversion of our tenements to 'modern' flats with bathrooms, toilets, and kitchens. These two factors led to us developing a stronger sense of a space being 'ours'. The first tenants on this estate had come from a background of regularly having to move. Usually this was within an area, but 'home' was not so much 'where you laid your head' in any one year, it was more the area and the people, your family and friends. The stability of these flats as homes and the increase in interest in homemaking made this sense of 'ownership' grow in us and made our relationship with the landlords more contentious. Ironically, this less 'home-like' relationship typifies the one that 'market rent' tenants have with their flats now, rather than the working class tenants with 'protected' rents. The market rent tenants have one year contracts that state they are not allowed to decorate their flats or install any new fixtures that might make them feel those spaces are theirs.

This sense of 'ownership' is always at odds with the relationship the organisation that owns the housing has with it, but in ways that change with different systems of ownership. Our current housing manager is seen as 'rude' by most of the tenants because she is quite firm about what her organisation's rights are as landlords. This relationship is different from the one we had with Church Commissioners, which was still influenced by Octavia Hill's ideas on housing management right up to the point of the sale of the estate in 2006. For long-term tenants this is confusing. We were used to a somewhat paternalistic style of management and a set of rules that were always argued to be there for our communal benefit. Now, they are just what the landlords have decided, and they no longer feel the need to even explain them to us.

The Disappearing Estate

Roy Fisher describes the disappearance of working class urban areas in his pamphlet length poetry sequence *City.*

> These lost streets are decaying only very slowly. The impacted lives of their inhabitants, the meaninglessness of news, the dead black of the chimney breasts, the conviction that the wind itself comes only from the next street, all wedge together to keep destruction out; to deflect the eye of the developer. And when destruction comes it is total: the printed notices on the walls, block by block, a few doors left open at night, broken windows advancing down a street until fallen slates appear on the pavement and are not kicked away. Then, after a few weeks of this, the machines arrive (Fisher, 2005: 33).

This is how estates traditionally disappear. It is probably how the streets that were here before our estate disappeared, despite the insistence by Octavia Hill that those streets were fairly good (Hill, 1933). The Booth reporter had said they were deteriorating fast and had become considerably more slum-like in the time between the creation of the poverty map and the police notebooks. There is a general lack of maintenance from landlords, coupled with an increasing sense of powerlessness on the part of the tenants, and that can create a sense of defeat at the hands of a hostile outside world, so 'that the wind itself comes only from the next street'. That is arguably the story of Waterloo from the Second World War on; the slum clearances, the Blitz replaced with South Bank's art palaces, offices, luxury housing and now, hotels, and none of this is done for us 'locals'.

When the old slums were cleared for our estate, it was not so much Fisher's 'machines' that came, more '200 Irish navvies with horses and carts' (Jones, 2017). The current process of the disappearing estate is happening slowly. This time, instead of crumbling from the outside, our estate is crumbling, or not being maintained from within. The flats that are let to long term 'protected rent' tenants are generally in poor condition and repairs are few and far between. Occasional inspections are made by the landlords, and repairs are promised but rarely carried out. When tenants die – or move out, then the builders and their machines arrive. They are given an average of nine weeks, and the work they are doing is fundamental. We can see, through the windows, non load-

bearing walls coming down and being rebuilt elsewhere as the flats are reshaped for a changing world. It is not the first time this has happened, but it is the first time the working class population of the estate has been priced out and moved on. Several families have been paid to leave in the last two years. This is often when community history is written, when those communities are threatened.

Tenement to Flat

The last time the estate was altered was in the early 1960s; the flats were converted from tenements with external shared toilets and sinks, to flats with bathrooms and kitchens. My flat was converted in the early 60s. The last tenant of the three-room tenement was widow Annie Ireland. She left in 1959 and moved into a retirement home. Alice Morris was the first tenant of the one-bedroom flat with a bathroom and kitchen. The conversion was a relatively simple one. My sister's flat is a two bedroom with living room, kitchen and bathroom. It was converted from two former tenement flats. Mine is essentially the one three-room tenement, with the incorporation of the shared toilet and water point as a bathroom. The entry point from the yard into the toilet was partially bricked up and had a window put in and the wall separating the two was taken down, leaving a rather grand archway. My flat was extended slightly, giving me a strange little three-foot square lobby in front of the bathroom. The conversion was to meet changing expectations of what the working class home should consist of. The additional room and lobby took the flat from being one of the larger 'family' units to a small single person or couple unit. See plan of former tenement with new bathroom/lobby – Figure 2.

Because of this refurbishment, our lives became more separate. We spent less of our domestic time in that strange half-private half-public space. Although we continued to be expected to share cleaning the stairs and yards, our most personal laundry and hygiene routines became totally private. The key 'issue' at the heart of complaints to the housing office about neighbours shifted from hygiene to noise.

Architect Juhani Pallasmaa uses the phrase 'acoustic intimacy' to discuss the way we hear architecture (2005: 53): 'The space traced by the ear in the darkness becomes a cavity sculpted directly in the interior of the mind'. Arguably, that is intensified in the experience of flat dwelling and, therefore, how normal that is for you, as part of your

childhood and oneiric home, will condition how you respond to neighbour noise. Of course, Pallasmaa is not talking about neighbour noise. In his beautifully designed houses, one does not have shared walls – on either a vertical or horizontal plane. Interior noises from other people are likely to come from a member of your own household. He is referring to the ways in which noise, either from other people or yourself or from the ambient sounds made by the house's materials as they breathe, is heard by the inhabitants due to the acoustics of the rooms. We are particularly sensitive to those acoustics at night. The noises I hear in my room at night might be someone upstairs walking, slow dripping water, and the preparing of a recipe that involves bashing meat with a hammer at one-minute intervals. I can rarely literally know what the noises are, even if I think I do. This adds a sense of mystery.

Literature does not tend to present 'neighbour noise' as a positive thing. One exception to this is in the poetry of Piotr Sommer, which gives us the noise of a lift in an old block of flats as being 'reassuring' even if that is just because the sound tells you 'the lift works today' (2005: 56). That sound is symbolic of the outside world and intrudes into the poet's thoughts in another of Sommer's poem, 'Worldliness'.

> Hearing the lift come up,
> voices on the stairs, a brief argument,
> the old dog is drawn away from her blanket
> and the contemplation of another world,
> and reluctantly strolls over to the door
> to express her opinion. She favours
> the worldly life, but without conviction (2005: 41).

That idea of sound from the outside world as an intrusion but not a necessarily bad one is also present in Stephen Watts' East London poems. In the aforementioned 'Birds of East London', Watts hears, from his 21st floor flat in his 'tower', his elderly Ukrainian neighbour talking to his pigeons on his balcony, 'twelve floors down'. These are the only sounds Watts refers to, this neighbour, the birds and the air and a dream-like quality from his oneiric tower block (2014: 42).

The poet who has most discussed neighbour noise in his poems is Michael Hofmann, and he does not like it. 'White Noise' is the epithet Hofmann gives to one neighbour's

noise in one particular flat poem. This noise consists of her radio and hoover with its 'pre-war drone in the corridor' (2008). Alan Robinson argues that 'despite the tender metaphor with which 'white noise' ends, the narrator's voyeuristic curiosity betrays an inability to achieve intimacy other than by an attempt to appropriate the other person' (1988: 54). The 'tender metaphor' Robinson is referring to is where Hofmann compares the neighbour's fragility to a pile of leaves swept into a corner. I find it hard to see this as tender, 'the jungle and the platitudes of sentiment (the woman's music) battle it out with technology, (earlier discussed as her hoover) sweep you/ into a corner of your room, delirious, trembling,// a pile of leaves'(2008). Despite my slight disagreement with Robinson here, I do agree that Hofmann reduces the neighbour by a mixture of appropriation and otherising. His is the only version of the story. It utterly disempowers the neighbour. In another flat noise poem, 'Open House', Hofmann discusses the noise of builders nearby. It is a friendlier poem on the surface of it, describing the noise thus:

> the cheerful tamping thump of reggae through the floorboards,// the drawling vowel er' of Irish or Jamaican English/carrying easily through the heated, excitable air// as though I lived in a museum without walls (2008: 34).

Here, the others are heated and excitable, and as a result, Hofmann himself is living in the rarefied sanctity of a museum, albeit without walls. He is not part of the action, or a community; he is only a listener from afar.

My own relationship with neighbour noise is one of both hearing and not hearing. Living alone is not always easy. When the imagination wanders in the direction of fear, then neighbour noise can be reassuring, like the sound of the lift and the arguing neighbours is for Sommer and his dog. Sometimes the fear is in not hearing; there is an aspect of that in my poem 'The Nightman' (see below). There is a sense of connection in the heard. The familiar sound of upstairs' washing machine is part of my sense of 'acoustic intimacy' in my home and a key theme in this collection.

The Poems

The history, shape, sounds, and smells of the flats all hold meaning for the tenants. They are ways in which our imaginations shape our experience of living inside them

and they also shape how we react to each other. The estate is neither a collective housing scheme nor comprised of privately owned units. The relationship between tenants is complicated by the facts that we are often united in our complaints against our landlord and in our experience of home life, and we also have the ability to upset each other with careless acts, such as leaving taps on and flooding downstairs flats or playing loud music. It is neither a totally antagonistic relationship nor a completely harmonious one. This adds layers of meaning to issues that Pallasmaa and Bachelard have considered when looking at the oneiric and sensual house. For us, on our estate, the other is part of the brickwork.

One Day

'One Day' is a mediated memory poem, drawing on a memory of T. Jones, the 87-year-old man, mentioned above. He has lived on the estate for 84 years. Many of the stories he tells are from his mother, who was born and brought up in the area, and discuss a history from before his existence. This narrative is one of those. There are interesting implications for memories that are put through this filter, and I discuss those at some length in the chapter on memory and voice. The interesting part of this narrative for the purposes of this chapter is, however, the fact that he is talking about his mother's childhood memory of the demolition of the previous houses and the relaying of the roads. The story is really just about the 200 or so workforce that descended without her prior knowledge or awareness. The first time he told me this, we were standing in the middle of the street, discussing when I should come and see him, so that telling was not recorded. Unfortunately, when I did come and record him, the telling was not as dramatic and enlivened as it had sounded on the first telling. There was something of the 'Western' in his telling on that occasion; with 200 men appearing out of a cloud of dust. The second telling, with the voice recorder on in T's living room over a cup of tea, was more relaxed and contained more explanation of the situation. In the poem, I wanted to both create something of the drama of the first telling with a slightly fuller telling of the scene. The poem is called 'One Day' because it is a story. The poem is a straightforward unrhymed short poem. It is fourteen lines, but has only a slight sense of 'turn', which falls in the middle of a line, so it would be a bit of a stretch to call it a sonnet. It would have been easy enough as a writing task to make it conform as a sonnet, but I did not want to distract from the drive of the narrator's natural speech rhythm. There is something of an anapaestic metre in the poem, but again that is not

forced because I wanted to keep the sense of storytelling alive in it. I chose not to make the poem a prose poem; largely because it is a narrative and prose poems tend not to be, but also because I liked the idea of giving this material white space and a shape.

Nightman

The Nightman was one of the names given to Night Soil Collectors. Teams who collected human waste before water closet sanitation units were common. They came in the night and emptied the contents of whatever the household was using as a toilet onto their carts and took it away for disposal as either manure or for use as chemicals in industry, such as leather tanning. In the case of our estate, the Nightman is pre-historic. The estate was built with fairly modern flushing toilets and a drainage system that still 'does'. So, the Nightman lives in the shadows of the past.

Raphael Samuel, in his *History Workshop* essay on Britishness, says, 'History notoriously takes wing at dusk, that twilight hour when shadows lengthen, silence thickens and when (according to believers in the numinous) thought flies heavenward and ghostly presences make themselves felt' (1998). That phrase appears again in the collection as a poem title, which is discussed in the last chapter, but was also a consideration in this poem. Twilight is not night time of course, which is when the nightman comes, but he brings with him the 'shadows' that in natural light would more belong to twilight. The space through which the Nightman, in my poem, enters the cellar to collect my 'dirt' is quite literally a space of shadows. Above the back door is a security light that is triggered by movement. The space around the 'air brick' or ventilation grill in my bedroom is just outside the area that is lit by the security light. Shadows between the two and between other lights in our light-polluted London night sky are thrown across my bedroom window in a way that can be beautiful, familiar, and strange, and sometimes frightening.

For me, this was what the 'idea' of the Nightman is about. He is entering a space below the waterline, in my oneiric cellar. It is a working class cellar and therefore is at least partly associated with the outdoors, a shared space, semi-public and therefore has something of a sense of shame about it, in that the creation of dirt, of pollution is 'shameful'. My bedroom at night is a place of shadows and is a place of dialectical contradictions. There are both secrets and clarity in the shadows; it is safe and

dangerous, mother and father, boundaried and unboundaried. The Nightman is ‘shadowless’ and therefore invisible, and what is unseen is frightening. For me, the individual living in an age that is as removed from dealing with our own excreta as it is possible to be, his presence is frightening. His job is done mechanically these days. If the mechanics of taking my ‘soil’ away go wrong, a plumber comes, and I do not see what he does. If that goes wrong, the Water Board deal with it, and that happens in another realm.

This poem was first drafted freely; the lineation was decided on quite a while after as I did not want to impose it too early in the writing process. I wanted it to have a fairly long line length. The first line ‘came’ as a musical line in my head and could only potentially be split where the first comma is. So my choice of lineation was between a fairly standard contemporary lyric five-foot line or a line containing the whole sentence, which had a subordinate clause giving us two extra metric feet. After much deliberation, I decided the longer line had the fluidity necessary to build up tension to help create the sense of a nightmare for the oneiric landscape of this poem. This left two shorter, two and three foot lines that I had allowed to wisp like a trace of shadow. However, in a later redrafting, I chose to relineate it as a standard lyric breath-length line and allow the music to flow in a less obviously directed way.

Backroom

‘The Backroom’ considers what it is like to live in spaces where other people have lived. The room usage in the flat has changed over time. My flat is a small one: one bedroom, living room, kitchen, and bathroom. It was built as a three-room tenement, one of the larger housing units at the time. The tenement flat did not have a bathroom and kitchen. The toilet and water point were shared units in the hallways or backyards. So, at least two of the three rooms were designed for sleeping in. The front room was always meant to be the living room. However, depending on the size of the family occupying, that might have to be someone’s sleeping space. The first occupants were two middle-aged sisters, Annie Urquhart and Sarah-Ann Rose. Annie also had adult sons who stayed occasionally. Most of the time, however, it was just the two sisters living there, so they would have had a room each and a living space, relative luxury. In the next-door block, the Way family also had a three-room flat. There were ten of them,

two parents and eight children. As far as I can tell, the backroom of my long, thin flat has always been a space for sleeping. The tenant before me experimented with using the slightly larger front room as a bedroom, but it did not work for her due to street noise.

The poem considers ‘how many bodies’ have essentially made the same gestures and movements as they woke to start their day over the hundred plus years that it has provided sleep space. The form is free verse. It is a short lyric that follows its own stress-rhythm, which is composed of fairly short phrases with some repetitions. It follows that century of bodies waking in the backroom, getting up and getting some form of breakfast together; they are half-asleep and still trailing the ghosts of both their own sleeping forms and whoever has been there before.

Airbricks

Airbricks or vents are simple devices that allow air to circulate in a room. There are a large number of them in the flats and have been since they were first built. Some of the outer ones are not in great condition. There is a strange patterning of smell in the flats, which could have something to do with these bricks and changes to the layout of the flats during their conversion from tenements. This poem discusses their purpose. At the time of first drafting, I had a serious damp problem near to one of the vents in my bedroom. There was dry rot in the floorboards and a large hole through which came a small rat or large mouse on a regular basis. When the floorboards were finally taken up ‘when the damp man’ came, it was discovered that the rodent had been stealing things from me – small toys, and dirty laundry amongst other things. All these things feature in the poem.

The poem also talks about the phenomena of smells that migrate from other flats and outside, through these vents. Flat A – which is the flat I share a floor with – is divided from mine by a corridor and two fire doors. There are no adjoining walls. It is a ‘market rent’ flat and is a bedsit (converted from a two room flat, the second room forming the bathroom and kitchen) so has had a high turnover of occupant in the last decade. Market rent tenants typically work long hours, and are not home an awful lot, and do not tend to play much of a role in the social life of the block; however, my concern when a new tenant moves in is whether they will be a good cook. This is because, despite no adjoining walls, their cooking smells invade my bathroom and lobby. Other people’s

smells are a feature of life in social housing. I had assumed the cooking smells came from somewhere more logical, such as upstairs, who I share a ceiling/floor with, or flat A of the block next door, who I share a wall with. It was not something that bothered me much. However, it was only when a Thai couple moved in and I could smell the production of a very good green curry and only on the husband's night off (he was a chef) that I realised where it was coming from and that it must be through a linked system of air bricks or vents. The smell was so intense that I could practically have followed the recipe. Sadly, the next occupant seemed to believe that dinner was not dinner unless it involved very boiled cabbage.

