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A Painter in Paris: Creating authentic biofiction voices for historical artists

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***A Painter in Paris: Creating authentic biofiction voices for
historical artists***

by

Sarah Turnbull

Supervisor:
Professor Catherine McKinnon

This thesis is presented as part of the requirement for the conferral of the degree:
Doctor of Creative Arts

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Abstract

This thesis comprises an exegesis and a biographical novel, *A Painter in Paris*, which centres on the life of the Australian Impressionist John Russell (1858–1930). A key challenge which arose during my creative practice informs my research question: how do biographical novelists create *authentic* voices for fictional protagonists based on historical painters? Focussing on the thriving sub-category of biofiction, this thesis explores research pathways that I identified during my practice – ethics, place and art. My investigation led me to explore notions of authenticity and to examine biofiction theorists such as Michael Lackey, Lucia Boldrini and Catherine Padmore, to better understand the distinct aspects and contentious nature of the literary form. Using as case studies three biographical novels based on historical artists, and also through an examination of my own practice, I investigate how ethical issues linked to the use of real identities, as well as visiting the places where the figures once lived and the art of the historical painters, help writers create authentic voices for fictional artist-protagonists.

My research found that to do this biographical novelists must know the historical facts and then follow ethical protocols – which I propose and collate – and draw on “informed imagination” to express the aspects of the artist-figures’ lives that resonate with them. Important also when aiming to create authentic voices for historical artist-protagonists is a “bodily comprehension” of the places the historical figure lived and worked, and an in-depth study of the colour and subject of the artist’s paintings. In making this argument, I approach the term “authentic” in a way that aligns with how artists such as Russell and the Impressionists viewed authenticity in art. Rather than aiming to accurately *represent* what they saw, the fin de siècle painters sought to convey the essential characteristics they perceived in the subjects. Similarly, my creative work, *A Painter in Paris*, which involved extensive historical research relating to Russell and his life, presents a subjective vision. Thus, while my exegesis extends our understanding of the ways biographical novelists shape authentic voices for their protagonists based on historical painters, my novel contributes to Australian biofiction and offers a fresh, fictional exploration of a rich creative life.

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A chers Fred et cher Oliver, merci. Je peux enfin l'écrire: FIN.

Certification

I, Sarah Turnbull, declare that this thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the conferral of the degree Doctor of Creative Arts, from the University of Wollongong, is wholly my own work unless otherwise referenced or acknowledged. This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

Sarah Turnbull

27th July 2022

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Chapter One: Introduction

The radiant paintings of Australian Impressionist John Russell, which I first saw some 25 years ago, were the seed for this research project comprising a biographical novel and an exegesis. A single research question, which arose out of my creative practice, informs the project: how do biographical novelists create authentic fictional voices for protagonists based on historical artists? My exegesis contributes new knowledge to biofiction, a thriving yet under-researched literary form, by exploring this question through three research pathways, and by focussing on a growing sub-category of biofiction centred on historical artists. My creative work, which is the first biographical novel based on John Russell, also offers a timely contribution to the literature relating to an artist whose place in Australian art is still not widely understood.

My biographical novel, *A Painter in Paris*, involved extensive research and draws on the historical facts to reimagine the four years Russell spent as an art student in Paris – an experience that profoundly changed the direction of his art and his life. Part art journey, part love story, the novel explores what it means to lead a successful creative life, as the fictional artist’s ambitions are challenged by new ideas, friendships and finally by tragedy. As the author of two works of creative non-fiction, biofiction represented a new genre for me. The project hinged, I understood from the outset, on my ability to create an authentic voice for my fictional protagonist based on Russell. This goal led me to explore strategies in my creative practice and to identify the three key lenses which frame my critical inquiry: ethics, place and art.

This exegesis goes beyond enduring notions of history and fiction as “antagonist partners”, as Virginia Woolf (1927, p. 154) called them, and examines the possibilities of biofiction, which in recent years has been recognised as a distinct literary form. I argue that biographical novelists can create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical artists by paying careful attention to their historical lives, which involves following ethical protocols, then using “informed imagination” to pursue their subjective vision. Writers must know the facts about the real painters, but they must also recognise all that can never be known and can only be imagined. This knowledge allows biographical novelists to use historical lives to express emotional or symbolic truths that say as much about the present as the past (Lackey 2016b, 2017a). Drawing on the scholarship of biofiction theorists such as Michael Lackey, Lucia Boldrini and Catherine Padmore, my research finds that it is the writers’ pursuit of their artistic vision, based on rigorous historical research, which is key to the quality of authenticity in the text. In making this argument I am guided by John Russell and the Impressionists, who did not aim to copy or accurately represent; instead, by closely studying their subjects then expressing the essential qualities they saw in them, these artists sought to produce vivid new offerings.

1.1 Creative project

A Painter in Paris is a biographical novel written in the first person from the point of view of my fictional artist who is based on, and named after, John Russell. It spans the years 1884–1888, when the Australian painter was a student at Atelier Cormon, a small art school in Montmartre. Like Russell, to get the best training and become a great artist my fictional protagonist goes to Paris where he finds his life complicated by art and love. In *A Painter in Paris* the pivotal events are based on historical fact: the painter's marriage to Marianna Mattiocco, important friendships with other artists, the death in Sicily of his infant son. For this reason, it is useful to present a brief biography of John Russell.

1.1.1 Biographical Russell

Much of what is known about Russell and his work is a result of the essential research of a few committed scholars including, most prominently, the Australian art historian Ann Galbally. Remarkable creative journey, passionate love story, Homeric adventure: the life of the Australian artist is in fact several stories rolled into one. Born in 1858 in Darlinghurst to wealthy parents, as the eldest son, Russell was expected to enter the thriving family engineering business. Instead, after his father died Russell decided to pursue his passion. Joining the exodus of ambitious Colonials, he travelled to London where he enrolled at The Slade School of Fine Art. In 1884, Russell moved to Paris – which at the time was the flourishing centre of the art world – and enrolled in a private atelier run by a then-renowned academic painter Fernand Cormon.

Outgoing, generous and a competent French-speaker, Russell proved popular at Atelier Cormon, though inwardly he lacked confidence – particularly in his ability as an artist. Fellow students at the school included painters Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Vincent van Gogh, who became a close friend and a crucial colour mentor to the Australian. In Paris, Russell also fell madly in love with a beautiful Italian, Marianna Mattiocco, who likely worked as an artist's model. Following the death of their young son during a trip to Italy, the couple moved from Paris to Belle-Ile-en-Mer, an island off Brittany. Commonly known as Belle Ile, the island and its rugged coastline provided Russell with many years of inspiration.

However, in 1908, Russell's happy family life was shattered when Marianna died of cancer; in his grief it is alleged the artist destroyed several hundred of his paintings. Eventually, almost four decades after he'd left, the painter returned to live in Sydney. Despite the ambition that led him to Paris, when he died in April 1930, his work was uncelebrated. In 2018, the Art Gallery of New South Wales held the first major survey of Russell's work, yet his name remains less known in Australia than contemporaries such as artists Tom Roberts and Arthur Streeton.

Between the agreed-upon facts of the painter's life there exist many mysteries. Surviving correspondence between the artist and friends, such as Tom Roberts, Auguste Rodin and Vincent van Gogh, offers few insights into his personal life. Occasionally I made a breakthrough in my research, such as when I discovered the whereabouts of the artist's "lost" notebooks. In the upstairs attic of a medieval chateau in Brittany it was a thrill to see the pages scribbled with his sketches and verses from poems. Nevertheless, the notebooks were not a diary; they do not reveal Russell's thoughts and feelings. A desire to use the

known biographical facts and imagine beyond them influenced my choice of genre for my creative work.

1.1.2 Fictionalising Russell

Based on my previous experience in journalism and two published books, creative non-fiction represented the most familiar genre for my project. From the outset, however, my fascination with Russell was underpinned by a sense of connection. Like the artist, I was 27 when I moved from Sydney to Paris; like him I fell in love there and made the city my home; I too eventually returned to live in Sydney. The themes that shaped his life – belonging, notions of home, living abroad, creativity – have also shaped mine. My own expatriation made me curious about Russell’s experience. What was it like to be an art student in Montmartre during the late nineteenth century, when a “revolution” was underway in the Paris art world? What do we gain and what do we lose when we leave home to live abroad? What does it mean to lead a successful creative life?

The existing historical and archival documents, including letters from Russell to his friends, offer little in the way of answers to these questions. Fictionalising the historical artist presented a way to explore the aspects of the artist’s life with which I identified. Thus, *A Painter in Paris*, the first biographical novel centred on Russell, is distinct from the existing biographies about the artist, *A Remarkable Friendship* (Galbally 2008) and *The Lost Impressionist* (Salter 1976).

As well as carrying out extensive historical research, I visited the places where Russell had lived during the time frame of my novel to imagine his physical world in the past. On Belle Ile, I spent time walking along the Wild Coast which has not changed a great deal since the artist’s time. In Paris, I tried to see past the tourists and imagine instead the scruffy, bohemian arts quarter where the Australian artist was first introduced to the French avant-garde. During these trips and in Australia, I studied Russell’s work at galleries and in private collections, and his radiant landscapes and portraits provided insights into his relationships, artistic ambitions and his humanity.

Once I had decided on the genre for my creative project, I had to resolve the question of point of view. Though I experimented with the third person, first-person narration, which allows for a heightened sense of “psychological intensity”, resonated with my aims for my protagonist based on Russell (Jacobs 1990, p. 43). The challenge for me was to create a fictional voice that was “authentic” – or rather a voice that readers would accept as authentic. The word and its variant meanings will be further explored shortly, but in the context of this exegesis an authentic voice is one that *persuades* readers, and which draws on history not to represent the historical artist and the past as they were but to create a new offering.

Consequently, notwithstanding years of study and my enduring fascination for the Australian Impressionist, *A Painter in Paris* is simply my interpretation of John Russell. The process of researching my biographical novel required me to look hard at the biographical facts of the artist’s life, including the places that influenced him as well as the art he made. Writing my novel required me to draw on the history, as well as my experiences and observations, to produce a new vision which explores a timeless theme: what it means to live a meaningful creative life. My practice informed my research question and

the key lenses for my study, as outlined in the following section on my exegesis.

1.2 Exegesis

My research project examines the question that posed the greatest challenge to me during the process of writing my novel: how do biographical novelists create authentic fictional voices for protagonists based on historical painters? This inquiry led me to identify three research pathways: ethics, place and art. Particularly useful to my study of ethical issues was Michael Lackey's research regarding the specific aims of biofiction writers and the nature of their contract with readers. My inquiry into place is framed by theories proposed by social work scholar Carolyn Saari and the research of novelist and literature academic Catherine Padmore, as well as the writings of philosopher Michel de Certeau. In examining how the art of historical figures might help writers create authentic voices for artist-protagonists, I draw on psychological aesthetics theory on the links between art and emotion (Pelowski et al. 2016; Tinio 2013). I argue that biographical novelists create authentic voices for fictional protagonists by following ethical protocols and carrying out extensive research, which includes visiting the places and studying the art of artist-figures, and then using informed imagination and their subjective responses to produce a new offering.

While this exegesis refers to a cross-section of creative literature, it uses as case studies select biographical novels which reveal the scope and experimentation occurring in the genre. My own creative project being linked to John Russell led me to focus on three works in the increasingly popular sub-category of biofiction centred on artist historical figures. In *The Incantation of Frida K* (2003), novelist Kate Braverman writes from the point of view of a fictional Frida Kahlo. *Painter to the King* (2018a), by English writer Amy Sackville, draws on the life of the Spanish master Diego Velázquez. In *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper* (2002) author Harriet Scott Chessman uses the life of the American Impressionist Mary Cassatt. The different ways in which the writers create authentic voices for their fictional protagonists based on historical artists are examined in this exegesis through the lenses of ethics, place and art.

Ethical issues arise in all types of writing but biographical novelists, who use real people as fictional subjects, face particular considerations. Working on my creative project I frequently faced dilemmas. How far could I go in imagining between the facts? Could I alter the historical facts of Russell's life or did they, as suggested by biofiction scholar and novelist Jay Parini, represent immovable "boulders of reality?" (2015, p. 23). How biographical novelists balance the need to create with the responsibilities that come with using another's identity, and what they decide they can and cannot invent, directly influences the voice they shape for their fictional protagonist.

In *The American Biographical Novel*, Lackey (2016b) offers a framework for assessing the ethical approach of biographical novelists that is useful to my study. Key to his approach is the nature of the implicit truth contract between biofiction writers and readers. Lackey states that: "Once readers define the contract, they can begin the process of determining whether the writer has produced a responsible or ethical work" (p. 253). Another aspect of the scholar's argument is his insistence that biographical

novelists may “alter historical fact, so long as the writer remains faithful to more important symbolic truths” (p. 13). Lackey’s arguments provide a useful frame for analysing how Braverman creates an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist by foregrounding her responsibilities and rights as a creative writer and transforming Frida Kahlo into a symbol of the oppressed woman artist.

During my research I identified ethical protocols, including the need for writers to interrogate their aims and responsibilities to the historical artist, and to uphold their contracts with readers. However, whereas biography and history raise an expectation that writers will adhere to historical facts, biofiction involves a different contract which must be determined and upheld by the writer and also understood by the reader.

Similarly, my investigation into place was led by my practice. On Belle Ile I did not “find” Russell on the clifftops where he loved to walk and paint. However, experiencing the energy and rugged beauty of the place I felt I understood how the island had freed the artist to brighten his palette and loosen his brushstrokes. Going to Belle Ile also allowed me to respond to the location, and this subjective response informs the voice of my fictional protagonist. Using Padmore’s (2009, np) notion of “bodily comprehension” and De Certeau’s (1984, p. 108) claim that all places are “haunted” by spirits of the past, I investigate how going to locations may offer biographical novelists possibilities of connection with the place in the present as well as in the past.

This study is also underpinned by Saari’s (2008, p. 228) theory that humans must first construct “a picture of the world in which we live” to create a “sense of who we are”. Extending the scholar’s framework to biofiction, I propose that in order to create fictional protagonists based on historical figures, biographical novelists must first picture their world. Focussing on *Painter to the King* (2018a), I examine how Sackville draws on a field trip to Madrid and her own sensory observations to create the world of her fictional artist based on Velázquez. In a distinctly different approach to Braverman, for Sackville, authenticity involves acknowledging all that cannot be known about the seventeenth century painter, his voice and his world.

Finally, contemporary psychology studies which examine the links between art and human emotions inform my investigation into the way writers respond to the art of artist-figures (Leder & Nadal 2014; Pelowski et al. 2016; Tinio 2013). The key idea – that art triggers emotions – frames my research and provides a way to understand how in many cases, including my own, paintings provide the seed for biofiction centred on artists. In addition, my responses to certain aspects of the artworks, such as colour and brush marks, and my subjective interpretations also influenced the writing in my biographical novel.

Using as case studies *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper* and *Painter to the King*, I explore the different ways in which art can influence the writing in biographical novels. Drawing on the quietly engaging portraits of artist Mary Cassatt, Chessman infects her fictional protagonist with the intelligence and combination of strength and frailty that the author perceived in the painted subject. Sackville, through her words and punctuation, reproduces the gestures and energy of the painting process.

1.2.1 Biofiction – fiction or biography?

Aligning with some contemporary scholarship, my exegesis situates biofiction as a type of *fiction*. As literature academic Maureen Ramsden (2011, p. 356) points out, “the aim of fiction is not to imitate the factual discourse, but to extend the paradigm to suit its own particular needs”. Lackey, who has interviewed many biographical novelists, also points out that the writers themselves commonly insist on the fictional nature of their work (2016a, p. 5, 2016b, pp. 18–9). The American theorist has arguably gone further than any literature theorist to define biofiction and its specific aims. In his view, biographical novelists may diverge from historical facts because “they think that a symbolic reality will give readers something more substantial about the nature of a historical period” (p.13). Similarly, scholar Jay Parini, who has authored biographies as well as biofiction, explains that fictionalising historical lives allows him to “shine a light into dark corners and make connections that a professional historian or biographer might hesitate to make” (2015, p. 26).

Not all scholars see biofiction in a positive light. Australian historian Inga Clendinnen and British biographer Nigel Hamilton are among those who warn of its dangers: by blending fact and fiction, they say biographical novelists risk distorting history and misleading readers (Clendinnen 2006; Hamilton 2016). Despite these concerns, in recent decades there has been a dramatic rise in both the proliferation and popularity of biofiction. This development is seen to stem, in part, from postmodernist ideas including those of philosopher Michel Foucault (1988), who challenged the notion of absolute “truth” and purist approaches to the way history is written.

While the blurring of fact and fiction in literature is not new, writers are increasingly willing to test the boundaries between history and fiction and biography. One sub-genre of biofiction in which this trend is very evident is alternative histories. In *La Part de l'Autre* (2001), for example, author Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt takes a monstrous figure of history – Adolf Hitler – and imagines *what if* young Adolf’s application to art school had been accepted rather than rejected. My biographical novel is situated in another growing sub-category of biofiction, centred on historical artists whose lives can be reimagined in ways that, according to art historians Marleen Rensen and Christopher Wiley (2020), “speak to us across centuries, cultures, and nations”. This view aligns with Lackey’s argument that biographical novelists use historical figures to express something about the present.

Experimentation is also occurring at the intersection of fiction, biography and *autobiography*. In *A Painter in Paris*, I not only use John Russell’s life, I also *speak* for him. My choice of point of view led me to research first person narrations, a sub-category of biofiction which according to some scholars raises the ethical stakes. As literature scholar Lucia Boldrini asks rhetorically: “How can someone assume the name of another and speak for them?” (2017, p. 2).

The success of authors such as Hilary Mantel, who has twice won the Man Booker prize for her biographical novels based on Thomas Cromwell, has helped raise the status of biofiction, which has long been perceived as a dubious hybrid – a “bastard form”, as biographical novelist Irving Stone lamented in a lecture given in 1957 (cited in Lackey 2017a, p. 130). But some writers share the concerns of certain

scholars concerning the proliferation of biographical novels. Prominent creative writers have also condemned the use of real people for fictional purposes, including Toni Morrison (quoted in Schappell & Brodsky Lacour 1993) and AS Byatt (quoted in Flood 2009).

In arguing that biofiction is a type of fiction, this exegesis does not suggest that historical figures are “fair game” for writers. The use of another’s name and identity for fictional purposes involves responsibilities. However, unlike biographers, whose implicit contract with readers represents a commitment to factual discourse, biographical novelists have scope to invent and reimagine. Rather than seeing fact and fiction as binaries, literature academic Martin Middeke (cited in Lackey 2017a, p. 315) sees possibilities, and states:

(...) that a fictional or empathic/sympathetic approach to the subject may make use of the historical material, may play with it, may even invert it, if necessary, and still arrive at a heuristically impressive and plausible interpretation of that life.

To do this, biographical novelists carry out rigorous research then use “informed imagination” and subjective interpretation to produce a new offering through a process of careful attention to ethical protocols, place and art. This argument aligns with Trilling’s (1974) broad concept of authentic art, which he argues may extend and subvert what exists or is known. While biofiction poses challenges for authors, readers and for society, by imagining beyond the facts writers might express symbolic and emotional truths which allow past lives to resonate in the present.

1.3 Significance of research project

This thesis extends our understanding of biofiction, a literary form which has often been misunderstood and misaligned by scholars because of the way it blurs boundaries between biography and fiction. By exploring ethics, place and art as research pathways, I offer new knowledge about biofiction practice, including ethical protocols, which is useful to scholars and also to biographical novelists.

My creative work also makes a contribution to the sub-category of biofiction based on historical artists. Drawing on my experience as a writer, *A Painter in Paris* extends themes of belonging and expatriation that I explored in my previous creative non-fiction works, *Almost French* (Turnbull 2002) and *All Good Things* (Turnbull 2013). My perspective as an Australian who has lived experience of being immersed in French language and culture enriches my biographical novel. The insights and understanding I gained as a foreigner during ten years in Paris helped me connect with Russell and to reimagine his experiences and impressions of the city more than a century earlier.

Based on extensive research, including interviews with art curators and art historians, my creative work also makes a fresh contribution to the literature relating to John Russell by imaginatively interpreting his pivotal years in Paris. As one of the very first Australian-born artists to study art in Paris, John Russell occupies a unique place in Australian art and, ironically, for this reason he was long neglected. For many decades after his death, the transnational nature of his work and life were at odds with the nationalism which has dominated Australian art since Federation. Yet according to Chris Riopelle, curator of

twentieth century art at the National Gallery, Russell was “the most aggressive, forward-thinking of all the Australian Impressionists” (2017 pers. comm., 21 July).

My research on the artist has already achieved outcomes; in 2018 I participated in a documentary on the artist as an interviewee, a researcher and also an interviewer. *Australia's Lost Impressionist*, which has screened on the ABC numerous times, has been viewed by an estimated 240,000 Australians. It is my hope that by bringing Russell's story and art to more people, my biographical novel might help reframe popular conceptions of what it means to be an Australian artist.

1.4 Key terms

It is important to explore key terms and define their meaning in the context of this research project.

1.4.1 Biofiction

As a literary form, biofiction has existed for several centuries. However, the term itself is a relatively recent innovation. Coined in 1991 by Alain Buisine, “biofiction” is now used widely, though not universally; in this exegesis it is used interchangeably with “biographical novel” and “biographical fiction”. Variant labels include “fictional biography”, “fiction biography” and “speculative biography” and the implications of these alternatives, which foreground the biographical nature of the aesthetic form, will be examined in the following chapter. However Lackey rejects these labels, which he claims “subordinate the fictional to the biographical” (2017a, p. 2). Locating biofiction firmly as fiction, he contends that “even though the protagonist [of a biographical novel] is named after a real person, that character is still a fictional creation” (2022, n.p.) For Lackey, the use of the actual name is key. According to his definition, novels centred on historical figure-protagonists who are renamed are not works of biofiction (2016a, p. 3).

Some scholars, however, offer a broader interpretation. In defining the genre in *Experiments in Life-Writing*, literature scholar Julia Novak (2017a, p. 9) does not insist on the use of historical figures' names, asserting instead that biofiction “is a narrative based on the life of a historical person, weaving biographical fact into what must otherwise be considered a novel” which can “take many different shapes and forms, ranging from realistic tales to postmodernist experiments”. Marleen Rensen and Christopher Wiley take a similar position in their comprehensive study of the portrayal of artists' lives in literature, *Transnational Perspectives on Artists' Lives* (2020). Biofiction, they state, “can generally be understood as literature that presents hypothetical or imagined lives, relying on real-life stories yet containing a certain degree of creative invention” (p. 9).

Given the experimental nature of the literary form, in this study I embrace the slightly looser definition of biofiction offered by Novak, Rensen and Wiley. In truth, using the name of a real person is not the only way authors (and publishing houses) can establish that a fictional protagonist is inspired by an historical figure. In *The Broken Book* (2005, Johnson), the novel's central character is called Katherine Elgin yet it was made clear in author interviews and reviews that the protagonist was drawn from real-life writer, Charmian Clift. Therefore unlike Lackey, in defining biofiction this study does not insist on the named

historical identity. Nevertheless, the use of someone's name is very significant and involves ethical responsibilities which I examine in Chapter Three of this exegesis.

As all the definitions indicate, biographical novels are not exclusively concerned with dead people. Famous living subjects who have been used as the basis for fictional protagonists include Queen Elizabeth II (*The Uncommon Reader*, Bennett 2007) and Hillary Clinton (*Rodham*, Sittenfeld 2020). However, biofiction of this sort raises particular issues such as libel which are beyond the scope of my research. Using deceased people frees writers from legal constraints; death also provides "completion" to the biography (Boldrini 2017), which helps authors think of a life in terms of story. To avoid word repetition, unless otherwise stated it may be assumed in this exegesis that the terms biographical fiction and biofiction refer to novels which use *historical* figures as protagonists. Further, in acknowledgement of the increasing experimentation occurring in the genre, I embrace the broader definition of biofiction proposed by Novak, as well as by Rensen and Wiley. Whilst biographical novelists do commonly name their fictional protagonists after the historical figures on whom they are based, and the use of a person's name is significant, this exegesis also allows for exceptions to the rule.

