Other Mothers: Curating and Creating Voices of Adoption, Surrogacy and Egg Donation

Thesis

How to cite:


For guidance on citations see FAQs.

© 2021 Shanta Daneille Everington

https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/

Version: Redacted Version of Record

Link(s) to article on publisher’s website:
http://dx.doi.org/doi:10.21954/ou.ro.00014bca

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online’s data policy on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.
Shanta Everington

Other Mothers: curating and creating voices of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation

A thesis submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

The Open University

Creative Writing

September 2021

VOLUME 1:
Other Mothers – experimental life writing

VOLUME 2:
Curating and creating voices of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation – a critical commentary
Abstract

*Other Mothers: Curating and creating voices of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation* is a Creative Writing PhD inspired by the author’s personal experience as a biological and adoptive mother. The work comprises a book-length piece of experimental life writing and an accompanying critical commentary.

Contemporary explorations of motherhood in life writing have primarily focused on the biological mother raising the child she gave birth to. *Other Mothers* gives voice to women who become mothers through the alternative routes of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation, and their silent partners – the birth mothers, surrogate mothers and egg donors – who make motherhood possible for them.

The life writing draws on interviews with six women (all names have been changed): Alison, a mother via egg donation and adoption; Charlotte, an egg donor; Rubi, who became a mother through surrogacy in India; Robin, a surrogate mother; Lorraine, an adoptive mother of two who was adopted herself as a baby; Margaret, a birth mother in her seventies who gave her baby up for adoption fifty years ago. The life writing is presented in a hybrid form, encompassing edited interview, re-imagined scenes, poetry, lyric essay and quotation collage.

The accompanying critical commentary is divided into four chapters: Chapter 1 introduces the research rationale, analysing related published life writing; Chapter 2 opens up debates around the ethical issues of speaking for and representing others; Chapter 3 considers the artistic considerations involved in
producing the life writing; the final chapter sets out the wider relevance of personal narratives – ‘the personal as the political’ – drawing on feminist theory.

The biographical portraits on ‘other mothers’ illuminate the diverse and changing landscape of motherhood. The research’s original contribution to knowledge lies in the way it uses an innovative hybrid life writing form – a collage approach – to illuminate an expanded understanding of motherhood.
**Acknowledgements**

Special thanks go to the women who so generously shared their stories for this research, known here as Alison, Charlotte, Rubi, Robin, Lorraine and Margaret. I am very grateful to my supervisors, Dr Sally O’Reilly and Professor Derek Neale, for their unrelenting support and invaluable input. I would also like to thank Professor Mary Jane Kehily, for sharing the methodology of *Making Modern Mothers*, and Dr Duncan Banks, Chair of the OU Human Research Ethics Committee, for ensuring that the research was ethically conducted.

This work is dedicated to my son’s birth mother.

***

Some material from Volume 2 chapter 1 has been published as a paper, ‘Through the Looking Glass: Biographical Writing as Self-reflection’, in the *Journal of Writing in Creative Practice* (Everington, 2019).

Some material from Volume 2 chapter 2 has been published as a paper, ‘Ethics and Life Writing’, in the NAWE journal, *Writing in Education* (Everington, 2021).
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

## VOLUME 1: OTHER MOTHERS – EXPERIMENTAL LIFE WRITING

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Babies</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreword</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alison</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The nearly son</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Where it all began</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hers</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrate</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sun will come out tomorrow</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlotte</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The lady of the house</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>M.O.T</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A day at the races</td>
<td>70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holes</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shanta</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like mine with a kiss</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rubi</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Would you like something stronger?</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Passage to India</td>
<td>107</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>It all started with my legs</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A good life</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wisdom</td>
<td>129</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The beds in my head</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In her belly</td>
<td>130</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everything can be fixed</td>
<td>131</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robin</td>
<td>132</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drama queen</td>
<td>133</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The farm and the full moon</td>
<td>136</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yes, no, maybe</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Half a kiss</td>
<td>149</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>She’s got it</td>
<td>164</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The text from Volume 1 of the thesis has been redacted. An amended version of the text will be published commercially by Routledge in print and electronic editions. The author has therefore restricted access.
BABIES

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
FOREWORD

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
The nearly son

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Where it all began

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Hers

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Celebrate

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
The sun will come out tomorrow
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
CHARLOTTE
The lady of the house

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
A day at the races

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Holes

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
I like mine with a kiss

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Would you like something stronger?

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Passage to India

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
It all started with my legs

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
A good life

[This content has been redacted due to publication]

Wisdom

[This content has been redacted due to publication]
The beds in my head

[This content has been redacted due to publication]

In her belly

[This content has been redacted due to publication].
Everything can be fixed

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Drama queen

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
The farm and the full moon

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Yes, no, maybe

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Half a kiss

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
This page has been redacted due to publication
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
This page has been redacted due to publication
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
She’s got it
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
LORRAINE
Damned if we do, damned if we don’t

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Summer of love

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
This page has been redacted due to publication
Perfectly polite

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
It is what it is

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
This page has been redacted due to publication
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
No babies

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
MARGARET
Never forget

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
[This page has been redacted due to publication]
Sorry not sorry

[This contented has been redacted due to publication]

Care

[This content has been redacted due to publication]
The wrong mother (part II)

[This content has been redacted due to publication]

The wrong mother (part II)

[This content has been redacted due to publication]
Elephant

[This content has been redacted due to publication]

Blue

[This content has been redacted due to publication]
AFTERWORD

[This page has been redacted due to publication]
CONTEXTUAL NOTE

[This content has been redacted due to publication]

Fertility treatments

[This content has been redacted due to publication]
Egg and sperm donation

[This content has been redacted due to publication]
Surrogacy

[This content has been redacted due to publication]
Adoption

[This content has been redacted due to publication]
Fostering

[This content has been redacted due to publication]
VOLUME 2: CURATING AND CREATING VOICES OF ADOPTION, SURROGACY AND EGG DONATION – A CRITICAL COMMENTARY
I’m already flustered when I arrive at the community centre. As I park up my new buggy, still splattered with mud from yesterday’s jaunt in the park, another mother arrives.

‘Hi!’ I say. ‘Are you going to the mother and baby group?’ Stupid question.

‘Yes. God, I’m a bit late. Trying to get out the house with these two, you know… The routine’s all gone to pot. They’re supposed to be napping now.’

It’s only then that I take in the twins, peering up at me in tandem, one with a shock of poker straight, black hair, the other curly.

‘Oh, I know, mine's asleep! Shall we go in together?’

I point the buggy at the double doors.

‘We have to leave the buggies out here. I’m just waiting for someone to come out and help me carry one of these in.’

A smiley woman with purple lips and gold bangles jangles out of the double doors and fusses over the twins as I grapple with my baby’s squirming body, outraged at being woken from his slumber. I picture a packed room full of mums chatting in cliques, like the groups I went to the first time around. This time is different though. I prepare myself for the questions. Who does he get his eyes from? The other mother introduces herself as Jyoti – it suits her. I’m a kid on my first day at school, clinging on to my new best friend. We walk through into a light, cheery room, a bombardment of primary colours. Toys are laid out on the
fat, squidgy, square mats. Another member of staff sits holding a wooden drum. 

Noisy blonde hair.

I look around. Where are the other mums?

‘It’s a new group, ladies. We’re still trying to get the word out. As it’s just the two of you today, you won't need us both. I'll leave you with Sarah. Shout if you need anything, Sarah, okay?’

I exhale and settle onto a turquoise square, balancing my baby between my knees, as he grabs at a spikey, orange ball. Sarah forces us through the hello song, complete with hand actions, the type of banal activity that you never quite manage to get used to. Time for form filling. The usual questions – date of birth, health information, emergency contacts, permission to share photographs.

‘Um, this question about photos…’

‘We like to take photos of mum and baby doing different activities to put up on the walls and on our posters and leaflets.’ Sarah smiles.

‘I don’t really, um, want photos of my son shared on posters and leaflets, is that okay?’

‘Oh right, yeah, no problem. Just note that down on your form.’

A quizzical look.

‘So where was he born?’ Sarah nods her head, blonde frizz bouncing.

I answer with a carefully constructed sentence that seems to satisfy her.

She turns her attention to Jyoti.

‘How about the twins?’

Jyoti’s eyes flick from side to side. ‘Do you know what? It’s really hot in here. Could we open the window?’
The cold air flows through the room. The curly twin starts to cry and Jyoti takes him in her arms, stroking his head with manciured fingertips. Then the straight haired one joins in and Sarah pulls him onto her lap without asking.

‘So are you guys still breastfeeding?’ She pats his head like a puppy.

I’m starting to think coming here was a mistake.

‘No.’ It comes out terser than planned. I’ll try to be quiet.

Jyoti smooths down her black leggings. ‘It’s too difficult with twins,’ she says quickly, eyes darting again.