The poem is a thirteen-line poem composed of half-rhyming tercets. Something of the traditional terza-rima pattern of interweaving rhymes is present but not fully. This gives a tone of slightly disjointed interlinkedness, which suits the idea of an unfathomable (to the tenant) network of airbricks that either do or do not function as they were intended to. Air is moving either perfectly or imperfectly but I, as the one living there, have little clue as to which it is. The dry rot shows me that something is wrong, but I am dependant on the 'damp man' coming, the professional who will check things and put things right. There is a sense of desperation suggested in the repeated end line.

> When the damp man comes, all will be re-made.
> When the damp man comes – please say he'll come.

This ending was not something I was convinced would work for the reader and was prepared to lose it. However, I workshopped this with a group of poets and they liked it, so it is staying.

Infill

'Infill' considers what the walls and foundations of the blocks that form the housing estate were built on and of. My initial interest in this came from finding a letter of complaint in the archive of the Church of England. It was from a builder who had been sacked for union (association) activities. He claims the building was 'scamp[ed]' by use of bad quality infill, 'rubbish' essentially (Church of England: 779639/2: 1904). I thought about what that rubbish might comprise of at the turn of the twentieth century, locally: brick rubble, marsh mud, general household rubbish, perhaps some industrial

landfill – referred to in the poem as ‘cow dung’ and ‘Coade stone’. The title ‘Infill’ also refers to us, the tenants of the new estate and the estate it cleared. Octavia Hill refers to the population and the houses as ‘fairly respectable’ (Hill, 1933); in the poem we are ‘not too bad’. The estate, as stated before, was surrounded by some ‘bad’ streets, particularly on the North side of The Cut and in Gray Street – to the South, where prostitutes and criminal gangs lived according to the Booth report (Booth, B363).

In the Booth Survey follow up in 1903, just before work began on the new build, the surveyor and his policeman guide, Sergeant Waters, walk past and witness a child having a fit. They comment on the local people just watching the child: ‘The whole neighbourhood out of the window or in the street to look at him’ (Booth, B363: 73). The comment suggests they are looking out with the sole purpose of looking, to satisfy their own voyeuristic compulsions. In 2003, the whole estate was given double glazed windows; prior to that everything that happened in the street was audible. I was attacked coming home one night in 1982. A man jumped out at me from the recreation ground in the middle of the estate. I screamed. At every window a face appeared, and at every door a person came and stood – just as described by the Booth reporter. The man ran off, and the neighbours mostly disappeared – job done, leaving me feeling watched over and safe. The few who knew me well came to see if I was all right. Derrick Porter describes this phenomenon of watching in his poem ‘Parted Curtains’ (2015: 31) – a sense of ‘keeping an eye on things, without seeming nosy’.

Before our estate was built, this interaction in the street would have been even louder with no televisions or music systems to drown it out with and a social interaction within the block or house and yard via shared cleaning routines (‘the broom’) and shared social concerns (‘the fitting child’, ‘the likes of Gray Street’). Infill is also that estate, the one before ours, not built to last and especially Caffyn Street, the vanished street, where the fitting child was witnessed. Booth’s surveyor says Caffyn Street was the poorest of the three streets, and now, it is itself ‘filled in’.

I return at the end of the poem to the literal infill. The walls in our flats are extremely hard to make holes in. Drilling is a task fraught with difficulty. Once you are through the plaster, you are trying to drill through what feels like flint. Whatever they made the inner walls with is not really user friendly for modern décor.

The form I have chosen is free verse. It has two stanzas of four lines with a third of five lines. The lineation is largely a result of rhythmic concerns and keeps a hanging sense of enjambment to help with that. It is another thirteen-line poem, which has an 8:5 ratio, a golden section, a nod to the architectural, arguably as much of a nod as they gave the building of the flats, so I would not want to overstate this. There is no sense of turn or volta here however, just a build-up of infill.

Back Yard Megalith/Stone Thing

'Back Yard Megalith/Stone Thing' refers to a structure that was in our communal back yard from the mid 1960s to 1990. It was in the centre of the yard and was a slim pillar, made of cement, that rested on a small pedestal. At the top were some rings and the idea was that on washing day, a line could be strung from one of the rings to the block to create a washing line. There were three rings, one for each of the three blocks that share the yard. Although I was mostly very happy with the conversion of the back yards into gardens, made for our increased leisure time, I did love that stone thing. In this poem, the history is my own. It is my own memory of an architectural feature that is gone. I am not using anyone else's testimony or any archival material. There are no photos that I have or have come across in my research to remind me of what it looked like, because prior to the backyards being converted into flower gardens, we did not use them as social spaces very much. I may have exaggerated its beauty in my memory.

The form I chose for this poem was the ghazal. The repeated radif is just one word of one syllable – stone. This old song form, which consists of self-contained couplets (in that they ought to be able to work as self-contained short poems in their own right) that when brought together work as a series of intensified observations, seemed ideal for this pondering of a small thing in detail. The final couplet, or maqta, traditionally contains the poet's name or some kind of personal reference and that also helped me develop the idea of this as being my personal response to this piece of history, rather than a collective one, or one owned by someone else.

Mother-In-Law's Nets

Mother-in-law's nets is a poem that properly belongs in the memory section, where I will discuss a different aspect of the poem. However, I wanted to discuss the early

lighting of the common areas and flats and the impact of the Blackout in the Second World War here. The poem explores the day when a woman was able to wash her white net curtains for the first time since blackouts were declared, and had a breakdown while she washed them. Blackout preparations began with rehearsals about a year before World War Two started. Householders were required to make themselves blackout curtains in black fabric and seal any gaps with brown paper. You were not allowed to clean the windows or wash your curtains (Goodall, 2009: *Guardian*). On estates like ours, where respectability was important and the semi-public nature of hygiene-related shared space might give women good reasons to become anxious about 'what the neighbours think', the added burden of not being allowed to keep your windows and their curtaining clean, which after all was the most public facing aspect of your house keeping skills, must have been difficult. The fact that you did not have a choice would have helped most to cope with it. For this woman, the dirt in the curtains represented everything she had experienced, all the darkness, dirt, danger and difficulty of the war. At least one member of this woman's family was killed in a local air raid. As the dirt drained out of the curtains, she was finally able to stop 'doing her bit' as government propaganda urged her and to stop holding it together. She is doing this in the darkness of the hallway in the communal washing space. Whatever the full nature was of what her future daughter-in-law referred to as her 'breakdown', she does it in that semi-public sphere, in front of the neighbours, literally washing her dirty laundry.

Chapter Three: The Archive

Archives hold within their boxes, both real and oneiric, the chance for poets and historians to try to take hold of the past and make it work for them and their communities or audiences. That search can serve as many purposes as anyone wants. Poets might want to use archival materials for language raids, finding the written voice of the Victorian 'fair hand', historic 'slanguage' in verbatim accounts. Archives can be raided for images to be used in collages, both visual like Natalia Jezova who has used an archive of old photographs to construct her family history, and written, such as Linda Black's poetry in her first collection, *Inventory* (2008). I have chosen to work with the archive in a more conscious, political and historical fashion, to try to create poems that work as histories, where as much as possible is verifiable in the manner of a history essay.

For a poet, archives offer a number of things you might choose to write: a narrative; the chance of stumbling on something 'new' or 'different', which is in itself another narrative; a different 'voice', perhaps authoritarian, perhaps not; a way of 'complicating' by containing within its boxes potentially different views or aspects of a situation in different media. The 'average' archive, if there is such a thing, might have photographs, plans or maps, office memos, letters, and reports, and these all have a language and a 'brief' to respond to. Archival research has been an important aspect of my working process for all my collections of poetry so far. In *The Finders of London,* I used materials from National Archives, Lambeth Archives, and Southwark Archives, amongst others (Robinson, 2010). For *Into the Woods,* I used libraries and archives at Hawthornden Castle, British Library, Lambeth Libraries, and, once again, Lambeth Archives (Robinson, 2014). For the poems in both those books, I had read or researched things because I was interested in them and only later wrote the poems, so I had not been consciously researching for the purposes of writing poems.

In this work, I have been more conscious of what I am attempting with this process. It is often argued that when a poet sits down to write 'about' a particular thing, those poems will be weaker than poems that spiral out of an urge to find out what lies in the poet's head. For example, Don Paterson describes the first seventeen sonnets of Shakespeare as the weakest and cites William Boyd as saying that they 'read like a commission'.

This is, as opposed to how most poets work, using a poem 'as way of working out what he's thinking, not as a means of reporting that thought' (Paterson, 16th October 201*0: Guardian*). That is the way I normally work. However, this project was not as different as it may seem in this regard, because the historic research had largely been undertaken either before or at the start of this PhD; therefore much of the history and its language has become part of my language and image store, so most of the poetry began in the usual way of the lyric, starting with a first line in my head and working with the music of that line. A small number of poems have started with found text, and so more immediately leap from the archival items themselves, such as 'Conditions of Tenancy (1937)' and 'The Crimes of Mrs Williamson', discussed at the end of the chapter.

Carolyn Steedman's basic definition of 'archive' is:

> a name for the many places in which the past (which does not now exist, but which once did actually happen; which cannot be retrieved, but which may be represented) has deposited some traces and fragments, usually in written form. In these archives someone (usually someone from about 1870 onwards, across the Western world) has catalogued and indexed these traces (Steedman, 2001: 69).

'The archive is also a place of dreams' (Steedman, 2001: 69). 'The social historian's dream' is 'to enter the place where the past lives, where ink on parchment can be made to *speak*'. They dream of 'bringing to life those who do not for the main part exist, not even between the lines of state papers and legal documents, who are not really present, not even in the records of Revolutionary bodies and factions' (Steedman, 2001: 70). Arguably, that is also the poet's dream; or at least for those poets who have worked on archival material in archives, it is often what they say they are searching for. Certainly it was the declared aim of most of the poets involved in the *Through the Door* project in 2015.

Through the Door was a project run by Poet in the City (a London-based literature organisation) and Archives for London. It placed poets Imitiaz Dharker, David Harsent, Simon Jenner, Andrew Motion, Mario Petrucci, and Fiona Sampson at six London-based archives: Hackney and Tower Hamlets local authority archives, the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, Royal College of Surgeons, St Paul's Cathedral, and the

British Library. The poets were not recruited competitively, which might have encouraged applications from poets with pre-existing interests; they were 'placed' somewhere to find what they might want to write about rather than writing from materials they had voluntarily researched. The project resulted in an anthology called *Through the Door,* in which each archivist and each poet discussed their work and the resulting poems were published. Some of these poems are 'history' poems, but none of them straightforwardly redraw or discuss this past from its own perspective; they are almost all poems that spin a small aspect of the archive into something the poet 'dreams' or sees as interesting.

Mitzman says that Michelet 'understood the Historian's task as pacifying the spirits of the dead, exorcising them "by finding the meaning of their brief existences".' (Steedman, 2001: 71). Michelet's rescuing of the dead was to help them achieve their potential. Up to their point of discovery or re-discovery, the dead are lost to our present world, in the boxes of the archives. The 'potential' they have is to exist within the text of history via this process of 'finding the meaning' of their lives. Many of the poets involved in *Through the Door*, in particular Imitiaz Dharker, Simon Jenner, David Harsent, and Fiona Sampson, were engaged with 'pacifying the spirits of the dead' in the writing of their poems. I will discuss Dharker, Harsent, and Jenner's outputs below as although they were all working towards 'finding the meaning' of their subjects lives to some extent, each had a different approach.

Dharker was based at St Paul's Cathedral Archives and used a number of resources. Key to the production of several poems was a photograph that was taken during the London 'Blitz' and is of a bombed part of the cathedral. The visual image that had 'moved' the poet showed a fallen cherub head amongst the debris. In the poem the cherub represents itself, as well as all the children 'we could have saved,/ if we had been looking' (2015: p.13). Another of Dharker's poems uses a working ledger as a resource. It notes that twelve bells have been donated to St Paul's by the Livery Companies of London. The poem compares the sounds of the city on a working day to the sounds of the bells and names some of those livery companies, making them musical components of the bells 'the clapper strikes/ for the Company of Drapers' (2015: 20).

Simon Jenner was placed at Hackney Archives. His project, much like Fiona Sampson's who was based at Tower Hamlets Archives, used institutional records from the poor law union. Jenner had some interesting things to say about his working process. He discusses his aims in the same kind of language cited above to discuss historians' relationship with the archives, the lone explorer looking for someone or something to rescue. Jenner says, 'I tried to let these [voices] work out their voicing or as Keats says, salvation, through what I could write' (2015: 41). 'Salvation' is surely far more akin to Michelet's rescue mission of actually 'finding meaning' than simply acknowledging them. Jenner also says he was 'keen to honour all' in the archive (2015: 41). This feels like something I might say of my project, but Jenner describes his writing process as having taken quotations and 'riffed this with imaginative narrative derived' (2015: 41). This word 'riffed' is useful. Few of the poems make literal sense; therefore it is hard to see how the events of people's lives are being 'honoured'. Each poem takes a date entry and no one person gets more than one mention with just a few lines accorded to each. The date is the key, not the individuals. The people whose lives he is describing in this way, are defined only in the way the archive allows, in its most obvious way – from the language of one item: 'Frances Cranston so sadly depraved – wishes to reform/… Alice Faulkner, stole Japonoiserie - / claims to speak the bowl's tongue./… Ann says she's none of theirs – a changeling foisted brat/ (2015: 43). More successful as a 'salvation' poem, or one that 'honours' its subject is the only poem that concentrates on an individual, '27th November 1850: Eliza Lambert Admitted'. Jenner discusses having filled out details from 'implied' suggestions in the text, which is an interesting and not uncommon strategy in historic narrative – in fiction, poetry, and history texts. He used secondary sources to fill out his knowledge of what these 'implications' might be, and it would only take references for this to be absolutely justifiable as a working practice for a historian. Eliza Lambert is describing a past of sexual abuse, a thing implied in the archive but backed by historians working with nineteenth-century women's social history such as Andrew August (1999) and Sally Alexander (1983: 63), amongst others.

David Harsent was assigned the archives at the Library of Freemasonry, and was guided by the archivist Susan Snell, so his archival journey was less 'lonely' and more mediated than would be normal. She gave a considerable amount of time to guiding him through a range of materials that he could choose interests from. Harsent chose to write sonnets. This form allowed him to hone in on important detail whilst being able to complicate matters via 'turns' both in his sonnets and his narratives. Giving them the

same form allowed him to unify the disparate material he was using, perhaps like the archival box, and also to offer slight variations in other ways to give each its significance. Snell showed Harsent materials about people she finds interesting, as a starting point, and allowed him to begin to explore within that: a nineteenth century Black mason called Loveless (or Lovelace) Overton; Annie Besant, who, like many theosophists, joined a co-freemasonry organisation (one that admitted men and women); and the freemason's own girls' school, Ruspini's House. Ruspini House was set up by a mason, to educate daughters of freemasons. Harsent's poem uses the language of the archive to some extent. The phrase 'proper object' is used twice in the Ruspini House poem as a description of the girls, and as a sonnet has only fourteen lines, this ensures the reader understands that these are important words. Susan Snell, the archivist at the Library of Freemasonry, explained to me that being a proper object meant that the girl conformed to a checklist of requirements: her father was a freemason, her parents were married and she was baptised. The names of the girls and the statements that they are 'proper objects' comes from the archival voice; the rest is an imagined conversation among the girls where they discuss the 'attributes of a supreme being' (2015: 28).

Many other poets use archives; there was nothing especially new about the afore mentioned project, except perhaps for its scale. For example, Annabel Banks has written poems using the Boulton and Watt Mining Company Archive in Cornwall and Aviva Dautch has written poems from a residency at the Jewish Museum. They have both taken a somewhat 'slant' approach to their materials, writing what are not literally 'history' poems but work that arguably 'rescues' language and voice rather than the people in the archive. Hannah Lowe's poetry project *Ormonde* (2014) was perhaps closer to an actual history told in contemporary poems. Her father came to the UK from Jamaica in 1947. Lowe's archival research actually did turn up a new 'fact'. 'Windrush' is an appellation given to the 'first' generation of black Caribbean settlers to the UK in the late 40s, and the 'Windrush Generation' is that social community of Caribbean people who settled here in the late 40s and 50s. However, the Ormonde brought people a year before the Windrush came. The Windrush was apparently the third ship to arrive. Lowe's father was on board the Ormonde, and the poems commemorate him and all of the other Ormonde passengers. As part of the project, Lowe sent a postcard to each passenger, to the addresses supplied on the passenger lists that she found in the National Archives. No-one responded, which is hardly surprising. However, Lowe used her

imagination to fill in what blanks she could, helped by contextual material from her own family history knowledge and social history books.