1.4.2 Heterobiography

Literature scholar Lucia Boldrini (2004, p. 243) proposes this term to describe biographical novels written in the first person, "*as if* they were the autobiographies of historical personages". This type of biofiction, in which the author assumes the identity of another and pretends to speak for them, raises particular ethical issues according to some academics, including Boldrini. While the term is not widely used in academia, in the context of this exegesis, which examines as case studies two first-person narratives, it is useful for distinguishing this sub-category of biofiction.

1.4.3 Authentic

Defining "authentic" is a more complex proposition, as the term has multiple meanings and applications which continue to evolve. In 1937, literature theorist Georg Lukács established an enduring interpretation when he linked the term to "accuracy", declaring that authenticity in historical fiction derived from realism and adherence to historical truth. The American critic Lionel Trilling offers a very different interpretation in *Sincerity and Authenticity* (1974). Describing authenticity in art as "a marvellous generative force", he emphasises artistic integrity as a key aspect (p. 12). In a debate among scholars which took place several years later, Trilling elaborated: "authentic art", he stated, "may involve deconstructing what exists and using it to create something new" (1978, p. 616). This approach resonates with the biofiction project's aim to create something new using real historical identities.

Nevertheless, in the context of creating "authentic voices" for fictional protagonists based on historical artists, the word "authentic" needs further investigation. Adding to the complexities, in recent decades its meaning has been revisited and redefined as literature theorists respond to postmodernism as well as socio-cultural shifts which place increasing value on authenticity relating to everything from travel experiences to products and people. The range of definitions and interpretations is evident in dictionary

entries for the word, such as the one below from the Webster Online dictionary (2022):

Authentic:

- 1** **a:** worthy of acceptance or belief as conforming to or based on fact
 b: conforming to an original so as to reproduce essential features
 c: made or done the same way as an original
- 2:** not false or imitation: REAL, ACTUAL
- 3:** true to one's own personality, spirit, or character

The problematic nature of these variant definitions in the context of biofiction is revealed when they are applied to my research question. Is an “authentic” fictional voice one that conforms “to an original” or rather one that is “real” and not “imitation”? In his essay on historical fiction, ‘The Authentic Western’ (1978), American scholar Max Westbrook identifies two “fundamentally different types of conceptualisations” which he calls “facsimile authenticity” and “denotative authenticity”.

If by authenticity we mean *facsimile*, then we have a restrictive concept, a simplistic formula that is antithetical to the complex and ambiguous world the artist writes about. If, however, the word is used to mean *denotation*, then we have a concept which calls for accuracy and discipline without implying a restriction on the artist's imagination. (p. 214)

Westbrook's recognition of two “fundamentally different conceptualisations” helps explain the different interpretations of “authenticity” among literature theorists. For scholars who apply the “restrictive” interpretation, which takes authenticity to mean an exact representation or “facsimile” of the past, the pursuit of authenticity in biographical fiction is futile and paradoxical. Writers *cannot* know the past as it was experienced by historical figures; it is impossible to see the world as it was through the eyes of another. Australian creative arts academic Kelly Gardiner (2012, np) argues that while authenticity is a “Holy Grail” for biographical novelists, it cannot be created.

What many writers and possibly readers mean by the term ‘authenticity’ in voice and setting is in fact a mirage created by detailed references to objects of daily life, and a BBC-approved accent, with contemporary terms (or something that sounds a bit like them) tossed on top of the text like garnish.

Gardiner's approach aligns with the widely held view that, in relation to biofiction and historical fiction, authenticity is linked to verisimilitude. Laura Saxton of the Australian Catholic University underlines the point: authenticity, she states, is “the *impression* that a text is accurate, even if it is not, and this sense of authenticity can be shaped intertextually, culturally, and subjectively” (2020, p. 2). Literature scholar Jerome de Groot points out that this “illusion” is key to the effect of an historical novel – “the historical novel must look like it is the original” – and calls this the “authentic fallacy” which underpins the genre (2015, p. 16). These arguments evoke the first Webster dictionary definition of “authentic”: something “worthy of acceptance or belief as

conforming to or based on fact”.

Social studies scholar Richard Winter proposes a straightforward way of thinking about authenticity. He states that the correct question to pose in assessing the authenticity of a text is not “is this narrative true?” but “does it persuade us” (2002, p. 145). If we apply Winter’s concept to fiction, authenticity is in part reliant upon reader expectations and whether, to them, a novel has the ‘ring’ of truth. Literature scholar Katherine Harris goes further along this pathway. A fictional voice for a protagonist based on a 16th century artist, will likely fail to convince readers, she argues, if it includes accidental anachronisms. On the other hand, anachronisms used *intentionally* and skilfully may serve an artistic purpose and can help biographical novelists create what calls “a differently ‘authentic’ past” (2017, p. 194).

In addition to Trilling’s idea that authenticity in art is linked to the creator’s artistic integrity, this exegesis draws on the above interpretations suggested by Winter and Harris. An authentic voice for a fictional protagonist based on an historical artist is one that *persuades* readers. To create authentic voices authors must therefore possess writerly skill as well as artistic integrity. Harris offers an approach to artistic integrity which is useful to my research. She states that “fictional histories” can be authentic in “their self-awareness and honest acknowledgement of their inevitable limitations” (2017, p. 193). Applying this idea to biofiction, authenticity is less about writers representing historical truth than acknowledging they cannot know the truth.

However, it is important to note that the perception of authenticity in biofiction is not fixed; rather it depends on individual readers and their expectations. All texts involve subjective interpretation. Authenticity in historical fiction and biofiction may also be seen therefore as an interaction – or as scholar and creative writer Bryony Stocker proposes, as a “negotiation between the evidence available to the writer, the reader’s existing understanding of the period and the imaginative power of the author” (2012, p. 310).

1.5 Methodology

Although *A Painter in Paris* is a work of fiction, as a biographical novel it involved extensive research. As well as consulting archives and carrying out historical reading, I visited the places where Russell had lived and worked and studied his paintings. Going to Paris and Belle Ile and experiencing the locations in the present offered me the possibility to connect with my protagonist by helping me to picture his world in the past. Even when I was unable to access, imaginatively, the place as it once was, seeing the location for myself was useful: I made notes of buildings and topography. Studying Russell’s work was as close as I could get to seeing the world through his eyes. While painters do not necessarily paint the world as it *is* and there is no way of knowing if my interpretations of his work match the artist’s intentions, Russell’s landscape paintings and portraits provided me with important insights into his character and relationships.

This research project is practice-led, a methodology that foregrounds my creative practice, which led me to my research question: how do biographical novelists create fictional voices for protagonists based on historical artists? However, while I approached my biographical novel and exegesis separately, each

component influenced and extended the other. The cross-fertilisation between creative practice and critical work is an essential aspect of practice-led research, highlighted in Smith and Dean's important 2009 study on research in the creative arts.

My research extends across disciplines and led me to read a wide range of scholars, but certain theoretical frameworks were particularly useful. Regarding ethics, to understand my case study as well as my own ethical approach to fictionalising John Russell, I drew on Michael Lackey's (2016b, p. 165, 2017a, p. 10) theory that biographical novelists use historical figures to express symbolic or bi-temporal truths. Key to Lackey's approach to ethics in biofiction is the nature of the writer-reader truth contract in biofiction. In the *American Biographical Novel*, he provides a framework for distinguishing an ethical "truthful fiction" from an unethical "misappropriated life" (2016b, p. 229), which informed my study of Braverman's novel based on Frida Kahlo.

My investigation of place draws on literature scholars, particularly Catherine Padmore's notion of the importance of visiting locations where historical figures lived, as well as the ideas of Michel de Certeau, expressed in his essay *Walking in the City*, of "spirits" of the past that one can "invoke" or not in locations (1984, p. 108). The research of social work scholar Carolyn Saari, who identifies the need for humans to construct a "picture of the world in which we live" (2008, p. 228), provided a useful frame for the way author Amy Sackville drew on place to create her fictional artist based on Velázquez.

Finally, contemporary psychology studies which examine the links between art and human emotions inform my investigation into the way writers respond to the art of art-historical figures (Leder & Nadal 2014; Pelowski et al. 2016). The key idea – that art can trigger emotions and powerful feelings such as curiosity – frames my study of the way biographical novelists use their responses to the paintings of artist-figures to influence the writing.

Within biofiction, novels centred on artists form a rich and expanding sub-category. The novels which will be closely examined in the following chapters present distinctly different creative offerings: *The Incantation of Frida K* (Braverman 2003), *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper* (Chessman 2002) and *Painter to the King* (Sackville 2018). In each case, I believe the protagonists' voices are persuasive and that the novels represent new creative offerings which vividly bring to life the historical artist and their work. Put simply, Braverman, Sackville and Chessman each succeed in creating *authentic* voices for their fictional protagonists. The following chapters in this exegesis look at *how* they did it.

1.6 Chapter outline

Chapter One introduces the research question that guides this project: how do biographical novelists create authentic fictional voices for protagonists based on historical artist figures?

Chapter Two is a literature review consisting of two parts. Part one of the literature review explores biofiction theory, from Georg Lukács to Michael Lackey, as well as the ongoing debate over the identity of the genre and key ethical contentions. This research led me to identify gaps in the knowledge relating to a little-studied sub-category of biofiction centred on historical artists, and to identify fresh research

pathways: ethics, place and art. My study of ethics is informed by scholars in philosophy as well as literature including Claudia Mills, Bryony Stocker, Lucia Boldrini and Lackey. In relation to place, the theories of social work scholar Carolyn Saari inform my understanding of how constructing a picture of place helps us form identities. I also draw on theorist Michel de Certeau as well as academic and creative writer Catherine Padmore to frame my examination of how of exploring place on foot helps writers connect with past lives.

Part two of the literature review focusses on creative writers and reveals the rich scope of biofiction and increasing experimentation within the field. In this section I explore how different novelists approach key dilemmas and debates over biofiction, and identify trends and important sub-categories including biofiction centred on artists.

Chapter Three begins by examining broader ethical issues around the use of real identities and their names for fictional purposes; focussing on *The Incantation of Frida K* as a case study, I then examine Kate Braverman's ethical approach to using Frida Kahlo. My investigation explores how the author's emphasis on artistic integrity helped her create an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist, as well as the ethical dilemmas her approach poses. This chapter, which draws on the scholarship of Lackey, as well as ethics philosophers Claudia Mills and James Harold, proposes ethical protocols for biographical novelists.

Chapter Four interrogates how biographical novelists create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical artists by drawing on place and visiting the locations where the historical figures lived and worked. Using as my case study *Painter to the King* (2018), I explore the innovative ways author Amy Sackville uses a field trip to Madrid to infect the writing of her biographical novel based on Diego Velázquez. Broadly informed by the cross-disciplinary field of psychogeography and its emphasis on exploring places on foot, this chapter draws on the notion of "bodily comprehension" (Padmore 2009), as well as Carolyn Saari's (2008) study on the role of the environment in psychoanalytic theory.

Chapter Five investigates how biographical novelists create authentic fictional voices for protagonists based on historical artists by drawing on the figures' art. I argue that paintings, through aspects such as subjects, colour, and brushstrokes, can provide insights to writers about the real-life artists, their relationships, artistic ambitions and character. Biographical novelists also draw on their subjective responses to the art – which is often the seed for the creative project – in ways that infect and enrich the writing both at a structural and at a sentence level. This chapter is informed by contemporary theory in the psychology of aesthetics including an important 2016 study on the links between art and emotions by Pelowski, Markey, Luring and Leder and the research of Pablo Tinio. As case studies, I focus on two creative works: *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper* (Chessman 2002), which draws on the life of American Impressionist Mary Cassatt, and *Painter to the King* (Sackville 2018), which is centred on Diego Velázquez.

Chapter Six explores the question: how did ethical issues, visits to place and the art of John Russell help me create an authentic fictional voice for my protagonist based on the artist? I argue that the project to

create an authentic fictional voice for the artist involved looking hard at the historical facts relating to Russell, as well as at the places where he lived and his art. Fact and fiction do not mix, Woolf (1927, p. 154) said, and at times when I was writing my biographical novel, I wondered if she was right. At these moments I drew inspiration from Russell and the Impressionists and the way they looked beyond the “facts” of form and proportion to reveal new ways of seeing.

1.7 Conclusion

The notion of authenticity in art as a “marvellous generative force”, as described by Lionel Trilling (1974, p. 12), provides a useful context for approaching the research question that drives this thesis: how do biographical novelists create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical artists? My investigation uses three lenses which I identified during my creative practice: ethics, place and art. Biographical novelists have responsibilities to the figures they use, and these responsibilities oblige them to follow ethical protocols and to respect the historical artist as well as their contract with readers. Visiting place enables writers to experience the location in the present and to form a picture of the past world of the artist. The art of historical artists, including aspects such as subject and colour, not only provides insights and information to authors, it can also influence the form of the writing at the sentence level. These three elements help biographical novelists create voices for fictional protagonists which are authentic because they persuade readers, and because they offer vivid visions that can enrich the literature relating to historical lives in new ways.

Chapter Two: Literature review

When I first approached my creative work, *A Painter in Paris*, I did not think in terms of a genre designation. When friends asked about my project, I said I was writing about the Australian Impressionist John Russell, though it was “not a biography”. It was only after I began my theoretical research that I was able to assuredly locate my creative project within biofiction. This review of the literature therefore represents, in part, a desire to understand the form in which I had chosen to work.

This chapter begins by outlining the evolution of biofiction theory from Georg Lukács, who saw the form as a dubious sub-genre of historical fiction, through to Michael Lackey, who describes it as a distinct and “dominant” literary form (2017c, p.343). I examine the debates and concern among scholars over the rise and proliferation of biographical fiction, which has been described as a “revolution” (Hamilton 2016) and an “epidemic” (Dee 1999). My research draws on literature theorists including Lackey, Lucia Boldrini, Bryony Stocker and James Phelan, as well as Australians Catherine Padmore, Kelly Gardiner and James Vicars.

The blurring of fact and fiction is contentious, and this review examines notions of historical “truth”, drawing on the arguments of historians such as Inga Clendinnen and Tom Griffiths. It also includes ethical protocols proposed by academics for good practice in biofiction. The second part of the chapter focusses on creative writers and reveals the rich diversity in the field as well as important trends and sub-categories in the genre. In both sections, I identify the gaps in the literature which allow this thesis to contribute new knowledge to biofiction theory, as well as to the creative literature in a growing sub-category of biofiction centred on the lives of historical painters. As the first biographical novel based on the Australian Impressionist John Russell, *A Painter in Paris*, which involved extensive research, also extends our understanding of a singular Australian artist.

A desire to understand how biographical novelists create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical figures drives this thesis and led me to explore other research pathways. Consequently, this review briefly touches on theory in relation to place as well as to art, areas which in the context of biofiction have been little explored.

Part I: Biofiction theory, voice & other pathways

2.1 Biofiction theory

2.1.1 “Biofiction” and alternative terms

The use of historical figures in fiction is not a twentieth-century innovation; indeed, it has been pointed out that literature of this type enjoyed popularity as far back as the Renaissance (Jacobs 1990, pp. 2–3). Yet even now there is no consensus over what to call the genre. Although coined in 1991 by Alain Buisine, the term “biofiction” has only recently become widely used. The first international conferences

devoted to the study of the genre, and which used the term, were held in 2016, including a symposium on Australasian historical biofiction at Latrobe University, organised by scholars Catherine Padmore and Kelly Gardiner. Yet variant names remain in common usage. It may be argued that genre designations are of little importance at a time when many writers are boldly pushing beyond conventional genre boundaries or ignoring them altogether. However, the labels reveal deeper differences over what biofiction *is* and how to position the literary form in relation to history and biography.

In her 1982 study, *Fictional Biography, Factional Biography, and their Contaminations*, Ina Schabert used the term “fictional biographies”. A few years later, literature scholar Naomi Jacobs (1990) proposed “fiction biographies”; the small variation, she argued, places greater emphasis on the fiction character of the genre without undermining the essential biographical component of such creative works. “Speculative biographies”, another common variant, is often used to describe novels which involve imagining historical lives that are scantily documented. Such fictions often rely on historical context to develop a persuasive narration. Examples of speculative biographies include *Burial Rites* (Kent, 2013) and, more recently, two novels by Maggie O’Farrell: *Hamnet* (2020), inspired by the short life of William Shakespeare’s son, and *The Marriage Portrait* (2021) which reimagines the little-known life of 16th century Lucrezia, Duchess of Ferrara. Creative arts academic Donna Lee Brien (2017, p. 11) states that “speculative biographies” are “thought-provoking, historically-informed narratives of real lives and experience”, a description that also fits many biographical novels.

While the difference between “fiction biographies” and “fictional biographies” is undeniably subtle, “biofiction” suggests a more meaningful shift. According to Lackey (2016), locating the genre within a fictional rather than biographic space is appropriate, because many biographical novelists identify their works as fiction – some even include a cover subtitle which states, “A novel”. Australian scholar James Vicars (2017, p. 103) argues that while the variant terms are sometimes used interchangeably, “biofiction” represents a real distinction; compared with “fiction biographers” and “speculative biographers”, biographical novelists may exercise “unhindered imaginative freedom”.

I suggest the use of historical figures as fictional protagonists invariably places constraints on writers – although I will argue that those constraints do not necessarily limit the authorial imagination. Nevertheless, by employing the term “biofiction”, this exegesis situates the genre as a type of fiction. While I recognise the essential biographical component of novels based on historical figures, and the extensive historical research they often entail, this genre designation seems the most appropriate, particularly considering the increasing experimentation in the field. It also seems appropriate for my own creative work, which does not claim to represent John Russell as he was, or his actual life, but rather as I have imagined him.

It is worth pointing out that not all authors ascribe a genre to their work; indeed, not all biographical novelists examined in this exegesis expressly identify as biographical novelists. For my own purposes, it was helpful to clarify what I was writing and useful for academic discussions around the form. These variant terms are in fact indicative of deeper contentions which have shaped perceptions of the genre and its evolution.

2.1.2 Biofiction, its evolution

Although the term “biofiction” only dates back a few decades, as a field of study it has a longer history. From the beginning, the genre has divided scholars and critics who broadly fall into opposing camps depending on their approach to a fundamental question: is it a form of biography or a type of fiction? In 1889, Oscar Wilde wrote what may be the first theoretical study of the literary form, in which he defined its aims. While Wilde claimed it was “base” to use real people as the basis for fictional characters, he advised that if writers did so, they had to use their imagination to bring the characters alive. The aim, said the Irish author, is to produce “creations”, not “copies” (cited in Lackey 2019, p. 6). Virginia Woolf took a different view from Wilde, arguing that “the truth of real life” and the “truth of fiction” are “antagonist” (1927, p. 158). It was either one or the other, in other words, and writers must choose between fiction and biography. Yet Woolf’s seemingly unequivocal position belies a more complex approach and a willingness by the author to use real figures in fiction, though not their real names. In her novel *Orlando: A Biography* (Woolf 1933), the fictional protagonist Orlando is based on the writer’s friend, Vita Sackville-West. By pushing the boundaries between biography and fiction, Woolf played an important role, according to Lackey, in the growth and legitimisation of biographical novels (2018, p.12).

The first proper study of biofiction was published in 1937 as part of the pioneering scholarship by Georg Lukács. In *The Historical Novel*, which devotes a chapter to biographical novels, Lukács’ analysis is framed by his view of biofiction as a subgenre of historical fiction. However while he lauded historical fiction for its ability to accurately convey history, the Czech philosopher and literary critic argued that biographical novels were “neither fish nor fowl” (1962, p. 320) and the literary form was fatally flawed. According to Lukács, historical figures in fiction can only work when writers use minor or unknown historical lives. His strongest criticism was directed at biographical novels centred on famous figures: “One naturally revolts against this simultaneous botching and distortion of historical material” (p. 273).

The Czech theorist’s view of biofiction as an inherently flawed literary form proved difficult to shake. Almost 60 years later, in *The Character of Truth in Fiction*, Jacobs noted that to many critics it was a “mixed breed” with “neither the vitality of a mutt nor the beauty of a purebred” (Jacobs 1990, p. xvii). The argument that marginal historical figures and “obscure” lives make better subjects for biographical novelists also persisted (Schabert 1982, pp. 13–4).

Biofiction suffered a further blow to its reputation in 1967 with the publication of a study by Paul Murray Kendall, who deplored the genre as an invention of the “radical left” (cited in Lackey 2017, p. 282). In contrast to Lukács, who insisted that novels centred on historical figures are a type of fiction, Kendall evaluated them as biographies, a categorisation which greatly influenced subsequent scholarship. Postmodernist thinking, however, challenged absolutist notions of historical “truth” and the idea of categorical distinctions between fiction and history. Historiographer Hayden White (1973, p. 281) points out that history, far from representing inviolable truths, is based on subjective interpretation and narration; facts, too, are constructs. Some theorists emphasise the affinities between factual and fictional discourse such as rigorous research and fact-gathering, which many biographical novelists carry out as

scrupulously and obsessively as conventional biographers (Schabert 1982, p. 7). Also, both factual and fictional texts strive for the appearance of truth (Ramsden 2011, p. 348).

The increasing boldness with which biographical novelists use historical figures came to the attention of scholars in the 1980s. In *The Character of Truth in Fiction* (1990), Jacobs notes that novelists are no longer content to simply fill in the “gaps in the historical record” but aim to “transform the persona” to offer “a new creation” (p. xvi). She points out that writers are increasingly using historical figures to emphasise “similarities between modern times and times past”: “To these writers, historical figures are interesting not as unique, historically significant individuals but as representatives of unchanging patterns of human behavior” (p. xx).

These arguments are in line with work by Michael Lackey who more recently has done a great deal to define the distinct characteristics of biofiction as a literary form. He argues that biofiction, by seeking to offer “new possibilities in seeing and being” does something “radically different” from historical fiction, which aims to accurately convey the past (2019, p. 6). Lackey also identifies the key differences between biography and biofiction, which he argues relate to the way biographical novelists transform the historical figure into a literary symbol which expresses as much about the present as the past:

Biographers seek to represent the life of the subject as accurately as possible, while authors of biofiction use the life of their subject in order to create their own vision of the world. This idea of using a life is of crucial importance, for it shifts the emphasis from biography’s sacred art of accurate representation to the creative writer’s sacred art of imaginative creation. (2017a, p. 10)

Although it is widely recognised that Lackey’s scholarship has greatly advanced understandings of biofiction, some in academia suggest that his definition of biofiction might be overly prescriptive. Oxford English professor Patrick Hayes points out that some contemporary biographical novels resist rigid categorisations and instead “thrive” in an “unsettling literary space” (2017, p. 273):

While there is certainly a pragmatic value in separating out biography and biographical fiction, and a powerful philosophical tradition that organises the terms upon which that separation is based [...], many texts are engaging precisely because they don’t behave quite in this way. (p. 272)

It is for this reason that I proposed in Chapter One using a slightly broader view of biofiction than the one put forward by Lackey. Nevertheless, the American scholar offers a valuable framework for analysing and examining biographical novels, and this framework informs my own research.

2.1.3 History fiction contentions

While biofiction has gained recognition and popularity as a literary form, the blurring of history and fiction remains a deeply divisive issue, not only between novelists and historians but also among historians. In Australia, the divisions became very apparent following the publication of *The Secret River* (Grenville 2005). Tom Griffiths is among the historians with a positive view, describing history and

fiction as a “tag team”, which work in tandem or take turns to “deepen our understanding and extend our imagination” (Griffiths 2009, p. 74.5). Yet fellow Australian Inga Clendinnen warns that novelists risk distorting history and raises the issue of accountability: while historians have a “moral contract” with the past, she argues that the only binding contract for novelists is to their readers (2006, p. 32).

