

*Fishing for difference: A case study of
singularity and sensibility in critical
literary life writing*

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“Singularity makes the worst part of our suffering,” Lady
Russell tells Elizabeth Bennett in *Pride and Prejudice*, “as it
always does of our conduct.”

To be singular, Austen believes is to have departed from the strict code
of conduct to which her heroines adhere, despite their considerable
independence and strength of spirit. To be singular is to have traveled
beyond the pale and thus to have become worthy of universal contempt.
It is, purely and simply, wrong. At the same time, as it was originally

used in the fourteenth century (and still is today), the word *singular* can also denote something remarkable, unique, or outstanding, as in, for example, *a singular feat*. In this paper, we consider the notions of singularity and difference as we reflect upon a two year federally funded research project conducted in Vancouver BC, from 2007 to 2009. We will suggest that the processes of critical literary writing that we used helped our participants to negotiate differences, to tease differences out, to celebrate them, and to find ways to feel more, and less, different from others. We have chosen one participant to ground our observations: Christine Morrissey. We use her actual name at her request.

Morrissey is officially singular, in both senses of the word. Raised in a Catholic family, she became a nun in her late teens, fell in love with another nun, and quit the church – all choices that some would consider morally unacceptable, and most would say were, at the very least, unusual. However, Morrissey is also singular in the second sense, that of being *remarkable*. A poster (see Figure 1 at right) celebrates her appointment as one of twelve “Remarkable Women of Vancouver” (in 2011) and a recent news article (see Figure 2) reports on her receipt of the Queen’s Jubilee medal.

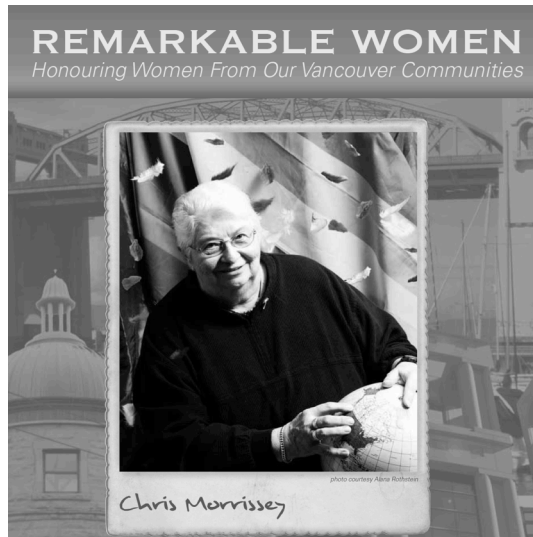


Figure 1. Promotional poster for Remarkable Women of Vancouver, 2011

Morrissey received these awards for her activist work on behalf of queer refugees in Canada and across the world. Her activism and achievements are widely acknowledged and celebrated, not only in the



Figure 2. Chris Morrissey receives the Queen's Diamond Jubilee medal (Photo: Shauna Lewis, XTRA! News, 2012)

gay community, but also by human rights workers across Canada. What we consider here is whether her singularity, as an out lesbian and as a remarkable woman, might render other of her important identifications and insights less visible, and if so, how practices of critical life writing might serve to tease out some of the nuances in her story. However, before we consider Morrissey's participation in our research group in greater depth, we will first

contextualize it with a brief outline of our theoretical framework.

Critical theory and, by extension, critical research seek "to liberate human beings from the circumstances that enslave them" (Horkheimer, 1982, p. 244), and as Thompson (2009, p. 3) has suggested, first hand narratives can give back a central place to "the people who made and experienced history" as they offer alternatives to dominant historical accounts. In his theory of the narcissism of minor differences, Freud argued that while all human beings share a remarkably similar genetic

structure, we use perceived small differences to maintain a coherent sense of our own identities and do so quite often by seeing others as existing “beyond the pale” – outside the staked fence of established conventions and community. Going into the research, then, one of our goals was to consider the ways in which writing memoir might help our group of older lesbians “write back” to such exclusionary discourses by sharing their memories. Rather than having them focus on their more obvious singularity, we hoped to encourage them to consider more subtle differences in what they had to share. We note, in passing, that the experiences of older lesbians are rarely represented in the media, or in literary and historical accounts.

Practicing writers (Dillard, 1990; Winterson, 1995), curriculum theorists (Butt, 1983; Davies & Gannon, 2006; Pinar, 2004) and philosophers (Denzin, 1994, 2000; Gadamer, 1989) have considered autobiographical methods as a tool for *representing* the nuances of our life experiences. What has been lacking, however, is a close investigation of how better *understanding* might be achieved – in other words, the intersections between narrative theory, culture, education and cognition. As we have drawn together work from psychoanalytic theory, queer and feminist theory, critical theory, complexity thinking and cognitive science, we have recently coined the term “critical literary life writing” to describe our ongoing research at these intersections.