There is a past world where many of us feel we 'belong' or believe we might better 'fit'. This is the business of 'heritage' and of arts projects working with 'heritage'. The Heritage Lottery Fund describes 'heritage' as 'really wide ranging' (HLF, 2017). They support projects that 'celebrate' local communities and public spaces (amongst other things). This is a part of the Heritage provision of the state, along with English Heritage, for example, who preside over 400 sites of historical interest. So, a 'heritage' project might involve looking at Stonehenge or a palace or a local park in South London. Heritage has as broad a range of meanings and styles as history. With local heritage projects, finding that past world and putting our claim on it, is an often-repeated theme. 'In the project of finding an identity through the processes of historical identification, the past is searched for something (some-one, some group, some series of events) that confirms the searcher in his or her sense of self, confirms them as they want to be, and feel in some measure that they already are' (Steedman, 2001: 77). The role of the archive in this kind of community heritage project is to justify the quest either by those who fight back against perceived injustice or by those that simply want to belong and feel they maybe do not, that deep within the archive is a justification for how they feel and are. I write my *Webber Street* poems, search in these archives, as someone not 'born on the estate,' but who after 37 years of living here, cannot see where else, right now, I might belong.

The archive is an oneiric space, in the way of Bachelard's House. Bachelard argued there is meaning attached 'to objects that may be opened' (1994: 85). They are transitional. Closed they are just objects, although bound up with potential. For poets and for material cultural historians there is no such thing as 'just an object'. Objects themselves are bound up with meaning. However, it is an object that changes when it is open: 'From the moment the casket is opened… the outside has no more meaning (Bachelard, 1994: 85). The archive contains many things that can be opened and that in turn contain other things to open. Solander boxes often contain files containing papers wrapped in archival paper, all neatly tied with special linen ribbons. For the historian and the 'heritage' artist, when these are opened, the outside world retreats. I find the experience to be like doing a satisfyingly long lottery scratchcard. You hope the item

that will make your heart leap is in there, and it is not until you have undone the last item that you know you will be disappointed – unless you have won, of course.

Archive comes from Arca or Arkhe, Latin for box, or Greek for origins and also the seat of power. That dual route has made some argue, like Derrida is his essay entitled 'Archive Fever' in English, that archives represent only sources of power, or that come from power. Derrida's essay is not really about literal 'archives'. It is more about power and history as told by the powerful and their historians. However, the idea of archives as powerhouses has proved seductive to artists. Rosangela Renno's piece, *Immemorial,* commemorates workers killed in the building of Brasilia. The files about those killed are classified under 'dismissed due to death' (Merewether, 2006: 161). Other artists have worked in archives of imperialist governments and have found similarly shocking images or language in those. However, it is still a paper trail in a box. That paper trail might well tell a more rounded picture than contemporary propaganda allows. There is the example of Alice Wheeldon, whose trial for 'attempting to murder Lloyd George' was in 1917 (Rowbottom, 2015). However, as new papers are released to public viewing in the archive due to passing their hundredth year (some relating to the Attorney General's role were released after eighty years), it is becoming increasingly clear that Alice Wheeldon was 'set up' and did not commit the crimes she was accused of (alicewheeldon.org). The information is all there, in that powerful archive for both the state and those who oppose it. The destruction of 'sensitive' papers during the final years of the British Empire, however, should perhaps urge caution on eventual justice being a guaranteed outcome of the ability to find 'the truth' of government culpability in all cases (Cobain et al., 17/04/2012, *The Guardian*).

Archives used and their materials

The content of boxes in archives will depend on the collecting policy of those various archives. Len Reilly, one of Lambeth's archivists, defines local authority archives as containing 'the business of the local authority and its predecessors', those predecessors being the Parish and manor of Lambeth; although, as Foucault argued 'The archive cannot be described in its totality' (2006: 29). That is certainly true for Lambeth, which also holds a number of collections that relate to the population of Lambeth and have nothing to do with the business of council, such as the photographic archive of Brixton studio photographer Harry Jacobs, who did portrait photos of people living in Brixton

from the 1960s on. Lambeth, like most archives, is a rich source of material, but it is inconsistently so.

The archive, according to Foucault, is 'the first law of what can be said' (2006: 145), but also that they are organised rather than an 'amorphous mass'. Cataloguing an archive is, literally, that attempt to 'describe' it. However, an archival record is an extremely difficult thing to navigate, and the system lacks consistency for researchers across different archives. Heritage funding has been given to a number of national schemes meant to make archives easier to navigate for researchers. The a2a project for example, Access to Archives, was a database organised by the National Archives to provide researchers with the ability to find what they wanted to consult at over 2,500 archives across the UK. It was not particularly user friendly with a very narrow Boolean-led search function, one that allowed no misspellings and searched only the titles of documents, so you had to already know how the archivist had named the document you wanted or get lucky. It was a huge project, however, and is now part of the improved 'Discovery' site via the National Archives website, which organises the information by 'word search' from a larger amount of descriptive text; this requires patience from the researcher, but nothing more. It is, arguably, a step closer to 'describing' the totality of the archive, but finding something useful in an archival search still seems to feature a large element of luck.

These are the archives that I used to find sources for the poems in *Webber Street*:

The Church Commissioners of England, formerly the Ecclessiastical Commissioners, are the managerial committee for the Church of England. They are the organisation that manages the finances, property and investments of the Church. They are the landowners of our estate and built and ran the estate for its first hundred years. The records were formerly held at One Millbank, then headquarters of the Church Commissioners. I saw them there in the mid 1980s whilst I was researching for a local history project and there were a substantial amount of files relating to this estate and its tenancies. There are now only two files that have anything in them related to the history of this estate. That might be because things were disposed of during the process of moving to the Church of England archives in Bermondsey, or more likely, it is because the CofE archives have a stricter viewing policy and enforce a 75-year closure on any records deemed 'personal'. The materials available in this archive are: architectural plans for the layout of the estate – but not the individual blocks, paperwork about maintenance of

blocks, early letters of complaint, up to mid-1920s, and some responses to those complaints, and some press cuttings.

Lambeth Archives holds the aforementioned 'business of the local authority and its predecessors'. I consulted the rate rolls, electoral rolls, drainage records, records of the World War Two local defence wardens and the post office directories. Locally held information helped me to access information on tenants who lived on the estate post 1918 from the electoral rolls and some pre 1918 in the rate rolls. They also have useful map and street renumbering files that helped with the different flat numbers before and after the 1960 re-furbishment and flat conversions. Council archives do not tend to hold anything managed by a later unitary authority, even if the local parish formerly ran it. London Metropolitan Archives holds the records for London's unitary authorities, the LCC, GLC, ILEA and some predecessors. I consulted Lambeth's workhouse and infirmary records there, as well as some local school records that LMA inherited after the closure of the ILEA.

When it comes to the most micro of micro histories (micro as in small, not Ginzburg's microscopic research, discussed in chapter five), that of families and individuals, it is the largest, powerhouse archive, National Archives that you go to. They hold all census records and birth, marriage, and death records. I used census records, which have been taken every 10 years since 1841, for a sweep of the estate in 1911 and the local area prior to the estate being built in 1901. This gave me a better understanding of the local population as a demographic and led me to question some of the myths around 'belonging' that exist here. Birth, marriage, and death records were useful when tracking individuals who had lived in my flat before me, and their stories.

The housing estate had a rent office in a ground floor flat until 2006 when the estate was sold. The housing manager between 1979 and 2000, Janet Shearman, kept a history file. It contained documents and old photographs that had been kept relating to events before her time and was added to regularly. Janet Shearman had a keen interest in Octavia Hill and her contribution to housing management and was conscious of the tradition she stood in and believed in its values. After she retired, that history file came into my hands and is still with me. It is my intention to lodge it with an archive, probably Lambeth, in the near future. The file contains souvenir booklets published to 'open' the 1935 blocks in the estate, newspaper cuttings, photographs – mostly of street parties and

outings to seaside resorts and London Zoo, and annual reports from partner organisations – largely local charities. Of all the archives, this has been the one I have used the most as it has been with me all the time; I do not have to make a special journey or an appointment to use it. This means also I have been able to make use of it in a more spontaneous way when writing the poems. I do not have to rely totally on my notes or my memory of the archive during the writing process. My archival research was supported by reading and re-reading of social history works, which helped me to contextualise the archival materials. However, some books, such as Mary Chamberlain's *Growing Up in Lambeth* (1989) and Maud Pember Reeves' *Round About a Pound a Week* (1990) were used in a similar way in the poems, as the other archives I used. That is because those books reported on original research undertaken by those writers. Waterloo Action Centre and Coin Street Community Builders hold collections of oral histories taken in the late 1970s and early twenty-first century respectively. I was a participant and collector during the Coin Street project and have also used my own memory of interviews alongside those interviews to create a layering of memory.

The Voice of the Archive

The archive has a voice. Alessandro Portelli talks about the archive or 'official record' as having 'orality [is] woven into the very texture of the written official record' (1991: 5). This is the voice of the testimony given to government and local government officials mediated through writing. This voice will be tidied up grammatically, to make it understandable to the reader. There might also be other changes made, to make the speaker sound more or less authoritative and authentic. Natalie Zemon-Davis has written about how crafted the voice of pardon tales are, for example. These are sixteenth century letters of remission found in French regal and government archives whereby people accused of, usually, capital offences like murder, plead their case. The stories would usually be dictated to a clerk and the person whose story it was, would nearly always have been illiterate (1987: 1-6). Zemon Davis refers to the narratives in these letters as 'fictions', not because they are not true but because they are crafted, which, as she points out, is inherent in a possible meaning for 'fiction' due to its root word in French of feindre. Although feindre in modern day speech largely connotes deceit, its usage in the sixteenth century was more about creation. These fictions were what we might describe as 'creative non-fictions' in the twenty-first century. So, the voice in

these narratives is a storytelling voice. Both the writer of the narrative, who might have tidied the story up somewhat, and the teller are present in these pieces. There are many other kinds of interviews in the archives as well. These might be brief accounts of reasons for poverty by a person pleading for poor relief, or word for word accounts of people on trial, written mostly with such detail it invites the reader in. In April 1828, a young woman called Catherine Welch was hanged for the alleged murder of her baby. In her testimony, she explains that the dead child was not hers, that her child had died a few months before. She restates her evidence or lack of it, and finishes by saying, 'I am as innocent as a baby unborn, and leave it to the gentlemen of the court to look into my case, for I have not a person in the world to do anything for me' (National Archives: HO/17/26/50). I worked with this text in 2002 for a poem called 'The Search' (Robinson, 2010: 42) and was struck when reading the trial account about how different each voice is; it made a convincing case for the assertion that these were at least a close rendition of the voices of the trial participants. So, the voice of the archive is sometimes the voice of those we would 'rescue'.

The archive also has its own writers' voices. Depending on the object, these are various. Most memos, committee minutes, record books, interview and testimonial transcripts held in public archives are written by civil and public service staff. From the mid to late nineteenth century, when most of these records began, the writers consisted of a mixture of literate working class and middle class people, people with a 'fair hand', as most official records were made in handwritten text. Because the writers of these texts were government or local government employees, it does not necessarily follow that they shared the values of those in power. The first office workers' union was founded in 1890, The Clerks' Union, which eventually became APEX and is now part of the GMB union, the second largest in local government. Many people contributing material to archives as part of their daily lives are and have been, to some extent, in opposition to the state, even if that is only in regard to employment rights. Although the poor law unions have a bad reputation in history and in particular historic fiction, largely due to Dickens and to the policy of making working class people afraid of being in the workhouse, many poor law union staff and officers were not 'anti-poor' and had humane and charitable aims, and many socialists and feminists, such as Charlotte Despard, were elected to their local poor law unions (Despard in Lambeth in 1894).

Many of the documents in the voice of the public servant that you find in archives are working documents, not intended for historical referencing. At their most 'official', they might be intended as a formal 'paper trail', a record of a set of proceedings or transactions. However, much of what we look at in the archives are informal communications between colleagues. The tone of despair in a school punishment book kept at Barnet Archives, when describing the behaviour of one particularly disruptive girl and the progression of that tone to one of outright anger, is telling in this regard (L22962), as is the aforementioned letter from Miss Hooker to Octavia Hill, explaining why she did not offer accommodation to a couple who had complained about their rejection (CC79639 1904). The writers of these memos might not have been very happy about the future world reading their semi-private notes. Had they known a future world might see this material and analyse it for the purposes of 'history', they might have felt slightly embarrassed, as I did, when a freedom of information request was made to Hackney Council regarding an incident I had been involved in and I had to see an email trail between me and my boss published on a website. What was embarrassing was not my role in the affair but the informal tone and language of the exchange. It had been written for one set of eyes to see and as part of a conversation, not for the whole world and with no right of reply to questions raised. My voice is written in the archive. It is no 'voice of power', but simply a box to place that voice, or an aspect of it, in.

The Poems

The *Webber Street* poems written using materials from archives have potentially more historical facts that need explaining, so these reflections of the writing of these poems contain more 'history' than the previous chapter's poems.

'Us at the Seaside'

This poem draws on two very small photographs. They are Box Brownie photographs, approximately 1 ½ x 2 ½ inches landscape. They were the property of the former housing estate office and are currently in my possession, in my personal archive of estate history. They are of a group of women and children on a trip to the seaside, an estate outing, organised according to the writing on the back, as part of the 1935 George V Silver Jubilee celebrations. The estate has a tradition of outings, and there is a strong idea, part of our myth of permanence, that this outing is an annual tradition. The

destination is usually Margate. This might have been the first such trip. Hop or fruit picking was still the getaway of choice for local working class people into the 1930s. These trips and other 'organised' community social experiences tended to be organised by the housing managers rather than the tenants. Those came later.

One photograph features a group of women in their outdoor clothes (one is wearing a coat and they all are wearing hats) on the beach. There are two rows, the front row features three women sitting on deck chairs and behind them are four women standing. The women are aged between 20 and 50. The hats they are wearing are, with one exception, not fashionable. These are cloche hats, which by 1935 had not been fashionable for a few years. These women lived close to a street market that had hat stalls as well as several hat shops along its stretch at the time (Directories). Although they were poor, money could have been found for a cheap hat from a market stall if they had really wanted one. Mary Chamberlain says that despite unemployment being the highest of the twentieth century and poverty a huge cause for concern in the 1930s, working class women were increasingly fashion conscious (1989: 70). Perhaps these women did not care that much about the latest hat fashions.

The second picture is of five women, one of whom also appears in the first photograph. They are each holding the hand of a young child, under five. They are wearing less clothing than the women are in the first picture; they are each wearing a dress in the same style that could have been cut from the same pattern. In the electoral roll for 1934 the eleven women pictured across the two photographs all live in the same street. This makes it quite likely that they shared and reused a sewing pattern. That is something that Mary Chamberlain notes that the increasingly fashion conscious working class women on Lambeth did regularly (1989: 70), and it is something my own mother did several decades later.

These photographs are tiny pictures about something that, at most, happened once a year, so I wanted a short form for the poem. I had wanted a 'form' as I did not think (from my own memory of them) that these women would have been modernists or appreciated unrhymed free verse. Although I felt rhyme was necessary for this work, I do not like full end-rhymes very much and tend to feel they do not really suit English, sounding too heavy on the ear. So, I used a half-rhyme that was predominantly assonant. I was applying a close eye to these small photographs, scrutinising them in the

way that a microhistorian might scrutinise them[1], so needed to be able to complicate and extrapolate meaning from them. Sonnets suit the kind of complicating discursive structure I had wanted, but even they seemed too big. So I chose a Hispanic form, the Decima, which can be used in the same rhetorical way as the sonnet but has only ten lines. I chose a sort of 'crown' like structure for the overall form, in honour of the hats. It was a simple crown, consisting of taking the first line of each poem to make an eleventh decima.

The poems are voiced by one of the women, talking about her memories in a more or less conscious way. Sometimes she is talking to a listener, explaining how things were in a straightforward way, and in some poems, she is back in the space of the poem or photograph, talking to the others in the photographs or to her past self.

'Street Party'

'Street Party', on the other hand, is a modernist poem. It is also based on a photograph from the same archival collection. The photograph was taken by a professional photographer and was published by the South London Press. It is shot from above and is of a children's tea party celebrating the same Silver Jubilee in 1935. Technically, it is not a street party, as it is in the small recreation ground in the centre of the estate. I used that as the title however, because it was part of the set of national celebrations that took place and a term by which we understand that particular kind of communal outside, but seated, celebration. T. Jones was at the party and remembers the photographer; he recalls the photograph was taken from an upstairs window.

That perspective, from high above the bunting, is what gives the photograph its modernist appearance. If the photographer was not conscious, whilst taking the shot, of what he had taken, he could not have missed seeing it when he developed the picture. The lines of bunting cut up the picture in a very abstract way, almost cubist. It draws the eye so that you explore the picture through the shapes the bunting creates rather than looking at it as a whole. That holistic view is something you do later, when the detail begins to overwhelm.

[1] See chapter 5

The poem is written in prose paragraphs. Each section explores a separate aspect, hats, the tea, the women, the men and lastly, the guests of honour – the children. Each part ends with the bunting 'all cut up with bunting/all sliced by bunting/all those slices of bunting/get cut up by bunting'. Although it is laid out in prose paragraphs, the prose has a slightly cut up feel. The rhythm is a triple metre, not a regular triple metre such as dactyls or anapaest, but more randomly stressed. This gives it a tripping rhythm that enhances that 'cut up' sound.