‘Oh yeah, yeah. I’d love twins though.’ Sarah fingers the baby’s silky locks. ‘When did you find out you were expecting twins? Was it at your first scan?’

The impossibly huge eyes seem to shrink. A pause.

‘Look, I wasn’t going to say anything but as it’s just us… the questions about breastfeeding and giving birth, well… I had the twins by surrogacy in India. We put two embryos back, so yeah we found out after the surrogate’s scan.’

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. My son reaches up and presses his fingertips into my chin, making my mouth fall open.

‘Ooh, how exciting! What was it like using a surrogate?’ Sarah hops up onto her knees, still holding Jyoti’s boy, kangaroo style.

*Using.* Jyoti’s left eye twitches.

‘An experience.’ That’s all she says at first. She glances at me. For a reaction? Because she suspects something? Oh, what the heck…

‘I wasn’t going to say anything either but as you’ve just shared your surrogacy, it feels weird to hide it. There’s a bit more to our story too.’
Jyoti turns to face me, eyes huge again.

‘We adopted our baby.’

A sharp intake of breath as her hand flies to her mouth.

‘Oh my God, I’ve got goose bumps.’

Let me put the kettle on. Sarah stands up, leaving me and Jyoti together, seeing each other as if for the first time.
INTRODUCTION

The short piece of auto/biographical narrative in the preface, focusing on my attendance at parent-baby group, involves a classic storyline: meeting a stranger and finding a connection. This re-imagined scene sets out my experience of feeling ‘other’ as a mother, and finding a connection with another mother who also felt outside the norm, albeit in a different way. Just as we seek connections in person, we also seek connections through literature, enabling us to ‘reconfigure and create ourselves in relation to the literary text’ (Campbell, 1998, p. 167).

Harman wrote of the ‘astonishing omission’ of an exploration of motherhood in women’s life writing, with ‘the most painful stories’ being particularly rare (Harman, 2001). Contemporary explorations of motherhood in life writing can be broadly split into two categories: writing about being a mother, that is, motherhood memoir (Cusk, 2002; Enright, 2005), and writing about one's own mother, termed 'matriography' by Mansfield (2013). Both categories, it seems, have primarily focused on the biological mother raising the child she gave birth to. There is a dearth of life writing, by and about other types of mother: women who have become mothers through the alternative routes of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation, and their silent partners – the birth mothers, surrogate mothers and egg donors – who have made motherhood possible for them, sometimes at a personal cost.

When I was going through the process of adopting my second child, after having my first by a more conventional route, I was looking for diverse reflections and representations of mothering to help me make sense of my own journey from secondary infertility to adoption. Jackie Kay and Jeanette Winterson have
published highly moving accounts of the adoptee’s experience (Kay, 2010; Winterson, 2011). Yet the voices of adoptive mothers – and indeed birth mothers whose children are adopted – are largely absent in literature. Where are the memoirs of surrogate mothers who gave birth to children for other mothers to raise? Or egg donors whose genetic offspring were out there in the world with other families? I decided to embark on a project to discover and write their stories.

My research aims to contribute to new knowledge by applying and extending existing life writing methodology to the uncharted territory of ‘other motherhood’. The aim of the project is to create a collection of biographies which extend our understanding of what it means to be a mother. This study contributes to discourse which challenges the assumptions that to be a mother a woman must be biologically related to her child/and or have given birth to her child, helping to broaden understanding about the complex nature of mothering. It also explores the unique and hidden relationships that exist between adopters and birth mothers, egg donors and women who become mothers through egg donation, and surrogates and women who become mothers through surrogacy.

The aims of life writing can be said to overlap with those of autoethnography, a method of qualitative research using writing and reflection to explore personal experience and connect it to wider cultural, political and social understandings (Ellis, 2003). This research uses life writing to explore my own personal experience of motherhood and the experience of other mothers, connecting these auto/biographical stories to wider cultural, political and social understandings.
Following on from my literature search, the identified aim of my life writing research was to curate the stories of six mothers, with three pairings spanning adoption (a birth mother and adoptive mother), surrogacy (a surrogate mother and a woman who became a mother through surrogacy) and egg donation (an egg donor and a woman who became a mother through egg donation). The rationale behind this decision was that the juxtaposition of these diverse stories and voices, alongside my own responses to the material, would allow a richer interpretation and understanding of the labyrinth of ‘other motherhood’, than that afforded by a single voiced memoir. The life writing evolved into an experimental hybrid form encompassing edited interview material, selected quotations from published works, poetry, re-imagined scenes and personal essay.

In *New and Experimental Approaches to Writing Lives*, Dr Jo Parnell speaks of the lack and need for serious scholarship into ‘ways of writing lives that demonstrate an entirely new or experimental form, an unusual hybridisation… or an approach to a form that is relatively new’ (2019, p. x), offering a collection of critical essays to begin to meet this need. My research contributes to knowledge in this area by developing and critically analysing an innovative hybrid form, as a way into expanding our thinking on motherhood and on life writing.

The overarching research questions were:

1) How can life writing techniques be applied and expanded to illuminate untold stories of ‘other motherhood’?

2) What are the methodological, ethical, artistic, personal and political considerations involved in transforming the mothers’ lives into literature?
3) How can critical writing serve as a meta-narrative to the mothers’ stories, interrogating definitions of both motherhood and life writing?

This thesis comprises a book-length piece of life writing and a critical commentary. Inspired by my personal experience as a biological and adoptive mother, my PhD project involved creative practice as research, alongside critical approaches, to culminate in the production of a multi-subject biographical narrative of women who have become mothers through adoption, surrogacy and egg donation, and their silent partners – birth mothers, surrogates and egg donors – whose stories remain largely untold. The creative writing embeds the research processes undertaken: field visits with biographical subjects, acts of writing and rewriting, the study of relevant life writing and critical writing, and the study of the creative process and the practices of other life writers.

As outlined in the Foreword, I interviewed six mothers to obtain their stories: Alison, a mother via egg donation and adoption; Charlotte, an egg donor whose eggs have created two babies for two different families; Rubi, who travelled to India to find a surrogate, and now has two children via two different surrogates; Wren, a surrogate who carried two babies for one couple; Lorraine, an adoptive mother of two who was adopted herself as a baby; and Margaret, a birth mother in her seventies who gave her baby up for adoption fifty years ago. (All names have been changed.)

The critical commentary explores the methodological, ethical, artistic, personal and political considerations involved in transforming life into literature. The research methods of interviewing, creatively inhabiting and transforming
experience into narrative are analysed, drawing on a range of theoretical approaches.

The commentary is divided into four chapters. Chapter 1, *Through the looking glass*, further develops my rationale for my PhD project, explaining the gaps I experienced when looking for life writing accounts while preparing to adopt. Part one, *Representations of the adoptive triangle in contemporary life writing*, focuses on one aspect of my literature review, discussing four authors – Jackie Kay, Jeanette Winterson, Carol Schaefer and Sally Donovan – whose life writing explores the adoptive triangle, from the perspective of the adoptee, adopter and birth mother. Part two, *Biographical writing as self-reflection*, discusses the ways in which researching and writing the lives of others can help us to better understand our own. I examine the role of self in my biographical writing, exploring other women’s lives, drawing on life writing by Sally Cline, Jackie Kay, Jamaica Kincaid, Tony Parker and Jeanette Winterson. Applying the theory, practice and writing of feminist ‘auto/biography’ (Stanley 1994), I look at how the model of the interview as public performance (Forrest and Giles 1999) can apply equally to researcher and researched, as a way of constructing and presenting a self for an audience.

Life writing gives a voice to other people’s experiences, raising questions of authorship and ownership of stories. Chapter 2, *Whose voice is it anyway?*, opens up debates around the ethical issues of speaking for and representing others. This chapter explores the wide ranging ethical considerations encountered throughout the project. Part one looks at *Procedural ethics*, detailing the ethical and methodological considerations negotiated, including submission to The Open
University ethics committee. The interdisciplinary nature of the project is addressed, and related research, such as the Open University’s *Making of Modern Motherhood* project, discussed. In the second part of the chapter, *Relational ethics*, Couser's work on ethics in life writing with vulnerable subjects (2004) and Ellis's autoethnographical work (2007) provide context for discussions on writing about parent-child relationships. Lastly, I discuss issues relating to *Appropriation and authentication* in relation to examples of other contemporary life writing dealing with living subjects, not limited to mothers, including Alexander Masters’ *Stuart: A Life Backwards* and Julie Myerson’s *The Lost Child*, exploring ideas of ventriloquism, creation of voice, oral history and questions around ownership of story and voice.