We argue that personal stories lie in the intersection between the public and the private – that place where trauma and oppression occur. As Cvetkovich (2003, p.23) has said, it is in everyday slights and

oppression that “abstract social systems can actually be felt.” Whenever we tell stories about our experiences, we subscribe to or create theories about what happened, whether we are aware of these theories or not. To borrow from Foucault, these are not theories “of the knowing subject, but rather theories of discursive practice” (as cited in Hall & Du Gay, 1996). We organize our thoughts and reflect on our relationships through language, and as we become aware of different discourses, language becomes a site of struggle. The key word here is *awareness*. We believe that life writing can generate critical awareness, though it does not always do so. As many critics of the memoir boom have pointed out, it can often re-inscribe and strengthen comfortable narratives (Genzlinger, 2011). That said, we build upon the work of theorists who have used writing practices as a form of critical research (Davies & Gannon, 2006; Butt & Raymond, 1989; Butt, Raymond, McCue & Yamagishi, 1992). Perhaps the most notable is Frigga Haug (1992, p. 20), who argues that examining subjective memories is essential if we are to understand anything about objective structures.

We also follow Haug (1992) in believing that critical life writing is a demanding literary project – that to write well is an important part of a critical approach. She notes how easy it is for writers to hide behind half-truths and clichés, or to narrate stories that we have told so many times that we hardly think about them anymore. Haug (1992, p. 25) believes that writers must be taught how to investigate their experiences, rather than just tell about or narrate them. It is, she thinks, a special kind of detective work that is only possible for writers who are trained in certain

methods. Haug (1992, p. 25) believes, and we agree, that what is needed is a *language school*, where writers might help each other to disrupt comfortable narratives and dig below their surface. This is what we attempted to provide in our project.

Method

Our SSHRC funded research was conducted with a group of six lesbian seniors who met for two years every two weeks for three hours at a lesbian restaurant on the Eastside of Vancouver, BC, Canada. We chose to work with lesbian seniors because their identifications are the result of long and complex experiences, as they have lived through times of great change in terms of cultural and societal attitudes and legal changes with regard to LGBT rights (Stein, 1997). The group was necessarily small, given the nature of the work, which involved group process, as well as one on one teaching.

The women in the group worked under our direction, as we assisted them in processes of critical literary life writing. These included close reading and analyses of literary texts (including ones written by participants as well as well-known writers). As we read and reread White's (2000) autobiographic novel, *A Boy's Own Story*, for instance, the women enjoyed picking apart its dense imagery and closely written descriptions and began to include these in their own work, allowing remembered images and details to open up their stories to new possibilities. We had them experiment with various genres (including rants, parables, and found examples) and imitate sections of writing

from the texts they read. In the second year of the project, all the women completed what they liked to call a “memoirette,” working with a tight thematic focus, rather than attempting to cover their entire lives chronologically. Though none of them had had much experience with creative writing, the women worked these memoirettes through many cycles of revision (Robson, 2012).

Data comprised the common reading texts, the writing produced, discussion and interview transcripts, researcher field notes, and written testimonies such as email and social network correspondence. These data were analyzed in order to discern how transposing remembered experiences and literary identifications into non-fiction and fictional forms serve as tactical counter-normalizing interventions. The analysis and methodology employed drew upon Sumara’s (2002) model of literary anthropology and upon Davis & Gannon’s (2006) notion of emancipatory critique, itself built upon the feminist model of consciousness-raising.

An almost invisible aspect of this work is its collective nature. As Haug (1992, p. 25) argues, collective discussion opens “new vantage points” and “different ways of seeing.” It allows us to “hear what is not being said, to see things that have not been displayed” (1992, p. 25). We engaged our participants in constant, and very searching, critique, in groups and one on one as they worked through revision after revision. We challenged them, and they challenged themselves and each other, to search for precise words and phrases as they got closer and closer to what they wanted to say. Haug (1992, p. 24) argues that attention to

detail in specific situations helps transform writing from self-referencing journaling into fictionalized first person narrative, which gives “conformist abstractions the slip.” To summon up the possibility of others is to attempt critical distance and to become aware of narrative through lines, as we step back from our lives and see ourselves as characters. One of our participants put it this way: “Writing about myself gave a shape to my life that I never thought about when I was living it” (Robson & Sumara, 2007–2009, March 27, 2009).