Annie Poems, 'Shaddas' and 'Blow This Forra Lark'

The Annie Poems are a set of poems I began writing in 2008, one of which was published in my first collection, *The Finders of London* (Robinson, 2010: 23). They are poems addressed to Annie Urquhart, who I discovered whilst researching my address at Lambeth Archives. Annie Urquhart was a widow with three sons who was the first tenant of my (our) flat. She lived here with her older sister and youngest son from 1905 until her death in 1936. For that first poem 'Tawkin' too Wannie, Sundee tee time' I used a form of dialect or accent writing that I had developed for this conversation. I will discuss this further in the voice chapter. This first poem was an imagined, and one sided, conversation with Annie, asking about her view from our shared window. To see what was opposite our flat in 1905, when she first lived here, I consulted the 1905 Post Office Directory at Lambeth Archives and a contemporary map. At the start of the writing process for this collection, I had continued in this vein, poems written in this same voice that discussed elements of the local area, mostly containing snippets of history that I had come across through two oral history collections. The oldest of these was collected in 1981 by the Morley College Local History Group and now exists on CD and the most recent, part of a collection of interviews conducted for Waterloo Sights and Sounds by the Coin Street Community Builders' Heritage Project, whose interviews are mostly available through their website. For these poems, I chose snippets from those interviews and began the process of interrogating them from the point of view of a partial outsider. One interviewee had given a list of his childhood neighbours nicknames – 'Maisie from the Nile' and 'Pineapple Ada'; the poem ponders these acts of naming. These poems are all in accent and so are discussed in the next chapter, but they also featured some archival research.

‘6 Church Walk’

‘6 Church Walk’ was the first poem written out of considerable research on Annie Urquhart’s life. It is the address she was born at and so is a poem in her imagined voice. It is interesting that by the time I knew this much about her, I no longer imagined her with a particularly strong local accent. This poem is written with a lighter touch; she starts with ‘I come into the light in this room/’, if Annie was herself writing this, she would have written ‘came’, so the use of ‘come’ instead tells the reader she is speaking not writing. Certain details of her life made me suspect she might have been a more ‘refined’ speaker than I had first imagined her. Annie was literate, her father and her husband had worked as compositors or typesetters in the print industry, and she had also worked in the print industry as a young girl. Almost all jobs in the industry required literacy. The task of ‘proof reading’, which today is part of journalism and editing, at that time was the job of a ‘reader’ with a ‘reading boy’ or more rarely, girl, assisting them. The reading boy/girl would be a school leaver, as young as twelve when Annie left school in 1862. Their job would be to read the proof print and return to the typesetters or journalists with any mistakes or queries. The time demands of Fleet Street meant that fast, as well as accurate, reading was important. That time spent reading and running for the boys, was part of a training towards becoming a typesetter rather than a journalist (Booth, 1903: 190). Print work was not always well paid through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but it was unionised, protected and respectable. It had strong communities around it (Child, 1967). I know that Annie worked in the print industry as a young woman, but I do not know what she did. According to the Booth Inquiry into industry, the most common job for a woman in the print industry was ‘folder’ if not the aforementioned reader (1903: 231). A ‘folder’ was someone who makes folds in printed paper and card. But, this was some thirty years after Annie would have stopped working in the industry. Annie married a compositor and had three sons. William, her husband, was 28 years older than her, however, and died in the Lambeth Infirmary in 1892. He died from Hypostatic Pneumonia; lung difficulties were a common problem amongst compositors. The Booth reporters say this is due to poor ventilation in the work rooms. However, Hypostasis suggests that his death was caused by drowning due to lack of medical care in the infirmary. While William was dying in the infirmary, Annie and the children were in the workhouse at Norwood. When Annie and her baby, Percy, left and moved in with her sister, Sarah, back in Waterloo, the two older sons, Fred and Arthur, remained as boarders at the poor law union’s school at

West Norwood for what remained of their childhoods. While not necessarily a happy experience (there was an escape attempt by Fred) it gave them an education that saw them gain employment in white collar professions (LMA, LABG/197/004).

So, Annie was terribly poor for most of her adult life and for all of her childhood. However, she valued literacy and education. My other reason for suspecting that Annie might not have spoken with a terribly strong accent was the fact that she was close to her sister and lived with her from William's death to the end of their lives. Sarah was a regular volunteer for the church and was described in two census records as a 'church mission woman' (1901, 1911). A lifetime associated with literacy and religion may well have given her a quiet tone and associated values. During the course of her final fifty years, it was fashionable for working class people who were able to afford it, to take elocution lessons. According to T. Jones, the idea of revelling in one's own 'commonness' was associated with celebrating a different kind of lifestyle, and something that others in the area (perhaps Pineapple Ada) did, but probably not Annie. The things I found in the archives, Lambeth, National and London Metropolitan, are what I constructed this idea from, rightly or wrongly.

The poem is about Annie's babyhood, spent behind St John's church in Waterloo. It was a house where people occupied a room or two and a year or so before her birth; a young man had died from cholera during the Lambeth Cholera epidemic of 1848 (Thomas, 2010). This poem is imagining her mother's anxiety of trying to keep children healthy in the living memory of that event and all the other health problems the late Victorian world could introduce.

'The Crimes of Mrs Williamson'

'The Crimes of Mrs Williamson' is also about this anxiety, albeit some seventy years on. The text comes from a letter in the Church of England Archive. The letter was signed by the tenants of a neighbouring block on the estate, with the exception of one household, and was a complaint about the conduct of that household. Most of the complaints were about the woman, Mrs Williamson. Her husband only featured in a couple of the complaints. The letter was an interesting example of the archival voice. Although signed by all, it is written by one person and veers between a collective and a personal voice. It starts quite formally with 'Dear Sirs' despite being addressed to

women housing managers. The appeal itself then starts with a personal statement of long-term tenancy and of not being alone in this:

> After being here for five years I have had reason so many times to complain about Mr and Mrs Williamson at No 4 Flat: I am not alone in complaining. No 3 and No 1 also have. We have all been over to the office to see if we cannot have peace and quietness, without always being unjustly insulted (CC79639/2/1921).

It continues with some background to the problem:

> I believe Miss Allen two years ago, gave the said people a chance of moving here, they lived No 28 as they could not agree with anyone in the house there: Mrs Williamson went to the office and evidently made such a talk as they said after, someone has been putting people in the house against her. But what about the first house they lived in, and various other people in the street she has abused (CC79639/2/1921).

A bit later in the letter, the writer, Mrs Kate Cretton, begins her list of examples of what the Williamsons have done. This is where the 'voice' gets particularly interesting. As the complaints become more outlandish and upsetting, so we can see this mirrored in the breakdown in the standard of her written English. The key feature of this is inappropriately placed full stops. These are not the normal mistakes that indicate low literacy levels. In any case, we have seen already that Kate Cretton does not have low literacy levels. Here is an example:

> 'said they had been waiting for this. insulted us. by saying I was only a chorus girl only earning £3.00' (CC79639/2/1921).

The full stops are wrong, but interestingly, the capital letters are not. It is as if the voice is jabbing its finger at the page, or indicating its upset with large breathing spaces. In another place the writer makes a grammatical error that is, once again, uncharacteristic of the whole. It is also at a part of the letter where she is complaining about something very upsetting. She is saying one of the other residents has had her:

‘house flannel spit on, her vegetables spat on:’ (CC79639/2/1921)

The examples of Mrs Williamson’s ‘crimes’ break into three categories: noise, abuse and then those accorded most importance – poor hygiene in the shared areas of the lavatory and sink. At one stage, Kate Cretton talks about rubbish in the back yard causing them all to ‘have had sore throats’ (CC79639/2/1921), which might sound a bit of a non-sequitur, but that was a key symptom of Diphtheria, a disease that killed many and was the most common cause of death among children before the 1940 vaccination programme began. It is a bacterium and therefore connected with poor hygiene. It also brought anxiety and shame with it. These neighbours are ultimately accusing Mrs Williamson of trying to kill them with her dirty ways.

The poem is in the form of a prose poem and uses the section of the letter that is most emotionally charged. It is not straightforwardly ‘the letter’; I have taken clues from it to translate it into a text that is spoken rather than written. The poem is what I think Kate Cretton would say if she was telling it to me rather than writing it. However, all the details are as in the letter. The only changes are in the energy of the diction. There is a voice in the archive, but it is rarely a straightforwardly spoken voice.

‘Thirteen at Fifteen’

‘Thirteen at Fifteen’ is a census poem. It is a human geography poem. At the National Archives, I made an overview study of the whole estate in 1911, making a note of ages, occupations, birthplaces and such. The estate was young then, and generally housed young families. Today, aside from the market rent tenants, the estate is home to mainly over fifties. This is because young people who grew up here have not, on the whole, been able to remain if they left home after the 1988 Housing Act when rent levels on new tenancies became much higher. With that in mind, I chose the thirteen fifteen year olds who lived here in 1911 to overview. I chose that age group because in 1911 they were embarking on the beginnings of their adulthoods. Ten of them were working, two had remained at school, and one was unemployed. The poem looks at that point in life where anything is possible and the future is both exciting and daunting in equal measure. Formally, it is a free verse ‘list poem’. A list poem is a poem created by making a list of something that hangs together in some way. This might be because the things listed evoke something, either in the sound, meaning, their sequence or non-

sequence. In this case, the list is the names of the young adults and their jobs. This is all we actually know of these people, the rest – what they might or might not aspire to is conjecture, and therefore those names and job titles are the heart of the poem. I might at some future point trace these individuals forward, but for the purposes of this poem chose to focus on that one point in time where they are forever on the threshold of adulthood.

Chapter Four: Voicing Memory

So, as I have established, the archive has a voice. It tells its story in its own particular way. Oral history and reminiscence tell it differently. There are two key themes that I have been considering in regard to writing poems from oral history and reminiscence materials, firstly, the issue of memory and secondly, how you write down voice.

In the 1970s and early 80s, many local community organisations began to 'collect' the memories of their older generations, and during this time oral history and reminiscence work became distinguished as two different things. Oral History has to be recorded so that its 'orality', material, validity and ability to be referenced is protected and then, usually, a transcription has to be typed out in full. A set of 'rules' were developed that have established a way of proceeding that is measureable and not led by the interviewer or skewed by their discomfort regarding certain views or things the interviewee might say (Oral History Society). Reminiscence work was developed by Age Exchange, an organisation established in Blackheath in the 1980s, in response to these rules around oral history. They liked the impact that oral history projects had had on older people in communities, but felt that the rules emerging that were necessary to the project of serious history were irrelevant to their project of promoting memory collection as a healing tool for older, isolated people and, later, for people with short-term memory loss. That view of the value of memory had more in common with Maurice Halbwachs' ideas on the role of memory for older people within their communities.

The question of recording voice and its nuances in text has occupied oral historians, writers of verbatim drama and poetry texts and writers in general. Most dialogue in contemporary fiction has to convey accent at some point, if it wants to show something to the reader about the character's background, social standing or even their aspirations. Mainstream literature has historically been quite disrespectful to working class characters, and if that 'voice' is the writer's own, that is problematic, as I have already said. This chapter will further discuss these issues.

Memory

The estate and the area in general have had a long history of 'memory raids' (Sinclair, 2016). When Iain Sinclair uses this term, he appears to be referring to the psycho

geographer's tendency to freely wander and collect and collate in their own heads, memories of their own and others almost as an act of curation. However, for me it is a phrase that articulates the peculiar relationship that Waterloo, and many other working class areas in London, have with some aspects of reminiscence or memory work and oral history. This was not always the case. Our first experiences, collectively, of oral history collecting in Waterloo, date from the late 1970s. Mary Chamberlain, a member of History Workshop, gathered interviews for her book *Growing Up In Lambeth* (1989). Chamberlain was a South Londoner whose grandmother had been 'a local', so she was known to many of her interviewees. Jane Mace's work with the SE1 People's History Group was another successful project, based as it was, at the very active Waterloo Action Centre. Both those projects produced publications that were respectful of their tellers. Chamberlain's book was well received locally by her informants, although some disappointment was expressed to me by one participant as the interviewees were given pseudonyms, often part of academic ethics requirements, and she had wanted to be able to show her grandchildren something of their family history. Mace's collections were published as individual pamphlets in the names of the people she had interviewed, such as Dolly Davey (1980) and Stanley Rothwell (1981). The work undertaken by the Morley College local history group in the early 80s off the back of this project ended up as a very well attended 'Talking Slide Show', which has subsequently been produced as a DVD (Bruce, 2010). I moved to Waterloo, as a 21-year-old, in 1981 and saw this 'slide show'. When I first moved to the area, I worked in a bar in the evenings, so I was around in the daytime. The people I moved with, aside from my own network of night economy friends, were the elderly. At the jumble sales and protest meetings of Waterloo, I met this generation, in their most radical and culturally conscious form. I was introduced to the area through their history project and their memories. That generation had a real link with proper 'history', with things I had learned about at school. They were the children discussed in Maud Pember Reeves' *Round About a Pound a Week,* they remembered the music hall, times when no-one had a bathroom or indoor toilet, they had been bombed in the Blitz, and some of them had even experienced the workhouse. The elderly were the people who gave the right to belong through connection with them and, despite being in my early twenties, I did want to belong.

Since these projects, most memory-based projects in the area have had the feel of a 'raid'. They have usually taken the form of a small group of young middle-class

'outsiders', not even 'incomers' by local standards of intersubjectivity. These have usually been visual artists, who advertise their 'mission' in our local library, the action centre and our local community paper, *In SE1*. The take up of those prepared to tell their stories is, increasingly, small and usually not representative of the older, established population. By representative, I mean not able to remember a shared community experience of any particular set of local events, such as The Blitz or experiences of childhood at a particular local school or 1950s youth culture in Lambeth Walk. So, this is what I thought 'memory raid' must mean when I first saw the term. When a 'raiding party' comes in from outside the area to 'take' local people's stories and then leave again, showing no signs of having even listened but at the same time having taken some sort of strange ownership of them as a 'product' in their art. Reminiscence gatherers spoke of the importance of making people feel valued, but this was spoken about as if it was a given – that if you listen to people's stories, they would feel valued (Age Exchange). But, there is a limit to how often people will tell those stories if they do not believe, in the end, there is something of value to the process. This has been at the heart of my concerns, both in any interviews I have collected from people who are friends and neighbours, and in the poetry I have written from this material.

The ideas behind Age Exchange and its projects, started by Pam Schweitzer in 1983 in Blackheath, are influenced by Maurice Halbwachs' work, summed up in the essay collection *On Collective Memory* (1992). Memory is, according to Halbwachs, 'the true occupation for the old' (1992: 48). The collective variant of that task, described below, is a good description of how Age Exchange run their workshops and other activities.

> Old people ordinarily are not content to wait passively for memories to revive. They attempt to make them more precise, ask other old people, go through old papers, old letters; above all, they tell what they remember, when they do not try to write it down (1992: 48).

This is the time-honoured code of all memory based projects. Schweitzer says, in her training manual, that it is important to make older people feel listened to as they will stop talking to you 'if they feel you are bored or not listening' (Schweitzer). Schweitzer's project and those she has trained are not about history but are therapeutic. However, despite the care with which both Age Exchange and the Oral History Society

have explained what their aims are and despite offering training to people, I have experienced many projects that have muddled these two very different aims. ‘We are collecting memories, we are doing our history, it is intergenerational, older isolated people will feel valued’ were statements made on a project I worked on that had a successful Heritage Lottery winning bid. It is a project that struggled until the interview collectors had completed their ‘oral history training’ provided by a local university. I would argue that many of these less successful ‘memory raid’ projects have been less than punctilious in their understanding that these are two differing sets of ideas and that that has led to participants feeling patronised and belittled and ‘not interested’. We had had, collectively, quite muddled ideas regarding what we were doing until we ‘did the training’ and discussed more fully what we wanted to achieve. Another reason for the difficulty that many projects have found in recent years in engaging Waterloo pensioners in talking to them is simply that as a community, we have been ‘under siege’ from developers constantly, often with the open collusion of the local council, since the 1980s, and we are now almost defeated. This has sometimes included ‘community arts projects’ that developers have in some way supported but that arrive tainted by that relationship, such as the ‘artspace’ in what was our local library, which possibly innocently, has colluded with the Local Authority and its ambitions for doing business with developers by taking our library from us. Having been let down by a number of organisations, both Waterloo based and outside, our ‘old people’, and younger people as well, will and do share our memories but only amongst ourselves. In recent years, this process of ‘shutting down through defeat’, of wanting only to tell my stories to those who already know them, has also happened to me. I feel less and less enthusiastic about ‘projects’. However, because I am a poet and therefore feel my audience or readership is small, I want to include my readers (or at the very least my ‘ideal reader’) in my inner circle of those trusted to hear these stories because, to some extent, they are mine to tell.

In my treatment of memory for these poems, I have used excerpts from oral history recordings and transcriptions, an official and signed off recorded interview and perhaps more controversially, memories shared with me in informal conversations over the thirty-seven years that I have lived here. I will describe those processes for each individual poem discussed at the end of the chapter.