Chapter 3, *Finding a form*, considers the artistic considerations involved in producing the body of life writing, curating and creating voices of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation. The verb ‘curate’ is usually taken to mean to select, organise and present a collection of items, for example, for an exhibition. Here, it applies to the selection and arrangement of the interviewed women’s recorded voices (as edited verbatim material) and selected quotations from published works. Poetry, re-imagined scenes and personal essay were created in response to the interviews. Part one, *Transforming life into literature*, analyses the stylistic and formal choices made in representing each woman’s story. Part two, *Collage as an evolution beyond narrative*, discusses the hybrid form that evolved when writing up the material. Inspired by the idea of research participant Alison’s embroidered quilt as a method of storytelling, I explore how the form evolved organically into a tapestry, a rich woven artistic product encompassing different
images, threads and stories, combining different voices, registers, and forms. Discussions draw on David Shields’ discussion of collage in *Reality Hunger*, Mikhail Bakhtin’s ideas on heteroglossia and hybridity, Jo Parnell’s ‘literary docu-memoir’ and Roland Barthes’ experimental form.

The final chapter, *The personal as political: Contributing to new understandings of motherhood*, sets out the wider relevance of personal narratives – ‘the personal as the political’ – drawing on feminist theory and the work of writers such as Adrienne Rich and Ann Oakley, as well as autoethnographer Carolyn Ellis, focusing on what *Other Mothers* can offer in this realm, and how it makes an original contribution to knowledge. Part one, *The politics of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation*, acknowledges the possible inequities involved in these vehicles to motherhood. Part two, *A mother writing about motherhood*, highlights my own experience and challenges encountered in working on my PhD. In part three, *The politics of form (and the nature of truth)*, the political relevance of artistic choices is examined, drawing on a range of critical thought, including Jerome de Groot’s discussions on the move away from grand narratives and linear form, Carol Heilbrun’s ideas on the limitations of available language, Fiona Sampson’s ideas on reification and social sciences researcher Mats Alvesson’s assertion that ‘all knowledge is metaphorical’.
CHAPTER 1 – THROUGH THE LOOKING GLASS

In 2012, when preparing to adopt a child, I was consumed by a need to read true life stories of adoption. I wanted to understand adoptive mothering from all perspectives. In 2014, two years after becoming an adoptive mother, I started my PhD, inspired by my obsession with adoption but expanding the focus to include surrogacy and egg donation, as explained further on in this chapter. The first section focuses on one aspect of my literature review, analysing life writing by four authors – Jackie Kay, Jeanette Winterson, Carol Schaefer and Sally Donovan – which explores the adoptive triangle, from the perspective of the adoptee, adopter and birth mother. Evoking Hooks’s concept of cyclical ‘auto/biography’ and Eakin’s ideas on how we develop identity through self-narration, the second section explores how creating stories of other lives serves to deepen our understanding of our own, examining my role as the seventh voice alongside the six women interviewed for my PhD.

Representations of the adoptive triangle in contemporary life writing

When we consider representations of adoption in contemporary life writing, perhaps the two memoirs that spring most readily to mind are Jackie Kay's Red Dust Road (2010) and Jeanette's Winterson's Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal (2012). Both memoirists have previously published work in other forms tackling their experience of being adopted: Kay via a poetry collection, The Adoption Papers (1991), and Winterson with her autobiographical novel, Oranges
Are Not the Only Fruit (1991). This comparative analysis of Red Dust Road and Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal will look at contrasts and connections; recurrent ideas and preoccupations; character in relation to theme, plot, imagery and symbolism; how language is used to convey emotional climate; and the form and structure of the narrative. Parallel readings of the adoptive and birth mothers' point of view compare Sally Donovan's No Matter What: An Adoptive Family's Story of Hope, Love and Healing (2013) and Carol Schaefer's The Other Mother: A Woman's Love for the Child She Gave Up for Adoption (1991), exploring the representations of the 'other mother' as a silent partner; highlighting common themes; and addressing narrative structure.

All four memoirs blend biography and autobiography: Kay and Winterson’s writings are as much biographies of their mothers (termed ‘matriographies’ by Mansfield, 2013) as stories of their own lives. Similarly, Donovan and Schaefer write the story of their children’s lives in the act of writing their own. Clearly, all family stories contain fathers (present or absent) in addition to mothers (and indeed Kay’s memoir opens and closes with scenes involving her birth father). However, for the purpose of my research, the focus of analysis will be the adoptive triangle in terms of the adoptee, birth mother and adoptive mother.

Adoptees’ stories

Although Kay's Red Dust Road and Winterson's Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal both deal with childhood experience of being adopted and of adult experience of tracing birth families, the two memoirs paint very different pictures of adoption. While Kay’s experience of adoption is presented as a happy one,
portraying her as extremely close to her adoptive mother, Winterson’s memoir is full of pain, with her strict Pentecostal adoptive mother rejecting her, locking her out of the house and even subjecting her to an exorcism.

Coincidentally, both Winterson and Kay’s adoptive mothers were linked with other babies before they adopted their daughters. We hear how Kay’s adoptive mother was advised to consider a different child as the doctors feared that Kay may be brain damaged:

My mum wouldn’t pick another baby; she’d become attached to the idea of me in the months of ghost pregnancy, where she’d shadowed my birth mother in her own imagination, picturing, perhaps, her belly getting bigger and bigger. She already felt like I belonged to her.

(Kay, 2010, pp. 25-26)

Whereas for Kay, this is translated into a positive experience of being chosen, Winterson, finds out that her adoptive mother was promised a boy called Paul but the adoption fell through, which partly explains the rejection she experienced in her childhood, with her adoptive mother repeatedly claiming, 'The Devil led us to the wrong crib' (p. 1).

Characterisation

The idea of the birth mother as an imagined, mythical figure is present in both memoirs. Winterson explains how:

[Mrs Winterson] invented many bad mothers for me; fallen women, drug addicts, drinkers, men-chasers. The other mother had a lot to carry but I carried it for her, wanting to defend her and feeling ashamed of her all at the same time.

(Winterson, 2012, p. 220)
Kay recounts how every year on her birthday, her mum used to say that her birth mother would be thinking of her:

This was a sad but lovely idea and both my mum and I both thought about my other mother with compassion. My mum was crediting this other mother with exactly her own sensibility, her sensitivity, her outlook. Not for a single second was my mum thinking that there might be another mother somewhere who never bothered to think about me on my birthday.

(Kay, 2010, p. 45)

A lot can be inferred by the way the adoptive mothers are introduced as characters within the texts; while Kay refers to her adoptive mother as ‘Mum’ throughout and her birth mother as ‘my birth mother’ or as Elizabeth, no such terms of endearment are used by Winterson who refers to her adoptive mother as Mrs. Winterson or Mrs. W. and her birth mother as ‘my mother’.

Winterson’s characterisation of her birth mother as ‘a little red thing from out of the Lancashire looms, who at seventeen gave birth to me, easy as a cat’ is contrasted with Mrs W.'s bulk, a woman who ‘had muffled her own body in flesh and clothes, suppressed its appetites with a fearful mix of nicotine and Jesus…’ (p. 20-21). At times, Mrs W. is shown as almost Dickensian, a larger than life villain, a two-dimensional unknowable character, hardly the kind of person you expect to meet in everyday life. Conversely, Kay portrays three-dimensional characters; her adoptive mother, Helen, is characterised through dialogue and actions as a warm and loving woman:

She says, But your dad and I love you more than all the tea in China, more than all the waves in the ocean and will love you til all the seas run dry. And you are special. You were chosen…. Come here and let your mummy give you a big cuddle.

(Kay, 2010, p. 13)
Her humour is similarly portrayed when she recounts how they met in New Zealand, how the dad turned up in a ‘big filthy truck’ for the first date and how he made her choose between ‘a wedding ring or a rucksack’ (pp. 15-16). A device used by Kay here is to show her parents’ back story via her mum reminiscing out loud, giving a voice to her mum. Her adoptive parents are presented as loving, warm, humorous, principled; her birth parents as fragile, different to her (‘other’). The biographical detail of her birth mother is delivered in a different way to her adoptive mother, not in such a playful, creative way, but in a more matter-of-fact manner: ‘My birth mother was a sad and troubled figure; she’d had a hard life, been in and out of psychiatric hospital, had numerous breakdowns, and survived a son’s suicide’ (pp. 67-68).

Both writers present their first meeting with their birth mother as a pivotal scene in the text, characterising their birth mother by allowing the reader to see her alongside the narrator. For Kay:

Finally, a woman comes through the sliding door that I think might be her... carrying a plastic bag, a huge panda and a bunch of orchids, which is weird because I too am carrying a bunch of orchids. She’s small in height, even smaller than me, and has reddish hair. She’s quite well built, not as big as me, but not slight either.

(Kay, 2010, p. 61)

The physical description brings Elizabeth alive for the reader but it also serves another purpose, revealing how Kay compares herself to her birth mother. We see the writers sizing up their birth mothers, looking for similarities with themselves. Winterson shows her birth mother, Ann:
And then there's a scuffle from the kitchen and two tiny dogs appear bouncing up and down like hairy yo-yos, and from a tangle with the washing line, which at below-freezing temperatures shows true optimism, in comes my mother.