Results

As Morrissey wrote about her many experiences, she did indeed give voice to largely unexamined experiences. The working title for her memoir was *A Problem With Authority*, and in it, she wanted to trace the history of her oppression by a domineering father and by the monolithic Catholic Church. She learned to identify and dramatize scenes that crystallized this systematic and systemic oppression, from a car ride in early childhood, to her father seeing her off to the convent with the admonishment that “he that puts his hand to the plow and looks back is not worthy of the kingdom of God,” and on to the Mother Superior who moved Morrissey to another convent because she had developed a “particular friendship” with another woman.

As Morrissey began unpacking these scenes, however, something interesting occurred. She began to notice that despite living within rigid social structures for much of her childhood and youth, she had developed subtle and effective strategies of what we might call everyday

resistance to everyday trauma. Though outright rebellion was not an option when she was a child, Morrissey perfected a kind of guerilla insolence, skirting the very edges of her father's rules and employing a quiet stubbornness, for instance by refusing to speak to anyone in the family for three whole days. She continued this subversive activity as a nun, as she sabotaged the priests' ironing, slipped under the mosquito net of another nun's bed at night, and saw to it that she and her lover were shipped off to the same location in Chile, without revealing their relationship. Once there, she applied her covert tactics to broader politics of resistance, carrying messages for anti Pinochet resistance fighters, and organizing in secret with local women.

As she wrote her memoirette, Morrissey became aware of a new through line – one about courage and agency, rather than the “female masochism” that inhibits so many women's stories (Haug, 1992). By the end of the project, she had retitled her memoir as *A Problem For Authority* rather than *A Problem With Authority*. As she had investigated the ways in which she created herself in response to social structures, Morrissey proved able to complicate her narrative.

The work that is required to maintain group coherence is not just directed outwards, at other groups, but inward, as people turn their desire to conform against their individuality. This is a complication that we take up next. Though shared memories can “reconstitute fragmented communities” (Smith & Watson, 2010, p. 26), they may do so at a cost. Firstly, marginalized people often tend to focus only on one aspect of their identity, their singularity, when choosing which stories to tell. For

example, oral historian Nan Boyd talks about the dominance of the coming out story in gay narratives. As she tried to interview gay participants about their relationship to San Francisco, for instance, they inexorably steered the conversation back to their first same-sex relationships – the ubiquitous coming out story. Boyd’s narrators knew that they had been selected because they were gay; therefore, they felt that this is what made them remarkable. Secondly, as Thompson (2009, p. 167) has pointed out, “memories which are discreditable, or positively dangerous, are most likely to be quietly buried.” This is especially true of people who feel that they live under threat, such as gay and lesbian narrators (Boyd, 2008).

Many of the stories Morrissey wrote had a particular aim. She wanted to record experiences that might raise gay and lesbian political visibility and record key advances in queer social history and in Latin American resistance to dictatorship. Portelli (1981) has noted the tendency of such celebratory and historic stories to become epics – stories that are told the same way, time after time and strive for an heroic tone and structure. Here’s an example from Morrissey’s epic story about the day that her partner finally achieved permanent resident status after a lengthy legal battle, spearheaded by Morrissey:

Hundreds of people are gathered under the glass roof of the Law Courts. Bridget and I are walking toward the stage. We are grinning from ear to ear. We have overcome the last hurdle. We are handed a trophy. It is shaped like

a house. We enter and we know it is home. We know we
have come home.

We see here how the short sentences create drama, and the imagery strives for a heightened tone – “grinning from ear to ear,” “overcoming the last hurdle.” In actuality, both images are somewhat tired from overuse, and the writing in this excerpt thus strains to do justice to its topic.

Epics serve valuable purposes, for the individual and for the community. This one certainly marks an important moment in Morrissey’s and her partner’s lives, and a triumph for gay immigration rights in Canada. However, they can tend to obscure more subtle and surprising narratives. Portelli (1981) shows how epic narratives can become so fixed, especially for older people (Thompson, 2009, p. 184) that they “arrest consciousness.” Portelli (1981) suggests that it can be difficult to get such narrators to talk about anything else, or to see the events they describe in any other way. Above all, their celebratory, heroic tone can preclude emotional nuances – the complexities of what actually happened on the ground. For queer people, such stories can reproduce the conditions of fixed identity formations. The “minor difference” of sexual orientation can, paradoxically, obscure other important minor differences – experiences and identifications that have nothing to do with sexuality, or represent sexuality as complex, difficult, or disturbing. As Chimamanda (2009) has eloquently put it, the danger of a single story is that it creates stereotypes that are not necessarily untrue, but incomplete.