Voice: Dialect and Accent

Another aspect of voice in this collection of poems is that of accent or dialect. I have discussed in my introduction, the role and importance of dialect poetry in my childhood and in my sense of identity as a working class poetry reader. This is a common theme for poets using dialect. However, what seems different for the current generation of contemporary poets using dialect is the addition of the use of working class speech to discuss aspects of beauty and bear witness to the awesome and the horrific. One important aspect of that discussion is the musical pace or 'energy' of the voice in a contemporary dialect poem. The rhythm of poetry in English has traditionally been measured in feet. As I have already stated, iambs are said to be the natural rhythm of English, both written and spoken, and the iambic pentameter is said to be the natural length of what can be said in a single breath. Interestingly, in free verse stress meter, that breath length is usually four not five stresses. Edward Kamau Brathwaite has summed up the problem of iambic pentameter for writers and readers of other Englishes with; 'the hurricane does not roar in pentameter' (1986: 265). A fuller explanation of this is:

> It may be in English, but often it is an English which is like a howl, or a shout, or a machine-gun, or the wind, or a wave. It is also like the blues. And sometimes it is English and African at the same time (Brathwaite: 1986: 265).

This is also a problem for other English Englishes, not just African Caribbean. There really is no such thing as received pronunciation (RP). All people have some kind of accent, and the vast majority of poets use contemporary speech to humanise the voices of their narrators, but, because the majority of published poets in the London are middle or upper class, demotic language in London poetry tends to come from those accents. I recently workshopped a poem from *Webber Street* in a private workshop whose members are mostly young, privately educated poets. The poem had a lot of colloquial phrases. There was one phrase that I have only heard once in my life. A middle class woman I know had described a local council policy as being 'like a pig wearing lipstick'. I loved it and put it in the poem. To me it sounded beautiful. I pictured a delighted pig making the best of a strange find in its food trough. The group thought it banal and ugly and not living up at all to the 'exotic' and 'surprise elements' of the working class phrases I had used throughout. The purpose of the phrases was not to

surprise or be exotic, so I was a bit confused by the discussion; however it was interesting to note that despite the dominance of working class culture and language in televised drama and film, colloquialisms have not necessarily travelled as far as you might expect. They were delighted with phrases that they did not understand, as it was 'different'. My delightful lipstick wearing pig for them meant a banal and rather snobby comment about not very attractive women trying too hard. I took it out and had a good long think about what I had really meant to say with these phrases and what they might mean for the reader in the use of 'demotic' language from a different English.

These challenges are different to those that poets of Brathwaite's generation had in the twentieth century. Responding to the prejudice that earlier twentieth century Caribbean poets faced when writing in dialect, Brathwaite developed his theory of 'nation language' as discussed in the first chapter, because he felt the word dialect had 'pejorative overtones' and tended to be regarded as 'bad' or 'inferior' English (1986: 265). There is plenty of evidence for the veracity of this, and it is arguable that the work Brathwaite and others, such as James Berry and also Scottish poets such as Tom Leonard, writing in the spoken voice of Glasgow, have worked hard to change. Therefore, for those of us writing in dialect or a different accented, different rhythmic voice now, we are writing into a time where those poets are part of the canon, even if it is a small part. One interesting thing is that as I write this, towards the end of some five years of this research project, I feel that during that time, whilst young poetry becomes more upper class than middle, more Oxbridge dominated than it has been since the 1960s, oddly, there is more space for the kind of work I am doing. Other poets, 'standing on the shoulders of' those same 'giants', are taking the challenge of making ourselves hearable and, indeed, heard through concentrated listening and experimentation. We no longer need to say, as Leonard said for us:

> right enuff
> ma language is disgraceful
>
> ma maw tellt mi
> ma teacher tellt mi
> thi doactir tellt mi
> thi priest tellt mi
> …

ach well
all livin language is sacred
fuck thi lohta thim (1984)

What follows is a discussion of some dialect or accent poems by contemporary poets who challenge the notion that concepts such as 'beauty' and musicality belong to elite modes of language and accent. It is a small section of poems chosen to highlight important aspects of craft. Jacqueline Gabbitas' 'Shitspiders' (2007: 18) is my first example. Gabbitas is from a former coal mining area in the East Midlands; her partner and other family members were coal miners until the pit closures at the end of the 1980s. The narrative is about a kind of spider that formed homes in shit left by miners in the pits (there were no toilets in coal mines and you could not just go back to the surface for a break). On the face of it, this narrative has a strong 'yuck factor'; however, the spiders were gold.

> An' I'll tell thee this for nowt – thi wa gold! Thi were like a seam we could chip bits offa – for a wedding ring or a tooth.
> But thi wa movin'! In an' out of t'shite we'd left months ago (Gabbitas: 2007: 18).

There is an aspect to the description of the magical; the spiders are forming towns and streets for themselves out of the shit and getting on with their lives alongside the miners. Liz Berry's poem 'Birmingham Roller' is also about everyday beauty. It is about the pigeon-fancying hobby of tumbling, in which pigeons are trained to do aerial acrobatics for competitions. The poem's title is followed by a quote from Jim Showell, whose book on the art inspired the poem. 'We spent our lives down in the blackness… those birds brought us up to the light' (Berry, 2014: 3).

Wench, yowm the colour of ower town:
concrete, steel, oily rainbow of the cut,

ower streets am in your wings,/
(Berry, 2014: 3).

Here the pigeons are beautiful, graceful creatures that enhance the industrial space around them by reflecting the colours of that space back from a sky that is a 'white

breathed prayer'. The tone is gentle. My creative writing undergraduate students often express surprise at the softness of tone in a poem in a West Midlands accent, which is often regarded as loudly voiced and 'shouty'.

Ian McMillan's interest in dialect is well known. He has a playful approach to his poems, which often appear less serious than they are. His own introduction to his poem 'The Meaning of Life' on the Children's Poetry Archive website sums this up. The poem 'is about Yorkshire dialect poetry and the fact that it's not meant to be able to carry very big meanings, and it's also complete nonsense. Unless you read it very carefully' (Children's Poetry Archive). That careful reading pays in McMillan's poems. In this poem, McMillan repeats a number of themes across six verses, Yorkshire language, industry and an exchange between two men, the first line of which is "Hey, you're looking poorly" in the first five verses. In the last verse this changes to 'I said, "Hey, you died last week" '(McMillan, 1983). This theme of the fragility of men in an industrial landscape is picked up again in 'Fantasia on a Theme of Uncle Charlie' (2012: 25). Across four verses and an unspecified period of time, retired miner Uncle Charlie repeats, 'I'll tell you this, Ian lad, Nye Bevan…' never quite having the breath to finish his sentence. McMillan works with repetition and occasional surrealist imagery to make his poetry 'sing'. His particular project is to challenge the phenomenon identified by Tony Harrison in 'Them and [Uz]', that Yorkshire working class men are only fit for being the ones that 'Shakespeare gives the comic parts to' (Harrison, 2016: 133). Although McMillan does use humour in almost all his poems, it is not the only technique he uses and his characters are not stupid or inhuman. His poetry is a kind of poetry of witness, in that he has stayed in his home village of Driffield, just outside Barnsley, for most of his life and writes that village and its people with a compassionate eye.

Malika Booker also writes 'poems of witness' (Peepal Tree). Sometimes these poems witness the lives of her family or the experience of a diaspora – she arrived as an eleven-year-old in Brixton the day after the riots of 1981 (Shaikh, Arfridiziak: 14/8/17). Sometimes the poems are witnessing more historic concerns such as slavery. Booker's slave poems are complex, highlighting relationships between female slaves and a variety of others. In her poem 'Overseer's Lament', an overseer has died.

> The overseer dead and he whip sprout
> scarlet lilies. Whole cane fields bowed,
> yea he who wield whip with skill dead (eds Everisto, Nagra, 2010: 81).

The poem is delivered as if it were a lament, with a strong sense of song. Scots poet W. N. Herbert has described Booker's voice as both 'narrative and rhapsodic' (eds Everisto, Nagra, 2010: 79), so the poems tell stories but in a way that has musicality at its heart. You can see in the excerpt above the use of a lot of alliteration in both the consonants and vowel sounds. So, Booker's poems of witness are not just the stories she is telling, but the lyrical voice in which they are being told. Although this particular poem is not voiced naturalistically, lyricism is still a feature in her poems that are. 'I pray for that grandmother, grinding her teeth,/one hand pushing in fresh, hot peppers, seeds and all, turning/' are the two first lines of 'Pepper Sauce', about a violent assault on a grand-daughter by her grandmother as punishment for stealing. The repeated g of the first line and long e of the second are followed through in the rest of the poem. Booker often talks about her poems being about 'witness', but they are also about the music of her voice – a blend of Grenadian and South London and about her finding ways to tell these stories.

One poet who is not particularly concerned with identity and her own poet's voice in dialect form is Katrina Porteous, who writes Northumbrian dialect poems in the voice of a specifc community, that of fishermen who work the North Northumbrian coast. She is not one herself, and she is not from a family of fishermen. Porteous is the only poet I have considered who is writing in a dialect that is not her own. She is from the area, but from a middle class, non-fishing family. She made her relationships with her 'voices' while undertaking an oral history project. Her reason for wanting to write these poems therefore is not to do with identity but musicality. Her longest poem 'The Wund an' the Wetter' was written in collaboration with musician Chris Ormston to celebrate this aspect of North Northumbrian speech. Although the community she studies is 'dwindling', Porteous' background as an oral historian and her study of local dialect, (she is the President of the Northumbrian language society), mean that she mostly uses an established format for the writing of most dialect words and phrases. There are the odd sounds that are distinctive to the fishing community she has been studying but her 'outsiderness' does not present huge barriers and the relationship she has built with the majority of that community over a long period (her first local history book was

published in 1990) has given her a ‘place’ in that community as the person who listens with seriousness to what the older people have to say – and to the way in which they say it. In ‘The Wund an’ the Wetter’, a strong sense of music is created both by the dialect words used and the use of rhyme and alliteration.

> Wi’ hoppin’s an’ hingin’s tha’s toozled like tows,
> An’ pokes for the whullicks, an’bundles a skowbs (1999:18)

One can see, however, that there is a richness of vocabulary available to Porteous from the Northumbrian dialect, so that the musicality would still have been present without the use of end rhymes. My own voice poems are written out of the experience of discussions with and readings of these poets amongst others and share their concerns of identity, history, witness, and musicality.

The Poems

‘Filthy, Filthy Woman’, ‘Shaddas,’ ‘Blow This Forra Lark’

‘Filthy, Filthy Woman’, ‘Shaddas’, and ‘Blow this Forra Lark!’ all came from previous oral history projects conducted in Waterloo. The text for ‘Filthy, Filthy Woman’ came from Mary Chamberlain’s interview with a woman called Violet Harris (1989: 15). The poem starts with that interview but continues the text on; it is one of a few poems where I have allowed myself the liberty of some slight, but hopefully not implausible, fictionalisation. Because I had no access to the original recordings, I was taking my poem from the book itself. The quotes used from the interviews are selected according to the subject matter of the chapter and are written up in standard English. The energy and accent can be surmised from the syntax, especially if you know the accent well. In dialect poetry terms, Ian McMillan would refer to this as having a ‘lighter touch’ (BBC The Verb). The poem takes that lighter touch as a result. I did re-listen to the interviews that produced ‘Shaddas’ and ‘Blow This Forra Lark!’ They came from a DVD that was produced of the aforementioned ‘talking slide show’, *A Story of Waterloo* (Bruce, 2010). ‘Blow This Forra Lark!’ was written from the memories of a man who was an ARP warden in the area in the second world war. In the poem, I am talking to Annie Urqhuart. The interviewee’s direct words start from the fifth line and are presented as ‘snatches’. Because I was writing this from material I could only listen to, it came out as

I heard it, in a strong local accent. ‘Shaddas’ also came from the same recording, although from a different interviewee. Once again I have addressed it to Annie Urquhart. The subjects this time are alleyways and smog. With this poem, something of the voice I had been listening to took over and so, more of the poem is my creation and slightly less of it came from the man being interviewed. All of these three poems are short, free verse lyrics. This is in a sense dictated by the above-mentioned slightly jerky rhythms of the ‘snatches’ of local speech.

‘Ta||ered’

‘Ta||ered’ (Tattered) is another voice poem, but it does not so much come from the interviews. I had been listening to the interviews and working with them in a fairly concentrated way when I started writing this one, so it is in a ‘local’ voice. However, the narrative is totally imagined. Going round collecting money from neighbours is a long standing tradition. A wide variety of ‘clubs’ existed whereby people saved for particular things; from the feather clubs of the ‘match-girls’ to funeral clubs, people attempted to save up for what they could not really afford. The tradition lives on, on our estate, in the form of the Tenants’ Association annual seaside trip to Margate, and a collection for a wreath ‘from the neighbours’ that is taken when a tenant dies. For this poem, I have brought back the tradition of the Christmas club, and the person in the trance is an aspect of me, as is the person (Mrs Albright) expressing disgust at the conditions she is living in. The poem is not truly ‘history’ as I do not know if it ever happened; I made it all up. But, the history in it: ideas around respectability, language and payment ‘clubs’ are all things that happened in reality. So, to that extent it is a history poem. The form is prose poetry. I wanted to keep it in prose because there is a straightforward ‘telling’ voice, which felt to me as a reader like it came from a novel. There is a strangeness woven in, and you are only hearing one side of the situation, and the reader hopefully knows that voice is ‘unreliable’ because of its one-sidedness.

Miss Sunderland

I have included T. Jones’ memories and words in several poems in this collection. The haibun narrative, discussed more fully below, was written in mostly standard English, because it is, essentially, a transcript. ‘Miss Sunderland’, however, was delivered with such energy and humour that I decided to write it as close to my hearing of it as

possible. His part of that narrative, the first part, is in a fuller dialect style of writing, that features my earlier explained | glottal stop and descriptive lettering. As this is a much shorter piece, the reader being able to follow the whole of the narrative is not as important; they can follow the musicality instead. For example, there is a part in 'Miss Sunderland' where T. says 'and his face wen|…'; at that point in the telling, T. had pulled the face he meant. In the poem, I just leave a small space, assuming the reader's imagination will fill that gap. In a transcript, one would almost certainly footnote it so that nothing is left to suggestion.

Miss Sunderland was the housing manager on the estate when T. Jones was a child. She had grown up in a family of builders and was a strong capable woman. T's story about her demonstrates all this. I was showing a photograph to T. of a rather solid looking middle-aged woman with thick round glasses and asked if he knew who she was and he told me it was Miss Sunderland. Armed with these two different pieces of information, I set about attempting to evoke her – both from the photograph and the narrative.

'Us At The Seaside'

I discussed 'Us at the Seaside' in the last chapter, but there is something further I wish to add at this point. The poems are all voiced by one of the women, unnamed. There are two points at which the poems slip into a stronger London voice with glottal stops. This is not an alternate voice; it is simply a more energised voice. Simon Kovesi, in his lecture '"O wot 'orrid langwidge!" Working-class literature from John Clare to James Kelman' (Oxford Brookes, 2016), problematizes text that presents standard English and vernacular writing alongside each other, because he sees the part of the writing that is in standard English as being the part that 'speaks like us', that represents the middle class reader and the vernacular writing as being the bit that makes fun of the working class characters. I found this argument disturbing, although it does come from the same set of ideas that Brathwaite, Harrison and Leonard have all spoken and written about; dialogue in RP is respectable, 'slang' and dialect is not and historically, this has been problematic, as I have already shown. There are two reasons for finding Kovesi's idea disturbing, however. Firstly, why is the reader necessarily middle class? Secondly, why does he think that in the twenty-first century, that vernacular text is always readable as an insult to working class characters?

My concerns on that first point come from the fact that my working class parents were readers and I read from the age of three. I am a descendant of a man who helped form the first working class subscription library, in the lead mining village of Leadhills in Scotland. However, my sister and many of the rest of my immediate family are dyslexic, and although it is not a given, they do not like reading for leisure. It is clear to me that prior to compulsory schooling, I would have been the one that read the bible and newspaper to the rest of the village. That is how I place myself historically and socially, and it is how I see my audience. I do recognise that most poetry buyers and readers are middle or upper class. However, when a writer is pushing at boundaries in their work, they are writing for an imagined and idealised reader. My imagined reader is another naturally literate person, and they will, if they like my work, read it (or these days, recommend it) to others. In that respect my writing process often takes a communal turn. Actually, I have, after readings, sometimes met women who are this imagined reader. They will come up and say something that reveals the fact that they 'get it', and that they 'know' these people, their grandmother, mother, aunt et cetera. Secondly, it seems strange, after all the work by several generations of contemporary poets, as discussed above, and the work of many other writers of fiction, non-fiction and drama, that vernacular texts should be read in this way and in my experience, they are not. Liz Berry's *Black Country* was the 2014 winner of the Forward Prize for a first collection and is published by a mainstream publisher, she is not marketed as 'humorous' or faux naif, and her poetry is utterly respected and taken seriously. Indeed all of the poets I have mentioned have been accorded respect for their voiced work in an arena that takes contemporary poetry seriously. Jacqueline Gabbitas and I were invited on to The Verb, on BBC Radio Three to discuss contemporary dialect poetry with Ian McMillan and other guests. We were also invited to speak at a translation conference in Munich in 2010 (W-orte Ludwig-Maximilians-Universitat) on the subject of 'the problem of colloquialism'. Things are different now; our voices can be heard if we write them well enough.