(Winterson, 2012, p. 213)

She is keen to note, 'Yes, we are alike. The optimism, the self-reliance. The ease we both have in our bodies' (p. 216). Winterson also compares her adoptive and birth mothers, declaring, 'My mother is straightforward and kind. This feels odd to me. A female parent is meant to be labyrinth-like and vengeful'

(p. 214).

_Tense, voice, metaphor and setting_

While Winterson writes in past tense, Kay writes mainly in present tense which has the effect of immersing you in every scene, creating immediacy and intimacy. Sometimes, she switches tense to indicate her reflections, e.g. chapter seven recounting meeting her birth mother is written in present tense, ‘She looks relieved’, but moves into in past tense with ‘In the weeks after that first meeting, I felt jangled…’ (p. 67). Kay uses a child’s voice to present her seven-year-old self’s perspective, discovering she was adopted (2010, p. 12):

What do you mean, you’re not really my mummy? I say. I am crying for real now because I love my mum so much and I want her to be my real mummy and I’m worried she means she is not real and that something is going to happen to her, that she is going to disappear or dissolve.
Winterson’s narrative voice manages to sound both poetic and conversational at the same time. She makes striking use of metaphor to characterise both her adoptive mother, e.g. ‘Mrs Winterson was gloriously wounded, like a medieval martyr, gouged and dripping for Jesus...’ (p. 223) and of Ann: 'our other life was like a shell on a beach that holds an echo of the sea' (p. 223). Winterson writes of the influence of poetry, which can be seen in her prose, with its vivid imagery and analogy, and also its strong use of repetition and rhythm, e.g. when referring to her birth mother: 'She was gone. I was gone' (p. 19).

Setting is also important in both memoirs. Winterson talks about being born in Manchester in 1959, discussing the history and politics of the place/era to set the scene of her roots, discussing her working class background: 'We were the working class. We were the ass at the factory gates' (p. 16). Geographical and cultural roots are central to both story and character in Kay’s account of tracing her Nigerian birth father, Jonathon, and Scottish birth mother, Elizabeth, with the title, Red Dust Road, representing her journey to Africa. The book opens with her first meeting Jonathon in the Nicon Hilton Hotel, Abuja, with chapter seven recounting her first meeting with Elizabeth in the Hilton Hotel, Milton Keynes, mirroring the format of chapter one. Here, the setting is inextricably linked to the identity of Kay’s birth parents, and also to the emotional content being conveyed. For example, the frequent moves backwards and forwards between Africa and Scotland suggest a chaotic, disorienting experience, as discussed in the next section on narrative form and structure. Setting is also handled on a micro level in Kay’s memoir when she details visiting Elizabeth’s house: ‘The living room was
curiously empty of anything except a kind of shrine on the floor, a special cloth and some cards on it, many sent by me…’ (p. 76). Absence is a strong motif; the house is sparse, there is absence of memory as Elizabeth is losing hers, there has been absence in their relationship.

Narrative form and structure

Neither story is told in chronological order but, rather, structure is approached in a fragmented, thematic way. Winterson addresses this approach in the text when she discusses how Mrs Winterson banned her from reading books and burned those she found stashed under her daughter’s bed, recounting how after the fire ‘there were stray bits of text all over the yard and in the alley… It is probably why I write as I do – collecting the scraps, uncertain of continuous narrative’ (p. 41).

So too in Kay’s memoir, time jumps abruptly backwards and forwards; the book opens on meeting her birth father, the second chapter reveals her finding out she was adopted; the third chapter outlines her adoptive parents’ first date; chapter seven shows her first meeting with her birth mother; later chapters show her tracing her birth parents. This chaotic organisation of stories could be seen to mirror the sense of dislocation and disorder inherent in tracing birth relatives.

* 

 Mothers’ voices

Having examined life writing by adoptees, we move on to two narrative accounts of mothers’ experiences of adoption, as an adoptive mother and birth mother:

Sally Donovan's *No Matter What: An Adoptive Family's Story of Hope, Love and*
*Healing* (2013) and Carol Schaefer's *The Other Mother: A Woman's Love for the Child She Gave Up for Adoption* (1991). These memoirs make for compelling reading due to their subject matter and unusual vantage points, offering insight into lives and voices seldom heard.

**Beginnings**

Both memoirs open with pivotal scenes before returning to the beginning of their stories and working through them in chronological order. Schaefer’s *The Other Mother* opens with pregnant, nineteen-year-old Carole sitting with her mother and Sister Dominic in Seton House as arrangements are made for her to give up her baby:

> On my right, Mum leaned forward eager for the sister to know we were there to do the right thing. Then this mortal sin would be erased from my soul and hers, too. My penance would be to go to the home for unwed mothers. Absolution would come after I gave up my baby. Sister was telling us that I would forget everything. It would be as if it never happened.

(Schaefer, 1991, p. 8)

Compare this with the opening chapter of *No Matter What*, ‘Revelations - In the Bad House’, which begins:

> I watch as Jaymey systematically arranges treasured teddies, dogs, rabbits and monkeys along the gap between his bed and the wall. It takes time; every gap must be filled, checked and if necessary refilled more securely. He is frightened of dark, unknowable spaces, where the terrifying might be lurking.

(Donovan, 2013, p. 15)
The reader could be mistaken into thinking this is an ‘ordinary’ bedtime scene, portraying a young child with everyday worries like monsters under the bed. However, by the end of the first page, the reader is hit by Jaymey’s revelation, ‘In the bad house, Ellie, him had long pole with sharp bits on the end. Him push it into my mouth, hard like this’ (p. 15). Donovan uses Jaymey’s childlike speech to convey the horror of physical abuse, the juxtaposition of the simple vocabulary with the meaning having added impact: ‘There was blood, a lot of lot of blood and it hurt very, very much so I could not eat anymore. I could not even eat biscuits, for long, long time’ (p. 16). The device of using the children’s reported dialogue is used by the author throughout.

Clearly, the memoirs portray two very different sides of adoption, of children relinquished and of children removed. Schaefer’s account is that of a naïve, young, Catholic American woman, falling pregnant outside of marriage and being pressurised to give up her baby in 1965, charting an eighteen year journey to tracing and meeting her birth son, Jack. Donovan’s account charts her experience of adopting siblings, Jaymey and Harlee, then aged four and one respectively, who have been removed from their birth family following physical and emotional abuse, following them through six years to Jaymey leaving primary school.

In both memoirs, chapter two takes the reader back to the beginning of the authors’ journeys, both of which coincidentally occur in a car park, the car possibly acting as a metaphor for the start of a journey, its static position indicating a feeling of being stuck. Donovan recounts a conversation with her husband in a car park, where she awkwardly broaches the subject of trying for a
baby for the first time (pp. 21-22). In this way, the couple’s experience is presented as following the conventional ‘normal’ path – get married, decide to try for a baby, become a mother. By presenting the similarities with the norm, the author invites the reader to identify with her, in effect declaring, I am like anyone else. She then goes on to chronicle their journey through infertility, the subtext, this could happen to anyone – this could happen to you. Similarly, Schafer portrays a discussion between partners in a car park, her account discussing the positive pregnancy test. Both women use discussions of life changing test results, fertility tests and a pregnancy test, as a springboard for their stories.

Donovan presents both similarities and differences between her experience and that of ‘normal’ mothers. She discusses having to transition to early starts, the exhaustion and adjustment she experiences when her husband goes back to work after his paternity leave (p. 151), themes that most new parents would relate to. However, she also shows how she is perceived as different, drawing on experiences of other people’s reaction to her ‘otherness’, the awkwardness of relatives when they tell them of their decision to adopt, the lack of congratulations cards and presents when the children arrive, the hurtful comments from others. Schaefer also highlights the reactions of others when she later gets married and becomes pregnant, how her family acted as if, and acquaintances assumed, the baby was her first child, stating, 'my joy was tainted with necessity for further deceit' (p. 187).

In No Matter What, the implications of mothering children who have experienced abuse is also shown in detail, e.g. three months into having the children, Donovan reflects:
When Jaymey loses his cool with me, or his sister, he seems as though he really wants to do some damage and if he was big enough then he would. If he shouts an insult at me, then it might be, “I, going to punch your eyes, kill you... eyes”, which doesn't make sense but leaves me horribly unsettled, wondering if he has heard something like it before.

(Donovan, 2013, p. 179)

**Key themes**

Loss and grief are key themes in both memoirs, for Donovan the grief of not bearing her biological children, and for Schaefer the grief of not raising hers.

Donovan (2013, p. 45) states:

> It is a secret, shameful grief, patched over with shallow smiles. I feel a cheat for grieving when others are overcoming much worse... However, the feeling of the loss of the unknown carriers of my genes – whom, for most of my life I had unthinkingly anticipated giving birth to, nurturing and growing old with – is great and deep.