It is not only historians (Hamilton 2016) who warn of the potentially negative impacts of biofiction for culture and society. In an essay on ethics in fiction, literature scholar Ron Hansen argues that given the level of “ignorance” about history in America today, distorting the record further amounts to “a kind of malfeasance, a violation of public trust” (2007, np). In his essay, *The Ethics of Fiction Writing*, Hansen cites his colleague at Santa Clara University, law professor Ken Manaster, who states: “To deceive people about what was not only is disrespectful, but also undermines our collective conversation about our path, hindering our thinking about what could be” (cited in Hansen 2007 np).

Even enthusiastic exponents of biofiction recognise the possibility that biographical novelists might mispresent or misunderstand a historical figure’s life and work (Lackey 2016b, pp. 219, 254; Parini 2015, p. 26). Among the potential consequences of such a fictional portrayal is the risk of causing damage to the figure’s reputation and distress to the descendants and families, particularly if the figure is recently deceased. The potential for harm increases when the fictional work is widely read and therefore may become the accepted historical version. In the Australian context, Padmore and Gardiner (2020) underline particular risks involved when white writers fictionalise Indigenous historical figures. While biofiction can serve as a catalyst for “a new way of thinking” (p. 433), which enables “different understandings of Australian history” (p. 442), the scholars point out these representations can also establish and perpetuate racist or reductive stereotypes of First Nations people.

Situating the literary form as fiction does not absolve writers of responsibilities; nor can writers make up anything they like simply because the historical figure is dead. Like biographers, biographical novelists, as has been noted by Rensen and Wiley (2020, p. 11), can “impact on the international reputation of an artist”. This knowledge led me to investigate the ethics of biofiction.

The broad scope of creative literature within the genre, which includes historically factual novels as well as deliberately counter-factual works such as alternative histories, means there is no single methodology for good practice. Instead, some scholars offer guiding principles to help biographical novelists use historical figures responsibly.

2.2 Ethics and using historical lives

2.2.1 Ethics general protocols

The protocols relating to the ethics of using historical figures in fiction reflect different approaches and theoretical frameworks. Some scholars, such as Ron Hansen (2007) and ethics philosopher Claudia Mills (2000), use a moral perspective which places responsibility on writers to interrogate their practice. Building on Wayne Booth’s scholarship on the ethics of fiction, Mills argues that authors “have no special license to harm others, either by damaging their reputation or by causing them pain” (2000, p. 205). However, Mills makes a useful distinction between harm that is an unfortunate consequence of a

text which features real people and harm which results from an intent to cause harm, which is unethical (p. 197).

Bryony Stocker offers a more detailed methodology that links ethical practice in biofiction to historical accuracy. Building on Hilary Mantel's dictum, "don't lie" (2017a, p. 4), Stocker advises biographical novelists on the sort of liberties they may and may not take:

Try not to lie, but remember altering real events is acceptable, as long as these are more minor matters, such as personal history, and that the alterations do not affect historical outcomes. You can also lie if it serves the truth of your story, but if you do have to lie, confess to it in your author's note. If your narrative requires it, fill the gaps between the traces of the past, but make sure your inventions are feasible and in line with what is known of the past. (2019, p. 333)

By contrast, Lackey's framework for ethical practice shifts the emphasis away from historical accuracy and the use of authorial paratexts. In *The American Biographical Novel* (2016) he points out that it is possible to remain faithful to the historical record and yet "misappropriate" a life (p. 229); similarly, Lackey argues that biographical novelists may flagrantly alter and even "violate" (p. 243) the historical record and still produce a "truthful fiction" (p. 229). However, the American scholar stipulates that to be ethical, changes to the historical record must be "illuminating"; in other words, they must serve the vision the author is trying to express (p. 229).

Key to Lackey's framework for testing ethical practice is the question of whether the biographical novelist has upheld their implied contract with readers. The idea of a tacit reader-writer contract originates from Philippe Lejeune's (1989) notion of the autobiographical pact, which refers to a commitment on the part of the author-narrator to tell the truth. In relation to autobiographies, Lejeune stipulates that the name of the author on the book cover must correspond to the "I" in the text. A similar "truth" pact has been proposed for biography; however, fiction is seen to involve a different pact – or rather not one but many possible pacts which exist between individual authors and their readers. Using this idea of a specific fiction contract, in *The American Biographical Novel* (2016b), Lackey asserts that biofiction allows writers to change facts to express an emotional or "symbolic truth" that is essential to their vision (p. 229).

The different approaches among scholars to ethics in biofiction informed my project and also point to a need for further research into what constitutes good practice in the genre – a need underlined by Lackey (p. 254) who offers his theories as a "provisional framework" (p. 229). At the same time, I needed to understand the issues relating to a sub-category of biofiction which offered a space in which to locate my own creative work, *A Painter in Paris*.

2.2.2 Heterobiographies, ethics & contracts

According to some scholars, first-person narratives in biofiction raise specific concerns. At issue is the blurring of boundaries not only between fiction, history and biography but also *autobiography*. Consequently, as well as criticising their potential for intrusiveness, literature theorist Max Saunders

(2010, p. 501) claims that readers risk feeling “duped” because the thoughts and feelings ascribed to the fictional protagonist based on the named historical figure are in fact those of the author.

In *Autobiographies of Others: Historical Subjects and Literary Fiction*, scholar Lucia Boldrini (2012, p. 146) states that readers, too, have a responsibility to engage with the literature critically. This argument is supported by other academics including Laura Saxton (2020) and Lackey (2022). Boldrini asserts that although heterobiographies breach the “autobiographical pact”, they do so non-deceptively. Despite the use of the “I” pronoun, readers know that the works are not autobiographies: among other signs is the fact that the author’s name on the cover does not correspond with that of the name of the narrator in the text (2012, p. 146). Yet Boldrini acknowledges that claiming to speak for another – “saying ‘I’ under “false pretences” – raises ethical issues:

There is a certain authority that comes from history, the past, what has been and can no longer be changed. It is this authority that these novels exploit, explore and, sometimes, explode. (2004, p. 246).

By focussing on little-examined biofiction written in this sub-category my research project therefore helps fill this gap in the literature. Two of the three case studies examined in this exegesis are biographical novels written in the first person: *The Incantation of Frida K* (Braverman 2003) and *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper* (Chessman 2002). To distinguish such works from other kinds of biographical novels, in this exegesis I will use Boldrini’s term “heterobiography”. As well as raising ethical issues concerning the use of historical figures, the first-person point of view has narratological implications, which as a writer I needed to understand to create an authentic voice for my artist-protagonist based on John Russell.

2.3 Voice and point of view in biofiction

2.3.1 Defining and creating voice

First-person narrations can be powerful, however in biofiction they pose a challenge for readers who are asked to suspend belief and accept that it is the dead historical figure, and not the living author, who is “speaking” directly to them. This point of view also challenges writers who must create a voice for the fictional protagonist based on the historical figure that is authentic enough to persuade readers. Certain scholars, including Saunders (2010, p. 46), claim that in heterobiographies a so-called “authentic” voice is merely the thoughts and feelings of the author. However, the idea that writers simply transpose their own thoughts onto their fictional protagonist is, I suggest, somewhat simplistic. Authentic voices must be created; even in my memoir, *Almost French* (2002), the narrator is only a *version* of me. As Jacobs points out: “in re-creating the historical subject, even one with whom the writer identifies, the writer cannot simply re-create herself or himself” (1990, p. 32).

Although the term is commonly used in theory and creative practice, in the context of this exegesis it is perhaps important to clarify what is meant by “voice” in fiction. Literary scholar James Phelan (2005, p. 219) makes a distinction between two meanings of the word: in structuralist narratology “voice” is the answer to the question “who is speaking?” In rhetorical discourse it may also refer “to the synthesis of a

speaker's style, tone, and values". In other words, "voice" may refer to language and speech or a deeper signification of the narrator "self". It can refer to both.

Historical novelist and scholar Emma Darwin (2011) concedes that it can be difficult to define exactly what is meant by the term in fiction. On her blog for writers, she suggests that voice is, among other things, "the human presence (however implicit) that the human reader connects with". This notion of connection, which falls into the narratological meaning of "voice", resonates with the possibilities I wished to explore in *A Painter in Paris*, and it is this sense, rather than a focus on historical speech and language, that I applied to my research. While I have already discussed the ethical issues linked to the heterobiographical form, it is worth briefly examining it from a narrative perspective. More directly than other points of view, first-person narration takes readers into the emotional mind-set of the narrator and can create a sense of intimacy. In *Writing Voice*, author and writing teacher James Scott Bell claims that "seeing a story through that character's thoughts and perceptions is a fast-track to empathy and identification" (2017, p. 157). However, limiting the point of view to the experiences and knowledge of the protagonist can also be problematic; the interiority of a single character can make for a restrictive space. First-person narration also raises another question relating to voice and *how* the story is told.

2.3.2 Voice and unreliable narration

The concept of unreliable narration was first explored by Wayne Booth in his 1961 pioneering study *The Rhetoric of Fiction*. While there is not the space in this chapter to examine it in detail, the theory offers a way to approach the challenge of creating an authentic fictional first-person voice for protagonists based on historical figures. An unreliable narrator does not intend to deceive; rather they believe they are telling the truth, but the reader picks up inconsistencies or signs that give cause to question the narrator's version. Building on Booth's theory, James Phelan (2005, p. 219) outlines six modes of character unreliability, which he divides into two groups that demand different responses from readers. The first includes "misreporting, misreading, and misregarding" and requires the reader to "reject" the narrator's words and "reconstruct" a new version. The second category, "underreporting, underreading, and underregarding", requires readers to supplement or "complete" the narrated events.

Phelan's modes of unreliability gave me a framework for thinking about my narrator and positioning him in place and time. Early in the writing process I envisaged *A Painter in Paris* in the form of a diary. After experimenting, however, I found the structure too limiting; now, my fictional artist recounts the story in the late nineteenth century as the events unfold. Using Phelan's framework, I decided that my narrator was in the second category of unreliability: "underreporting, underreading and underregarding".

2.4 Other research pathways: place and art

My practice-led research journey began with a need to explore biofiction theory, which helped me understand the genre in which I was working and locate my project within the sub-category of heterobiography. I examined ethical issues and protocols for good practice among biographical novelists and identified a need to investigate this area further. However, I wanted to understand more about how

biographical novelists create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical figures: what other factors might influence and help writers with this challenge?

Essential to my own creative practice was a trip in 2017 to Belle Ile, where John Russell lived and worked for many years, as well as the art of the painter, which I studied in galleries and in private collections on numerous occasions. These aspects were the catalysts for exploring other areas of research. Chapters Four and Five of this exegesis will explore place and art in more detail. Rather than aiming to provide a comprehensive review of the literature in these broad fields, here I briefly outline research relevant to my theoretical inquiry and identify gaps in the literature.

2.4.1 Using place

As a field of study, place can be approached in many ways – through a geographical lens or from philosophical, anthropological, historical, cultural, sociological, ecocritical or interdisciplinary perspectives. Yet certain aspects are widely agreed-upon, such as the interrelation between physical environments and people. In the 1960s, the pioneering research of psychologist Roger Barker (1968) found that people could only be understood in the context of their physical and social contexts, and that these settings were a more important determinant of human behaviour than character. Later studies of environmental behaviour have extended Barker’s concept of “ecological psychology” to allow for the subjectivity and psychology of the individual (Moos 1983). Geographer Robert Sack (1993, p. 326) claims that while the “self-evident powers” of place are “complex and elusive”, “geographic place and space affect everyone”. Place shapes people, people shape place, and this continuum produces, according to geographer Doreen Massey (1995), an essential interplay: the “past is present in places” (p. 186) and the “present also makes the past” (p. 187).

Whichever way you look at it, then, place is an essential means of understanding not only living people but also those who once lived there. One way of gaining knowledge about environments and locations in the past is through historical reading and archival research yet it is also recognised that the experience of being *in* place can provide critical stimulus. This was the view of the Paris-based Situationists, a group of 1960s and 1970s artists and writers who first used the term “psychogeography” to describe the “study of the specific effects of the geographical environment [...] on the emotions and behavior of individuals” (Andreotti and Costa 1996, 69). A key aspect identified by the avant-garde intellectuals was the importance of walking in a location as a “means of knowledge” (73). Many scholars have since contributed research that has extended the field – even if not all of them identify as psychogeographers. In his renowned essay *Walking in the City* (1984), culture theorist Michel de Certeau argues that being physically present in a location, and exploring it at ground level, allows us to connect with past lives: “There is no place that is not haunted by spirits, spirits one can ‘invoke’ or not” (p. 108).

De Certeau’s theories helped orientate my research towards biographer Richard Holmes and to Australian literature scholars Catherine Padmore and Nigel Krauth, all of whom emphasise the importance of being physically present in place and walking, to connect with the people who once lived there. Padmore, a novelist as well as an academic, links visiting place to the pursuit of authenticity in biofiction. In a village near Oxford, where her sixteenth-century historical figure had lived, the writer hoped to “build bridges between myself, the dead woman and future readers, to create that credible and compelling version” of her protagonist’s life (2009, np). These were my hopes too in going to the locations where the Australian artist John Russell had lived. I identified a gap in the literature that I wanted to explore. How does going to places where historical figures lived and worked help biographical novelists shape authentic voices for fictional protagonists?

2.4.2 Art

The idea that art inspires emotion is not new. Aristotle claimed that art can trigger emotions; so too did Freud. The last decade has seen a surge of research interest in the ways in which humans respond to art. In one important study, psychologists propose cognitive models to analyse the processing experience of people viewing art (Pelowski et al. 2016). According to the authors: “Art viewing engenders myriad emotions, evokes evaluations, physiological reactions, and in some cases can mark or alter lives” (p. 160). Novelist and essayist Jeanette Winterson (1996, p. 19) has described in writing the experience of studying art as a “constant exchange of emotion” between the viewer, a painting and the (unseen) artist. The author, who made a pact to study single paintings for a period of an hour, notes that the “triangle of exchange alters, is fluid, is subtle, is profound”.

Contemporary research into human responses to art provide a starting point for understanding my own experience and that of other biographical novelists, whose fascination for historical artists often begins with the figures’ work. Irving Stone, author of *Lust for Life* (1937) which is based on the life of Vincent van Gogh, describes the profoundly “emotional experience” of seeing the Dutch painter’s “blazing Arlesian canvases”: “I left the exhibition hall determined to find out who this man was who could move me to such depths”, the biographical novelist explained in a 1957 lecture (cited in Lackey 2017, p. 122).

For biographical novelists then, seeing art can be powerful enough to incite their own creative project and an enduring fascination. Yet how does the historical artist’s art – and aspects such as subject, colour and brushstroke – influence their writing? Can the paintings of historical figures help authors create persuasive voices for fictional protagonists based on artists, and if so how? I saw an opportunity for further research.

2.5 Conclusion

Despite contentions over the use of historical figures for fictional purposes and the lack of consensus among theorists over its name, biofiction is now a “dominant” literary form (Lackey 2017c, 343). Long neglected by scholars, the genre requires further study to be fully understood. While acknowledging a great debt to existing research and to theorists such as Lackey, Boldrini, Jacobs and Schabert, this exegesis focusses on aspects of biofiction that are under-explored. My investigation examines how biographical novelists create authentic fictional voices for protagonists based on historical figures through three lenses: ethics, place, and art. In this way I contribute new knowledge, including ethical protocols, to our understanding of this literary form, the popularity of which shows no signs of waning.

Part II: Creative literature

Despite his concerns about biofiction and its potentially negative impact on historical “truth”, in 2016 biographer Nigel Hamilton predicted that “one of the most promising and exciting areas of biographical study” is the “no-man’s land between biographical fact and fiction” (np). Hamilton also noted the exponential increase in the use of “real-life, named figures” in fiction. Given this proliferation, the task of providing a comprehensive survey of the creative literature is beyond the scope of this chapter. Rather, this review offers a sample of biographical novels by international and Australian authors; similarly, it does not attempt to cover all the types of works within the genre, but to identify some important sub-

categories. Despite these constraints, my research attests to the rich diversity within the field and to the “promising and exciting” nature of contemporary biofiction.

2.6 Approaching ethics and inventions

Contentions over biofiction exist not only among scholars and critics but also among creative writers. In an interview with *The Paris Review*, Toni Morrison called using real people in fiction “an infringement of a copyright” (quoted in Schappell & Brodsky Lacour 1993, p. 105); AS Byatt states that it represents “appropriation of others’ lives and privacy” (quoted in Flood 2009). At the other end of the spectrum are biographical novelists who not only “appropriate” real lives for fictional purposes but also subvert the facts of those lives. Author Laurent Binet (cited in Lackey 2019, p. 37) admits to “pulling and twisting the rope of reality until it broke” in *The Seventh Function of Language* (2018), a far-fetched tale of the “murder” of Roland Barthes, who in real life died in an accident with a laundry van. In *La Part de L’Autre* (2001) novelist Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt audaciously alters the actual life and rise of Adolf Hitler with an alternative narrative: *what if* as a young man Hitler had been accepted, instead of rejected, into art school?

While these authors take flagrant liberties, it would be false to assume that they are loose with the historical facts – indeed the positing of counterfactual narratives stems from deep knowledge of the actual history. Although the first scholarly studies of alternative histories, as such fictions are called, only appeared in the 1990s (De Groot 2010, p. 171), counterfactual narratives are now widely recognised in academia to have specific aims and legitimacy:

History is properly the literature of what did happen; but that should not diminish the importance of the counterfactual. What-ifs can lead us to question long-held assumptions. What-ifs can define true turning points. They can show that small accidents of split-second decisions are as likely to have major repercussions as large ones. (Cowley, cited in De Groot 2010, p. 171)

Alternative histories therefore reveal the limitations of using historical accuracy as a measure for ethics and also for authenticity in biofiction. Yet contemporary biofiction is not necessarily experimental, nor do all authors alter biographical details. Renowned for her scrupulous research into the Tudor period, Hilary Mantel (2017a) proposes sticking to historical facts because they are generally “better, stranger, stronger” than inventions. However, in line with Lackey’s theory about the aims of biofiction, her chief concern is with the “interior drama” of her characters (Mantel 2017b). This led the author to find an “interim position” and to draw up her own ethical guidelines: it was fine to “make up a man’s inner torments, but not, for instance, the colour of his drawing room wallpaper” (Mantel 2017a).

A scarcity of known facts can therefore be an advantage to some biographical novelists, who prefer to use marginal historical figures and obscure lives as fictional protagonists. Fiction writer Maggie O’Farrell does this very effectively in *Hamnet* (2020), which won the 2020 Women’s Prize for Fiction. The novel centres on playwright William Shakespeare’s son, about whom little is known other than the facts of the boy’s birth and his premature death, age eleven, in 1596. Australian writer Jesse Blackadder is one of a growing number of writers to focus on the lives of women; in *Chasing the Light* (2013) she reimagines the voyage of the first women to land in Antarctica. Some scholars claim that biographical novels play an

important role in celebrating and giving visibility to women and other historical figures who have been overlooked (Rensen & Wiley 2020, p. 9). Literature scholar Todd Avery (2020, p. 36) concurs, arguing that this type of biofiction “can perform important and generous ethical work [...] by recuperating and inspiring interest in long-neglected historical figures, or by encouraging readers to achieve the empathic understanding of other lives”.

2.7 Heterobiographies

Marguerite Yourcenar, whose novel *Memoirs of Hadrian* (1986) is considered a classic of the heterobiographical form, likened the process of creating a voice for her protagonist based on Hadrian as a “controlled delirium” (Yourcenar 1986, p. 275). A sense of “delirium” also infects *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001), Richard Flanagan’s hallucinatory tale which uses, very freely, the life of little-known convict painter, William Buelow Gould. In *The Incantation of Frida K* (2003), which will be examined in this exegesis, writer Kate Braverman seemingly performs an act of ventriloquy, “speaking” for her protagonist based on Frida Kahlo. Scholar Naomi Jacobs claims first-person narrations in biofiction can offer readers heightened immersive experiences:

The best of these writers overstep the boundaries of research and reason and move right inside the heads of their subjects and the people around the subject.

The resulting works retain both the fascinations of fiction and the fascinations of biography: the simulation of a particular real life, not just of ‘life’. (1990, p. 28)

More recent heterobiographies continue to test boundaries. In *Rodham* (2020), author Curtis Sittenfeld not only “speaks” for (the living) Hillary Clinton, she also reimagines what Clinton’s life might have been had she *not* married Bill. In *Blood Water Paint* (2018), a biographical novel written in verse and mostly from the first-person point of view, Joy McCullough uses a feminist lens to reimagine the life of the seventeenth century Italian painter Artemisia Gentileschi.

2.8 Australian biofiction

Australian biographical novelists, according to Gardiner and Padmore (2017, p. 9), are “punching above their weight”. In their short survey, *Biofictions from the Antipodes*, they highlight emerging patterns in the literature as well as the “richness” and “diversity” of creative offerings from Australia which include *Schindler’s Ark* (Keneally 1982), *True History of the Kelly Gang* (Carey 2000) and *Burial Rites* (Kent 2013). A particularly fertile area of Australian biofiction is literature which attempts to grapple with the country’s colonial past. Early contact between Indigenous Australians and European colonists has been explored in a revisionist way by novelists including Thomas Keneally (*The Chant of Jimmie Blacksmith*, 1972), Robert Drewe (*The Savage Crows*, 1976), Richard Flanagan (*Wanting*, 2008), Rohan Wilson (*The Roving Party*, 2011), Kate Grenville (*The Secret River*, 2005) and Catherine McKinnon who, in *Storyland* (2017), reimagines an eighteenth-century sailing trip undertaken by explorers Flinders and Bass.

Within the colonial context, contemporary Australian biofiction reveals another pattern which aligns with the international trend to tell stories from the perspectives of women who historically have been overshadowed by more famous husbands or men. *The Birdman’s Wife* (Ashley 2016) focusses on

illustrator Elizabeth Gould, whose early work documenting Australia's birdlife was overshadowed by that of her husband. In *Mrs M* (2017), author Luke Slattery writes from the point of view of a fictional Elizabeth Macquarie, who in life was married to the colonial governor; *A Room Made of Leaves* (Grenville 2020) shines a light on Elizabeth Macarthur, wife of the colonial wool baron John Macarthur. In *Elizabeth & Elizabeth* (2021), author Sue Williams fictionalises both Elizabeth Macquarie and Elizabeth Macarthur by reimagining a friendship between the women.

Scholar Marc Delrez (2018, p. 120) asserts that a "nationalist bias" predisposes many Australian writers to explore and investigate "an embattled national past". However, Australian biographical novelists also look abroad for inspiration; *Goddess* (2014), by Kelly Gardiner, centres on a seventeenth-century French swordswoman. Another booming sub-genre with broad appeal is biofiction centred on the lives of artists.

2.9 Biographical novels based on artists

My own creative work, *A Painter in Paris*, represents the first biographical novel about John Russell, and it extends the literature relating to an Impressionist painter whose contribution to Australian art is still not widely understood. While biofiction centred on artists is a growing category, the fascination among writers for the lives of artists has a long history, as does the practice of fictionalising real artist figures. In 1886, Emile Zola based his deranged artist-protagonist in *L'Oeuvre* (*The Masterpiece*) on his (living) childhood friend, Paul Cezanne. At least that was the widespread perception, shared by the painter who, after receiving a copy of the novel, sent a curt note thanking the writer and never spoke to his old friend again. William Somerset Maugham, perhaps wisely, waited until after the death of Gauguin before travelling to Tahiti to carry out research for his novel *The Moon and the Sixpence* (2000). Like Zola, the English writer changed the name of his fictional artist, though the protagonist's identity is made explicit on the novel's back cover text, which begins: "Based on the life of Paul Gauguin..." The fiction of Irving Stone, who used the names of historical figures, contributed greatly to the popularity of the biographical novel. He wrote works centred on three artists: Vincent van Gogh (*Lust for Life*, 1937), Michelangelo (*The Agony and the Ecstasy*, 1961) and Camille Pissarro (*Depths of Glory*, 1985).