Two years after the end of the research, Morrissey is still writing, and recently, she asked for feedback on a work in progress that she's finding difficult to complete. This is a short prose memoir called *Fishing*, about a day spent on the water with her father on their annual family holiday at Bednesti Lake. There is a moment that Morrissey perceives as significant, though she doesn't yet quite understand why. It is a moment in which nothing much happens, but a lot is going on. Here is a short extract from this work in progress:

Dusk was waiting in the wings. The reflection of the boat ran along beside them trying to keep up, never getting ahead. The water shimmered as the last rays of the sun tried to penetrate the depths. The surface of the water was becoming busy. Hundreds of tiny flies covered the water like a knotted comforter.

As we compare this to the earlier extract of Morrissey's work, we note the sophistication and originality of the imagery (similar to White's), which successfully communicates a sense of immanence and energy – the boat's reflection strives to catch up with the action; the sun tries to penetrate the surface of the water, and the flies gather in their hundreds "like a knotted comforter." Though the young protagonist, Morrissey, does eventually catch a fish (which gets away), Morrissey said that this was not really the central event. She was trying to capture something else: an elusive feeling she had that day, just before the fish was caught. She was unable, in our conversation, to put her finger on exactly what this was, but she knew that it was to do with the word *shimmering* and

the quiet beauty of the lake. It was also to do with sharing this time with her father – a man who did not normally pay her any attention. But these explanations weren't enough. She was still fishing, and even at the moment of writing, finding her catch to be elusive.

Discussion

Zwicky (2006, p. 95) argues that lyric's intuition is to reach beyond and behind what she calls the "grammars of consequence" in order to find "resonance." Rather than merely recounting epic narratives that we have told and retold, we follow trails of imagery and association that may lead us into surprising points of departure. Lyric thus becomes the genre of choice for the "astonished" treatment of memory, and in particular, for memory of experiences that fall "outside the pale of communal myth-making" (Zwicky, 2006, p. 95). We argue that whereas biography takes a linear and sensible approach to narrative, critical life writing can take us beyond the pale, and past the predictable single story. It has the ability to engage authors in a search for resonance, for subtle themes and meanings, and for fine distinctions. These are distinctions that Austen would have called *nice*, those acute perceptions and responses that make up *sensibility* rather than *sense*, and meaning rather than chronology.

Whereas simplistic autobiographical educational research approaches can serve to reinscribe and reproduce overdetermined narratives, critical literary life writing can serve to investigate them. We believe that the processes of critical literary life writing allowed Morrissey, and others in

the group, to make significant shifts in perception. Morrissey's move from *with* to *for* does not so much demonstrate increased agency – she has developed this in spades during her long activist life – but rather, an increased ability to re-analyze her past in the light of current circumstances and insights. We also believe that this work made us all – both researchers and participants - think harder about the ways in which discourses developed to support minor differences can become marginalizing in themselves, as they obscure more nuanced and complex identifications. The states of being *old* and being *queer* are both over- and under-determined in our culture, both packed with emotional charge, and yet not represented in mainstream culture with a wide degree of subtlety or range of interpretation. We consider it important to complicate such normalizing and restrictive narratives, in the form of firsthand accounts.

Limitations and Future Research

It is impossible to quantify the shifts and insights that our participants achieved during the two-year research project, other than to analyze the style, content, and subtleties of the writing produced. These analyses are highly interpretive, as is any judgment as to the literary merit of the two pieces we discuss. It is also difficult to say with any degree of certainty that changes in Morrissey's ability to be more critical in her perceptions necessarily resulted from participation in our project. Morrissey is socially and politically active, and as such, engaged with many projects of community and individual liberation. At the time of

writing, her short story, *Fishing*, is incomplete, and she still doesn't know if she will ever finish it to her satisfaction. Though Morrissey has read this analysis and agreed with its content (after minor changes) this does not guarantee its accuracy, for many reasons.

Though using one case study has its advantages – allowing us to trace one participants' journey in depth, and through her writing – it does not allow us to make broad claims for our method, but only to suggest that it had results in this one instance. Indeed, we would go further, and say that the method did not work well with all our participants. Not everyone in our group had Morrissey's patience and tenacity. At least two of the six seemed to get “stuck” in difficult core stories. Though they wrote promising first drafts, the material seemed to be too much for them, and they shied away, to write about less demanding topics. That said, all have continued to write and share their work with others on a regular basis. Since Morrissey composed *Fishing* some two years after the research ended, we are led to wonder what other participants might be working on at this time, or future times.

As we reflect upon the elusive nature of our findings, which we have tried to articulate through words such as *resonance* and *lyric*, we continue to wonder how our findings might be better communicated, and how others in the field are representing their work. Future research might usefully bring together those working with marginalized groups through critical arts practices to consider alternative means of presenting their research at conferences or in scholarly journals. An apparent disjuncture or creative tension between *art* and *criticality* has played out in the world

of scholarship in ways that might be productively addressed. We also suggest that this kind of work has much to offer in fields such as critical research, education, and the social sciences.

Notes

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