While trying to trace her birth son, Schaefer (1991, p. 265) reflects on the fact that her son’s new birth certificate shows his new name and adoptive parents' names with no reference to the birth mother's name (this applies today in UK):

> Her relationship as his parent was one I could never have. I would never dare to pretend to be his parent. That was a privilege I could not have and a loss I would always mourn. But I had given birth to him. I had never stopped loving him. I was his mother, too, and shouldn’t be wiped out of his life as if I had never existed.

Just as Kay refers to her mum feeling ‘like I belonged to her’, the ideas of belonging and ownership are key themes for Donovan and Schaefer, conveyed through phrases such as ‘I was his mother’ and heavily enshrined in the powerful word ‘mine’. In the opening of *No Matter What*, Donovan refers to Jaymey as
'My beautiful son, four years old, who has been mine for such a short time’ (p. 16) and at the end, 'I am not a believer in magic, nor destiny, but from the moment I met Jamie and Rose I felt they were meant to be mine' (p. 350). (The children’s first names were changed post adoption.) Although the phrase ‘belonging to’ can conjure images of ‘ownership’, of being the ‘property of’ a person, a somewhat disturbing idea in the context of parenthood, the notion of belonging can also have softer connotations, of feeling happy and comfortable in a situation, and to feel as though one is in the right place, the right family, hence belonging together rather than to.


It sounded like we were brood mares and implied that the relationship to our children ended at birth. Dolores said that “natural mother” wasn't any good either, as that implied the adoptive mother was unnatural. The same with “real mother” and “first mother.” “Biological mother” sounded so clinical.’…'The struggle to find a term to describe us underscored the existence of a competitive situation.

Silent partners, victims and villains

Just as Kay and Winterson’s memoir portray their birth mothers as imagined figures before meeting them, Donovan and Schaefer each portray the ‘other mother’ as a silent partner in their own adoptive triangle. Soon after her son is born, Carol reflects on his other mother: 'I saw her as simply a more together version of myself, the kind of person my parents hoped I would be. Where I had failed, so far, she would triumph' (p. 106). As Kay and Helen thought of her birth mother on birthdays, Schaefer (1991, p. 144) reflects on her son’s other mother on Mother’s Day:
Did she think of me? Had she wiped me from her mind, as Sister Dominic had undoubtedly advised? Or was she having a difficult time erasing me and wondering why she couldn't, perhaps believing that not forgetting was a deficiency on her part?

Conversely, Donovan’s vision of her children’s other mother is a wholly negative one: ‘I can never shake off the feeling that Trudy and Mike are not only part of our children’s lives, but part of Rob’s and mine too. They are like silent partners – infiltrating, influencing, blocking’ (2013, p. 177. Donovan expresses her powerful reaction to receiving a memory box sent to her daughter from birth mother, Trudy (via the social worker), with a card signed ‘with lots and lots and lots of love from Mummy’:

I am caught between feeling that I am a sham parent who has usurped another woman and a sickness at the schmaltzy tat, the fake, pink love... Maybe she thinks her baby's fear of hunger can be soothed away by the teddies, that they will make it alright that her brother was left in his own shit for hours and beaten and burnt.

(Donovan, 2013, p.150)

The birth parents are shown as cruel, damaging people; characters in the story are clearly demarcated as ‘victims’ or ‘villains’, just as the media portrays mothers using an ‘us and them’ approach of ‘decent folk versus abusers', failing to consider the complexities involved, such as the possibility that a mother may love her children despite being incapable of looking after them and keeping them safe from harm (Douglas and Michaels, 2005).

[The social worker] talks through all the chances that the birth mother has been given – chances to turn things around, to prove herself capable of parenting her children. Each chance is missed, squandered. I don’t know if she couldn’t believe her children would ever really be removed or whether
she didn’t want to play along with the system.

(Donovan, 2013, p. 103)

Beyond the backdrop of Donovan’s understandable anger, we never get to hear Trudy’s story; she remains a silent, unheard voice. Yet as we are offered a glimpse into Jaymey’s potentially violent behaviour arising from being abused, we are left to fill in the gaps about what could possibly have happened to Trudy in her own past to cause her to fail her children so spectacularly.

In *The Other Mother*, Schaefer initially portrays herself as a victim, ‘forced’ to give up the child she loved against her will, although later, she recounts an incident when she was working as a social worker, visiting a single mother: ‘As I watched her speak, with her son draped around her knee, I knew I could have been this woman, if I had only had the courage…For the first time, I took full responsibility for not keeping my son’ (1991, pp. 177-178).

*Happy ever after*

Schaefer’s account (1991, p. 285-286) follows her story from the mother and baby home where she gave up her son, through to tracing him aged eighteen. After the imaginary characterisation of her son’s adoptive mother, Rosemary, she is finally characterized through the dialogue of their initial phone call, as chatty, welcoming:

“We used to pray for you every night,” Rosemary said. “I always told Jack that you loved him when you gave him up. I just imagined what it would have been like for me in your situation... I often wished I could have told you about different things he did.”
Her meeting with Rosemary and Jack is portrayed in a positive light, and they stay in touch, with Jack even suggesting she write the book. In this way, there is a clear ‘happy ever after’ sense of closure.

Similarly, *No Matter What*, ends on an upbeat note of hope, with the final chapter focusing on Jamie's (name changed from Jaymey) final day at primary school, showing an event where both children receive trophies. 'It is remarkable to see him like this, to see him differently; it is a bright glimpse of a future of possibilities' (p. 348).

The author, who also writes a blog on adoption and a column for *Community Care*, has since shared on her blog that things are very difficult in a post *Rainy Afternoon* (2014) reflecting Winterson’s assertion that in life writing, 'Happy endings are only a pause' (p. 225).

**Biographical writing as self-reflection**

The title of my life writing, *Other Mothers*, was inspired by Schaefer’s memoir, *The Other Mother*. I was clear from the outset that I wanted to widen the net from adoption to include other routes into motherhood. Like most women who go down the adoption route, I had considered other avenues of building my family, including IVF with my own eggs and with egg donation. Finding a connection with a mother via surrogacy at the baby group (as detailed in the preface) opened my eyes to the world of surrogacy, not something I had considered. On a personal level, as a biological and adoptive mother, I undertook the process of researching
and writing these mothers’ stories as in a quest to deepen my own understanding of what it means to mother a child when your child has another mother (through adoption, surrogacy or egg donation), exploring the role of other mothers as ‘silent partners’, with the implicit themes of ‘ownership’ and ‘belonging’ as introduced in the first section of this chapter.

After negotiating the ethics and methodologies involved in finding suitably diverse mothers to interview and conducting the recorded interviews (as discussed in Chapter 2 of the commentary), I was left to focus on how to creatively transform this material into narrative. This necessitated consideration of my role – the role of the self – as a narrator and character in the text. Do I include my questions? Or do I edit myself out? How much of my own story do I include? How will I select and arrange the interview material for maximum impact? I was influenced by the work of oral historian Tony Parker, such as *Five Women* (1965) and *In No Man's Land: Some Unmarried Mothers* (1972), testimonies of women released from prison and unmarried mothers respectively. I found the unique, idiosyncratic voices in these published verbatim accounts utterly compelling and started to think about how I could preserve the women’s voices in my stories while creatively transforming the interview material. In the preface to the reissued version of *Five Women*, editor Richard Kelly defines oral history as:

> [...] works by a writer who conducts extensive in-depth interviews with a subject or subjects; then edits, structures and refines the verbatim transcripts so as to produce a seamless account of the subject(s) in their own words. Oral historians absent themselves from the texts they make [...] 

(Kelly, 2013, p. I)
This assertion that oral historians absent themselves is interesting; this is a key area in which my work differs. Alongside the production of edited verbatim material and narrated scenes arising from the interviews, I inserted myself within the text in a number of ways: as an interviewing ‘life character’, by writing poetry in response to the interviews and through two personal essays, recounting my own experiences of becoming a mother. It felt important to be transparent about my presence as an interviewer when deciding how to write up the stories: the interviewer is not a tape recorder or a machine but a person with values and experiences which shape the process. Lesley Forrest and Judy Giles introduce the idea of interviews as a public performance. In their experience of interviewing, women ‘constructed versions of themselves, drawing on a range of fictions and fantasies’ for example, the ‘powerful narrative that a mother’s place is with her children’ (Forrest and Giles, 1999, p. 46).

The versions of self most frequently offered to the researcher matched prevailing and normative expectations [...] each woman ‘chose’ a mode in which to represent herself: for example as a fighter, a stoic, as rebel, as excluded, as conformer. In doing so, the women drew upon the repertoire of myths and iconography available, choosing versions of identity which were both socially acceptable and *comfortable* (original emphasis) to them.