The renewed interest in biofiction about artists has been noted by scholars (Rensen & Wiley 2020); novels based on the lives of women artists are a "booming" category (Novak 2017b). In addition to being historical subjects, there has been a surge in women writing biographical novels about painters. Artist Georgia O'Keefe inspired *Georgia: A novel of Georgia O'Keefe* (2016), Dawn Tripp's biographical novel which was a national bestseller in the United States. In *Night Street* (2010), Australian author Kristel Thornell sensitively reimagines the life of Australian painter Clarice Beckett. In *How to Be Both* (2014), Scottish writer Ali Smith interweaves a present-day narrative with a second story set during the Renaissance and centred on the Italian painter Francesco del Cossa. Like Kate Braverman, author of *The Incantation of Frida K* (2003), which is examined in the next chapter, Barbara Mujica's biographical novel, *Frida* (2001), is centred on Frida Kahlo. Art historian Julia Dabbs (2022, p. 220) points out that the life of Renaissance painter Sofonisba Anguissola has inspired no fewer than eight works of biofiction between 2006 and 2019. The two most recent biographical novels on the Italian artist, both published in

2019, are Donna DiGiuseppe's *Lady in Ermine: The Story of a Woman Who Painted the Renaissance* and *Sofonisba: Portraits of the Soul* by Chiara Montani.

This exegesis examines three creative works centred on real-life artists. In *The Incantation of Frida K* (2003), a heterobiography based on Frida Kahlo, Kate Braverman brings the artist's bold originality alive by infecting her writing with the same quality. In *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper* (2002), which centres on the American Impressionist Mary Cassatt, Harriet Scott Chessman explores portrait paintings and what we see when we look at another. Finally, in *Painter to the King* (2018a), Amy Sackville creates not so much a voice for her fictional protagonist based on Diego Velázquez as an imaginary artist's "eye".

2.10 Conclusion

This review, which includes both theoretical and creative writing, helped me locate my novel in the field of biofiction and within the increasingly popular sub-category centred on historical artists. It also enabled me to identify my novel as a heterobiography; although the term is not in common usage, in this exegesis it is used to distinguish first-person narratives from other forms of biofiction. Studying the literature gave me an understanding of the evolution of the genre and helped me situate it clearly in a fiction space, which clarified my thinking about my biographical novel. It brought my attention to key ethical concerns regarding the use of real lives for fictional purposes, and to specific issues raised by heterobiographies.

Although this chapter is mostly concerned with biofiction theory, the creative challenge to shape an authentic voice for my fictional protagonist based on John Russell led me to explore narrative aspects related to point of view and unreliability. Significantly, it directed me towards three research pathways: ethics, place and art. Consequently, this review of the literature allowed me to identify gaps in knowledge, firstly relating to the ways in which biographical novelists create voices for fictional protagonists. The creative literature revealed a need for further research regarding an important sub-category of biofiction that explores the lives of historical artists, and it also revealed a gap in the creative field in Australia. Despite the prevalence of biofiction centred on colonial themes, comparatively few fiction works explore the lives of Australian painters. This helped me understand how, by drawing on the life of Australian Impressionist John Russell, I might extend and contribute to the literature.

Using three lenses, this exegesis examines the question: how do biographical novelists create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical figures? This review of the creative literature has revealed the contentions surrounding the genre, as well as the exciting experimentation occurring in biofiction – including within the sub-categories of works centred on artists and in heterobiographies. In the next phase of my research journey, I examine the ethical issues linked to fictionalising historical figures and offer a close study of how one author approached them to create an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist.

Chapter Three: Ethics and creating authentic voices

When I first approached my biographical novel, I had in mind a few broad ethical guidelines. It was clear that using a real identity for fictional purposes required me to do rigorous historical research into the life of John Russell. I would stick to the facts and invent in the many historical “gaps” in the Australian artist’s biography. However, it soon became clear to me that these simple rules were insufficient to cover the issues and dilemmas that arose during the writing process. I needed to understand more about the ethics of fictionalising historical figures; I needed firmer protocols to guide me in my creative practice.

This realisation informs my research question in this chapter: How do ethical issues help biographical novelists create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical figures? I argue that ethical issues oblige biographical novelists to interrogate their aims and their responsibilities to historical figures and to readers, and to establish ethical protocols, and that this process of careful attention gives purpose and clarity to their creative vision. Writers must carry out extensive research and then, using informed imagination and their subjective interpretations, create voices for fictional protagonists based on real figures. Dilemmas relating to the use of real identities and what it is acceptable to invent require biographical novelists to take an ethical stance which can free them to produce an exciting creative offering. In relation to my case study, *The Incantation of Frida K* (Braverman 2003), this argument becomes more specific. By creating an unreliable narrator whose voice embodies the “delirium” which is central to many heterobiographies (Boldrini 2017, p. 9), author Kate Braverman engages in a truth contract that foregrounds artistic integrity over historical veracity.

This chapter collates and proposes ethical protocols for biographical novelists, drawn from my own practice as well as from the research of literature theorists Michael Lackey and Lucia Boldrini, and ethics philosophy scholars James Harold and Claudia Mills. My study explores key inquiries, including whether fiction writers have the right to appropriate a dead person’s name and identity, particularly one who is racially, culturally or ethnically different from the author. Then, using Lackey’s theory as a framework, I examine Braverman’s ethical approach to creating a fictional protagonist based on the artist Frida Kahlo.

Braverman’s novel was particularly suited to my research project, firstly because my own creative work is narrated in the first person and I was interested in examining a biographical novel in the same form – one which some scholars claim raises particular issues for writers and for readers. Braverman’s novel encapsulates the “thrilling” and “slightly disturbing” aspects of saying “I” in the name of a dead person, as described by Boldrini (2004, p. 245). Also, it was important for my study to choose a biographical novel which offers an *authentic* voice for a fictional protagonist based on an historical figure. I suggest that *The Incantation of Frida K* is successful in this respect. When the biographical novel was published, many critics singled out the voice of “Frida K” for special acclaim. *The Washington Post* (2002) praised the novel for being “true to Kahlo” “in a way that no biography could ever be”.

Nevertheless, the choice of Braverman’s novel in the context of this chapter is not without irony. The American author, who following her death in 2019 was remembered by the *New York Times* as

“outspoken and outrageous” (Sandomir 2019), would likely have been dismissive of debate over the ethics of appropriating historical figures in fiction. In contrast with Hilary Mantel’s dictum “don’t lie” (2017a, p. 4), in an interview Braverman declared:

The page is about what you can get away with. We break and enter, transgress, autopsy the living and dead, rob, exchange identities, lie, confess, steal. The arts of writing and successful crime are the same. Opportunity. Robbery. Seizure. Con. Misdirection. Theft. (Braverman 2006)

In the second part of this chapter, I investigate Braverman’s unabashedly bold approach to appropriating Kahlo. However, first, to provide a context for my study, I examine broader ethical issues relating to the project to create an authentic voice for a fictional protagonist based on an historical figure.

3.1 Appropriation and identity theft

3.1.1 What’s in a name?

appropriate: Take (something) for one’s own use, typically without the owner’s permission. (Oxford Online Dictionary 2022)

As dictionary definitions establish, the term appropriation commonly refers to the use or taking of something that belongs to someone else. From a legal perspective, the dead do not own their identities, yet few of us could deny the powerful, inextricable attachment of humans to their own identities and existences. How would we feel knowing that our own lives were to be used for fictional purposes after our deaths? The question to examine therefore is not *if* biographical novelists appropriate, but rather whether they have the right to do so.

Some critics, scholars and also writers argue that they do not. “That person owns his life, has a patent on it,” according to author Toni Morrison. “It shouldn’t be available for fiction” (quoted in Schappell & Brodsky Lacour 1993, p. 105). Canadian writer Guy Gavriel Kay (2009, np) sees the proliferation of biofiction as a “pandemic” which he links to a “general erosion of the ethical value of privacy and a parallel emergence of a widespread sense of entitlement to look at – or to make use of – the lives of others”.

Central to the debate over appropriating historical figures in fiction is the use of a real person’s name. According to Boldrini (2017, p. 2), heterobiographies raise the ethical stakes further: “what happens to the name and its authority when it is claimed by someone else who can say ‘I’ under false pretences?”. Historian Antony Beevor (2015) argues that if biographical novelists must appropriate historical figures, they ought at least rename the fictional protagonist to indicate that “their version is one step away from reality”. This practice is not uncommon among some writers, who find that changing the name of their protagonist based on an historical figure untethers their imagination from the binds of historical fact. Yet is this approach necessarily more ethical? Might it potentially allow writers to appropriate real lives and identities without adhering to the responsibilities that come with their use?

In reality, even if the protagonist based on an historical figure is renamed, the link with the historical person is often established in other ways. This is especially true regarding biographical novels centred on famous figures because, as Boldrini (2017, p. 181) points out, “the actual historicity of the character remains central to the success of the texts”. Curtis Sittenfeld’s decision to rename her fictional protagonist based on Laura Bush did not prevent the author (and the publisher) from using the former First Lady’s name to publicise *American Wife* (2008). In *The Broken Book* (2004), Australian novelist Susan Johnson makes clear in the Acknowledgements that her protagonist, who she renamed Katherine Elgin, is based on the writer Charmian Clift. As a result of controversy over *A Secret River* (2005), in her second historical novel, *The Lieutenant* (2010), Kate Grenville renamed her fictional protagonist, though it was publicly acknowledged he was based on astronomer William Dawes.

As some writers discover, the decision about the use of the name is not always theirs to make. Fearing criticism from Velázquez scholars, in *Painter to the King* (2018), author Amy Sackville chose to call her protagonist “the painter”. In a BBC radio interview, the writer explained that her publisher insisted on establishing the link with the Spanish master on the back cover because his name was a “massive hook” (Sackville 2018b).

While I am not suggesting it is unethical to rename protagonists based on historical figures, biographical novelists who name their fictional protagonists after historical subjects do at least appropriate openly. Lackey (2016b, pp. 31-32) also underlines this point: “biographical novelists are simply more transparent than most novelists in that they reveal the source of the characters by naming them after the actual historical figures”.

Agreeing with Lackey, I came to the decision that it is not *in principle* unethical for biographical novelists to use someone’s life, including their name and identity. However, does that mean writers have the right to use *any* historical figure? Is it acceptable for a non-Jewish writer to create a fictional character using the identity of a real Holocaust survivor? Can a biographical novelist base a fictional protagonist on a recently deceased figure whose close relatives may be distressed by the portrayal? It is not possible in this chapter to explore the range of potential circumstances relating to the use of historical lives by novelists. Instead, to illustrate some of these contentious issues and offer a possible way through them, I briefly examine the use of historical figures who, in relation to the writers, are racially, culturally or ethnically different.

3.1.2 Appropriation and misappropriation

The Confessions of Nat Turner (1967), William Styron’s heterobiography of an African American slave, illustrates how contentious it can be for writers to assume the voice of a cultural or racial “other”.

Although the novel won the 1967 Pulitzer Prize and was initially lauded, it was later vocally condemned by some academics and critics as racist (Harold 2003); Styron was accused of misrepresenting the reality of African American experience in the nineteenth century. In the Australian context, scholars Catherine Padmore and Kelly Gardiner point to the long-lasting impact of two early biofictions published in 1941 and written by white authors, which feature characters based on Indigenous Australian, Woollarawarre Bennelong: *My Love Must Wait* (Ernestine Hill), and *The Timeless Land* (Eleanor Dark). Very popular at

the time, both novels, according to the scholars, can be “criticized as essentialist, paternalist or racist”, however Dark’s work “enabled different understandings of Australian history” (2020, p. 433). Thus, according to Padmore and Gardiner, while representations of Indigenous historical figures by white writers can serve as a catalyst for revisionist ways of thinking about Australian history, they also can also perpetuate “colonial ideologies” (p. 442).

Ethical dilemmas relating to fictionalising historical figures from different cultural and racial backgrounds must be grappled with and resolved by individual writers. One useful approach for biographical novelists, however, is that offered by philosophy professor James Harold (2003, p. 253), who argues that the determining factor in ethical practice is the writer’s “internal motive”. This he defines as “careful attention” shown by the author to the historical figure and which constitutes the “kind of concern for detail and depth that the object of fictive imagination deserves”.

What might this “careful attention” look like and how can it help writers create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical figures? Two Australian novelists found answers to this question through their creative practice. Scholar and novelist Catherine McKinnon came to the conclusion that she could not write from the point of view of an Indigenous narrator in her first contact story, ‘Will Martin’ (2011), later published as part of the novel *Storyland* (2017). In Australia, a contemporary white writer cannot ignore the broader historical context of colonisation, racism and oppression, nor the history of cultural appropriation in relation to First Nations people. For McKinnon, consulting with Indigenous Australians and seeking advice on how to fictionalise aspects of a first contact story was an ethical imperative:

Fictionalising first contact stories, I discovered, requires a comprehensive research approach that acknowledges and respects contemporary Indigenous cultural protocols, recognises past misuse of Indigenous stories by white Australian authors, and is sensitive to the unique place of story within Indigenous culture. Interviewing Indigenous elders was an important – vital – component of my attempt to fill in the gaps prevalent in the historical documentary material and hypothesise about the meeting between the Europeans and the Kooris (2012, np).

McKinnon’s approach reveals important elements of “careful attention”. Authors need to show respect for the historical figure and to carry out extensive research which may involve seeking permission from Indigenous elders and conducting interviews to better understand the protocols of fictionalising Indigenous figures. Author Drusilla Modjeska highlights the importance for writers to self-interrogate. Her novel *The Mountain* (2012) draws from her own life experience as a young Australian woman living in Papua New Guinea. Modjeska initially envisaged writing from the point of view of a Papuan. However, after honestly considering the limits of her imagination, as well as what can be learnt through research, she made the protagonist a white Australian whose fictional life experience was much closer to her own:

[...] I came to understand that the ‘informed imagination’ does not only mean qualifying ‘informed’ with ‘imagination’ as I had done; it also requires us to bring an informed intelligence to the nature – and limitation – of imagination itself. It would have been a grave error on my part to think that ‘I’ could sit in a village in PNG and ‘imagine’ myself into a village person. [...] Even the briefest acquaintance with psychoanalysis alerts us to the deep structures of subjectivity laid down from infancy, so that while we might all bleed, our sense of ourselves and our understanding of self in relation to others and society can differ radically. (2015, p. 61)

Historical figures who represent a cultural or racial “other” in relation to the writer might raise particular ethical dilemmas, however the fact is that appropriating any real identity for fictional purposes comes with responsibilities. How would writers feel, after all, about the idea of their name and identity being used in fiction after their death? Although my own creative project does not involve identities who are, with respect to me, racially “other”, my research nevertheless indicated lessons for ethical practice more broadly in biofiction. Drawing on McKinnon and Modjeska, I formulated the following two protocols: i) carry out extensive research, including interviews if necessary, as part of the process of “careful attention”; ii) use informed imagination and also interrogate the limits of informed imagination.

Some writers also see dangers in taking a proscriptive approach to the sorts of historical figures writers can use and the types of fiction characters they may create. In an eloquent essay published in *The New York Review of Books*, author Zadie Smith expresses her unease. Smith, who has Jamaican heritage, argues that on the one hand it is rational to assume that people of the same culture or race are less likely to create clichéd, prejudiced, or harmful fictional depictions. However, as a novelist, she also feels “deeply insulted” by the idea that “we should only write about people who are fundamentally ‘like’ us” (2019, np). To Smith this view denies deeper human commonalities and the possibility for connection, despite differences, through our heartbreaks, joys and grief. In the *Incantation of Frida K*, which I examine next, a powerful sense of personal connection with the heartbreaks of Frida Kahlo was critical to the way author Kate Braverman created a voice for her fictional protagonist based on the artist.

3.2 *The Incantation of Frida K*

This section examines the question: how do ethical issues help Braverman create an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist based on Kahlo? My research found that by considering her aims and responsibilities to the historical artist, as well as to readers, the writer took an ethical stance which provided purpose and rare clarity to her creative vision. By following ethical protocols, which were her own and may be disagreed with, Braverman gave herself authority to pursue her subjective interpretation of the historical Kahlo and to create an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist. Before examining *The Incantation*, as I will call the work for the sake of brevity, I begin with the seed for the biographical novel: the biographical details and work of the artist.

3.2.1 Approaching Frida Kahlo

The life of Frida Kahlo was marked by personal tragedy and trauma. In childhood she suffered from polio. As a student, Kahlo almost died in a violent tram accident during which she was quite literally skewered by a metal handrail; her crippling injuries and lifelong pain later fuelled drug and alcohol addictions. As an adult she had a leg amputated due to gangrene. The tram accident also led her to become an artist: as Kahlo lay bored and bedbound during her long recovery, she began to draw and paint.

Her broken body became a theme of her work, and so did her tumultuous relationship to the Mexican painter and muralist Diego Rivera, who was twenty years her senior. Their private ups and downs became public scandals. While both artists had affairs, Rivera's relationship with Kahlo's sister, Cristina, left Kahlo emotionally devastated. In rigidly conventional Mexican society of the pre- and post-World War II period, they made an eccentric, outrageous duo. Rivera's biographer Bertram Wolfe, who knew them well, described the unforgettable impression the couple made:

This frail, slender dynamic girl with her colourful raiment, jewels, ribbons, and make-up resembling some pre-Conquest Indian princess, with the ribbons in her hair barely coming up to her male companion's shoulder, accompanying this clumsy, lumbering giant of a frog-faced man in a huge sombrero, ill-fitting tweeds or paint-stained overalls.
(Wolfe 1963, p. 396)

After years of surgeries and suffering, Kahlo died in 1953 at the age of forty-seven. Although in her lifetime she became the first Mexican artist to have a painting bought by the Louvre, for much of her career her work was overshadowed by the success of Rivera. Now, however, her deeply personal paintings, including her uncompromising self-portraits with the "bird's-wing" eyebrows (Wolfe 1963, p. 240), are renowned throughout the world. It was these "unequivocal" and "ruthless" paintings that prompted Braverman's interest in the biographical details of Kahlo's life (2003, p. 241). In the author interview at the end of the novel, the writer explains how she filtered the historical figure's life through the feminist lens of her own experience:

I decided to write about Frida because I identified with her, as an artist as a wounded woman. My activist involvement during the '60s and my life in Los Angeles, which was a literary frontier region as much as Mexico City in the 1940s, informed my perspective. I saw myself as an outlaw, a woman who defied the consensual realities. (p. 242)

Braverman's strong sense of connection with Kahlo as a "wounded woman", which provided critical impetus for the novel, raises the contentious issue of authorial identification with historical figures. Narrative scholar Suzanne Keen claims that "empathetic imagination" is a "key ingredient of fictional worldmaking" (2006, p. 215), yet she also recognises the danger: "I impose my feelings on you and call them your feelings. Your feelings, whatever they were, undergo erasure" (p. 222). Historian Inga Clendinnen (2006, p. 32) claims that by using emotional empathy to access the past, fiction writers risk

distorting and misrepresenting history. Such concerns are relevant to examining how Braverman's identification with Kahlo helped her create the character and voice of her protagonist.

3.2.2 Creating Frida K

According to Braverman, at the beginning of the writing process she remained faithful to the "biographically correct Frida" (2003, p. 243). In the author interview, which serves as a paratext to frame her practice, she explains how gradually she took liberties until she "discarded the facts entirely when the fictional truth was more compelling" (p. 243). Despite this claim, the recollections of the dying Frida K, which form the novel's narrative, correspond directly to the important events of Kahlo's life. These events include the tram accident which left her maimed, the miscarriages and her enduring emotional pain over being childless, her marriage and subsequent divorce then remarriage to Rivera, his affair with Kahlo's sister, the couple's years in San Francisco, their political engagement, Kahlo's bisexual affairs and her liaison with Communist exile Leon Trotsky and the endless operations to try to repair Kahlo's body as well as the plaster casts and metal plates.

It is perhaps in the fictional depiction of Kahlo's relationship with Rivera that Braverman diverges from the known facts. In *The Incantation*, "Diego" can be cruel towards his wife, who he humiliates for her "ugly", "childish", "inept" paintings (p. 83) and her maimed body: "You are too distorted to be a woman. You mock proportion," he tells Frida K (p. 59), who describes the marriage as a "litany of mourning" (p. 67) and likens it to a form of death for her. As well as being verbally abusive, the fictional Diego is physically violent. In the novel, Frida K recalls a disturbing incident which began when he dragged her "by the hair" (p. 108):

'Kneel slut,' Diego said and I did. He was opening me and lighting matches [...]

'What are you doing? Diego, you're burning me.' I was frightened.

'I'm looking for tape worms. You're a filthy boy,' Diego drank a beer and smoked a cigar. 'Now I want to hurt you.' (p. 109)

The writer's portrayal of the fictional artists' adversarial relationship is challenged by some scholars. While biographers of both artists acknowledge that Rivera put his art and himself first, they also commonly underline the intense love they had for each other. According to biographer Hayden Herrera, Frida Kahlo continued to express her deep love for Rivera right up until her death (1983, pp. 373, 378). Rather than belittling her work, Rivera was known to encourage her painting (107). In her study *Writers and Artist in Dialogue: Historical Fiction about Women Painters* (2015), Cortney Cronberg Barko argues that through the author's "feminist retelling" of Kahlo's life (p. 142), Braverman distorts the figure of Rivera, who in life was not known to have been verbally or physically abusive (p. 133).

However, a close reading of *The Incantation* suggests that in the novel Braverman deliberately plays with ambiguity. A later exchange by Frida K's hospital bedside paints a different picture of Diego as the fictional couple looks back on their relationship:

‘Was I worthy’ I want to know, ‘in love and war?’

‘You were in all ways superior,’ Diego has considered this. [...] ‘You were a better painter and you had more stamina. You were more refined and brutal.’

‘More intelligent, more imaginative,’ I suggest. ‘More daring.’

‘Without doubt. Your cruelty was inspiring. Ferocious. Relentless. I was continually entertained. You challenged me’, Diego concludes.

(Braverman 2003, p.117)

In examining Braverman's portrayal of the historical couple's relationship, it is important to place the first-person voice of Frida K in the context of unreliable narration, a concept in fiction first identified by Wayne Booth (1983) and extended by James Phelan (2005). At times in *The Incantation* it is difficult to know whether the fictional protagonist, who is drugged with morphine and other pain medication as well as alcohol, is recounting memories or hallucinating. Phelan states that unreliable narrators exist along a spectrum (2017, p. 96). However, in *The Incantation*, Braverman confuses distinctions through her memory/hallucination conceit, which is expressed through regular references to drugs and pain relief. “Yes I am screaming. It's time for morphine. I hear cathedral bells through rain,” states Frida K (p. 14). When Diego tells her she is hallucinating, that she takes “too much morphine”, the fictional protagonist laughs: “You can't take too much morphine” (p. 26). Despite the vividness of her memories, at times Frida K seems disorientated, perhaps deluded, such as when she wakes up thinking she is twenty-two, not forty-six (p. 93). The fictional artist also takes Demerol, another strong pain relief medication: “I put morphine in one wrist then Demerol in a vein I find in my neck”, she states (p. 220). Her skin, Frida K tells us, is: “webbed with morphine kisses. Demerol kisses [...] Butterflies cluster along my veins [...] I have gardens on my arms” (p. 225). Adding to the sense of hallucination is the evocative prose, which shifts from dreamlike descriptions to nightmarish ones, such as the violent scene where Diego pins her down and lights matches at her vagina (p. 109).