'The Mother in Law's Nets'

Many of the memories featured in *Webber Street* are what I have termed 'layered memories': that is memories that are not directly experienced by the person narrating. Obviously, apart from the few poems that are my own memories, all the memory narratives are told through a layer of me. Someone has told me their memory and I have

retold it; albeit often intending to replicate their voice in some way, it is still my retelling. The poem, 'My Mother in Law's Nets', has a few more layers however. The narrative that unfolds in the poem was told to me by a woman at a street party the estate had to mark the 50th anniversary of VE Day. At the time I was recording people's stories during the day, on a video camera belonging to my brother-in-law. I no longer have the cassette of the recording to check, so it is the story as I remember it. The teller was a woman in her early 60s, telling of something that had happened to her mother-in-law fifty years before. Therefore, she was unlikely to have directly experienced it. She will have been told this story by either her husband or possibly the mother-in-law. I cannot check how many layers through which the story has been told because the teller and her husband no longer live on the estate. It is a striking narrative. During the Blitz years, people were not allowed to clean their windows or curtains due to the blackout regulations. On VE Day, 'the mother in law' took down her curtains and washed them, and when she did so, she had a 'breakdown'. The extent of this breakdown was not made clear and I did not ask, partly because the information seemed so complete. This gives the narrative a slight sense of myth because whatever other questions a historian might have, it cannot be rechecked. This is potentially a weakness connected with future use of oral history or reminiscence recordings in general, as even if I still had the video cassette, I could not ask it questions. If I was creating this narrative from materials in an archive, I could double check things and perhaps find a pathway through different paper trails to answer some questions. There is, arguably, a richness in that myth-making however. It is totally plausible that a homemaker's response to the stresses of war would have been to 'break' in some way when relief came. There was a sadness in the telling and that tone is in some ways more important as a 'historical fact' than how severe the breakdown was and who had told my teller the tale. That is what I have tried to preserve for the poem. The last words that describe the breakdown are deliberately unclear so that I do not say something untrue.

> …by the time/ the nets were white again, howling, fit to burst,/you could even say she had

'T.'s Haibun'

'T.'s Haibun' is another poem that uses layering. Haibun is a Japanese poetry form that uses one or more paragraphs of prose, followed by haiku. Here the prose consists of T.'s

oral history transcription and haiku that are my observations. I have shown T. what I have done with his words, and he is happy with it. The prose paragraphs from T.'s stories are largely simple, three-stage narratives with a forward narratival progression, while the haiku are still moments, single-thought responses to an aspect of the narrative. T.'s interview was fairly standard in my experience of oral history collecting in working class communities. We were not talking about a specific historical event, so it consisted of randomly generated stories that T. wanted to tell. Because he knew I wanted to know about the early history of the estate, he began with layered memories. These were all stories about his mother's childhood. His first mention of himself came in the seventh story, which began with 'my mother told me…' and then is another story from his memory of her stories.

These mini narratives are short and complete on the whole. They feature his own memories, his memories of his mother's stories, and stories of heroic characters: Dad, Gran and the family doctor, Dr Lanagan. They sound like stories that have been told often; in fact I know they have, I have heard some of them several times myself. There is something of an oral-formulaic structure to T.'s stories. So, they are not just about memories, but they involve a feat of memory in the retelling. Milman Parry discussed this in his 1930s study of Serbo-Croatian bards. He was researching the structure of bardic verse in Serbia to try to understand something of the tradition in which Homeric verse was 'written'. If I ever write my own history of who I am in the local landscape, Parry and Lord's writings and a whole treasure store of classics books in a 'secret' stash in the basement of Newington Library (Elephant and Castle) will play a large role, particularly in my intellectual development in my twenties. Aside from that, I was reminded of this work, when thinking about T.'s storytelling, because it is partly about challenging concepts of 'purity' and 'truth'. Classicists generally argued that the closer to the original a bardic offering was, the 'purer' and 'truer' it was. Parry said 'the truth of the matter is that our concept of 'the original', of 'the song,' simply makes no sense in oral tradition' (Lord. 2000: 101). The oral-formulae of T.'s stories, much like traditional bards, are there to help him remember the story in its purist sense. Exactly how he tells it does vary, and one of the reasons for those variations is that the point he is making with the story might change. Life is complex; the point of a story drawn from a memory of something that actually happened might vary. One story T. has told me in the past was of his mother's memory of the slums in these streets being cleared and the new estate being built. The first few times he told me this story, it sounded like a

western: *Out of a cloud of dust, 200 navvies appeared with their horses and carts.* This story was a party piece, hugely entertaining. On the day of the interview, T. wanted to tell about the hardship faced by these navvies and so told it differently. The elements '200 navies' 'horses and carts' appeared but not the cloud of dust; in its place came the tough element of their work and the harsh way in which they were treated. All these elements are historically true; photographs of slum clearance show it was a dusty process, and the working conditions are a matter of record. Thus there is nothing untrue about T.'s story. However, in choosing particular images from a collection of possibilities, he can foreground a particular aspect of that.

Other oral-formulae that T. uses regularly in his storytelling are: heroic epithets, repetition, drawing the listener in through making an assumption of understanding, referring to your lived experience, references to change and difference, and triple meter. T. might well be less aware of the use of some of these story-telling methods than a professional bard; however he still uses them frequently. T.'s tendency to repeat words and his use of a triple meter are part of his telling structure. It is to do with his sense of verbal flow. I use the term triple because he does not talk purely in dactyl or anapest, which would not just be very strange, it would also produce either a classical falling or rising rhythm. T.'s use of random triple meter produces a rhythm that dances with itself. That musicality is learnt. All our local storytellers have it. The repetitions produce rhythm also: 'My mother was saying – she said – she said…' (Jones, 2016).

T.'s epithets are not quite Homeric and arguably not quite epithets, but I will call them that for simplicity. He does not give each hero a different epithet. The most frequently used heroic epithet is big or strong; 'I mean my dad was big'; 'My dad wasn't small'; 'my dad was as strong as a bleedin' horse'. The other two hero characters get similar treatment, Dr Langan, a 'really broad Irishman' is 'big' and 'rough and ready'; his grandmother is 'strong' and 'a big woman my gran was'; 'you picked on her, you picked on the wrong one' (Jones, 2016).

T. draws the listener in by use of second person in his stories. You, of course, were not present at the time of the event he is telling, but that does not matter: 'You never had mains electricity'; 'You could never afford holidays' (Jones, 2003). Another technique he uses has a similar purpose; T. makes references to my family quite regularly (who mostly live, or have lived, on the estate): 'Where your sister lives'; 'like your gran had';

‘your mum had one of them.’ This is not because it is always literally true. Yes, my sister does live in the block he and his family first moved to, but our grandmothers lived their whole lives in villages or small towns in Lancashire. He has never met either of them. He does not know what kind of beds they had. Perhaps he means there is just one kind of bed that working class people had in the 1930s, but he chooses to phrase it like this, giving us an implied shared history and giving me, as the listener, a stake in my listening.

Finally, a common theme in storytelling in both oral history and reminiscence is that of commenting on change: ‘It’s not like that now’; ‘people wouldn’t understand it now’ (Jones, 2003). I have heard phrases like this in every memory-based project I have worked on or witnessed. I have used it myself when attempting to describe a situation that is so changed, the younger person you are telling needs to know that the situation is probably outside their experience. There is one poem in *Webber Street* where I try to describe how close to nuclear annihilation we felt we were in the early 1980s. That is my ‘it’s not like that now’ moment. Luisa Passerini has said of oral testimony, ‘Irrelevancies and discrepancies must not be denied, but these will never be understood if we take oral sources merely as factual statements,’ they ‘should be taken as forms of culture and testimonies of the changes of these forms over time’(Passerini, 2001). This is also a valid point; our story telling is part of our social lives on the estate, part of a collective understanding of who we are that goes further than the merely factual.

Chapter Five: Referenced Histories

The object of this research has been twofold: to see if I could find a way of more fully presenting my voice in lyric poetry and to find a way of presenting the history of my local community in a series of poems that work both as poems and as histories. In this chapter, I want to discuss that latter objective and its problems. It is in the very nature of imaginative writing that the imagination comes into play and the imagination tends to fictionalise. This is obviously problematic with histories. I found quite early on in the process that reining in that tendency to fictionalise was difficult. As Wallace Stevens said, a poet 'must create his unreal out of what is real' (1951: 160). Therefore, starting with the real is fine, but for Stevens that procession to the unreal is a very important part of what poetry must do in creating a new thing. Maurice Riordan stated, 'The point a poem takes off is at the point of fictionalisation' (Riordan, 1998). I have been tempted to wander away from 'the evidence' and allow my imagination to take control to 'lift the poem'.

I have experienced working in both disciplines in the past, both my masters and first degree were in history, and I would say that historians also use their imaginations as part of their working process. Historians tend to imagine within a factual realm and to try to visualise, perhaps, what a past situation was like to be alive in, rather than take those facts and totally create a new world. For me, the actual imaginative part of the process, what happens when I am lying on my bed thinking my way into a situation, is no different whether I am being a poet or an historian. The difference lies in the discipline of what you allow yourself to write. Raphael Samuel, in *Theatres of Memory,* talked about the way that writers of fiction, in a number of different genres, handle historical facts. Discussing 'these fictions', Samuel writes that they:

> come to us peppered with epigraph and quotation. They criss-cross between historical research and invention; they will sometimes incorporate chunks of what scholars would recognise as original documents, duly footnoted or acknowledged in the afterward. But the purpose is not to establish the real but make it phantasmagoric, and to suggest that history, like reality, is a chimera (2012: 429).

Samuel goes on to say that this act can be 'offensive' to historians, since it often strays too far into distortion, and that historians work hard to establish 'the truth' of a situation. Samuel acknowledges that this is a hangover from nineteenth-century scholarship: 'we are not masters but servants of the evidence' (2012: 430). The historian in me does not see that as a necessarily restrictive thing, however, and I wanted to see if I could 'do history' whilst working in a way that normally allows the imagination or sub-conscious mind, more reign. Historians are, however, as Samuel points out, 'constantly re-interpreting the past' (2012: 430). There is a spirit of this idea, of what a historian does, of what history is, that I have endeavoured to honour in the production of these poems. That has not always been easy. Sticking to only what is verifiable, which was my intention at the start of this process, has not always been possible. However, I have tried to minimise the places that I do fictionalise and be fairly strict with my imagination, imposing rules on how and why I can take depart from fact.

Untold Stories

Marxist historians and other 'fellow travellers' began a new tradition of histories, with many different names, social history, history from below, working class history, labour history, women's or feminist history or even 'herstory' (for a brief 1980s moment), amongst others. They did not necessarily work according to the discipline of any kind of historiography (unless they were Marxist), or even together, but more often than not, just did the work of research and writing in a way that presented usually unwritten, if not untold, stories, some of which challenged 'official versions'. One large-scale example of that challenge was the oral testimonies of First World War soldiers for the BBC production of *The Great War* (1964). This presented a view, from the ex-soldiers who survived, for the first time in mainstream media, that the war was not glorious but a horrendous waste of life. Each episode had an average of eight million watching (Hanna, 2009: 21). Prior to this massive project, historians, including conservative military historians, had been developing a view that the first world war was not glorious but badly led (Clark, 1961), or for profit and imperialism (AJP Taylor, 1966). The BBC production was the first time this view was made available to a mass audience. The BBC employed 60 full-time staff, who interviewed 1,200 people from six different countries, many of whom were not officers thus giving, what Emma Hanna has argued is, a 'tyranny of the witness' (2009: 25), or what is more usually viewed as a 'voice for the ordinary soldier'. At this time, social history was, according to Harold Perkin, who

is credited with having created the subject in British academia, 'the Cinderella of English Historical Studies' (1962). His work in developing social history, along with Marxist historians such as E.P. Thompson, whose huge *The Making of the English Working Class* was published in 1963, began a process by which young historians questioned whose history they were being taught and how they were being taught it and began creating new histories and new historiographies.

The History Workshop was founded in 1967 by 'a fluid-coalition of worker-students from Ruskin and other socialist historians' (Samuel in Taylor: History Workshop). A journal followed in 1975 that still publishes. That journal and movement has provided a platform for historians working with either majority or minority-oppressed groups' histories locally and globally. The history workshop group and in particular, Samuel's, approaches to history were the focus for a new programme developed in the 1990s by him and Hilda Kean, Ruskin's MA course in Public History. I studied for this in 2002-4 and much of my reading for that historiography course has been in the background of my thinking in approaching this PhD. What did I learn and what can it contribute to my understanding of how I present or represent working class people from my community in my poetry? Brian Edwards, West Country local historian and Public History Alumnus, described the programme as 'a non-fiction creative writing programme' (Ruskin International Conference: 2005), meaning that the training offered in thinking about different ways of approaching the past and its detritus and the different narratives that could be spun from that pool were a good training for writers wanting to explore factual material. Edwards' own work has largely revolved around exploring the Victorian 'construction' of Avebury Henge and the history of working class Marlborough, both strong 'alternative histories', in the case of Avebury, because he has shown conclusively that it was largely a construction of the landowner, millionaire marmalade maker, Alexander Keiller (Eds Kean, et al., 2000). That statement stayed with me and has led me to revisit much of the theory I encountered on that course from the standpoint of poetry, which, however fictionalised, is usually classified in libraries as non-fiction.

As a result of my studies on the Public History MA, one of the areas of historiography that I have long regarded as having some kinship with poetry is microhistory. Microhistory is a branch of historiography that was developed from the late 1970s, in Italy. It began with conversations between Giovanni Levi and Carlo Ginzburg and

others, and developed into a book series called *Microhistorie* and what some have called a 'movement', although Ginzburg himself questions this (2012: 193). In the same reflective essay, Ginzburg says that early on in the process of developing their ideas on microhistory, he did not consider too closely or discuss with Levi exactly what they meant by this word; they both assumed they were talking about the same thing. The term had been used in the past, fairly frequently. It was usually said to mean the history of something 'small', a micro rather than macro history. For microhistorians of the 1980s, however, the term came to mean to microscopically look at an event to look at all its possibilities. Ginzburg discusses, amongst others, an American historian, who was using the term in 1959. George R Stewart wrote a book called *A Microhistory of the Final Charge at Gettysburg, July 3, 1863.* The book is over 300 pages long and discusses a twenty-minute battle. The outlying events discussed in the book amount to a total of fifteen hours (2012: 194). This kind of intensive and extensive discussion of a moment in history is what typifies Italian microhistory. John Brewer argues that the Italian microhistory practioners bore a 'family resemblance' to a group of historiographies that developed during the same period, post-annales, history from below, social history, and the German alltagsgeschichte. These approaches to history have a 'common set of preoccupations and a shared culture' (Brewer, 2010: 91). They mostly were linked to a socialist politics and a vaguely, if problematized, Marxist historical viewpoint. This fits with my own politics, my antecedents in history writing, and my ambitions for my poetry.

In poetry, the idea of the microscopic gaze is almost as old as the microscope itself. This 'charged semantic figure' of 'the microscopic eye' has been traced from seventeenth-century natural sciences through to eighteenth-century literature and politics by Kevis Goodman (2004: 40). He cites a critique by Robert Heron of James Thomson's poem 'The Season' in 1793 as saying, 'it is as if…every object [were] magnified by the microscope' (2004: 40). This idea of the close-up eye and ear has survived through modernity, which is after all, a word whose origins arise from Baudelaire's attempt, in his 1863 essay 'The Painter of Modern Life', to describe the need for an art that scrutinises the disposable nature of contemporary urban life, embraces the present, and acknowledges a different sense of history, abrupted, bendable, and changing. He describes the artist of modernity as having 'an intensity of gaze' with which the artist 'watches the flow of life move by, majestic and dazzling' (Baudelaire, 1863: 5).

My poem-histories try to smooth out the abruptions, in that the narratives are an attempt to 'touch base with' the past, to make sense of what I know of the past from my family and neighbours' stories. However, although I am not entirely the unknown strange flaneur of Baudelaire's urban landscape, I do have that 'outsider' eye, even if it is just because I have only lived in the area for thirty-six years and that I was raised by a northern couple who came to London, deliberately to be 'outsiders'. Baudelaire uses the term kaleidoscopic rather than microscopic to discuss the eye needed by the artists of modernity (1863: 5). For me though, occupying that hinterland between belonging and not belonging, I have needed to engage with close listening and close observation to present and represent our history. There is something in the engagement with text and evidence that microhistory does that is useful to me as a poet to think about.