(Forrest and Giles, 1999, pp. 46–47)

We can argue that this idea of the interview as a public performance can apply equally to researcher and researched, as a way of constructing and presenting a self for an audience. Just as the women I was interviewing chose how to present themselves to me, I was creating a version of myself to present to them: as a writer, as a researcher, as a listener, a confidante, as a mother. Revealing that I was an adoptive mother influenced the way the women responded to me. We
became more than interviewer and interviewee – we were two mothers, finding a connection. When I interviewed birth mother, Margaret, she asked me whether I had met my adopted son’s birth mother, and seemed relieved that we shared a life story book so that she would not be forgotten. Hearing her moving story made me reflect on the journey my son’s birth mother had taken, and develop a deeper empathy for her situation. Although I would gain even more from meeting my son’s actual birth mother, this was nonetheless a cathartic experience for me. Although my role was as a researcher, the fact that this was also a personal learning experience for me as an adoptive mother altered the power dynamic. I was not merely there in a professional role but also a personal one. This is discussed further in the subsection on ‘Drafting Margaret’s story’ in Chapter 3, *Finding a form*.

In *How our lives become stories: Making selves*, Eakin discusses how we develop identity through self-narration, defining ‘self’ as a process rather than an entity (Eakin, 1999, p. 100). This ties in with feminist ideas on the self as a shifting, fractured, relational concept (Kenny, 1999, p. 39). We are not one thing, we are constantly evolving and constantly recreating ourselves in the light of our experiences, our interactions with others and our interactions with text through reading and writing stories.

A more post-modern way of perceiving the self is to see it in terms of plurality of fictions. Creativity in the construction of subjectivity signifies not so much an access to notions of authentic real selfhood as the ability to construct more than one story or narrative.

(Campbell, 1998, p. 166)
In her memoir, *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* Jeanette Winterson states, 'It took me a long time to realise that there are two kinds of writing; the one you write and the one that writes you' (Winterson, 2011, p. 54). Winterson discusses how the act of writing about life with her adoptive parents, and her reunion with her birth mother, was an act of discovery: 'When I began writing this book I had no idea how it would turn out. I was writing in real time. I was writing the past and discovering the future' (Winterson, 2011, p. 226). Fellow adoptee Jackie Kay’s poetry collection, *The Adoption Papers*, presenting the voices of three speakers who are distinguished typographically: the daughter, the adoptive mother and the birth mother, seeks to present multiple versions of events (Kay, 1991). In *The Autobiography of My Mother*, Jamaica Kincaid writes about her mother who died in childbirth (Kincaid, 1996). The title itself could be seen as an oxymoron – how can we write the autobiography of another? Surely writing on another person’s life is a biography? Kincaid writes a story of her ‘unknown’ mother in an attempt to story herself, as explored in Alison Donnell’s essay, ‘When Writing the Other is being True to the Self: Jamaica Kincaid’s *The Autobiography of My Mother*’:

The explosion of criticism surrounding autobiography, and particularly women’s autobiography, over the last twenty years, has demonstrated that as a genre autobiography can be likened to an unmade bed; a site on which discursive, intellectual and political practices can be remade, a ruffled surface on which the traces of previous occupants can be uncovered and/or smoothed over… Many of the most influential women writers of the twentieth century have chosen to make this bed and some to lie in it too. Virginia Wolf, Zora Neale Hurston, Gertrude Stein, and their more contemporary bedfellows Sylvia Plath, Maxine Hong Kingston and Meera Syal have produced inventive and insightful works between its covers.

(Donnell, 1999, p. 124)
Liz Stanley offers a definition of auto/biography as a collision and conflation of the two sub-genres:

The notion of auto/biography involves the insistence that accounts of other lives influence how we see and understand our own and that our understandings of our own lives will impact upon how we interpret other lives…

(Stanley, 1994, p. i)

Hearing Margaret’s story influenced my understanding of what a birth mother goes through when her child is adopted, in turn influencing how I saw part of the role as an adopter to carry the idea of her child’s birth mother until they are able to carry her for themselves. Conversely, writing about the lives of mothers through the lens of my own experience and world view, the ‘biographical’ narratives of ‘other mothers’ are coloured and shaped by my unique perspective. This cyclical process can therefore be seen as an ‘auto/biographical’ act. The dynamic of writing another’s story is summed up by bell hooks as: ‘I want to know your story. And then I will tell it back to you in a new way. Tell it back to you in such a way that it has become my own. Re-writing you, I write myself anew’ (1990, pp. 151—2). A positive interpretation of this statement is that biographical writing can serve as a process of re-storying our own lives within the context of other. However, this raises questions of authorship and ownership of stories – who do they belong to, the biographical subject or the biographer, referring to the ethical issues of speaking for and representing others, discussed in Chapter 2 of the commentary: Whose voice is it anyway?
In response to Carlyle’s suggestion that writing about a life should be an act of sympathy, biographer Sally Cline regards the process as an act of empathy, stating that she ‘tried to understand my subjects better, get inside their heads, their world’, a process Cline says is easier if you admire aspects of someone’s character (2010, p.p. 22—24). Empathy, unlike sympathy, is not about feeling sorry for someone, but attempting to put yourselves in someone else’s shoes, to feel an affinity with them. Within my research, as an adoptive mother, it was easy for me to empathise with fellow adopters Lorraine and Alison, as we had a shared experience. However, it was also powerful to imagine myself on the other side of that experience, by interviewing birth mother Margaret. Despite having no personal experience of egg donation or surrogacy, I felt for Rubi as she spoke about the pain of infertility and her quest to become a mother, and deeply admired Charlotte and Wren for their altruistic acts.

Cline also speaks of biography as serving as a window on the times, that her writing on Zelda Fitzgerald’s life ‘became not merely a window into a destructive marriage but also a window into an unjust time in history for women who wished to achieve’ (2010, p. 25). Similarly, I wanted my biographical portraits on ‘other mothers’ to illuminate the diverse and changing landscape of motherhood. In this way, writing the lives of others causes the life writer to reflect on the wider context of the subjects’ lives, leading to a deeper understanding, not just of one particular life, but of the wider social and cultural factors impacting on that life (discussed further in Chapter 4 of the commentary: The personal as the political).
Writing about mothers involved in adoption, surrogacy and egg donation, in widely different circumstances, led me to deepen my understanding of rich, multi-faceted experiences of motherhood, as both lived experience and as social construct. Journeying through my PhD project, interviewing mothers in an attempt to capture their stories, has led me to position myself in relation to their selves.
CHAPTER 2 – WHOSE VOICE IS IT ANYWAY?

When we think about creative writing, what it is and what it means, we often think of fictional stories invented from the imagination. We admire a writer’s skill in ‘making things up’, conjuring ideas and words like a magician. How does the genre of life writing fit into this? Life writers are not making things up but writing about real lives. My research involved interviewing, recording and transcribing six women talking about their experiences, then editing and creatively transforming the material (as discussed in Chapter 3, *Finding a form*), raising questions of authorship and ownership of stories. If the words and ideas are not entirely the writer’s own, who owns them? Life writing, like all writing, is a literary construction. Life writers impose narrative strategies on the material to influence the reader’s experience of that material. This chapter opens up debates around the ethical issues of speaking for and representing others in life writing.

Procedural ethics

OU Human Research Ethics Committee

Ethical considerations were involved at all stages of my research. The first step before I could embark on recruiting and interviewing women for the project was to obtain approval from the OU Human Research Ethics Committee. The first few months of the project in 2014 were spent preparing to submit my plans to the OU Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), including undertaking relevant reading and attending OU doctoral training sessions. This enabled me to consider
good practice issues in recruiting and interviewing biographical subjects (referred to as ‘research participants’ by the HREC), as well as to network across disciplines with other researchers using related methodologies. The OU Faculty of Health and Social Care research on The Making of Modern Motherhoods Project, *Making Modern Mothers* (Kehily, 2011), used ethnography and biographical methods to explore the experience of pregnancy and new motherhood for biological mothers. A meeting with Professor Kehily, who led the project, helped me to identify some pertinent ethical and methodological issues relating to recruiting and interviewing mothers. For example, bearing in mind that participants may be at home with children, a suitable methodology would be to offer to travel to their home for the interviews or another place which suited the participant, such as a local café, should they not feel comfortable being interviewed at home. It was important to stipulate that any children present during interviews must be fully supervised by their parent at all times, and that I, as the researcher, would not be able to be left alone with the children. We discussed that stories should be anonymised using pseudonyms (for the participants and all other people featured in the story) even if the participants were happy to be named, due to the invasion of privacy for others involved, and that if there were other potentially identifying details, e.g. a specific location, these should be omitted or altered to avoid possible identification.