Yet even though *The Incantation* is a work of fiction and the narrator is unreliable and the depiction of Diego is more nuanced than certain passages might suggest, the possibility cannot be ruled out that some readers may accept the abusive Diego as historically accurate. In this case it could be argued the novel causes damage to Rivera's reputation – something biographical novelists, according to Mills (2000), ought to avoid doing. What does it mean to turn an artist, a man, into a character who is violent towards women? Should Braverman, in the very least, have indicated this divergence from the historical record in the author interview or some other note to readers?

Scholars such as Bryony Stocker (2019) and Antony Beevor (2015) insist that writers should declare their inventions so that readers can distinguish fact from fiction. Whilst it may not be necessary to indicate all the ways a biographical novel departs from the historical record, I argue that the abusive nature of the fictional Diego constitutes a significant, potentially harm-causing invention and it ought to have been made explicit by the author. My study of *The Incantation* led me to expand my protocols for biofiction practice: include an author's note or paratext of some kind to indicate significant inventions or divergences from historical fact. Nevertheless, while Braverman does not mention Rivera in the author interview, she is explicit about her approach to using historical figures:

A fictionalized work has nothing to do with a standard biography. It's a separate entity entirely. In fiction, one looks for the emotional truth. Facts are unimportant. Facts can be a catalyst. (2003, p. 242)

In her novel, Braverman sought to express an "emotional truth" – in other words, she sought to express aspects of the artist's life and character that struck *her* as true because they resonated with her experience as a "wounded woman" (p. 242). The emotional truth Braverman relentlessly pursues is that of the oppressed female artist surviving in a world dominated by men; "Diego" serves as the primary oppressor. Frida K states: "I should have died in Diego's overwhelming shadow, curled into its shallows and currents. Its blood-stained coral reefs" (p. 12). Later, when the dying Frida reflects on how she has served Diego's reputation and art, she admits she is partially responsible: "I am Diego's twisted bird," the protagonist states. "I agreed to this. Mute parrot. An adornment. A few seeds and I amuse" (p. 94).

Braverman's emphasis on "emotional truth", aligns with an argument that has been made through the ages by philosophers from Aristotle to Richard Kearney: namely, that there are truths "proper to fiction" which are distinct from historical truths (Kearney 2002). In relation to biofiction, Lackey builds on this idea by arguing that biographical novelists use historical figures to express symbols or symbolic truths (2016b, p. 12). He argues that it is acceptable for biographical novelists to alter facts if doing so serves the creative vision they wish to express (2016, p. 229). An important aspect of Lackey's ethical framework is the writer-reader contract, the tacit contract which exists between authors and their readers, which writers must uphold and readers must discern. The theorist goes so far as to place the ethical burden in biofiction primarily on readers, who "should realize that, even though the protagonist is named after a real person, that character is still a fictional creation" (2022). Boldrini (2017, p. 147) states the reader has an "equal share of the responsibility" to engage with the work critically and identify the nature of the contract by decoding signs on the book cover and in the text. Applying her argument to Braverman's work, this means that despite the use of the "I", readers know that it is not an autobiography of Frida Kahlo (which would bind the author to historical truth) because the "author's name on the cover is not the name of the narrator and of the character" (p. 3).

Judging from the bold writing in *The Incantation*, as well as Braverman's declarations in the author interview, her contract with readers would express a commitment to pursuing her subjective creative vision and her right to exercise artistic licence. It might be something like this: "Though I won't stick to the facts, I promise to use my own life experience and the truths I have learnt to create an offering which

is as fiercely original as Frida Kahlo herself.” If we consider Lackey’s writer-reader contract framework, does Braverman fulfill the mandate of her contract? To answer this, in the next section I begin by looking more closely at how Braverman employs “emotional truth”, as well as writerly skill, to create an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist.

3.2.3 Creating an authentic Frida K

I was born in rain and I will die in rain. Know me as river, as harbor.
They will say I was a slut with a brazen sailor’s mouth. They will not
remember my elegance and restraint. They will say they looked in my
eyes and counted one hundred forty-six pelicans flying in a wavering
line into a marina at sunset. (Braverman 2003, p. 11)

With these words the dying Frida K starts to speak directly to us from her hospital bed. Already the reader understands the narrator is a woman who feels misunderstood and maligned. In the second paragraph of the novel, the fictional protagonist identifies the maligners. “Men lack the spectrum and palette”, they have “a compulsion to categorize”, states Frida K (p. 11). Men prefer “primitive bodies outlined with hard black edges like the Maya painted” (p. 11). Thus, from the beginning of the novel the author signals her commitment to pursuing the emotional/symbolic truth of the “wounded woman” artist (p. 242) by creating an unabashedly subjective voice for Frida K, which expresses shifts from fond tolerance to fury against the men who have oppressed her. “Did I tell you Diego tried to kill me? Marriage was simply a context” (p. 17). This theme is reinforced through the depiction of Diego as buffoonish and lacking in subtlety: he is “tactless and ignorant” (p. 205), he has “the sensibility of pond scum” (p. 228). By contrast, the narrator describes herself as “layered and cryptic” (p. 17).

Writerly skill is an important factor in creating authentic voices for protagonists in fiction of any kind. From the outset Braverman’s prose, which is not factual but rather evocative and enigmatic, establishes the singularity of the narrator: “Know me as river, harbour” declares Frida K in the second sentence (p. 11). Through the use of poetic language, the author incites readers to engage with her book as an artistic creation. While Braverman uses Kahlo to create a symbol of the oppressed woman artist, she does not portray Frida K as a victim. By infecting the voice with wry wit and lively intelligence, the writer shapes a fictional protagonist who is commanding, even as she lies dying in hospital:

‘Am I dead?’ I ask.

‘Not yet,’ Diego says.

‘That’s good, because I expect more flowers,’ I say. ‘And of a better quality. Gardenias and roses. And more ceremony.’

Diego nods his enormous head. He’s begun to resemble a pre-Columbian stone statue. His face is becoming squat, indio. He blows his nose. Is he disappointed? I am dying as fast as I can. (p. 179)

The voice of Frida K was acclaimed for being “true to Kahlo” in a way that no biography could ever be, yet it is possible the voice of the fictional protagonist more closely resembles Braverman’s than that of the real Kahlo. According to literature theorist Max Saunders (2019, p. 95), it is precisely for this reason that heterobiographies are ethically dubious: readers, he argues, risk feeling “duped” and wondering whether the historical protagonist’s thoughts “come from another: the twenty-first century author”. However, the Australian historian and historical novelist Peter Cochrane points to the “subjective realm” as a key element in authentic fictional characters and voices:

They [great historical novelists] have the capacity to make us exclaim, ‘Yes, this is how it must have been’ or ‘this is what it must have felt like.’ They do this not by heaping on accurate detail from the historical record but by the illusion of reality conjured in the subjective realm; that sense of being inside the history, inside the player’s heads, or under their skin. (2020, np)

Aligning with Cochrane’s view, is it possible to accept that the rigour with which Braverman pursues her subjective vision through a feminist lens enhances the authenticity of the fictional Frida’s voice? The perception of authenticity will always be a matter for individual readers, however it is useful to approach the voice using Richard Winter’s interrogation: “does it *persuade* us?” (2002, p. 145). We might pose that question of the following passage in which Frida K describes the agony inflicted on her by doctors as a result of the tram accident:

Did you know they sealed me into a cast for one entire year? It was a premature burial where I kept breathing under dirt. They did this repeatedly, gathered my crushed bones like wild-flowers and used plaster as a vase. They sought to make an object of me. There was no composition. It was vandalism. (Braverman 2003, p. 11)

In the passage above, Frida K uses powerfully evocative language to describe her physical wounds: “premature burial”, “crushed bones”, “vandalism”. And yet somehow Frida K survives, “breathing under dirt” (p. 11). Braverman’s achievement is that she creates a fictional voice which both conveys the horror and pain of Frida Kahlo’s life and also transcends it. I argue that you *are* persuaded by the fictional protagonist’s voice, and that its authenticity stems from Braverman’s writerly skill and also her pursuit of the emotional truth she expresses about the artist as a “wounded woman”.

In examining *The Incantation* I found that the author did not “discard” all the facts, as she claimed, nor did she consistently respect them. While Braverman is explicit in the author interview about her creative aims and approach to using historical figures, I suggest that it would have served her ethical practice to indicate the ways in which the abusive fictional Diego differs from the historical record. Nevertheless, while we may disagree with it, her approach stems not from a lack of ethical protocols but rather the author’s uncompromising commitment to her truth contract with readers, which earlier I pointed out was linked not to historical truth but artistic integrity. Braverman’s fiercely original creative offering evokes

the words of Mills (2000, p. 205), who reminds us of the possibilities of connection through fictional portrayals of real people: “When a writer knows his material by heart, when he carries it with him in his heart, his using it to make his art is something we can understand and celebrate”.

3.3 Conclusion

This chapter investigates the research question: How do ethical issues help biographical novelists create authentic fictional voices for protagonists based on historical figures? Drawing on the work of literature scholars (Boldrini 2017; Lackey 2016a, Stocker 2019;), historians (Beevor 2015; Cochrane 2020) and ethics philosophy scholars (Harold 2003; Mills 2000), I examined broader ethical issues pertaining to biofiction, including whether writers have the right to fictionalise *any* historical figure. Then, focussing on *The Incantation of Frida Kahlo* (2003), I examined the voice Kate Braverman created for her fictional protagonist based on Kahlo: was it authentic *and* ethical? My research helped me to formulate protocols to apply to my creative practice: i) carry out extensive research, including interviews if necessary, as part of the process of “careful attention”; ii) use informed imagination and also interrogate the limits of informed imagination, iii) include a paratext for significant inventions or divergences from historical fact.

Examining the biographical novel, I revealed how Braverman, by creating an unreliable fictional narrator whose unreliability shifts depending on mood and memory, expresses those aspects of Frida Kahlo’s life with which the author identified. The author’s truth contract with the audience, I established, represents a commitment not to historical truth but to her responsibilities as a fiction writer which to Braverman means boldly expressing her own artistic vision. Further, her wholehearted pursuit of this vision is, in part, what makes Frida K’s fictional voice so persuasive and “true” to readers. My research found, however, that as well as respecting their truth contract with readers, biographical novelists must carefully consider their responsibilities to historical figures and to interrogate their imagination. In the author’s note, Braverman is explicit about her creative aims and artistic licence. However, I assert that her approach would have been more ethical had she, in the author’s note, elaborated on her inventions – particularly regarding the potentially harmful fictional portrayal of Diego Rivera.

In the next chapter, I look at another important factor which helps biographical novelists create authentic voices for fictional protagonists by enabling them to form a picture of the world of the artist-figure. In addition to reading archival documents and historical accounts about those locations in the past, what can writers gain by visiting the places where historical figures once lived?

Chapter Four: Place and creating authentic voices

The topic examined in this chapter arose from my own practice and the creative impact of my journeys to the places where the painter, John Russell, lived and worked, including Belle Ile, the Breton island where both the man and his art thrived. Experiencing his *outer* world – the rugged coastline which the artist loved to paint – helped me shape the *inner* world of my protagonist. This and other field trips revealed for me the deep connection between humans and place that exists in life, as well as the vital connection in fiction between place and character. The research question that underpins this chapter reflects a desire to explore this area more deeply: how does place, and the process of reimagining place through field trips and historical research, help biographical novelists create authentic voices for historical figures? I ask this in relation to writers in general, but also in relation to the approach novelist Amy Sackville took when writing *Painter to the King* (2018a), her biographical novel based on Diego Velázquez.

Contemporary place research spans a wide range of disciplines. The field of psychogeography, which involves the study of the ways in which geographical environments effect human emotions and behaviour, provides a useful context for examining the importance of visiting place and, specifically, of exploring the location on foot. The practice, as defined by contemporary scholars, is not simply strolling or “going from A to B” (Bridger 2022, p. 1). Rather it describes a “process” through which the “walker connects with the terrain in a way that sets her or himself up as a critic of the space under observation” (Richardson 2015, p.18). Psychogeographers include creative writers as well as theorists such as Michel de Certeau (1984, p. 108), whose claim that all places are “haunted” by “spirits” of the past informs my research. To examine how writers seek to encounter these “spirits” by walking in a landscape, I draw on the work of Catherine Padmore and Nigel Krauth, who are both academics and novelists, and also biographer Richard Holmes. The research of social work scholar Carolyn Saari frames my understanding of author Amy Sackville’s approach. Saari (2008, p. 228) argued that humans must first construct “a picture of the world in which we live” to create a “sense of who we are”.

My research shows that visiting locations, and especially exploring them on foot, enables writers to experience a “bodily comprehension” (Padmore 2009) of the physical environment, which can provide an essential connection to the historical figure. Writers draw on this connection to shape and inform the voice of their fictional protagonist. This was the case for Sackville, who drew on sensory observations gained during a field trip to Madrid – and her sense of being a foreigner there – to identify with Velázquez, who was also an outsider in the city. Going to places where historical figures lived and worked offers writers the possibility of multiple encounters: with the location in the present as well as the location in the past, and with the historical figure who may be sensed as a presence or as an absence. However, these field trips also force writers to confront the impossibility of seeing the world as it *was* through the eyes of another.

Literature scholar Katherine Harris (2017, p. 197) provides a frame for understanding how “fictional histories”, as she refers to them, can be authentic by being honest about their limitations, which includes

being “explicit about the presence of the present”. This is the case in *Painter to the King* (2018a), which includes a fictional narrator in the present that informs and also interrogates the voice of the fictional historical painter. Thus, authenticity for Sackville means using the insights and experiences that come from being in a place, while also acknowledging the impossibility of knowing the place as it was in the past. The research for this chapter reveals that to create authentic voices for protagonists based on historical figures, biographical novelists must first imagine the world in which the figure lived and interacted.

4.1 Defining place

The word “place” has multiple and complex interpretations and it is important to establish what the term means in my study. A useful starting point is geographer Tim Cresswell’s definition of place as a “meaningful location” (2015, p. 132). Elaborating on his definition, Cresswell cites political geographer John Agnew, who proposes that every place includes three essential elements: location, locale and sense of place (p. 27). Location is the actual location of the place, such as where it is on a map; locale refers to the physical shape of a place, such as buildings in a city or the walls of a room; and sense of place is the attachment that people have to the space.

In the context of fiction, however, and specifically biofiction where place refers not only to the real locations of historical figures but also the constructed worlds in the past, the term requires further definition. In *The Eye of the Story* (1979), which explores the art of writing, novelist Eudora Welty links place to feeling:

Place in fiction is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exacting and therefore credible, gathering spot of all that has been felt, is about to be experienced, in the novel’s progress. Location pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place. (p. 122)

Welty links place in fiction to the perceived credibility and believability of the text; fiction may be a lie, she states, yet “somehow, the world of appearance in the novel has got to seem actuality” (p. 123). Portrayal of place is therefore an important element in persuading readers to suspend belief, in the perception of authenticity. The author’s essay also articulates the reason for the “delicate control” place has over character; “by confining character, it defines it” (p. 129). A further point made by Welty resonates with my own findings and practice-led research. Place, she claims, is not simply to be “used” by writers, but to be “discovered” (p. 129). For biographical novelists, archival records and non-fiction reading provide essential information about the world of the past. Seeing and experiencing place – even if that place has changed – can provide other insights and understanding.

Underpinning the way humans encounter locations and landscapes are notions such as the power of place and *genius loci*. An “elusive” concept in contemporary place study, *genius loci* is sometimes translated loosely as “sense of place” or “soul of place” (Jiven & Larkham 2003, pp. 69, 79). Travel writer, poet and academic Linda Lappin (2014) claims that it is created by “the accumulation of human lives in place

over centuries”. While there is not space in this chapter to explore the many theoretical interpretations of the term, Lappin’s definition conveys possibilities which resonate with my research into place – possibilities which are explored by Amy Sackville in her biographical novel *Painter to the King*.

4.1.1 *Painter to the King*: an introduction

When Sackville went to Madrid to carry out research on the painter Diego Velázquez (1599–1660), she was not intending to write a biographical novel but rather a novel. The author and academic planned to invent a protagonist, not create one based on an historical figure. Unlike most biofiction writers whose project begins with the historical figure, Sackville started with a concept: what interested her was the perspective of a court painter, a position that gave artists a rare insider-outsider viewpoint from which to observe royal life (Sackville 2018b). Velázquez, who spent forty years in the Spanish court of King Philip IV, made an ideal case study for her character.

In Madrid, however, struck by the artist’s life and art, Sackville (2018c) realised that Velázquez was a “gift”: “I didn’t need to make up this different story that I think would have looked much more gothic”. Using his life, the author implies, she hoped to create something more authentic. As a result of going to place, her creative project abruptly altered course.

Sackville’s captivation with the paintings of Velázquez is not unusual. Many artists have been profoundly influenced by his work, including the Impressionists, who were struck by his bold, vigorous brushwork and the astonishingly life-like, life-sized figures in portraits such as *Las Meninas*, which have none of the stiff formality that until then had characterised royal depictions. John Russell, on whom my biographical novel is centred, was said to be “overwhelmingly impressed” by the Spanish master’s paintings, which he saw in 1883 at The Prado in Madrid (Galbally 2008, p. 57).

The Spanish artist grew up in Seville and in 1622 was only twenty-four when he was summoned by royal decree to Madrid. It was a period of royal excess and extravagant building projects that ultimately left Spain in financial ruin. Yet throughout the upheavals, as the King’s courtesans and advisors fell in and out of favour, the artist collected honours and his position within the court steadily rose. While the appointment restricted Velázquez to painting portraits and royal subjects, the move to Madrid also allowed him that rare reward for an artist: financial success and widespread renown during his lifetime.

One of the challenges for Sackville in Madrid, therefore, was to understand what the city meant to the artist in terms of his art and life. Scholar Carolyn Saari, in her study on the role of the environment in psychoanalytic theory, argues that human beings must first “construct a picture of the world in which we live” in order to create “a sense of who we are within the world – something we call identity” (2008, p. 228). Based on her research, Saari claims that this “picture” is vital for individuals to understand the role they can “play in that world” (p. 234). The theory gave me a framework for considering my research question. Do biographical novelists need to first construct a picture of the world of their historical figure to form an idea of the historical figure’s identity? This led me to investigate the ways in which

Sackville's experience of Madrid helped her to imagine the world of Diego Velázquez, and how in turn this helped the author create an authentic voice for her protagonist, "the painter".

4.1.2 Weaving past and present

For biographical novelists, place therefore represents both the real physical location, which they can see and experience, and also place in time, which is to say the world of the historical figure that they must try to imagine. In *Painter to the King* (2018a), Sackville innovatively uses the real and the imagined location in the past to create two interwoven narratives. The present-day narrator, referred to in this chapter as "the narrator", is a fictional author (who may or may not be Sackville; the reader is not told) who has come to Madrid to research and write about the Spanish artist. Following in the footsteps of "Diego", as she calls him, the narrator relates her own observations and experiences in the city as she tries to imagine how it was in the time of Velázquez:

I want to simply set down what it looked like to you, the world, what it felt and smelled like; as I pass through the same and different world now and it passes and I try to grasp what's solid and not solid [...] (p. 112)

By contrast, the main story thread is set in the seventeenth century and recounts the fictional artist's years in the royal court, from his arrival in Madrid to his death forty years later. In Sackville's biographical novel the text slides and jumps between the two narratives, which form a lively dialogue between past and present. Several such shifts are evident in the short passage below, in which the author describes the protagonist's restless night before meeting the King for the first time:

[...] every time the world slides and softens and begins to become senseless, every time he thinks ah, now I'm sleeping! that treacherous thought wakes him and he's back to the hot room [...] and the drone of his own thoughts and the flies. Oh, poor painter—I am with him, I have been here, this hot room; I can't bear nights like this, I know too well, I have not-slept through too many of them. And oh, he needs to sleep. (p. 16)

Whereas the fictional narrator is written in the first person, the voice of the seventeenth century fictional artist is written in the third person. As if to underscore the impossibility of knowing the thoughts and emotions of an historical figure, Sackville creates distance from "the painter": only in the scenes where he paints – and there are many – does the author move right up close and into his head. According to Lackey's (2016a) perception of biofiction, this might exclude *Painter to the King* from consideration as a biographical novel because, he claims, writers in the genre are interested in expressing the interiority of the protagonist. Yet this exegesis employs a wider definition of the term precisely to allow for novels such as Sackville's, which experiment with form and narrative and reveal new possibilities within the genre.

4.2 Encountering place

To understand how Sackville's visit to Madrid helped her shape an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist, it is important to understand what writers may gain from going to place, as opposed to archival research or reading about place. In *The Eye of the Story* (1979), author Eudora Welty devotes a chapter to the role in fiction of place, which she claims is as essential as character or plot. According to Welty, writers must experience the physical environments they write about: being in a landscape, she states, focuses the gaze and brings "awareness, discernment, order, clarity, insight" (p. 123). Sights, sounds, textures, smells, chance occurrences and encounters all become material during site visits. For Welty, this intense attention is an almost spiritual act that contains "beauty and meaning" (p. 123).

The idea that the art of seeing has to be learned is one that has been expressed by many artists and authors, including author Annie Dillard, whose writing is often inspired by landscape and the world around her. Proper, focussed "seeing" requires practice, argues Dillard (1998, p. 20), who points out that humans are poorly equipped for the task: "My eyes account for less than one percent of the weight of my head. I'm bony and dense; I see what I expect".

In *Painter to the King*, Sackville reveals an ability to "see", as well as writerly skill in conveying her response to place and in enlivening her observations with historical research. In the following passage, the sight of the fortress that was once the King's country residence sends the present-day narrator into a delightful delirious rift:

[...] I feel almost menaced by it; the vertigo of the high blank wall made black against the bright sky as I look up. It is dedicated to San Lorenzo, and is built in the shape of a gridiron, square, rigid and forbidding [...] —the gridiron that poor, hilarious Lorenzo was martyred on. They had him sizzling on the fire, those awful Romans, and they said well, have you had enough, and he said— he said!— yes, turn me over, I'm done on this side! Who says saints have no sense of humour? Medium-rare, please! [...] — the scale of the place makes me hysterical, facetious—so much heavy stone and holiness— (Sackville 2018a, pp. 95–6)

The above passage vividly captures Sackville's response to the foreboding fortress that makes her feel "menaced" yet also "hysterical" and "facetious". Place helps us to see but it also makes us *feel*, or as Welty (1990, p. 122) puts it: "location pertains to *feeling*" – and emotion is central to fiction. Human responses to landscape and locations are subjective. There is, however, an additional aspect of being in place which for many writers enhances their capacity to perceive, feel and observe. In the podcast *Imagining the Past* (2017), novelists and scholars Catherine Padmore and Kelly Gardiner refer to "stomping the ground" and "stomping through soggy fields" to describe an important aspect of biofiction research.

4.2.1 “Stomping”

The type of walking described by Padmore and Gardiner aligns with psychogeography theory. It is not simply a matter of “going from A to B” as Bridger points out (2022, p. 1), but rather a “process” which allows the walker to connect with the environment through observation and experience (Richardson 2015, p. 18). According to writer and academic Nigel Krauth Walking enables “the mind to be coupled to the body, the body to be coupled to the environment” (2008). This heightened awareness, which he describes as “animal perception”, allows for an “embodied comprehension” which has informed the work of many famous walker-writers. The poet William Wordsworth trained his microscopic focus on nature; German philosopher Walter Benjamin wrote volumes about the arcades of Paris. Padmore describes how, as she went “stomping” in wet fields in England (2017), she sought a “bodily comprehension” of the environment of Amy Dudley, the sixteenth-century historical figure who the author was using as a fictional protagonist (2009).