The Anomalous

Aside from a microscopic approach to archival material, Ginzburg's microhistory is typified by applying this process to the different. Levi had talked about the single voice of 'big histories', how they ignore voices that 'contradict the text.' Levi said, 'The unifying principle of all microhistorical research is the belief that microscopic observation will reveal factors previously unobserved… [phenomena] previously considered to be sufficiently discussed and understood assume completely new meanings by altering the scale of observation' (Brewer, 2010: 97). Microhistory makes a feature of these ignored and contradictory voices because to examine them closely you can get a fuller picture of the extent to which a community or nation ever has 'one voice'. As I write this, we are 'as a nation' commemorating the death of Princess Diana, twenty years after the event. We were, at the time, said to be 'united in grief'; we really were not. However, as we were marking a state occasion that few would want to 'rise up' against (after all a young woman with two children had been killed) any who were not particularly grief stricken went about their alternative activities individually. Any historian in the future who wanted to test the idea that 'the nation were united in their grief' would have their work cut out. I hoovered during the 'silence'. My mother also hoovered. I have a vague and un-evidenced impression that a number of my friends did that also. It was a Saturday morning, fairly commonly housework time. I could conduct an oral history survey of a community, asking them what they did that morning to find evidence. It was not a thought through act of rebellion but nonetheless that small 'fact' would show that not all of 'the nation' were 'united in grief'. The archive would no

doubt reveal left wing press headlines and articles that challenged the view also, but the hoovering that went on would be a more ordinary example of knowledge that would complicate the neatness of the given view. This is something that poetry also attempts. A poem, according to Czelsaw Milosz, is 'news' 'brought to the mountains by a unicorn and an echo' (1988). The contemporary narrative poem often presents a central concept that should 'surprise the reader' (Sweeney, 1997). That 'surprise' might, not untypically, be created by a poem's attempt to deconstruct or subvert a contemporary cliché and in so doing, make the reader see a given situation again from another perspective. Simon Armitage is one of many poets who subvert clichés, particularly in his earlier poetry. As I stated earlier, when we die, the process of mythologizing starts immediately. When our own mother died, she became the best mother that had ever lived, and it was only after she had been dead for a decade, that her children could discuss any flaws she had. Armitage's poem, 'Poem', sums up a man's life by citing the things that he did that showed him to be a good citizen, father, son, husband and so forth. There is the odd line that shows a slightly different aspect. Here is the stanza about the newly dead-man's relationship with his mother;

> And for his mum he hired a private nurse.
> And every Sunday taxied her to church.
> And blubbed when she went from bad to worse.
> And twice lifted ten quid from her purse (Armitage: 1995).

That one different type of 'fact' tells us a different story about this man, and it adds a layer of complexity.

Microhistory is not without its critics, of course. *The History Manifesto,* published in 2014, has been influential in the last few years amongst academic historians and argues that 'works of microhistory have expanded our understanding of peasant lives, the variety of psychological impulses, public and private, and the constructedness of human experience. But they have also largely abandoned the rhetorical practice, in their writing of history, of a larger moral critique available to non-historians as a source for alternative social formations over the longue durée' (Armitage, Guldi, 2014: 83). It describes microhistory and its sister arts as looking at the short term and small at the expense of finding important long term patterns that would really help us understand patterns and affect change. But that is not necessarily the case. In exploring the exceptional and the small, microhistory can highlight where an overly simplified macro

history is hiding something from us and help us to see a more rounded big picture. Whatever the case, and whether microhistory survives this 'big history' idea, it is true that poetry as well as microhistory takes its starting point from that seemingly small moment. That moment is Wallace Stevens' 'real' that the 'unreal' moment must come out of (Stevens, 1951: 160).

Referencing

One key difference between an academic essay and any other form of writing is referencing. The purpose of referencing is to demonstrate how you have used your research. In a history essay, it is also part of your 'evidence'. The referencing of primary source material, for example, would evidence your original archival research, or a reference for an argument in a history book would evidence your reading and understanding of that argument and its history. Poems are rarely referenced. The closest thing poetry traditionally has used is the marginal gloss, but few poets use this process any more. Alice Oswald is one who does.

Throughout her long poem *Dart* (2002), she places marginal notes that aid the reader in understanding extra material, background, perhaps the sources of the research behind her work, or who she imagines is saying this part as there are multiple voices in the poem. The book is a 'narrative of the river, tracking its life from source to sea' (2002: cover flap 1) and comes out of years of research on the river, its environment and wildlife, its history and people. This is all woven into a single 48-page poem. It is a free verse poem with a shifting form, much like a river. It occasionally breaks into sections that are quatrains that rhyme, loosely, but overall it is free verse. It is lyrical in its use of repetition and assonance and a strong sense of song rhythm present. This is from a section that talks about a wool mill beside the river:

> tufting felting hanks tops spindles slubbing
> hoppers and rollers and slatted belts
> bales of carded wool the colour of limestone
> and wool puffs flying through the tubes distributed by cylcones
>
> wool in the back of the throat, wool on ledges,/ (Oswald, 2002: 19).

The trochaic rhythm of that first line loops into the dactyls of the second. Across the next three lines, the word wool is repeated four time; it is a strong sound with both an imposing oral and visual nature. Alongside this highly musical passage of poetry, a marginal gloss appears which tells us 'the Woollen Mill has a license to extract river water for washing the wool and for making up the dyes' (Oswald, 2002: 19). It is information that helps the reader because just prior to the section cited above is a single line about anglers complaining about the woollen mills. The referenced fact gives a little more prosaic information on the impact of the mills on the river.

Not many poets use marginal gloss anymore, partly because there is no easy way of placing them in any common word processing package, and because they can interfere with the sense of space around a poem. Another reason is because referencing of any kind in poetry fell out of favour in the second half of the twentieth century. It came to be considered a bit 'precious' to show where you had got your 'facts' from and perhaps even 'dangerous' in a world obsessed with originality and 'surprise' to show off any specialist knowledge you had without retaining a bit of control over it. I listened to many discussions about whether it was patronising to the reader to footnote obscure facts or details in poems in the 1990s, when I began attending workshops regularly. The closest poets tended to get to referencing was to have a short epigraph below the title. This would usually present a different aspect and often, rather than literally explain something to the reader, it might obfuscate things or simply complicate them. Ugandan poet Nick Makoha often uses epigraphs to add something extra in this way to a poem. Makoha's 'voice' is usually straightforward, so his epigraphs tend to complicate rather than obfuscate. In his poem 'The Drive-In', there are several short narratives about teenage memories of attending drive-in movies in Uganda with his uncle and cousin. They are straightforward stories and the poem is about the nature of memory, comparing memories to watching a big screen. The epigraph, which in this poem is called the 'Plot' says 'the chessboard is the world, the pieces are the phenomena of the universe, the rules of the game are what we call the laws of nature and the player on the other side is hidden from us – Thomas Huxley' (eds. Everisto and Nagra, 2010: 100). The epigraph complicates the poem by placing those simple memories into a context of the bigger picture of life – as a chess game with God.

The main two ways that we reference an essay with are foot or endnotes and in parentheses, also known as Harvard Referencing. Foot or endnotes are a more flexible

system of referencing as the information you can add is not simply limited to the source of your evidence, but you can add other notes to your references. If you use parenthetic referencing then you can only reference the material used; if you need to say more about that evidence, you have to add footnotes as well. At the start of the research process, when I had been thinking about these two forms of referencing, I believed I would experiment widely with them and produce a body of work that played with both footnote and parenthesis. In the end, I have not found either system sufficiently interesting to write more than one poem using each.

I have discussed these poems and the reasons for this decision at the end of the chapter. In the case of the Harvard referenced (parenthetic) poem, I think this was because the use of parenthesis encourages a meandering narrative with constant interruptive asides that is too close to my natural voice to not be a feature already present in my work. My experiment with footnotes was total. I wrote a short poem and footnoted every word. The result is a long poem, and although I was pleased with the result (see discussion at the end of the chapter on 'Binless'), I felt that the balance of the whole collection would be upset if I repeated the experiment, and also I was not sure what was to be gained artistically, to re repeat the process. I do like footnotes in essays and factual books, however, they are often 'chattier' than the relatively objective tone of a history text. Those two contrasting tones often work well together. Geoffrey de Ste Croix' *Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World* is like that. It is a huge, thick book. However, on most pages, there are more footnotes than text, and those footnotes can be hugely entertaining. All in all, I think I most favour marginal glosses and epigraphs for the bulk of the poems in the collection. They, potentially, reference the poems as pieces of history and show the historical research and thinking. Marginal gloss do 'get in the way', however, for those who do not like that kind of interruption. They invade the white space that most poets regard as an important part of a poem; therefore their presence has had to be considered. I will not be discussing more than one example of an epigraph or glossed poem below, because each poem with one of these features has already been discussed elsewhere and the glosses or epigraphs are (as footnotes usually are) small addenda.

The Poems

‘What Is History?’

What Is History? was the title of the historiography text by E H Carr that I was given as an undergraduate to consider what I was about to start studying. In this book, Carr argues that detailed research and factual accuracy are vital for the creation of histories and the work of an historian. That is not all there is to it, however. History is not just a story but a narrative. It needs to contain an argument at its heart. These arguments are solid academic questions about the nature of change rather than a simple re-telling of the past. Carr argues that the central task of the historian, with or without the help of theory, depends on searching and interpreting patterns and regularities in the past. This view is essentially the same as that espoused by John Tosh, my history tutor at the Polytechnic of North London and author of the book my undergraduates use for the same purpose, *The Pursuit of History.* Those elements of painstaking research and factual application have been seen as important in virtually all historiography in the twentieth century and to my understanding as I have approached the writing process with these poems.

In addition to being the title of EH Carr’s historiography guide, *What Is History?* is also part of the title of the first of my essay poems. ‘What Is History, Discuss?’ In the poem, I explore a number of different ways of looking at and evidencing history. However, these are largely presented as images representative of ways of looking at history rather than as arguments.

I will discuss the poem line by line, as there is a lot of detail to unpack in it. The title is a reference not just to Carr but also the typical first historiography essay question an undergraduate faces in the UK. ‘History is and was’ says that history is a narrative written in the present about the past. The first stanza explores the ways in which history can be looked at, both as interest fields within the subject and as theory. The strange ‘dry leaf shape on a paving stone’ is partly a reference to geology and therefore pre-history, the backstory. Most paving stones in London are lime or sandstone slabs from sedimentary rock formations. It is also about family history because it refers to a specific stone that my mother fell on when she had a stroke and became part of the past. The ‘shards of clay tobacco pipes’ and ‘salt-glaze fragments’ findable on the beach of

the Thames are archaeological debris from early modern to modern periods. The ‘loose change in my pocket’ refers to coinage, royalty, economic and ‘great man’ history; the ‘fact that there never is any…’ is a class reference: it would not be every person’s story, but I could trace the fact that even when I have money, I fritter it, on my class upbringing. I have a fairly childlike relationship with money that is to do with a lack of knowledge of the phenomenon, experientially and learned. What follows is about history as language; it is also a reflection on the history of the origins of white English working class people, of how we are in the words of Raphael Samuel, ‘Geographically mobile and sociologically orphaned’ (1994: 352). The essay presents these phrases as touchstones for where we are from rather than who we are now: in our family history we are East London cockneys, northern English, Irish, Scottish, possibly even distressed gentry.

The second stanza focusses more on the local history of Waterloo, as a case study. King, Queen and offspring are royal and not royal, pearly and not pearly. They are any privatised family living in post-industrial London. One field of interest, that comes out of the archive and oral history telling locally, is the impact of light pollution. We have an older generation who can remember when you could see stars in the sky, when the full moon (or bomber’s moon) was a good night to choose to go out dancing. Gas light and candles lit the street market at night, which at that time was more than a few hot food stalls but ‘the longest street market in London’. ‘It’s in the pain of home’, which is what the word nostalgia means. With history and its facts, we can perhaps control that pain in some ways and hence, a fact-free history is sometimes called ‘nostalgia’. Finally, the last three images are ecological. We have a bumble bee, who may or may not be on the brink of extinction, a Brussel sprout – often regarded as traditional but it is a modern cultivar and the brown-tail moth, which infests the local trees every decade or so, and has done for a very long time. William Curtis complained about having an allergy to them in 1782 and evidence suggests that they have been around for longer than man (Curtis, 1782). When they appear on the estate in the street trees, people seem to act as if they are interlopers. This fits in, in my head at least, with the myth of permanence that older residents have on the estate, the idea that I discussed in chapter three, that true locals go back three generations. The brown tail moth is much older than that, much more of a local than any of us. The three categories of listed thing include one that may not have much longer to exist, one that is not as old as people tend to think, and one that is old and ongoing – whether we like it or not. That is the poem’s

conclusion on the nature of history, that some things change and some things do not and they can be looked at from different perspectives.

‘Time Has No Agreed Meaning For Historians’ and ‘ “History Notoriously Takes Wing At Dusk” (Samuel, 1998: 21)’

An essay, then, is referenced and structured around a set of arguments. A history essay might also have a historiographical theory at its heart that is directing it. An undergraduate essay will respond to a given essay title and must stick with that discipline or fail. Two other essay poems in *Webber Street* had the following ‘working titles’: ‘Time has no agreed meaning for historians: Discuss’ and ‘History notoriously takes wing at dusk” (Samuel, 1998: 21) Discuss’. The first was a title suggested on a page belonging to the history department at Warwick University. They are practice essays that would be applicants can try their hand at. The second is a quote from Raphael Samuel. Both essays require the student to unpack and discuss the title. In both essays, I have presented a case study that enables me to discuss the issues concerned.

The first essay contemplates the unclear nature of time when you are regarding the distant past. Historians have a tendency to link, or track, events across decades or even hundreds of years and that might make no sense to the people who lived at that time. My poem discusses a different ‘problem’ regarding time. It narrates a moment when I believed the world was going to end in three minutes. I heard an air raid siren and because it was 1984 and America and the Soviet Union were building up their nuclear arsenals, indulging in hostile non-negotiations; and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was extremely active again, it was totally believable to me that the world would end, now. I wrote the poem to demonstrate to younger people, born after the 80s, that that was a possible way of thinking.

The second essay poem is a contemplation of our mother’s death in 2007. She ‘had a fall’ outside her flat, around the corner from mine. This fall was the start of a brain hemorrhage from which she died 24 hours later. The facts are those, plus that it was lunch time, a sunny day and a day full of things to do for her. Despite these ‘facts’ it is true that I think of her death as intrinsically linked with that spot at dusk. I have gathered the details of the death of one woman, and used them to discuss this idea of how people think about the past. Because it is also a poem, a lot of the detail I could

have put in had it been a real history essay, is at best alluded to rather than unpacked; nonetheless, the poem does attempt analysis of the thought.

Both essays 'lost' the 'Discuss' part of their titles later on in the writing process. This was because when I workshopped them, other workshoppers felt that when that was applied to these poems, it added an air of insincerity that was not found in the poems themselves, as if answering the question was just a 'task' rather than a necessity. For the aforementioned 'What Is History' poem, it was felt that the title worked because it was not obvious that this was a broad discussion about the nature of history without that title.

'Naming the Estate'

When Jorie Graham uses parenthesis in her poems, it is to complicate. She said this in a lecture for the Poetry School in 2003; she argued that it is a duty for artists to complicate in our increasingly simplistic and simplified world. Asides do just that, even if sometimes it seems like they do not. Even the most banal sounding aside will probably add something, another layer to the text. Harvard Referencing, however, does not work in that way; it pins it down. The material in the aside, or the parenthesis, is evidence and shuts the consideration of other possibilities down. The Harvard bracket says 'you might have thought it was that but no, it is this!' That was my challenge with 'Naming the Estate', the poem that plays with Harvard referencing. The asides could not complicate; they needed to shut down the possibilities of meaning, to make the point specific. In order to do this, I reversed what Jorie Graham would usually do with her parentheses, so I started with a poem that meandered and used the parentheses not too complicate but simplify. Therefore, the poem begins with noting the fact that the estate does not have a name. The poem muses on that and then reveals that the poet will have to write this up as an academic piece referenced and then finally discusses John Harvard's life in Southwark, close to the estate. The information in parentheses is more banal, pinning down the everyday experience that the poem drifted out of. It was interesting to try this as an experiment, but in the end I did not particularly want to write any more in this manner as I felt the 'shutting down' nature of it to be of limited use in my writing process.

‘Conditions of Tenancy’

That said, there is another poem in the collection that has parentheses in it. ‘Conditions of Tenancy, 1937’ spins out of a set of rules in an old rent book from 1937 in Westminster Archives. I have written about this poem in chapter four. The poem is written in three voices: there is the voice of the rule itself (the housing manager’s best written voice), the voice of the person responding to those rules, and a second person, who only features in two of the stanzas, and both of those speak in accent/dialect. The second person speaks in parentheses and does so to correct the first speaker and make what she is saying more accurate, for example ‘stop eggsageratin’. It is a nod to that pedantic sense of accuracy that the essay insists on. Very specifically, we mean this. This is something that is similar and yet different in poems. Poetry can also be pedantic. However, it is in the context of the right image, metaphor, language mix. It is often said that every word in a poem has to ‘earn its place’. That is the pedantry of a poem. It is something that often makes a poem shorter; whole phrases from a first draft may be considered ‘unnecessary’. Whereas in an essay, the project of achieving ‘accuracy’, of ‘unpacking’ a theme to fully explain it, will often involve more words, perhaps thousands of extra words.