Following Professor Kehily’s advice, I drew up an ‘Information Sheet for Participants’ and ‘Consent Form’ (included in the Appendix) and submitted these, along with other relevant documentation, to the HREC, for project approval. Two versions of the documents were produced: a full length, detailed version and a
shorter Plain English version for accessibility reasons (for example, if being accessed by a potential participant with literacy issues or learning disability). The Information Sheet set out the following:

- What am I studying?
- Who do I want to talk to?
- What will participation involve?
- What will happen to the material from the meetings?
- How can I find out further information?

The Information Sheet invited volunteers to email me as the researcher to have an initial informal, confidential telephone conversation, to discuss the project without any obligation. Further to an initial conversation, if the woman wished to participate in the face-to-face interviews, a Consent Form would be provided for signature. This was an official agreement to participate in the project, setting out key boundaries including confidentiality. The Consent Form confirmed that the signatory had had the purposes of the research project explained to her and had read the information sheet, prior to commencing. It set out the agreement to take part in interviews and to the conversations being audio-recorded, on the understanding that the audio-recordings would not be used as broadcast material but transcriptions of part of them may be used in the life writing narrative and related publications. Participants were also given information about their rights to withdraw from the project. Signing the consent form assigned the copyright for the transcriptions of interviews/meetings to me, the researcher for use in my PhD thesis, and other publications, on the understanding that this would not affect participant’s right to publish their own autobiographical account in the future.
Participants were given contact details of the project supervisor and Head of Department.

A number of stipulations were made by the committee before I could commence, including that: participants could only be recruited via ‘gatekeeping agencies’ (such as charitable organisations offering information, advice and support services related to adoption, surrogacy and egg donation) and not via any existing contacts (to prevent the possibility of personal persuasion, bias or coercion) and that a suitably qualified counsellor must be involved to offer optional debriefing to participants in case the interviews triggered painful memories. Particular concern was expressed over interviewing a birth mother whose child had been adopted. There was discussion about the participants’ rights to withdraw their interview material and the level of input they should be given in the writing up and presentation of the material. It was advised not to allow participants the option to review and amend their stories as this could cause unnecessary delays and create complications of co-authorship. The committee also advised against an open ended right to withdraw, as this could potentially leave a researcher in dire straits if participants withdrew just before submission.

At the stage of writing this chapter, some six and a half years in to my part-time PhD, I am grateful for this advice. We settled on allowing participants thirty days from their last interview to withdraw consent. This was considered reasonable by all parties and was discussed and agreed up front with all participants, when presenting them with the Information Sheet to read and Consent Form to sign. I was reminded that the committee’s role was to oversee procedural ethics ‘to ensure procedures adequately deal with informed consent, confidentiality, rights
to privacy, deception, and protecting human subjects from harm’ (Ellis, 2007). The committee serves a legal function to protect the organisation (e.g. from lawsuits) as well as research participants.

Further internal networking was then undertaken, including with Dr Jackie Watts in the Faculty of Health and Social Care regarding the use of gatekeeping agencies and Dr Siobhan Campbell in the English and Creative Writing Department regarding ethical issues in creative writing projects. Dr Campbell was able to recommend a BACP qualified counsellor who she had worked with on a creative writing project, who agreed to be the named counsellor for the project.

Recruiting and interviewing biographical subjects

Once my reworked proposal was approved, I set about contacting relevant organisations to act as gatekeepers for recruitment. Membership organisation, Donor Conception Network (DCN), expressed interest and circulated a call-out for participants, resulting in enquiries from several women, who were sent the Information Sheet. Alison was very enthusiastic and had a wealth of interesting experience. As she has a child via donor conception and an adopted child, proceeding with Alison did threaten to jeopardise the six woman approach, but I decided to go ahead and allow the project to evolve organically. Indeed, subsequent participant, Lorraine, recruited as an adoptive mother, also happened to be adopted herself, so again presented a dual perspective and experience at interview. I began interviewing Alison at her home in August 2015. The experience enabled me to develop my interviewing skills (the ability to develop a
rapport with a subject and ask probing questions to uncover their stories) and an understanding of the ethics and sensitivities involved in practice. My second participant, Charlotte (not her real name), a woman who has donated her eggs to five different recipients, was recruited via the National Gametes Donation Trust. The further women were recruited via Surrogacy UK, Adoption UK and the Natural Parents Network (a user led organisation for birth parents whose children have been adopted). My approach to the research was to interview and write up one woman’s story at a time before moving on to recruiting the next to allow me time to digest and reflect on each woman’s story, and so as not to keep women waiting once they had expressed an interest in being interviewed. There was no shortage of volunteers wishing to be interviewed and the six women fell naturally into place.

My initial plan for the interviews was formed after meeting with Professor Kehily and learning about some of the interview methods used in the Making of Modern Motherhoods Project. I undertook four interviews with Alison, over a period of several weeks, with the following focuses: 1) Childhood photographs – looking at photos from the participant’s childhood and photos of her children; 2) A day in the life - shadowing the participant in her everyday life; 3) Objects – looking at an object that is significant to the participant as an 'other mother', in Alison’s case an embroidered quilt that her mother-in-law made to tell the family story (discussed further as an analogy to the quilting method of storytelling in Chapter 3, Finding a form); and 4) Important dates – discussing birthdays, Mothers’ Day and other celebrations. Formats varied from participant to participant, depending on their wishes. For example, there were several meetings
in the participants’ homes for Alison, Charlotte and Rubi; Lorraine preferred to be interviewed in a café (two meetings), and Wren and Margaret both opted to one longer home meeting each. The women were in control of the way the meetings were set up.

Social sciences researcher, Ann Oakley, has written extensively on her experience of in-depth interviews of women in the late 60s to 70s for research on ‘housework’ and ‘transitioning to motherhood’. In her paper, ‘Interviewing women: a contradiction in terms?’ (Oakley, 2005, pp. 217-32), Oakley talks about how academic researchers tend not to describe the research process beyond the basic facts such as how many interviews were carried out, duration, frequency, whether a standardised question format was used etc. and do not generally comment on the social, personal or emotional aspects of the interviewer/interviewee relationship. She says that sociology methodology textbooks on interviewing mainly operate a ‘masculine paradigm’ of legitimate and illegitimate interviewing behaviour, establishing a rapport as a means to an end to get interviewees to answer set questions, which offers a reductionist view of interviewers and positions interviewees in a passive role, exploring this as at odds with women’s models and not being a good fit for feminist interviewers interviewing women. Oakley talks about the significance of: the interviewee’s and interviewer’s feelings, interviewees asking the interviewer personal questions (e.g. do you have children?), hospitality (being offered tea etc.), transitioning to friendship, and views the ‘textbook code’ (e.g. do not get involved) as adopting an exploitative attitude to interviewees as purely instruments of data rather than human beings. While Oakley’s observations differentiating masculine and
feminine ways of approaching the interview relationship were important at the
time her social sciences research on housework and motherhood in the 60s and
70s, in the current climate, the interview dynamic may be viewed as a more
personal and nuanced relationship, depending on the individuals involved. The
traditional, more transactional approach might involve trust and hospitality.
Equally, there is perhaps a transactional element in human interactions, regardless
of gender. Oakley argues that in practice it is difficult to establish rapport without
answering interviewees’ questions (which in sociology research would
traditionally be batted away by commenting that it is the interviewer’s job to
gather opinions rather than offer them), claiming there is ‘no intimacy without
reciprocity’ (p226).

Certainly, the women I interviewed wanted to know about my own
experiences of motherhood, and they were particularly interested in asking me
questions about my experience of adoption (e.g. egg donor Charlotte asked how
old my son was when I adopted him, birth mother Margaret asked if he has any
contact with his own birth mother). Sometimes, women told me information ‘off
the record’. It seemed the moment the Dictaphone was turned off and my coat put
on was often the moment a participant would open up and say, ‘Don’t write
anything about this but…’ This was extremely frustrating to me as a researcher as
interesting material often emerged during these moments. Understanding that
women had the right to control what information was recorded (and thirty days
after the last interview to withdraw consent), I, of course, never used any of the
unauthorised material. However, at times, I wished they hadn’t disclosed it when I
couldn’t use it if it was to be of no use to me. However, to varying degrees, the
women opened up to me as more than a researcher. This leads onto the issue of relational ethics.

**Relational ethics**

Of course, ethical dilemmas did not cease to exist after the research had been passed by the committee. Questions abounded: Was it ethical to expect my subjects to reveal their innermost secrets for possible publication when I was wary about revealing my own experience, particularly around the adoption of my youngest child? How should I walk the tightrope between researcher and friend? And what about the children, who did not consent to having their lives exposed for public consumption?