In *Painter to the King*, the present-day narrator in Madrid does so much walking that she laments: “These shoes are stupid or the feet are, swollen, too soft, pink and weepy where the strap’s rubbed, paled on the instep and bright red toes” (Sackville 2018a, p. 19). There are numerous references to physical discomfort and the heat, which makes her feel “hot as a dog”; “sick and stupid and foreign” (p. 19). The narrator, like Sackville, is English, and although she loves the sunlight, the Spanish sun is “cruel” to her in return (p. 18).

Sackville does not identify the present-day author-narrator as herself, and the reader cannot know to what extent the narratorial voice is her own. Yet from statements she makes in interviews about her research trip to Madrid it is clear that, in the very least, the author draws heavily on her own experiences and sensory observations in the city to create the voices of both the narrator and character. Walking in Madrid, Sackville “connects with the terrain” and becomes a “critic of the space under observation” (Richardson 2015, p.18). One example of how the author’s personal experience infects the voice of the fictional artist-protagonist is through Sackville’s sense of not belonging in the city. In the novel, the present-day narrator describes feeling “stupid and foreign” in Madrid (p. 19). The ways in which Sackville “connects with the terrain” while walking also help her create the voice of the fictional painter in the past.

Painter to the King sticks closely to the biographical details of the life of Velázquez, who came from Seville to Madrid at the behest of King Philip IV. Within the royal court the painter occupied a unique position. Favoured and later honoured by the King, in life the artist became deeply immersed in the complex layers of the palace. Yet as a provincial and a commoner, Velázquez can never truly belong. This insider/outsider perspective, drawn from place, infects Sackville’s novel. There are evident parallels between the author-narrator’s perspective as an observer and a foreigner, and the point of view of “the painter”. Far from the sea, the fictional artist “feels awkward, hot, an interloper” (p. 20). Despite being “embedded” among the royals, “the painter” is also “removed”; many at the palace, we are told, still refer to him as “the Sevillian” (p. 42). By the end of the novel, after the fictional artist has spent most of his

life at the royal court, he has become “indispensable”, yet remains an outsider “at the just off-centre of everything” (p. 298).

The fictional painter endures the muttered jibes yet makes “no effort to drop his accent” (p. 42) – one of many details that Sackville offers to convey the character’s strong sense of his own identity. Being an insider-outsider provides a wonderful vantage point from which to observe, and “the painter” brings his intense focus to the palace, paying close attention not only to its royal inhabitants but also to the jesters, the dwarves, the court “fools” who are there to entertain:

He observes— — he sees them. And the court as they see it; the world as they see it. This unquiet shadow-world of instabilities—the fools know that nothing’s solid and consensus can’t keep us forever from chaos—he inhabits it. He too can be anywhere, unobtrusive. Watching. (p. 221)

Aided by their outsider status, in *Painter to the King* both the author-narrator in the present and the artist-protagonist in the past are master observers. For biographical novelists, the significance of being in the environment also stems from the knowledge that the historical figure – this dead person who has gripped the author’s imagination and is often the inspiration for their creative undertaking – was once there. A passing thought perhaps crossing a town square, where *their* feet had helped create the worn sheen on the cobblestones; on Belle Ile it was knowing that John Russell had stood on this very spot, painting the cove below. De Certeau (1984, p. 108) claims there is no place that is not “haunted by spirits” of the past. Central to the ability of being able to “invoke” spirits of the past is the fact of being physically there, at ground level, and walking.

This, I suggest, is the secret hope of many biographical novelists when they visit the locations where historical figures lived: to be able to “invoke” these “spirits”. In *Footsteps: Adventures of a Romantic Biographer* (2011), biographer Richard Holmes describes the pilgrimages he makes to locations. With each new biographical subject, he experiences an overwhelming urge to “go directly to the original materials – and most especially to the places” (pp. 1-2/65) where the person lived and worked, in order to get a sense of who they were. Evoking De Certeau, he refers to such journeys as “hauntings” (pp. 5-54). In the Cevennes in France, Holmes followed the exact route walked by Robert Louis Stevenson some forty years earlier. At one point during the walk, the biographer experiences a powerful sense of the Scottish writer’s presence – including Stevenson’s “rank” donkey, Modestine. In terms of Saari’s framework, Holmes had constructed a picture of place and with place came character:

[...] the whole aura of body influence, the sound of Stevenson’s voice, his particular loose-limbed gait, his mixture of frail boniness and energy, his large mobile brown eyes, the quick thin wrists and ankles, the smell of tobacco and cognac and cologne and sweaty Scottish tweed mixed with the rank odour of Modestine [...] (2011, p. 5-56)

Holmes goes on to recount that such “hallucinations” (p. 26) are inevitably followed by disillusionment: though a writer may literally retrace somebody’s steps, the reality is that the subject remains ever beyond reach. You cannot “cross literally into the past” (p. 16). This resonates with Padmore’s (2009) experience in England, where she sought to connect with the historical figure Amy Dudley, on whom she based her fictional protagonist. The novelist and academic describes eating lunch in a café in the crypt of St Mary cathedral in Oxford, knowing that the bones of her sixteenth-century subject were “somewhere between the vaulted ceiling above me and the floor of the cathedral itself”. As Padmore explains: “The moment captured for me some of the persistent strangeness of writing about this woman – I was both tantalising close to her, yet impossibly separate” (2009 np).

The experiences of Holmes and Padmore suggests that going to the places where historical figures once lived obliges writers to confront, “bodily”, the paradoxical presence, and absence, of the figure. With the hallucination comes a sense of disillusionment. In *Painter to the King*, the present-day narrator searches for Velázquez only to confront the reality of his absence. On a busy avenue where a small, high plaque indicates the site of the artist’s house, the narrator takes a photo, feeling “gauche and hot and gawkish”. “Are you at home?” she asks hopefully, addressing “Diego” directly. “I came calling for you ...” (Sackville 2018a, p. 28)

Not only is there no-one home, but the former home of Velázquez is no longer there. The author-narrator therefore confronts a double absence and frustration. This is another reality of visiting locations for biographical novelists: places change. Writers must observe attentively but they must also constantly interrogate what they see. Sackville does this frequently in the narratorial voice, as she does below when the fictional artist arrives for the first time at the royal palace:

At last he enters the palace gate; it has not been a long walk but heat, nerves and threat have made it seem so. He is within the walls—
—What was it like then, this palace? The Alcazar he enters which was not a fairy-tale thing but a fortress, is gone—and four hundred years after, I can’t follow.
(p. 18)

Sackville shows that even the changeability of place and the absence of the historical figure may provide creative stimulation. To create an authentic voice a writer must acknowledge what they can never know; visiting places where the subject of the fictional narrative lived will make that lack of knowledge clearer. In *Painter to the King*, from the first word of Chapter One – “Say” – Sackville embraces and plays with this ambiguity: “—Say he arrived at night, the painter” (p. 3). A few lines later, after relating the young artist’s arrival by night in Madrid, the author wonders about the version she has just recounted. “—True — he must have been anxious to reach the city, but there’s no sense in his arriving in the middle of the night; why risk himself, his goods his horse his faceless servant?” (p. 3)

Every location may be “haunted” by the “spirits of the past”, as De Certeau (1984, p. 108) asserted, however travelling to locations does not mean that writers will necessarily be able to “invoke” them. Place, however, can also work on the imagination indirectly; experiences may take time to process and absorb. During Padmore’s visit to Cumnor, near Oxford, the “real” Amy Dudley remained “remote and

inaccessible” to her (2009). Being in the location forced the author to recognise the limits of her imagination:

The body that walked through Amy’s landscape and wrote about it is one born in the twentieth century. All my tactile and cognitive sensibilities are inscribed with and by this world which will, of course, affect my attempts to empathize with and create an authentic sense of a body born centuries earlier [...] (Padmore 2017)

Yet this understanding, as well as “stomping in soggy fields” (2017), proved nonetheless invaluable: after the trip Padmore found she had “the bones of a portrayal” (2009). Visiting place had enabled the author to construct a picture of Amy Dudley’s world, which Saari (2008) suggests humans must do to understand their own identity. This is true, too, of Sackville, for whom going to Madrid involves seeking and not finding, seeing but “not knowing”. For her, authenticity means including this journey in her writing. Sackville’s approach is embodied in the very last words of the novel, spoken by the present-day narrator, which emphasise at once the tantalising closeness of “the painter” and his absence: “— here you almost are” (2018a, p. 314).

4.3 Conclusion

This chapter explores how going to place helps biographical novelists shape authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical figures. Place has the power to heighten our attentiveness and it also makes us *feel*. Psychogeography theory, which describes the “process” through which the “walker connects with the terrain” and becomes “a critic of the space under observation,” provides a frame for understanding the impact of walking in place for biofiction writers (Richardson 2015, p. 18). Drawing also on Saari’s (2008) theory that human beings need to construct a picture of their world to form a sense of their own identity, I argue that biofiction writers such as Sackville must imagine the world of the historical figure to create a fictional protagonist based on the figure. For biographical novelists, going to the “meaningful locations” (Cresswell 2015, p. 132) of historical figures allows them to draw on their observations and experiences, as well as historical research, to create authentic voices for fictional protagonists.

Notions of place are more nuanced than providing locations for the world of the fictional protagonist based on an historical figure. *Painter to the King* illustrates the profound impact visiting locations can have on approach to the subject, and the narrative shape, in the work of biographical novelists. Going to Madrid changed the direction of Amy Sackville’s project, prompting her to base her fictional protagonist on Velázquez instead of a character of her own invention. For the author, the city was the site of various encounters: not only with the physical place and the imagined world in the past but also with the presence/absence of the historical figure. Experiencing and seeing places for themselves does not allow biographical novelists to know what occurred in the past, or the thoughts, feelings and conversations of the people who once lived there. For Sackville, the not knowing helped her shape not one authentic voice, but two, that made explicit the gaps in the knowledge.

This research made me reconsider the section of my novel which takes place on Belle Ile. While Russell's move to the island did not result in artistic success in terms of recognition and financial reward – at least not during his lifetime – his love for the environment sparked a remarkable creative surge. *A Painter in Paris* includes the Australian artist's first visit to the island one summer. Had I managed to convey why the location was so meaningful to him? How could I draw from my own experiences of the island to make the voice of my fictional artist more authentic? I resolved to revisit this aspect in later drafts.

The following chapter examines another essential creative influence for me and for many biographical novelists who base fictional protagonists on painters from the past: their art. Years ago, the radiant canvases of John Russell gripped my imagination and aroused my curiosity. Later, they inspired me to seek out opportunities to see his work at special exhibitions in London, Sydney, Melbourne and Brittany, and as part of permanent collections at the Queensland Art Gallery and National Gallery of Australia. What exactly had I drawn from studying Russell's paintings? I needed to examine the ways in which the art of artist historical figures helps biographical novelists shape fictional voices for their painter-protagonists.

Chapter Five: Art and creating authentic voices

Twenty years ago in a provincial town in France, the dazzling colour and energy of John Russell's paintings of a rugged coast and wild seas became the seed incident for this thesis. Later, I drew insights from his art to write my biographical novel and to shape my fictional version of the Australian Impressionist. My experience informs this chapter's research question: in biographical novels centred on historical artists, how does the art of the figures help writers shape authentic fictional voices for protagonists?

I argue that paintings, which express the historical artists' world and relationships through aspects such as subject and colour, provide biographical novelists with insights and feelings that influence the writing at a structural level and a sentence level. In this growing sub-category of biofiction centred on historical artists, some of the finest novels achieve a rare coincidence on the page with the expression on the canvas: the brushstrokes and mark-making of the artist may infect the energy, mood and punctuation in the text. A single painting or portrait can also serve as a unifying motif for a novel or as an imagined icon (Byatt, 2). Yet paintings cannot talk. Art poses open-ended mysteries. Writers cannot *know* the thoughts, feelings or intentions of an historical artist at the time they made a work. Nor, in the case of portraits, can novelists know the silent subject – though long study of the work may bestow a *sense* of knowing the painted sitter. Simply, paintings make us *look* and this careful attention to the historical artist's work, which must be subjectively interpreted, helps contemporary biographical novelists bring alive creative lives of the past.

This chapter is informed by scholarship across several academic disciplines, including art history, literature and psychology. Although some of Freud's theories relating to art have been challenged, his wider argument of a link between art and human emotion is supported by recent neuroscience research. According to one well-known psychology study, the impact of seeing a work of art can be powerful: "art viewing engenders myriad emotions, evokes evaluations, physiological reactions, and in some cases can mark or alter lives" (Pelowski et al. 2016, p. 160). It is not within the scope of this chapter to explore in detail the various models of aesthetic experience proposed by scholars. Rather, contemporary art psychology theorists such as Helmet Leder and Marcos Nadal (2014), as well as Pablo Tinio (2013), provide a framework for understanding the essential ways the paintings of historical artists can help writers create subjective visions and authentic voices for their fictional protagonists.

This chapter focusses on two creative works as case studies. *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper* (Chessman 2002) centres on the American Impressionist Mary Cassatt, though it is her little-known sister, Lydia, who is the basis for the fictional protagonist. In *Painter to the King* (2018a), author Amy Sackville draws on the life of Diego Velázquez; later, this chapter examines how she used one painting in particular, the Spanish artist's masterpiece, *Las Meninas*. Thus, while *Lydia Cassatt*, as I will henceforth refer to the work for brevity, reimagines a marginal historical figure, *Painter to the King* centres on a

world-famous painter. Despite this and many other differences, both biographical novels are profoundly influenced by the art of their historical figures and the ways in which the authors responded to it.

5.1 Art and emotion

In an essay on the role of art in contemporary biofiction, art historian Julia Dabbs (2022, p. 219) points out that paintings do more than offer biographical information about artists. According to Dabbs, they “can serve as windows into the artists’ physical, intellectual, and emotional worlds, allowing us to more fully enter into the life of that protagonist, to see what they see, think, and feel” (p. 19). According to author A.S. Byatt, even a painted portrait may “end up as a portrait of the artist, rather than the sitter (2002, p. 41). To imagine the thoughts, feelings and worldview of fictional protagonists based on historical artists, writers draw on historical research, close study of the paintings and their own response to the work. It is this last point I wish to expand on. Though the capacity for paintings, as an artform, to trigger emotions has been disputed by some scholars (Konecni 2015), the idea is widely accepted by many theorists. Leder and Nadal (2014, p. 451) state: “It is so obvious that art can elicit strong emotions that such a remark borders on triviality”. Emotional responses to art vary, they say, from “rage and sadness to joy and awe” (p. 447). The idea that paintings may engender emotion resonates with my personal experience and informs this research.

Some theorists go further by suggesting it is possible, through the artwork, for the feelings of the artist at the time of making the work to be transferred and understood by the viewer. Pablo Tinio (2013, p. 274) describes art as a “two-way conversation” in which the “perceiver” may “recapture some of the thoughts, concepts and emotions of the artist”, which the “perceiver” then reinterprets “within the context of their current motivational states, emotions, thought process and viewing environment”. Relating this to biofiction, Tinio’s theory raises the possibility that writers might, by closely studying the paintings, experience or understand *some* of the thoughts and feelings of their artist figures. Yet how can you know, as a viewer, whether you have understood and correctly interpreted the feelings of an artist? Except if the painter has left a record of their feelings at the time of making the work you cannot, and this not-knowing is something writers must face. It is useful to recall that in this thesis the aims of biographical novelists are analogous with the aims of John Russell and the Impressionists: the writer and the painter seek to portray the “truth” of what *they* perceive rather than to accurately represent the facts.

For biographical novelists, therefore, perhaps the most important thing to be gained from studying a painting is *a sense* of having understood *something*. This was the experience of Jeanette Winterson (1996, p. 8) who, to overcome her “ignorance” of art, committed to studying single pictures for a period of an hour. In *Art Objects: Essays on Ecstasy and Effrontery*, she describes the “constant exchange of emotion” between the painting, the unseen artist and the viewer (p. 19). Over the hour, her reactions and feelings change: initial distractedness was followed by satisfaction – a sense of getting somewhere with the painting – and then increasing irritation: “why doesn’t the picture *do* something?” (p. 9). Winterson’s experience reveals how biofiction centred on artists is underpinned by a conversation between artist/subject/writer as viewer/writer as artist/reader. These interacting relationships extend the

“collaborative approach” described by Jerome de Groot, who states that in historical fiction “meaning is created between novelist and reader” (2015, p. 23).

Ultimately, Winterson likens the experience of studying art to being dropped in a foreign city: “Gradually out of desire and despair, a few key words, then a little syntax make a clearing in the silence” (p. 4). For biographical novelists it is these “clearings in the silence” that provide space for their own interpretations and subjective responses – key elements to creating authentic voices for fictional protagonists. As my case studies reveal, the ways in which biographical novelists draw on the art of historical figures, and the sorts of insights they seek from them, varies considerably. For Sackville, who studied Velázquez’s portraits of the Spanish royals, the challenge was to try to stand in the boots of the one *looking*. She sought to create not so much an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist but rather an authentic *eye* – in the Spanish court, Velázquez was said to be always silently watching and observing (Cumming 2014, p. 128). Chessman, on the other hand, had to try to imagine herself in the position of the subject on the canvas: the introspective woman depicted reading or crocheting, in whom the writer sensed quiet intelligence and a combination of strength and fragility (Sackler 2001; Chessman n.d.).

5.2 *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper*

5.2.1 Discovering Lydia

A literature scholar with a PhD in women’s studies, Harriet Scott Chessman became fascinated with Mary Cassatt’s paintings in the 1980s, drawn to the artist’s warm portrayals of women and the lush palette. Whereas male artists in the late nineteenth century commonly depicted female models as ideals of beauty or seduction, Cassatt painted her models absorbed in an activity: tapestry, reading, or driving a horse-drawn carriage. Born in Pennsylvania, the artist moved to Paris in 1874 where she earned the distinction of becoming one of the few women, and the only American, to be officially associated with the Impressionists. Degas, in particular, admired Cassatt’s paintings and the two occasionally worked together and modelled for each other, although there is no evidence of a romantic attachment. As a female artist in the late nineteenth century, she lacked the freedom of her male colleagues to roam the countryside looking for painting subjects. Instead, Cassatt trained her eye on women in their domain – homes and gardens, mostly.

A frequent model was her older sister Lydia, who along with the pair’s parents had followed Mary to Paris. Chessman was struck by the many portraits the artist did of her sister during an intensively creative period that ended with Lydia’s death in 1882. While the biographic details of Lydia’s life are scant, it is known that the sisters were very close; it is also established that Lydia died aged forty-two, several years after being diagnosed with acute nephritis, then called Bright’s disease. Thus, Lydia was being immortalised on canvas at a time when both artist and model knew she was dying. This fact helped shift Chessman’s attention to the unknown Cassatt sister. As she explains on her author website (Chessman n.d.), the paintings posed an intriguing mystery: “how would Lydia have felt to pose for her ambitious younger sister when she knew her own life would be cut short? It seemed courageous and fascinating”.

5.2.2 Creating “Lyddie”

Literature scholar Teresa Casal states that given the scarce biographical facts of Lydia Cassatt’s life, both her artist sister and Chessman play an important role as “recorders of a life that would otherwise pass unnoticed” (Casal 2012, p. 346)). The early painted “record” of Lydia’s life very much influenced the later written one. To shape the character and voice of Lyddie, the author looked to the portraits and was struck by the “beauty of introspection and emotion” in the art works (Chessman 2001 np). “I have always felt that an intelligent face is a beautiful face, and judging from Cassatt’s images of women, I believe she thought this as well,” states Chessman (2001), who was moved by qualities she perceived in the images of Lydia, specifically her modesty and intelligence. The way the writer seeks to convey these traits in the text is a key aspect to her approach to creating an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist.

The story itself is presented in five short chapters, each one centred around one of Mary Cassatt’s portraits of her sister, colour images of which are helpfully included in the book. Thus, art shapes the narrative literally through the paintings, and entices the writer to approach in prose what the artist captured in paint: the hidden interior world of Lydia Cassatt. Once the author decided on the protagonist, she quickly realised it was important to write in the first-person voice, to allow Lydia to “speak for herself”.

I loved this idea of imagining the voice of a woman whose vision of life – like most people’s – had gone unrecorded. And I loved the idea of the ‘subject’ of a painting really becoming a subject, able to present her vision of the one painting her. (Chessman 2001 np)

The writer selected five portraits of Lydia that she considered the most moving and telling. Each chapter is like a textual tableaux vivant of the painting on which it is based: using the pictures, Chessman imagines the posing sessions, the interactions between the sisters and the point of view of the sitter. Although the author sticks closely to the known facts relating to Mary Cassatt’s life, she does invent an affair with Degas. This allows for some tension and ripples between the fictional sisters, who fondly call each other “Lyddie” and “May”, as Lyddie observes little intimacies between the two artists and realises she will never know romantic love. Chessman’s use of the heterobiographical form allows readers into the fictional protagonist’s private world of unspoken fears and unfulfilled dreams. The writer sought to create textually the intimacy of Cassatt’s portraits: author, like painter, apprehends the meaning in everyday moments.

I think Cassatt might have liked this idea of capturing the moment – taking something evanescent and fleeting, and capturing it, holding it still. This is one of the conundrums of Impressionist painting: Your impressions, of one moment, become something that last. I wished to do something similar in my writing: to take a sequence of moments that might, from the outside, look small and familiar, and to make them memorable, to make them last. (Chessman, 2001 np)

Having selected the paintings, Chessman arranged them chronologically and found that they implied a narrative centred on the relationship between the sisters as they each struggle with the knowledge of Lydia's certain death. The first chapter draws its inspiration (and title) from *Woman Reading*, a portrait of Lydia absorbed in a newspaper, her face in profile, suffused in rose. Despite the appearance of wellness on canvas, both the model and the artist know Lydia is dying. The gap between life and its representation in art, between what we see and what we choose to see, the notion of truth in art: these themes of the novel are illuminated in the following passage, when Lyddie sees for the first time the half-finished portrait.

'May I see?' I ask.

'It's only a start,' she says, and I look at a swath of white paint – the *fichu* around my shoulders – and the beginnings of a woman's face, in profile, the nose and mouth painted with delicacy, the eye a darker line, and a sketchy band of brown for her hair, whitish-pink broad strokes for her cap. [...] *Who is this?* I ask myself, for I can't think it's me, and yet I know, with exquisite pleasure, that it is. (Chessman 2002, pp. 21–2)

The qualities of "intelligence", "modesty" and "introspection" that Chessman perceived in the face of Lydia, as painted by her sister, are mirrored in the text (quoted in Sackler 2001). Lyddie, we learn, would much rather pose reading *Madame Bovary*, however May states that "women are always pictured reading books" and insists newspapers are more "modern" (Chessman 2002, p. 11). Lyddie "flinches" under the intense gaze of her sister's appraising "painter's eyes" (p. 7); at the same time, posing gives her purpose and makes her feel useful. The protagonist describes herself as "plain as a loaf of bread" (p. 7) yet to her sister she is "beautiful" (p. 16). By reimagining the studio painting session, the author conveys Lyddie's ambivalence toward sitting for May, as well as the gap between how the model sees herself and how she is seen by the artist.

The second chapter, *Tea*, centres on a portrait of Lydia painted eighteen months later. Seated elegantly in an armchair, her gloved hands holding a cup of tea, the model gazes across the room as if listening carefully to a conversation with someone beyond the frame. Yet Chessman does not use the portrait in a literal way; in *Tea*, the sunlit canvas belies a darker reality. In the novel the painting sessions are interrupted when Lyddie, whose illness fluctuates, becomes bedridden. Days pass in an indistinct haze of vomiting and pain. When she is better, she poses again. The sisters' need for one another is encapsulated in this chapter: May needs Lyddie to finish the painting while the latter needs to model to give purpose to her remaining years. As Lyddie privately reflects on the "miracle" of being able to hold the teacup again, May appears to try to restore her sister to health, daub by daub, with her paintbrush (p. 73).