Binless

I had read poems by Beverley Charles Rowe (www.bevrowe.info) and Emily Hasler (eds Prior and Trevian, 2014: 48) that were essentially footnotes to invisible text. I liked the way those poems built up a picture through layering, complicating and filling out what the reader knows bit by bit. However, as I was using these poems to make my history verifiable, I wanted the reader to see what was being footnoted. My footnote poem is a short, six-line, poem with every word footnoted. Technically, it is actually an endnote poem. This was because when I footnoted it, it split it off into three couplets and I did not like this effect because the six lines belonged together and could not quite cope with the added weight of being detached into couplets. I still refer to it as a footnoted poem, however, because of the subject. The word ‘footnote’ means more than just the thing itself, whereas ‘endnote’ does not really carry the same metaphorical baggage. I chose a subject that was a ‘footnote in history’ for the history of our block of flats, a young man who had just moved out of the flat upstairs from me. He had lived there for just three years. He had worked long hours and not interacted very much with

his neighbours. In fact, he was so much of a footnote – our landlords had forgotten him when it came to giving out wheelie bins and not supplied him with one, hence the title of the poem: 'Binless' (LPM 15). Here is the six line, unfootnoted poem about him.

> Leaving no footprints, he passes through
> from above, no history, no need of a bin.
> He was here and spoke to one of us once.
> Now he is gone, and the clean up team
> making more noise than he ever made
> on all the days he lived there.

These lines were then fully footnoted, every single word. This took the poem from short to fairly long. The idea of the footnote, as discussed above, was to enable me to look at the impact on our community of a change of policy from our landlords. We were a social-housing estate, but now all new tenants are paying 'market rents' and with very few exceptions are not really part of our community. Even in a 'community heritage project', a process in which the lives of people in a geographical community, who would be regarded as footnotes at best of big 'proper' histories, become historicised; these market rent tenants are footnotes. This is because they do not interact with us and do not stay for long.

I had expected the footnotes when read one after the other to be fairly disjointed, but actually there is a relative sense of flow. I think this is because they follow the grammatical logic of the first six lines. Each note just unpacks its word in its place between the one before and the one after.

Marginal Gloss and Epigraphs

I have added footnotes to some poems that are not the footnote poem discussed above. I would intend these to be marginal gloss in a published version but cannot lay them out this way in Word. The marginal gloss will do in poetry form what more everyday footnotes do in essays – support other information in a way that complicates the main text. One example of this is a note added to the essay 'Time has no agreed meaning for historians'. The record that was playing was a particular twelve-inch version, and not all recordings you could buy of this song featured an air-raid siren. It was suggested I

needed to explain this, by a group of mainly young male poets for whom this kind of cultural reference needs accuracy. As I was writing the note, I was swept along with the idea of 'pinning it down' to thoughts of who would have been playing it. I had that same twelve inch, so should have known what it was, but also, that helped me think about who else would have had that record in that street at that time. Epigraphs have been used fairly straightforwardly, rather than creatively. I have mostly added dedications, 'for the thirteen fifteen year old living on the estate in 1911' that is attached to the title of Thirteen and Fifteen. This was again as a result of a request for clarity from fellow poets I was workshopping with.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

This practise-based research has explored the boundaries and intersections of history and poetry. The creative product, a collection of poems, has been produced using the same materials an historian would use for a history of the area and the estate I live on. The writing process has involved reflecting on a variety of concerns. I have considered: the block itself, as a lived architectural experience, the process of my archival search and what I found, ways in which my poet's voice can incorporate aspects of my actual spoken voice and therefore present a narrative that feels authentic to me as its first reader, to explore the idea of the essay as a poem (not as a rhymed structure like Erasmus Darwin's rhymed essays on Natural History, nor even as the simple argument the structure of a sonnet can present) as an image or set of images that represent a central argument.

The Block

My one-bedroom flat is usually where I write, alone. In the life of this estate and its residents, who form a real geographic community of people that know each other, I am part of a family. Until her death in 2007, my mother lived in a flat in the same set of blocks, we shared a back yard, and my sister lives on the estate in a larger flat with her sons. Over the last decade, both our parents and my sister's husband have died and those deaths have been marked by the community. All the coffins have had a wreath from 'the neighbours', and my mother's funeral cortege was 'sent off' from the estate by a large line-up of neighbours, many of whom had delayed their journey to work to be present 'for' us. This was in addition to those who attended from the estate, neighbours who self-identify as friends. However, when I have been sitting in my small flat thinking about the flat, its walls, neighbour noise, shadows, darkness and light, smells and other such elements, I have been alone and cut off from others by the walls, and barring the odd noise as people come and go, largely unbothered by thoughts of outside. Like Piotr Sommer and his dog, like Stephen Watts in his tower, the poems begin in the still quiet moment. A very large aspect of my lived experience is missing from this collection. There are no poetic explorations of summer evenings drinking with the neighbours in the backyard or winter evenings of tea and soap opera with my sister, even though these are important aspects of my life on this estate. Partly, this is because I

do write alone and usually during daytime ‘work’ hours and partly because when we write poetry we tend to lock ourselves into a quiet and contemplative headspace. Poets do, of course, write about family and friends, as I have from time to time. But those poems also take flight from the quiet solitude of the writing space, and that is a much a space in the head as it is a desk or favourite chair and is essentially contemplative.

Because I have been considering my flat and its walls and the fairly quiet daytime backyard whilst being alone in it against a backdrop of ideas about such considerations from Bachelard (1994) and Pallasmaa (2005), this has encouraged a more preternatural contemplation of the space than I might normally indulge in. The theme of the work is history after all, and that quest for that ‘dusk’ moment when history flies (Samuels, 1998: 21) has also contributed to that particular construction. This is because I have had to isolate and imagine which aspects (of whatever experience I was considering for the poem) would have been perennial, as well as what would have been and ‘felt’ differently in the past. It meant that I had to imagine myself into the experience of people who had actually lived and died in the space I now occupy. Given that this would have been one of the larger flats when they were built, very few, if anyone, experienced living here alone, and that is perhaps the key difference in my experience and that of the other post-1960 occupants to those who lived here before, from 1905 until the 1960 conversions.

The Archive

I have written a slightly different history than the one I thought I would. For example, I had thought, when I wrote my research proposal, that I would write at least one poem about each household occupying my flat in the past. However, predicting what you will find in your ‘lonely’ search in the archives is an act of hubris. In the end, I have only written to or about Annie Urquhart, the first occupant, and the Chick sisters, who were here for a few years from 1936, when Annie died. This was partly because of the difficulty in tracking people, in finding out about them when all I had was a relatively common name and an address.

Annie Urquhart’s life details are easily traceable in the archive. As already noted, she was born in 1850 and appears in every census between 1851 and 1911. She lived her whole life in one parish and was sufficiently poor to have required help from it and

thereby earn her place in its archive. She and her husband had involvement in an industry, print, that had a strong culture and a strong base locally, so there are things that can be learnt and understood from this. The Chick sisters grew up locally and, due to having a relatively unusual surname, the family could be traced in the 1911 census. The electoral roll told us when they came to live here and that they were joined by a man in 1938. Further research via family records revealed that he was an uncle with severe respiratory disease, who died in 1939. One of the sisters, Phyllis, got married in the same year, and the flat was again vacant.

The next occupants were Ann and Fred Ireland. Fred, a painter and decorator, died in 1945, and Ann Ireland lived on in the flat until 1959 when the refurbishments happened. That is all I could find out. Fred and Ann were too young to have their personal information on public access; the census, which tells the 'facts' of people's day to day lives, is released after 100 years, so I could only see that up to 1911. The death certificate for the only Fred Ireland who died in Lambeth in 1945 was clearly for a different man, and I came to one of those archival full stops. Too young for the archive, the Irelands were also too old to be stored in the estate's collective memory. Two older tenants remember the Irelands, very vaguely, as 'quiet people' who 'kept themselves to themselves'. D. remembers Ann Ireland as a quiet old lady who lived here alone. T., who is fifteen years older than D., thinks he went to school with their children. This gives a very different picture of life in this flat, complete with school age children, but he is not sure. So, despite their whispered presence, there is no poem for the Irelands in this collection.

The Archive rendered lots about other blocks and parts of the estate; the syntactically rich letters of complaint in the Church of England archive, stories rendered by a sweep of the whole estate from the 1911 census, and the social life of the 1930s estate richly portrayed in photographs are three examples of this. In the end, although I did not write exactly what I thought I was going to, I have still wound up with a book that feels right to me as an historical consideration of this estate and its history. That strange combination of inspiration and gesture that dictate how poems normally appear happened here. These poems were 'rescued' from the archive in that they reflect what I found there in those protected boxes that moved me and that I felt compelled to bring out into the daylight.

Voice

For most of my writing life, as I have already shown, I have been finding ways of incorporating my actual spoken voice into my poet's voice and my poems. No writer writes how they actually speak. That's a basic 'rule' of dialogue writing, even naturalistic dialogue (Singleton, in Richardson et al., 2005: 156). The repetitions, hesitations, interruptions, strange random throat noises are too much for a reader. Even dialect writing honours this relatively minimalist idea despite its quest to imitate spoken voice. It is still a crafted and stylised voice, but it aims to present an aspect of a different diction – perhaps in its energy or musicality as part of the narrative being offered.

The central issue for me as a poet was to find the right to speak as myself and not to be limited to that relatively refined self that found approval within the London poetry scene of the last two decades of the twentieth century. I wanted to develop this other voice and give it wings. Writing this collection has made me think in a more focussed way about what I am doing with voice and why. It was never my intention to write in accent or dialect all the time, and that is still the case. The energised voice that gives me a stronger London working class accent is not how I speak all the time. I also, sometimes, speak slowly, which is something non-English friends have said makes me easily understood by them, and something that I believe is a hangover from learning speech from my Lancastrian parents, both of whom spoke in an unhurried fashion. Also, unsurprisingly, as someone who has found their way into academia, albeit late in life, I like to think about what I am saying, which can hold the process of speech up a bit. All of these factors, along with the usual urge to 'fit in' or not, are aspects of my voice. I can and do use all these factors in speech; I wanted to be able to also use them in my poems. Although the narrator in any one poem might not be me, in reality, it is my writer's voice, and I wanted that to, in the very least, have as broad a palette as my own literal spoken voice.

The Referenced Essay

As Ian Mabbett says, 'A history essay is history' (2016:1). That is the way history is written and how a historiography is demonstrated. Therefore, an exploration of the intersections between poetry and history would have been ineffectual if it had not

explored the essay and its references. At the start of this research, I had intended to look at particular historiographies I thought had some crossovers with poetry, especially regarding ways of looking, microhistory for example; and others which had something, I felt, to offer and perhaps even teach a lyrical poetry about ways of presenting working class lives. I had initially thought this would be a purely intellectual exercise that would simply affect my thinking about my writing process and my understanding of it; that it would be more about practice as research rather than something that I would use as raw material for poems. I had not realised I would actually write history essay poems. This is something I have found exciting, and although there are just three of these in this collection, it is something I can imagine working with again in the future. Early on in the process, I knew I wanted to explore referencing within the poems. This was something I had thought I would do more of, but as I have discussed, the end results were not sufficiently interesting to me to pursue beyond the example poems discussed. However, I am open to the potential of using more marginal gloss notes, even within this collection in the future as they can be targeted and are relatively discreet and can complicate rather than simplify the thinking in a poem.

And Finally…

As a poet, I have been extremely privileged to be offered a number of opportunities since 1996 of working as some kind of 'poet in residence' in parts of my own community. I have had residencies in Lower Marsh market (2006), Coin Street Community Builders Heritage Project (2007-2014) and Better Bankside's *Union Print* (2012). Most of these local community heritage projects use the arts to provoke different kinds of local participation, so may not be that interested in what you produce. However, two of these projects did 'pay me' to write poems responding to the experience. The 'problem' of writing something to order that does not sound or read like a 'commission' is something that has often been discussed. That said, it was less of a challenge to write something representing a community I am part of and regularly write from than writing a poem to represent the food of London for the BBC. The poems for Lower Marsh market represent my relationship with that market and also mark the start of my working with local variant colloquialism (Robinson, 2010). They were poems I needed to write. The food poem, on the other hand, slightly embarrasses me. It is essentially a list poem of different foods sold in the area, and when I came to record it, the producer (by telephone link from Manchester) kept making me re-record

until she got the voice she wanted and so has a cartoon version of me, ‘mockney’ and utterly inauthentic, the very traditionally coarse, faux naïve image of the London woman I have been challenging all along (BBC Radio 4, 2014: You and Yours Food and Farming Awards). So, by allowing the commissioning party to dictate that commission, I wound up doing the exact opposite of what I had wanted to do.

This commission came halfway through this research project, and so I have had the time to consider it against the backdrop of producing poems that reflect me, my community, and my own real voices. This PhD has taught me that my inclination to work hard for what I want, especially when it is difficult, is not a personality failing on my part, the reason why I cannot have an easy life, but because it is only when you work at unpacking the precise problem and experiment with what can undercut the cliché that you succeed in turning something round and allowing a different voice into the canon. This is not something I am alone in working on. I have discussed other poets who are working in similar ways and have inspired and encouraged me. Mimi Khalvati has told me that the manuscript for *Webber Street* is ‘full of love and compassion for my community’. To hear that was very gratifying. It is perhaps a truer ‘aim’ for the collection than anything else. It is something that for me has shone out of those 1980s community and social history projects set in the area and something I wanted to reproduce in lyrical poetry, something that ought to be at the heart of that intersection between history and poetry. As Audre Lorde said, ‘Poetry is the way we give name to the nameless so it can be thought’ (ed. Baym, 2012: 417). If our voices are not heard in the canon, then we need to make them heard.

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Figure One: The Estate

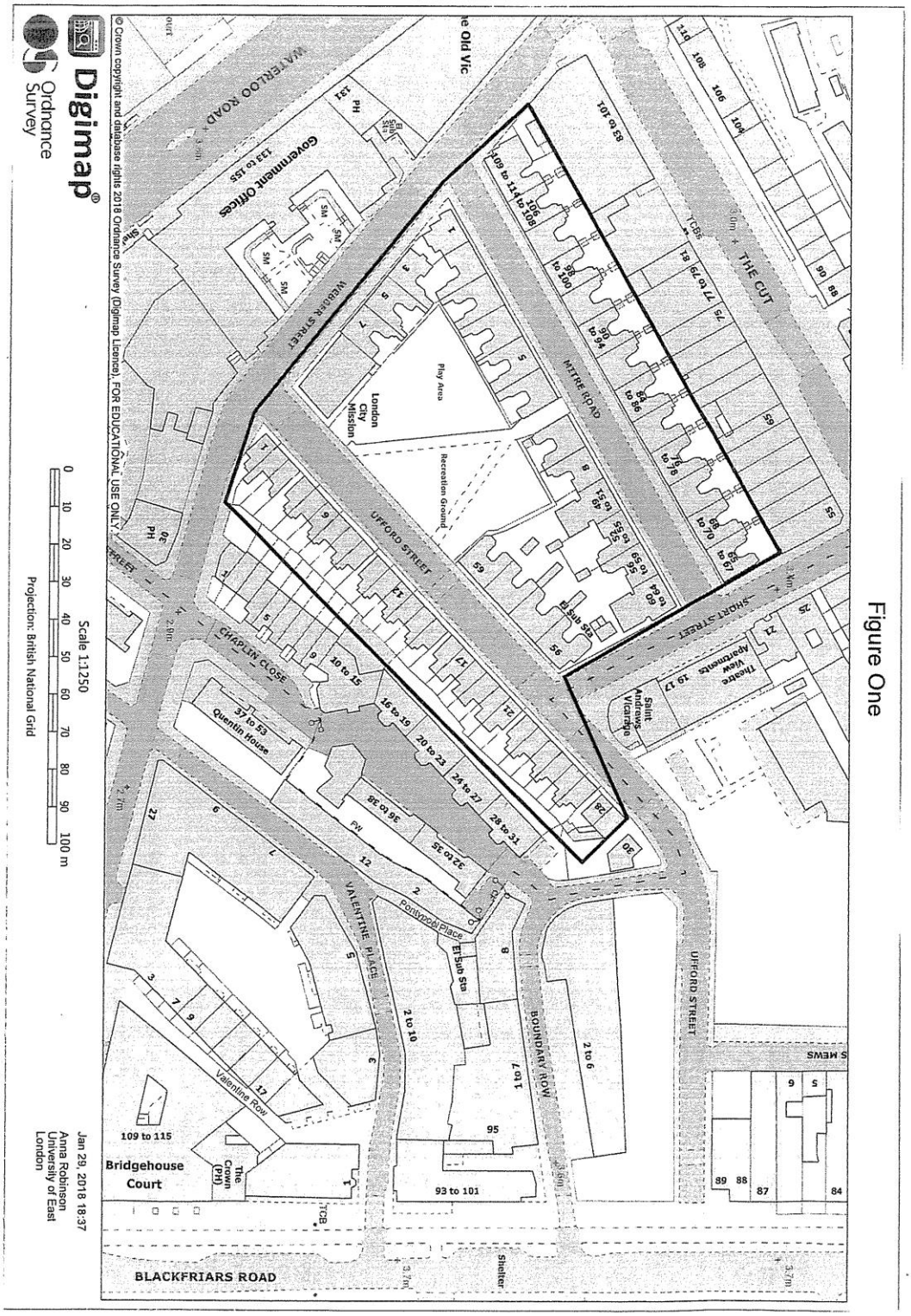

Figure Two: The Flat pre and post 1960