The next portrait that appears in the novel was painted only five months later, yet in *Lydia Crocheting in the garden*, the model is pensive and pale. The rose in her cheeks has vanished. Chessman's imaginative incursion into the creation of this work raises tension as Lyddie despairs at her sister's inability to face up to her illness. Yet if art can conceal truths, as it does in the first chapters, now it reveals one. While May is unable to acknowledge the reality in words, she expresses it in paint. This is the revelation Lyddie experiences when confronted with her own image, as seen through the eyes of her sister:

I see something else, but I find it difficult to say this to May. *It's illness she's discovered.* I gaze at the shadows around the woman's eyes (*my eyes*), the muted color of her mouth (*my mouth*), the down-turned lips. I comprehend how May sees her (*me*) – not what she acknowledges, perhaps, but what she knows. (p. 100)

Later in this chapter, Lyddie thinks back to the portrait and almost shakes “with sorrow and fury” (p. 103). Drawing from the actual portrait, Chessman exposes her protagonist's deeper longings – for the love she will never know, the children she will never have, for the time she does not have. By contrast May's days “glitter, round and new, like gold coins in a huge jar, filled almost to the brim, her only worry how to spend them” (p. 104).

The final chapter centres on *Lydia at a Tapestry Frame*. Unlike the previous two portraits, in this picture Lydia appears contentedly absorbed, as if the task of doing the tapestry is at that moment fulfillment enough. It conveys the understated beauty contained in a moment, a theme which informs the novel. By choosing to end on a more hopeful image, Chessman offers not a different outcome for her protagonist, but rather art as a consolation, as Lyddie faces her future and certain death.

Terrible, to imagine a world continuing beyond my own dissolving; yet what if I am a presence for May, and for others too, leaving a trace, like the swatch of white light on the top of this embroidery frame? Maybe I should not be so afraid of vanishing after all. (p. 161)

The paintings of Mary Cassatt influence Chessman's novel in profound ways: they inspired the structure, the narrative, the themes; they led Chessman to base her fictional protagonist not on the artist but on Lydia. Just as Frida Kahlo's paintings had an emotional resonance for author Kate Braverman, Mary Cassatt's portraits of her sister inspired feelings in Chessman. Both biographical novels convey poignancy by giving voice to a fictional protagonist who is dying. However, whereas in *The Incantation of Frida K* (2003), Kate Braverman sought to connect with the “wounded woman” artist (p. 242), for Chessman creating an authentic voice meant seeking to capture the qualities of introspection and intelligence she perceived in Mary Cassatt's portraits of Lydia and trying to imagine what it must have been like to pose for a picture knowing you were soon to die. Thus, while Braverman's biographical novel embodies the fierce originality of Kahlo's paintings, *Lydia Cassatt* honours the silent figure in the canvases by drawing attention to her vital role as muse, and the beauty Chessman saw in her. Using the framework of psychology theorist Pablo Tinio (2013), it is not unreasonable to propose that Chessman, through her writing, recaptured some of the emotion and respect Mary Cassatt felt for her beloved sister.

5.3 Painter to the King

Painter to the King (Sackville 2018) is also, at heart, a biographical novel about a relationship – in this case between court painter Diego Velázquez and his patron King Philip IV of Spain. However, whereas Chessman uses Cassatt's art to imagine the fictional possibilities of the relationship between model and sitter, Sackville is interested in what the portraits of Velázquez reveal about his eye and the physical act of painting. In *Lydia Cassatt*, a sense of proximity is created through the first-person narration which reveals the inner world of the fictional protagonist's private thoughts and feelings. By contrast, Amy

Sackville steps right up close to the marks on the canvas. One powerful human response to art identified by Leder and Nadal (2014, p. 447) in their research is “awe”, and this provides a frame for understanding the emotion that underpins Sackville’s fascination with Velázquez’s masterpiece, *Las Meninas*.

Reading *Painter to the King* evoked for me the words of Robert Henri, an American Impressionist and art teacher who, like Cassatt, and also John Russell, lived in Paris in the late nineteenth century. Henri (2007, p. 13) claimed that a great deal could be discerned from studying a single smear of paint: “The brush stroke at the moment of contact carries inevitably the exact state of being of the artist at that exact moment into the work, and there it is, to be seen and read by those who can read such signs ...” It is this kind of close attention to the feeling and intention behind every mark and daub of pigment that sums up the way Sackville approached the paintings of Velázquez.

5.3.1 Writing “the painter”

When Sackville went to Madrid to see the Spanish artist’s works she was just beginning research for a novel about an imagined court painter. The paintings of Velázquez changed the direction of Sackville’s work, prompting the author to use the identity and life of the historical artist to create a fictional protagonist. The remainder of this chapter looks at the ways in which the writer drew in particular on Velázquez’s masterpiece *Las Meninas* by using it as a frame for the novel and to inform the way the text plays with perspective.

To appreciate why Sackville chose to begin and end her novel with this painting, it is important to understand the way the picture encapsulates Velázquez’s supreme skill as an artist. Those who have been to the Prado and seen *Las Meninas* (“the maid servants”) describe a disconcerting impression of having stumbled into the palace where the royal family is gathered “like the guests at a surprise party who are trying to keep still and silent in advance of your arrival” (Cumming 2014, p. 118). The princess child stares from the canvas with “unabashed curiosity”; her maidservant performs a curtsy; one of the dwarfs gazes back at the viewer – only the nun seems oblivious. On close inspection, viewers see a mirror, reflecting the blurred miniature images of the King and Queen from their position outside the frame. The eyes of the beholder lock with the regard of a figure in the shadows, staring politely but slightly impatiently, his paintbrush mid-air: it is Velázquez himself, anxious to return to painting the scene you have just disturbed. Art critic and author Laura Cumming describes *Las Meninas* as “the most spectacular curtain raiser in art” (p. 118), one of the very few paintings “that one experiences as if it were part of the living world” (p. 121).

Sackville’s novel, which involves two interweaving narratives, begins in the present with the author-narrator (who may or may not be Sackville) seeing Velázquez’s big picture for the first time. She marvels at how “real” the life-like figures are, and the way their forms dissolve when you approach the canvas. The narrator conveys a deep interest in what A.S Byatt calls “the wordless skin of paint of rhythms of marks that make up the painted portrait” (2002, p. 49). “Step closer, and it’s all just a surface of smears; rough daubs, features half-formed, hands that only gesture at the shape of hands. The painter’s brush has a long handle – made only of a swipe of that same brush” (Sackville 2018, p. xiii). The opening pages of

Painter to the King convey a powerful sense of awe; the author-narrator is so moved by *Las Meninas* and the magician-like mastery of Velázquez that she declares: “And from now on, from this moment on, I am always following, always trying to follow” (p. xiii).

Unlike Chessman’s approach to her “sitter” protagonist in *Lydia Cassatt*, in *Painter to the King* readers are not taken into the world of feeling and thought of “the painter”. Sackville is interested in the court painter as an uncannily skilled observer, a trait which is attributed to Velázquez by art historians (Cumming 2014, p. 128), and evidenced by the author in the artist’s paintings and attention to detail. Part of Sackville’s approach to authenticity is to create not so much an authentic voice but the *eye* of her fictional protagonist. “I’d like to borrow your eyes”, the novel’s author-narrator states at one point, addressing “Diego” directly (Sackville 2018a, 5). In passages such as the one below, where the fictional artist prepares to paint *Las Meninas* and studies the royals gathered before him, the text conveys the movement of “the painter’s” roving eye.

— Here they all are. Stand on the brink of the light and by this light regard them: maids-of-honour, dwarves, a sleeping dog. Daylight, flooding from the unseen window, falls knowingly upon them— lightly upon the lesser beings, touching only the borders of their contours, but falling fully on the face of the Infanta, her white-gold hair, her white skin, the white satin of her wide skirts [...] Look though how they almost move, how they might easily at any moment join hands and dance a jig [...] (p. 285)

Close-up images of *Las Meninas* are included throughout *Painter to the King*, many of them a detail of the eye of Velázquez from the self-portrait he included in the picture. In an interview, Sackville explains that in the text she sought to play “with how perspective functions” in the same way that the painting “throws your gaze around so that you don’t quite know where you stand in relation to it” (quoted in Wheeler 2018). Yet Sackville takes the influence of Velázquez’s art even further by trying to replicate, through syntax, the physical act of painting. She does this partly through the conspicuous use of dashes, whose lengths vary in correlation to the effect the author wishes to achieve:

I wanted the language to feel gestural in the way of painting; it might be that you’re tracing back over something, you’re pausing for a moment, you’re lifting the brush off and going back over. Having done that in a fairly arbitrary ad hoc way, I then made a rule which I don’t expect the reader to distinguish [...] but there is a rule for how those dashes function. Part of the narrative voice, to me, is the texture of the language. (Sackville 2018c)

The use of the dashes is most effective in the novel in evoking the physicality of painting. In the following passage, the fictional artist grapples with the form of the King’s horse. The syntax conveys the gestures of the paintbrush, the way it hesitates and hovers in the air, before touching the canvas.

He works and reworks over it, turning and pressing the brush upon the palette, swiping the excess off on the corner of the canvas, his habit— — dip, swipe, dip,

swipe: The leg of the horse curves up and into the belly here, like— — Here, the
top of the leg rounding into the socket like— — The curve of the bell barrel-like—
— — No (Sackville 2018a, p. 33)

The royal horse evades Sackville’s protagonist; on the canvas the legs he has painted look like “the legs of another animal like they’re sewn on horribly” (p. 34). As “the painter” struggles to get the forms right, the text on the page – interrupted by em-dashes and double em-dashes while also lacking in full-stops and other punctuation – increasingly evokes the protagonist’s frustrated thoughts and the action of making marks and revising them.

The swish and thickness of the ropes of horse-hair thick at the root of it
muscle thick at the root lifting the swish of it into a plume like— —

Like— — Like it’s about to shit in the street. No. (p. 33)

“The painter” doggedly continues until finally:

Unpaint it again

Again

— —

—

Unpaint it

He starts over. (p. 34)

The paintings of Diego Velázquez influence *Painter to the King* in essential ways. Like Chessman, paintings led Sackville to the historical figure on whom she bases her fictional protagonist – though in the latter’s case the subject is the artist not the sitter. By reimagining the roving, observant eye of the seventeenth-century master as well as his brush marks and physical gestures, and by allowing these factors to influence the form of her sentences, the author creates a voice for her fictional protagonist whose authenticity derives, in part, from the close attention she paid to Velázquez’s canvasses.

5.4 Conclusion

This chapter investigates the question: how do biographical novelists use the art of historical figures to shape authentic fictional voices for protagonists based on those figures? Writers draw information and insights from paintings and respond emotionally to aspects such as colour and subject, in ways that can shape the structure of the novel, inspire scenes and infect the writing at a sentence level. Whilst we cannot know the feelings or thoughts of historical artists, recent studies in aesthetic psychology suggest that *some* of the feelings or thoughts of the artist can be transmitted and understood by the viewer (Tinio 2013). Yet the encounter with a painting is an interaction between the work itself and the knowledge, personal experience, insight and mood the viewer brings to it. As Laura Cumming points out in *Face to the World* (2014, p. 131), the grace of Velázquez’s work, which so vividly and precisely realises its figures, lies in the fact that it “accepts as many answers as there are viewers”. For biographical novelists seeking to

create authentic worlds and voices for fictional protagonists, the vital aspect of studying the art of artist-figures is its capacity to make them feel *something*.

The biographical novels examined in this chapter are shaped and influenced in profound ways by the work of the artist historical figures. Art shapes the narrative, literally, and draws the writer to approach in prose what the artist approached in paint. Mary Cassatt's portraits of Lydia led Chessman to illuminate a "forgotten" life that had been overshadowed by a famous sibling. Through her fictional protagonist, she seeks to replicate in text the modesty, intelligence and yearnings the author perceives in the painted figure of Lydia.

For Amy Sackville, seeing the work of Velázquez led to a fascination with the process of painting that infects the form of the writing down to sentence level. In *Painter to the King*, the author uses a system of dashes and punctuation to replicate the hesitations, gestures and alert, flickering gaze of "the painter". *Las Meninas*, which showcases the Spanish artist's rare powers of observation, inspired the author to create not so much a voice but an authentic "eye" for her fictional protagonist.

It was the radiant art of John Russell that many years ago caught my attention and drew me to the painter. In the final chapter of this exegesis, I turn the lens on my creative practice to examine the ways in which my approach to appropriating his identity, as well as visits to place and studying his art, helped me create an authentic voice for my fictional protagonist based on the Australian Impressionist.

Chapter Six: *A Painter in Paris*

“I had him but he’s gone. I can’t hear him, can’t see him, can’t write him on the page. Will he ever come back?” (Turnbull 2020, pers. notes)

The challenge to create an authentic voice for my fictional protagonist based on John Russell led to the research question that underpins this thesis. As the above entry from my writing diary suggests, pursuing this goal in *A Painter in Paris* was not always straightforward; there were many moments when the voice of my fictional protagonist eluded me. The challenge pushed me to seek creative stimulus by exploring fresh research pathways. Now in the exegetical chapter, I examine this process and explore the following research question: How did ethical issues/place/art help me create a voice for my fictional protagonist based on John Russell?

My creative project obliged me to look hard at the historical evidence relating to the artist, as well as at the places where he lived and his art, and then to imagine beyond the facts by following ethical protocols and drawing on informed imagination as well as my subjective interpretations. During the writing process, ethical dilemmas led me to interrogate my creative aims and negotiate boundaries for what I could, and could not, invent in the historical “gaps”. Visiting Paris and Belle Ile enabled me to draw on my “bodily” experience of place and to connect with Russell’s physical environment in ways that helped me imagine my fictional protagonist. The Australian Impressionist’s paintings and portraits influenced my novel at a structural level by directly inspiring numerous painting scenes and, through aspects such as subject and colour, they also provided essential insights about Russell’s artistic ambition, his relationships and his humanity.

This chapter, which includes extracts from my biographical novel, as well as from my writing diary, draws on primary research conducted in 2017 when I went to France. The field trip came about following an invitation by filmmaker Catherine Hunter to participate in a documentary on the Australian painter. It involved a few days in Paris, where Russell had been an art student, as well as one week on Belle Ile, the island which captured the artist’s heart and inspired his greatest creative surge. My role in the documentary was to provide background on the painter and to carry out interviews in French; I was also a subject of interview.

During this trip I also visited galleries to see Russell’s work, including the Musée de Morlaix in Brittany and the National Gallery in London. In 2018, the survey exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, *John Russell: Australia’s French Impressionist*, provided a further opportunity to study the artist’s paintings.

While this research journey was led by my creative practice, my critical study also offered me ways of thinking about issues that arose during my practice. Chapter Six is therefore also informed by the theoretical frameworks I have mentioned earlier, including Lionel Trilling’s (1974, p. 12) notion of authenticity as a “generative force”. An “authentic voice” in biofiction is therefore one which, by definition, aims to be not imitative but rather a new creative offering. Literature theorist Michael

Lackey's approach to ethics in biofiction extended my understanding of the genre in which I had chosen to write. His argument that biographical novelists use historical figures to express symbolic and "dual-temporal" truths (2016b, p. 165) illuminated my own process and the way I was using Russell to explore what it means to lead a meaningful creative life.

During the writing process of *A Painter in Paris* I identified the lenses which shape my research project: ethics, place and art. These lenses direct this exegetical chapter, which is divided into three sections. How did I create an authentic voice for my fictional protagonist based on Russell drawing on ethical issues, place and art?

6.1 Ethical dilemmas

From the outset, I approached my creative project with certain ethical guidelines in mind. I strongly felt that using John Russell's identity and life meant learning as much as I could about the facts of his life and art. I carried out extensive primary and secondary research and managed to locate the whereabouts of Russell's "missing" notebooks, which I was able to view in an attic room in rural Brittany. At times my desire to know the facts led me down fascinating and obscure pathways, such as when I made recipes from *The Art of Cuisine* (1966), an old cookbook of recipes invented by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, who was an art student with Russell.

My plan for writing my novel was to respect the facts and invent only in the historical "gaps", but this simple guideline soon led to further questions. Did I have carte blanche to invent *anything* in the spaces between known facts? How would I tell if an invention or imagined scene was ethical? There is not scope in this chapter to explore all the ways these issues influenced my approach to fictionalising John Russell. Here I focus on two examples drawn from my writing: one concerning an invented event where the fictional protagonist has sex with the governess who cared for his children, and the other concerning fictional scenes based on the biographically truthful death of Russell's son. In the first example, an ethical framework caused me to delete the scene, while in the second, my research into ethics helped me to complete an important sequence in the novel. Thus, my creative practice and the ethical approaches I needed to consider led me to establish three further protocols in addition to those I had already discovered through my research, and this expanded framework gave me greater clarity when it came to writing the voice of my fictional protagonist.

From an historical perspective, little is known about Russell's life immediately following the death of his first wife, Marianna Mattiocco, who by all accounts the artist loved dearly. These years represent an historical "gap" and therefore, according to my initial logic, they gave me unlimited space to invent. Early drafts of my novel covered this period, and one preliminary version included a scene in which my protagonist had sex with his children's young governess. The point was to show the fictional artist careening in grief over the loss of his beloved muse, lover and wife, and making a poor decision. My writing diary records my husband's response when I asked him to read the scene:

He [my husband] pointed out the possibility of adverse reaction to something like that from descendants. How would they react to an invented

scene where JPR is portrayed badly? You're using his *name*. Russell sounds like a total bastard. (Turnbull 2017, pers. notes)

This discussion brought home to me the fact that although my story was set in the past, readers would perceive the characters through a contemporary lens. By twenty-first-century standards there was a lot that was concerning about a fifty-something man having sex with a teenage employee. Through my fictional portrayal, I risked turning Russell into a man who abused his power and showed careless disregard for a vulnerable girl – possibly into someone who committed a criminal act. The issue might have been partly resolved by increasing the age of the fictional governess, yet the scene raised broader questions concerning my approach to John Russell.

I wondered whether the scene would be more ethical if in my biographical novel I did not use the artist's name. Perhaps it might be. Yet I knew from my experience in book publishing and my study of biographical novels that a publisher would likely insist on establishing the connection with Russell regardless, for marketing purposes – probably on the book cover. Further, by that point the fictional protagonist was very much fixed in my mind as drawn from Russell. By renaming him, would I simply be avoiding the responsibilities that come with using the identity of a real person for fictional purposes? Michael Lackey (2016b, pp. 31-2) argues that biographical novelists are simply more “transparent” than most novelists, in that they reveal the source of the characters they create. I decided that if I was going to commit “identity theft”, I preferred to do so openly and honestly.

I then interrogated my right to knowingly portray my fictional protagonist in a way that potentially might damage Russell's reputation and offend his descendants. It was not a question of legal right; under the laws of many countries, including Australia, dead people cannot be defamed. The issue was ethical, and it made me consider my motivation for writing my creative work, which had been inspired by a fascination with his art and life story and a sense of personal connection. I had no wish to knowingly cause damage to the artist's reputation. On the contrary, I hoped my biographical novel would bring attention to Russell's life and work. In the following draft of my novel, I deleted this scene; later, when I decided to concentrate on a narrower timeframe and focus on Russell's years as an art student in Paris, it became irrelevant. Yet the scene helped me expand on the ethical protocols I had already discovered during my research. In particular I saw the importance of interrogating your inventions to determine the creative purpose they serve; I also resolved that it was important to avoid causing harm, through inventions, to historical figures and their descendants. This contrasted with *The Incantation of Frida K* (2003) and the approach taken by author Kate Braverman; for her, authenticity meant pursuing her own artistic vision even if it meant changing the facts of Kahlo's relationship with Diego Rivera.

As part of my journey into the ethics of writing biofiction, I also needed to define what inventions *were* ethical. As this next example from my creative practice shows, the experience of creating character motivation also raised considerations. It is a known fact that in 1886 Russell went to Italy with his wife Marianna and their infant son, Jean-Paolo (“Jack”). The paintings the artist did during the first month or so of their journey reveal a new confidence and willingness to experiment with brighter colour. It is also a

matter of historical record that while the family was in Sicily, young Jack became ill and tragically died. After burying their first-born in Italy, the heartbroken couple returned to Paris alone.

In *A Painter in Paris*, I used the historical facts surrounding this trip, including the death of Russell's son. However, to raise the dramatic and emotional stakes for my fictional artist, I invented a motivation for him to travel to Sicily – artistic ambition. In *A Painter in Paris*, the fictional protagonist wants to paint a major work to submit to the prestigious Paris Salon exhibition. The winter light in Italy's south, he thinks, will be perfect. And Sicily, with its Greek ruins and smoking volcanoes, offered the kind of dramatic landscape setting that appealed to the academic taste of the Salon jury. The trip was a chance for him to make his name as an artist. In my novel, the fictional protagonist is so preoccupied with his big painting that at first he pays little attention when Jack starts to sniffle and grizzle. "Lately, I'd been so absorbed in my work that I'd barely seen my son," admits the fictional artist (Turnbull 2022, p.270). When Jack dies in Sicily of pneumonia, the protagonist blames himself. The following passage from my biographical novel reveals the fictional artist's mindset after the couple has returned to Paris:

Like a voracious gut-worm it gnawed my insides, mostly in the bleak hours between one day and the next. But what kept me awake were not distorted night fears, they were cold clear truths. If it weren't for me Jack might still be alive. Perhaps if we'd stayed in Cassino he may not have caught a cold which developed into pneumonia. Instead I dragged Marianna and Jack to Sicily. And for what? To paint a picture that would make my reputation, that might be Salon-worthy. Regrets swarmed like wasps. Why didn't I heed the Mattioccos' warnings? I'd made a promise to protect Marianna but what had I done for dear Jack? (Turnbull 2022, p. 270)

The imagined motivation for the trip allows me to express an emotional truth about grief and gnawing parental guilt. The invention has a purpose, and it served my creative vision of an artist who is frequently torn between his passion for his art and his love for his family. Portraying the fictional Russell as absorbed in his painting – possibly a bit selfish – does not to my mind damage his reputation. These sorts of character flaws are human. The artist's reimagined journey to Sicily does not, in my opinion, constitute a dramatic invention of the sort that ought to be mentioned in an author's note. While there is no evidence that Russell ever aimed to submit any work to the Paris Salon, it is not beyond the realms of possibility. Nevertheless, reviewing a first draft of the fictional scene using Lackey's ethical theoretical framework was a useful exercise that gave me clarity about my approach to fictionalising Russell.

I had understood from my research certain ethical protocols for biographical novelists, namely: i) carry out extensive research relating to the historical figure, including interviews if necessary, as part of the process of careful attention; ii) use informed imagination and also interrogate the limits of informed imagination; iii) determine and uphold your truth contract with readers; iv) include a paratext which makes explicit significant inventions. Now, my work on my novel led me to add two further protocols: v) avoid causing harm, through inventions, to historical figures (their reputations) and their descendants; vi) interrogate your inventions to determine they serve a creative purpose.

Although the death of his son was undoubtedly a pivotal event in the historical painter's life, it was not essential for me to go to Sicily to write these fictional scenes. However, to create a voice for my fictional protagonist I needed to get a sense of the places where Russell had lived and worked. According to the French philosopher Michel de Certeau (1984, p. 108), all places offer the possibility of encounters with "spirits of the past". Would I sense John Russell's spirit on Belle Ile or in Paris? How would these visits help me create an authentic voice for my fictional protagonist? In 2017, I headed to France to find out.

6.2 Place

A Painter in Paris focusses on the years 1884–1888, when John Russell was an art student in Paris. During this time, in June 1886, he made his pivotal first trip with his family to Belle Ile, an island off the Brittany coast. On the "Wild Coast", an unlikely chance encounter with Claude Monet changed the direction of the Australian's art. Russell was so drawn by the landscape's rugged beauty that later he moved to Belle Ile, where he and his family lived happily for twenty years. Consequently, while most of my novel takes place in Montmartre, where the artist lived and attended Atelier Cormon, it also includes a chapter of his visit to Belle Ile.

Like scholar and novelist Catherine Padmore (2017), I was "drawn to my subject's places". Given how strongly the Australian responded to the island during his first visit, going there seemed to me essential to create an authentic voice for my fictional protagonist based on the historical figure. I hoped to gain a sense of the place in the present (*genius loci*), to connect with Russell's world in the past and, perhaps, to get a sense of Russell himself. Most of all I wanted to understand what it was about the place that led him to move to the remote island and prompted an extraordinary creative surge in his art. Perhaps inevitably, given these high hopes, my first reaction upon seeing Belle Ile was one of disappointment. Seen from the ferry from Morlaix, the island looked undramatic, like a low flat cushion sitting idly on the sea.

My impression changed, however, when I arrived at the Cote Sauvage, where the land abruptly plunges 100 metres into the sea. My trip notes record my excitement at seeing Les Aiguilles, the monumental "needle rocks" which lie just off the coastline out to sea: "Rocks with sharp points, like tips of a sword. Ridges like blades. Dramatic. Grandiose, Dantesque!" (Turnbull 2017, pers. notes). Seeing Les Aiguilles in real life moved and engaged me in a way that photos of the view and even paintings of it by Russell and Monet had not. As fresh salt air filled my lungs and the ocean breeze brushed my face, I felt awed by the irregular, sea-sculpted forms, with their contrasts of light and shade. Being present in the location opened a pathway to Russell as I began to puzzle over the landscape as he might have done. How do you capture the feathery quality of the late afternoon sunlight? What colour is the shadowed areas of the rocks? I understood then how, more than a century earlier, the sight might have thrilled and challenged the Australian painter.

The experience shaped my thinking and fed directly into my writing. The moment of seeing the rocks had to be significant for my protagonist. Thus, in *A Painter in Paris*, I make clear my fictional artist's initial disappointment at Belle Ile, when he despondently likens the island to a "Breton crepe" (Turnbull 2022, p. 226). That only makes his first sighting of the Cote Sauvage more "shocking and exhilarating":

The subject of this canvas was the fantastically jagged rocks not far from the shore. *Les Aiguilles*, the Needles. They burst through the surface, darkly indigo against the rose-gold sky. Some, true to their name, were slender and stupendously sharp, others resembled ancient pyramids or crumbling monuments. Standing on the cliffs, not a figure or manmade thing in sight, I undid my flies. Into the ether I released a joyous sprinkling arc. It was a wonderful sight. My piss – briefly luminous and rainbow-coloured in front of the magnificent rocks and behind them the setting sun – somehow seemed the genius masterstroke that finished the picture. (p. 226)

Where Sackville used her experience of place to create an authentic first-person voice through the use of a contemporary narrator who spoke to the reader alongside the painter character, I used my own experience of place to directly inform what my fictional protagonist feels and sees. The Cote Sauvage has changed little since Russell's first visit. Thus, I was able to imagine the experience of Russell, as I had come to understand him, and to picture him in his world. Going to the island did not allow me to know what he had thought and felt, however it enabled me to draw on my own wonder at the landscape.

On Belle Ile, I spent much of my time walking along the coastal trail that wends along the cliff-tops. In Chapter Four I examined the notion of "bodily comprehension" of place, and how this is heightened by the walking – or as Catherine Padmore (2009, np) called it, "stomping". I visited the island in June, which was when Russell and his family arrived; the artist too would have seen the landscape covered in swathes of gold gorse and low pink thrift. Striding and swinging my arms, I felt thoroughly alive; the combination of being in place and in motion heightened my senses. "Honey, salt, strong seaweed smell [...] around certain coves with olive-brown seaweed over the rocks," I wrote in my travel notes. On one walk I challenged my fear of heights, going right to the very edge of the cliffs by sliding forward on my stomach. Peering over the void at the sky and sea I felt giddy and afraid; I also felt, viscerally, an overwhelming sense of space. I thought about Russell and how in Paris he might have begun to yearn for space – I did after several years living in the city. My experience and reflections on the cliff-top helped shape the way I saw my protagonist and conveyed his voice:

As we headed out Goulphar Bay onto the great plain of ocean I felt the cage of my ribs expand. In Sydney I'd loved to sail on the harbour. Whereas Marianna said she felt small and frightened on the water, crushed between the hemispheres of sea and sky, I felt utterly at home, free to be wholly me. Luminous blue overhead, bottomless ultramarine beneath, salt air scouring my throat and chest – I couldn't keep the grin off my face. (Turnbull 2022, p. 236-7)

During my trip to France, at times I also had to confront the limitations of visiting place. It is impossible to see the world through the eyes of another, or to know the world as it was. Places change – even places such as the Wild Coastline, which has been mostly protected from development. I was reminded of these truths when I went to the site where Russell's house once stood. "Chateau de l'Anglais", as locals called

it, was demolished in the 1970s, and in its place there is now a large Thalasso spa hotel which caters mostly to wealthy Parisians. Russell, who once declared that “sophisticated society” was “rotten”, would have hated it.

In Paris, where much of my biographical novel is set, I experienced more challenges. From my historical research I knew that in Russell’s day Montmartre was part slum, part rural village, with vineyards and goats and chickens. Back then there was no Sacré-Cœur Basilica; the top of la Butte, as the hill was called by locals, was razed earth. The following excerpt from my travel notes relates my first evening in the area:

Great night walking around Montmartre. Sat on the steps outside Sacré-Cœur, Paris spread out below, pale and perfect, windows catching pink evening light. Loads of tourists, young people, lots of beers and drinking. Guys from les banlieues with old-style ghetto blasters playing rap, hip hop. Atmosphere somewhere between celebratory and dangerous – it wouldn’t take much for it to tip. Night drops and lots of Africans sell trinkets. Madame madame. It’s late and he’s following me, I keep walking. Madame madame. I feel bad and stop. His smile is brilliant, so white, like [a] crescent of moon. He points the laser pointer onto the Sacré-Cœur and high above us the sharp green spot wiggles and dances across the basilica’s great dome. Wow! How much? 20 euros. What? Wave my hand and walk on. Madame madame, for you 10 euros! I buy it for Oliver. How many do you sell in a day I ask? Sometimes lots. Some days none: he’s a sans papier so when the police come he runs. I wonder if this is the life he dreamed of when he left Senegal. Why didn’t I just pay him 20?

What does all this have to do with JPR?

The walk which began so positively – “great night” – ends on a note of futility. Instead of connecting me to Russell, being in the location widened the distance between my present and his world of the past. Yet visits to place, I discovered, are also an interaction between the location and an individual at a given point in time. The next morning, in daylight, my attention was drawn by the things that had not changed since Russell’s time: the buildings with high entrance doors, the arrow-straight boulevards and, running off them, the narrow medieval streets. Thinking about social work theorist Carolyn Saari’s (2008) argument that humans must first construct a picture of their environment to form an idea of their identity was useful to my process. To my fictional colonial artist, newly arrived in Paris, the pale buildings glowed as if they had been dunked in “fresh cream”; the enamel street plaques were “dazzling” (Turnbull 2022, p. 100).

Whilst I did not experience a sense of Russell in Montmartre, the visit allowed me to make small observations that helped me imagine the world of my fictional protagonist, and then his place within that world. As with author Amy Sackville in *Painter to the King* (2018), these sensory details infect my writing. However, whereas Sackville’s notion of authenticity resides in being explicit about the “presence of the present” (Harris 2017, p. 197) through the use of two narrators, for me pursuing authenticity meant

using my impressions and experiences of place to imagine my way into Russell's world of the late nineteenth century.

These field trips to the places where Russell lived and worked provided insights and experiences that could not be gained from reading historical accounts of place. Visiting locations in the present helped me imagine the world of my fictional protagonist and to draw on my subjective response to place to create his voice in my biographical novel. On these trips I also had to confront the impossibility of knowing the places as they were in the past and seeing them as they appeared to a dead other. Perhaps the closest I could come to seeing the world through the eyes of John Russell was to study the artist's art.

6.3 Art

The impact of seeing a work of art can be powerful, it can "mark or alter lives" according to one well-known aesthetic psychology study (Pelowski et al. 2016, p. 160). In my case, the art of John Russell provided the seed for my research project, and it also helped me shape an authentic voice for my fictional protagonist based on the artist. To examine how, I focus on one particular painting – a portrait – and the multiple ways in which it influenced my writing.

6.3.1 Portrait, *Vincent van Gogh*

Despite being renowned as an Impressionist and a landscape painter, Russell was a highly skilled portraitist. Perhaps his best-known work in this genre is of his Dutch friend, Vincent van Gogh. Painted in Paris in 1886, the portrait delighted its subject and was admired by Russell's peers at Atelier Cormon, one of whom described it as an "admirable likeness" (Galbally 2008, p. 135). In 2018, the Russell survey exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales provided an opportunity to study the canvas up close.

The portrait helped me situate Russell's art practice in 1886. Unlike Russell's later, looser works in the Impressionist style, the sombre canvas is evocative of the Old Masters. "Very brown", I wrote in my notebook. "Dramatic light on the face, on the forehead. Like candlelight. Reminds me of a Rembrandt" (Turnbull 2018, pers. notes). The portrait, through aspects such as the subdued palette and the subject's formal pose, reveals Russell as a skilled painter who was, at the time, mostly conforming to the rigours of academic art. Seeing it therefore helped me understand Russell's artistic journey in Paris, and this informed the way I portrayed my fictional artist. The canvas also revealed certain difficulties Russell may have had with the human form. In the portrait, the Dutch artist holds a paintbrush, and the hand with the brush is, to my eyes, slightly awkwardly done – as if the artist or the sitter had insisted on including it in the frame. This aspect too informs my novel and the way I shaped the voice and struggles of my fictional artist.

What makes the picture so arresting, I found at the Art Gallery of New South Wales, is the intense, proud, rather severe gaze of the subject. For a full fifteen minutes as I studied the painting, Van Gogh's eyes bore into me as if challenging me to look away. Rather like author Jeannette Winterson's (1996) experience studying art for long periods, I found my reaction shifted: from awe at the artist's ability to capture his sitter's look, to interest (what did they talk about?), to discomfort (for God's sake can't you

look at someone else!). What must it have been like for Russell, I wondered, having his friend's eyes upon him for all those hours in his studio? From historical accounts from other artists who attended Atelier Cormon, we know that the Australian was popular; Van Gogh, by contrast, was considered by many students to be volatile, a "stark, staring crank" (Bailey 2007, p. 30). Was the Australian painter nervous about showing the portrait to the notoriously critical Dutchman? In my biographical novel *A Painter in Paris*, these thoughts inform the voice of my fictional protagonist as he paints his friend:

I felt his eyes closely watching me. I began to wish I'd asked him to look somewhere else – anywhere but directly at me. Every now and then his eyes darted away as if he too was ill-at-ease. What weaknesses and flaws in his character would my portrait reveal? [...] the scrutiny goes both ways. In my studio, less than ten feet apart, both of us felt unnervingly exposed. (Turnbull 2022, p. 247)

From the painting I also drew insights into Russell's character that influenced the voice I created for my fictional protagonist. As British art historian Marcia Pointon (2012, p. 15) reminds us, painting portraits "necessitate choice of episode, choice of visual data and interpretation on the part of artist [...]". I was struck by how, at a time when Van Gogh was scorned by many students for his eccentric behaviour and unconventional art, the Australian chose to portray him as serious, lucid. Though in 1886 the Dutchman had yet to sell a single painting, the brush in his hand is emblematic of his metier and conveys him as an accomplished artist. In *A Painter in Paris*, Vincent is delighted by the finished portrait:

'I look serious, don't I,' he said proudly.

'You do, you most definitely do.' It occurred to me that I had painted Vincent precisely how he wants the world to see him – not as a crank but as an unflinching, serious artist, poised for success. (Turnbull 2022, p. 258)

Seeing the painting did not give me access to the thoughts of the historical figure. There is no way of knowing whether the portrait truly represents Russell's view of his friend or whether he simply wanted to please the Dutch artist by producing a flattering picture. However, interpreting the canvas subjectively, I drew from it a sense of Russell's humanity. I began to think not about the artists' differences, but what brought them together. Despite the way Van Gogh gazes directly from the canvas, the half turn of his body suggested to me a defensiveness. Like most foreign artists, he had come to Paris to become a successful artist, and at Atelier Cormon it must have been galling and hurtful to be the object of ridicule. Did Russell, as a fellow outsider, empathise with the Dutchman? The painstaking care he took with the picture certainly suggests he respected Van Gogh, who in Paris had begun to experiment with new colour theories. I began to wonder whether these two very different men might have common ground and what else might draw them together – could it be that the artists, who pursued authenticity in their work, saw this quality in each other? In *A Painter in Paris*, these subjective insights infect my protagonist's character and voice as the friendship between the fictional artists develops:

The fact of being foreigners in Paris wasn't the only thing we had in common it turned out. Monet didn't hold a candle to the honest peasant pictures of Millet, we both agreed.

'Truth in Art is the only way', I said. Vincent pounded the table. 'We are seekers of de troos!' (p. 203)

In Sackville's *Painter to the King*, the paintings of Diego Velázquez helped her create an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist by leading her to reimagine in the text, through punctuation and syntax, the thoughts of the artist and his physical gestures during the act of painting. For Harriet Scott Chessman, authenticity meant using her emotional response to the images of Lydia Cassatt, who suffered from nephritis, which led the writer to ponder what it must be like to be immortalised when you know you are dying. For me, Russell's art was essential in helping me understand his evolution as a painter, his ambitions and relationships, as well as his humanity, and these insights are embodied in my fictional protagonist's voice – "the human presence" in my creative work (Darwin 2011, np).

6.4 Conclusion

In examining how ethical considerations, place, and art helped and challenged me to shape my character's voice, this chapter focusses on a creative project which is still a work in progress. There is, I believe, still work to be done on my biographical novel before I can claim to have successfully created an "authentic voice" for my fictional protagonist based on John Russell. In making this statement I draw on the interpretations of authenticity as defined in this exegesis: an authentic voice is one that represents an original creative offering and which persuades readers. It is also important to recognise that perceptions of authenticity in fiction are decided not by the author, but rather by readers.

In this chapter I have examined the way in which ethical issues, visiting place and studying the art of the historical figure helped me create an authentic voice for my fictional artist protagonist based on John Russell. The process required me to carry out rigorous research, develop ethical protocols, and pay close attention to the historical figure, the places where he lived, and his art. It also meant recognising all that can never be known about history, and this understanding enabled me to draw on my subjective interpretation and responses. Lackey's argument that biographical novelists use historical figures to express emotional or symbolic truths helped me understand the project to create an authentic voice for my fictional protagonist. In this and other ways, my critical study extended my creative practice. In the following Conclusion, I summarise my practice-led research project, which fills important gaps in knowledge about a thriving but still contentious literary form.

Conclusion

This thesis, which comprises my exegesis and novel, is led by a single research question which arose from my creative practice: how do biographical novelists create authentic fictional voices for protagonists based on artist historical figures? The question led me to examine biofiction theory to better understand the genre I was working in, and to explore variant definitions of authenticity. Narrowing my study to biofiction centred on historical artists, I identified research pathways which relate to the ethics of using historical figures as fictional protagonists, the importance of visiting the places where historical figures lived and worked, and their art.

My exegesis finds that to create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical artists, biographical novelists must pay careful attention to the painter-figures by following ethical protocols, then use informed imagination to express the essential characteristics and emotional/symbolic truths they identify in the historical lives. While some scholars continue to define authenticity in terms of historical veracity, this study is informed by critic Lionel Trilling's notion of authenticity as a "marvellous generative power" (1974, p. 11), which may involve using and subverting what exists (p. 616). Drawing as well on scholar Richard Winter's (2002) emphasis on persuasiveness, I propose that an authentic voice in biofiction presents a new creative offering which is persuasive to readers. This definition allows for the different approaches revealed by the case studies in this exegesis and in the chapter analysing my own writing practice.

For author Kate Braverman, authenticity meant foregrounding her artistic integrity and pursuing a symbolic truth related to the notion of a "wounded woman" (2003, p. 242). For Sackville it meant acknowledging what she could not know about Velázquez and recognising the "presence of the present" in the past (Harris 2017, p. 197). Chessman, who focussed on the largely unexamined life of the artist's sister and model, drew on her subjective interpretations of Mary Cassatt's paintings. For me, authenticity was a constant negotiation between the historical facts of John Russell's life and a desire to express the emotional truths I perceived in my fictional protagonist's artistic journey and time spent in Paris. These individual approaches also have common elements. The authors all researched the biographical facts and each writer identified on some level with the real-life artist on whom they based their protagonist. Braverman saw Kahlo as a wounded woman, Sackville empathised with Velázquez as an outsider in Madrid, Chessman empathised with Lydia Cassatt, who she perceived as shy and introverted. I identified with Russell as a result of my own life experience as an Australian in Paris.

My research project builds on existing scholarship and contributes fresh knowledge to biofiction at a time of growing recognition in academia for the need to further our understanding of the genre. Once commonly dismissed as a dubious hybrid of biography and fiction (Kendall 1965; Lukács 1962), biofiction is increasingly recognised as a distinct literary form. Contentions over the mixing of fact and fiction, particularly among historians, have not deterred creative writers, who in recent years have shown a great willingness to experiment within the genre. Among readers there has been a surge in the popularity of biographical novels. Contemporary literature theorists including Michael Lackey, Bryony

Stocker and Lucia Boldrini have done much to advance our understanding of biofiction; so too in Australia have scholars Catherine Padmore and Kelly Gardiner, who in recent years have held biofiction symposiums. Yet having been overlooked for many years, the field offers rich research opportunities. The challenge to create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical figures lies at the heart of the biofiction project, and my exegesis and creative work fill notable gaps.

This exegesis offers new knowledge by focussing on a sub-category of biofiction centred on historical artists and by examining little-studied biographical novels which imaginatively explore creative lives of the past. In *The Incantation of Frida K* (2003) author Kate Braverman “speaks” directly for Frida Kahlo; *Lydia Cassatt Reading the Morning Paper* (Chessman 2002) draws on the life of the American Impressionist Mary Cassatt; *Painter to the King* (Sackman 2018) is centred on the Spanish court painter Diego Velázquez. My creative work, the first biographical novel centred on John Russell, represents a new offering to this sub-category of biofiction. Based on extensive historical research, *A Painter in Paris* extends our understanding of the Australian Impressionist and his work, while exploring a timeless theme: what does it mean to lead a meaningful creative life?

In my creative practice, once I identified the three pathways essential to me – ethical considerations, visiting the places where the historical artist lived and worked, and using the art of the artist-figures – I then needed to research more specifically. Exploring my research question through these lenses, I needed to draw from disciplines including literature, history, geography, art and psychology. Thus, while biofiction scholarship is essential to my study, this exegesis is enriched by theorists in a wide range of academic fields.

In Chapter Three, which follows the introduction (Chapter One) and literature review (Chapter Two), I found that ethical issues oblige biographical novelists to follow ethical protocols and then use informed imagination to express a subjective vision, and that this process can give purpose to their writing. My research led me to collate and propose ethical protocols, outlined in Chapter Three and expanded in Chapter Six, including the need for biographical novelists to respect their contract with readers and to be explicit about inventions that depart from the known facts by using a paratext. Drawing on the scholarship of literature theorists including Lackey and Boldrini, as well as ethics philosophy scholars Claudia Mills and James Harold, I began by investigating whether creative writers have the right to use historical figures as the basis for fictional protagonists. I then examined *The Incantation of Frida K* (2003), and how Braverman’s ethical approach helped her create a voice for Frida K that has been praised by literature critics for its authenticity. In line with Lackey’s argument about the aims of biographical novelists, Braverman uses the facts of Kahlo’s life to express a symbolic truth about the struggle of women artists in an art world dominated by men. Through the fictional Frida, who recounts a lyrical flow of memories while on high doses of morphine for pain relief, the author creates an unreliable narrator. Ultimately, Braverman achieves an authentic voice for her fictional protagonist by mirroring in her own creative work the fierce originality of Frida Kahlo’s art.

Chapter Four explores how visiting places where the historical artist lived and worked helps biographical novelists create authentic voices for protagonists based on historical painters. My research found that

going to these locations allows writers to gain a “bodily comprehension” of the physical environment that can provide a connection with the place in the past and with the historical painter. This connection and new bodily understanding assists with creating an authentic voice. Sackville’s biographical novel provided an illuminating case study for the way a field trip to Madrid helped her imagine a world for her fictional protagonist and his place within it. In *Painter to the King* (2018a), the author draws on sensory observations and her experiences as a foreigner in Madrid to create a voice for the fictional Diego as an insider/outsider in the royal court. By including a contemporary narrator that interrupts and at times questions the past narration, Sackville is honest about what she cannot know, and this enables her to create “a differently ‘authentic’ past” (Harris 2017, p. 197).

Chapter Five examines the ways in which the art of historical painters helps biographical novelists create authentic voices for fictional protagonists based on historical painters. I found that writers draw valuable insights from paintings and portraits, through aspects such as subject and colour, and art can inform the writing at a structural level as well as a sentence level. Whilst we cannot know how an artist felt or what they were thinking at the time of painting, the art of the historical figures can help biographical novelists bring to life their fictional artist and can also infuse text. For Chessman, the paintings of Mary Cassatt provided the structure of her novella and also led the author to her protagonist – not the painter, but the painted subject in the portraits. Drawing on her emotional response and subjective interpretations, the writer infects the voice of the fictional “Lyddie” with the same quiet intelligence and modesty she perceives in the images. By contrast, in *Painter to the King*, Sackville draws from the paintings of Velázquez, with their masterly attention to detail, to create a roving artist’s eye for the fictional Diego. The author strives to imitate in writing, through her use of punctuation and syntax, the bodily experience of painting, including the artist’s gestures and hesitations.

Chapter Six focusses on my creative practice, and looks at how ethical issues, place and art helped me create a voice for my fictional protagonist based on Australian Impressionist John Russell. Citing examples from my text, I examined how ethical considerations made me consider what I could and could not invent in my biographical novel. Field trips to place enabled me to gain a “bodily comprehension” of Belle Ile and Paris, to respond subjectively to the physical environments, to connect with the world of John Russell and gain further understanding of his disposition that was useful for developing the fictional character. Finally, I looked at how the paintings of John Russell helped me create an authentic voice for my fictional protagonist by providing information into Russell’s artistic journey and his important friendships, and also by providing insights into the Australian painter’s humanity. My approach to authenticity involved trying to stay faithful to the known facts relating to Russell, while flexing my imagination and drawing on personal experience to imagine what it might have been like for an Australian artist in Paris in the 1880s.

The use of historical lives and identities comes with responsibilities, and my exegesis proposes ethical protocols for biographical novelists, which are collated in Chapter Six. However, these responsibilities need not hinder writers’ imaginations. By drawing on the biographical facts, place and art, and using informed imagination and their subjective interpretations, biographical novelists can create voices for

fictional protagonists based on historical painters that persuade readers and represent vibrant new offerings. In this sub-category of biofiction, some of the finest writing may serve as an homage to the artist and their work.

As I pursued my research journey, it was John Russell, along with his artist friends of the late nineteenth century, who provided an illuminating context for the project to create an authentic new offering using the facts relating to a real historical person. The Australian painter and his fellow Impressionists closely studied their painting subjects, observing form and contours, volume and the effects of light. The artists' aim was not to produce a copy of the original, however. Rather, by paying close and careful attention to the *facts* of their painting subjects, Russell and his friends interpreted the essential qualities to produce a subjective, original offering. By using the artists' notion of authenticity, we might see biofiction not only as a genre which comes with particular responsibilities, but also one which offers exciting scope and possibilities.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: *A Painter in Paris*

Appendix 1 containing my creative project that forms part of this exegetical thesis has been **REDACTED**.