In 'Telling Secrets, Revealing Lives – Relational Ethics in Research With Intimate Others', Ellis (2007) deals with ethics from an ethnographer's point of view, defining a type of ethics differing from procedural ethics, which she coins 'relational ethics'. Ellis’s paper discusses dilemmas arising in three separate ethnographical works that she undertook, in situations where she either had a relationship with the biographical subject or developed a relationship (or became ‘friendly’) with the subjects over the period of research. Many of her ideas could be applied to creative life writing, as the same dilemmas ensue. Ellis discusses writing about her mother, without her mother’s knowledge or consent, in ‘Maternal Connections’, and the feedback from her college students on reading this writing that it made them uncomfortable reading intimate details of her
mother’s experience in hospital, knowing that her mother was not aware of this information being shared. She also discussed writing about her experience of bereavement after the death of a romantic partner, and the issues arising in sharing personal information about the deceased. The third project, less personal perhaps, concerns one of her earliest ethnographical studies, with a small fishing community, who she lived alongside for the duration of the research, and became friendly with, discussing the limitations of pseudonyms, detailing how anonymised subjects recognised themselves in the text of one of her books, exploring the fall-out:

In my mind, the dissertation and book that followed were separate from my relationship with the Fisher Folk. Thus, I failed to consider sufficiently how my blunt disclosures in print might affect the lives of the people about whom I wrote. Instead I cared about how committee members reacted to my dissertation and whether my manuscript would be published as a book. Although I didn’t appear often in the text as a character, I considered the story I wrote to be my realist, sociological story about them, not their story…Wasn’t this what getting a PhD was all about?

(Ellis, 2007, p.10)

As a mother interviewing other mothers, I felt a connection with my participants and a responsibility as a researcher, leading me to deliberate over potentially unflattering character portraits, ruminating on the inherent moral ambiguities (Malcolm, 1990, p. 1). I asked myself how I would like my own complex experiences of motherhood presented. My own motives were something I had to carefully consider at each stage: I was researching motherhood through adoption, surrogacy and egg donation to help illuminate women’s experiences and increase understanding but, of course, there was also the matter of personal gain
Couser’s Vulnerable subjects: Ethics and life writing (2004) discusses the issue of informed consent and who is capable of giving it, exploring the inherent problems of parental memoirs, straddling an authorised and unauthorised biography, whereby parents assume rather than request rights: ‘What are intended by parents as beneficent acts may be perceived by their children, once grown, as violations of their autonomy, acts of appropriation or even betrayal’ (Couser, 2004, p. 57). When, as adults, we write about, or agree to have published, accounts of our parenting, laying bare accounts of our children’s lives, how can we possibly know what they will think of these publications when they are older? If we ask our children whether they give permission to have their lives exposed, how can we be certain that they understand the full implications of what they are agreeing to? At what age are children able to give informed consent? Is there always an element of coercion in the power dynamic of parent-child? Are some children more vulnerable than others?

To highlight these ethical dilemmas, I draw on Julie Myerson’s publication of The Lost Child in 2009. Myerson was commissioned to write a biography of Regency painter, Mary Yelloly, a girl who died of tuberculosis in the 1820s, leaving behind a collection of watercolours. However, during the process of writing the book, Myerson became distracted by her teenage son, Jake, developing what she described as a drug addiction to skunk (a potent form of cannabis), leading her to decide to rework the book-in-progress as a dual narrative of two lost children: Mary Yelloly and her son, Jake Myerson. The book reveals very intimate information about Jake’s drug use and personal life at the time, including
his parents’ decision to ask him to leave (and lock him out of) the family home aged seventeen, and his mother’s offer to pay for a termination of pregnancy for a teenage girl he got pregnant. It makes for uncomfortable, voyeuristic reading in places.

In an interview with *The Independent* at the time of publication, Jake, then twenty years old, insisted he told his mother he didn’t want the book to be published, despite her claims in the press that he had given permission:

‘My mother seems to have suggested that I somehow agreed to this book which isn't really correct. The book contains some poetry that I wrote when I was about 15 or 16 and I remember getting a call from my mother saying she'd pay me £1,000 if she could use it. I was scrabbling around for money at the time so of course I took it but that doesn't mean I wanted it to be published.’

(Myerson cited in Taylor, 2009)

Five years later after detox, in an interview with *The Daily Mail*, Jake takes responsibility for his drug use and agrees with some of his mother’s actions in terms of ‘tough love’. However, he still does not agree that she did the right thing in publishing his story. He reveals that since the publication of his private life:

‘He’s attempted to kill himself more than once. He’s been admitted to psychiatric wards twice. He’s shoplifted tens of thousands of pounds worth of goods, been arrested, and self-harmed’ (Foster, 2014). Clearly, then, it would seem fair to say he is a vulnerable person, by anyone’s definition. Five years after the account of his troubled teenage years were published by his mother, he says:

‘Obviously, I still don’t agree that my mother should have written *The Lost Child*. I was put into a position totally out of my power and felt very vulnerable. She should have held onto it and published it 20 years down the line — no one would’ve batted an eyelid. But she did what she did and she’s tried to apologise.’

(Myerson cited in Foster, 2014)
Mindful of the impact of autobiographical writing on my own children, I had to make an ethical decision over how much of my own story as a biological and adoptive mother to include in the creative writing for my project, and how this could potentially violate my children’s privacy. My decision to include two personal essays is discussed further in Chapter 3, *Finding a form*. The essays explore my experience of loss and trauma with an ectopic pregnancy, and also my experience of training and preparation to adopt, ending on seeing a video of the baby who went onto become my son. I took a decision not to include any other discussion of either of my children in the creative writing, nor reveal other aspects of their personal stories, which I see as belonging to them. Likewise, although I adopted as part of a couple, I decided to present only my own parenting journey; my children’s father has his own story.

Myserson claimed in her book that she wrote it to help other families dealing with teenage drug addiction (Myerson, 2009). The claim that publication may serve the ‘greater good’, possibly at the expense of individuals portrayed, raises wider ethical dilemmas. If more people may be helped by publication than those harmed, is the damage balanced out? In ‘The Unseemly Profession: Privacy, Inviolate Personality and the Ethics of Life Writing’, Paul Eakin unpicks the concept of ‘the individual’ and the concept of ‘privacy’, which he says can be said to be peculiar to Western culture. In some other cultures, the rights of an individual may be seen as less important than the rights of the community. Indeed a person may be seen to exist in terms of their role within a group rather than as a separate individual (1999, pp. 165-6). Eakin critiques the publication of the
controversial memoir, *The Kiss*, by Kathryn Harrison (1998) which explores an incestuous relationship with her father which began in her twenties. Although some commentators lauded her as being courageous for sharing her story, other critics condemned her for ignoring the consequences of publication for her two young children, calling the book an ‘exhibitionist display’ and ‘narcissistic act’ and accusing her of ‘merchandising pain’ (Eakin, 1999, pp.153-155).

Another key consideration for life writers, according to Eakin, is whether the life writer has objectified the person whose life is being documented, transforming him or her into a ‘thing’ (p166). This links with Couser’s critique of adoptive father Michael Dorris’s memoir of raising an adopted son, *The Broken Cord*, which Couser says reduces his son to a ‘case study’ (Couser, 2004, pp. 56-73). Couser explores how after diagnosis of foetal alcohol syndrome, literary treatment of Dorris’s son, Adam, changes from ‘a fully individualized character’ to becoming ‘a type and his story a case history’ (Couser, 2004, p. 60–61). This made me question whether my initial decision to select six women to interview by category (adoptive mother/birth mother/egg donor/mother via egg donation/surrogate mother/mother via surrogacy) was reductionist, reducing the women to ‘types’ rather than individuals. In reality, the women who came forward did not fit easily into one category – the first, Alison, being a mother through adoption and egg donation, the second, Charlotte, being an egg donor, biological mother and stepmother. All aspects of these women’s lives that were discussed were fascinating, not just the ring fenced aspects associated with their ‘categories’.
Appropriation and authentication

Linking these discussions on appropriation and Oakley’s assertion of the ‘masculine paradigm’ of social sciences interviewing, likewise a biographer has been traditionally reviewed as an ‘expert/authority’ narrating the life of their ‘subject’. The biographer has traditionally remained absent in the text and/or presented as being objective, their processes invisible to the reader. Literary editor, Boyd Tomkin (as cited in Cline and Angier, 2010, pp. 149-151), talks about ‘a new wave of biographical literature’ over the past two decades, highlighting the example of Philip Hoare ‘once a conventional biographer’ whose 2009 non-fiction book, *Leviathan, or The Whale*, ‘puts the storyteller centre-stage, and makes a drama out of his quest for the subject’ (p.150). The idea of having the biographer centre stage may be viewed as an innovative way of working but the inclusion of a meta-narrative, writing about the process of life writing, doesn’t eliminate the risk of appropriation. Indeed, Julie Myerson’s narration of her son, Jake, very much put her own character centre stage. Placing oneself centre stage as a biographer also presents the risk of narcissism; by staying on the sidelines, it might be argued that the author at least avoids gratuitous self-dramatization. If the biographer is no longer an absent voice but acknowledged as a person with their own role in the journey of narrating another’s life, how does this shift the paradigm?

This idea of the storyteller as a pivotal character can be seen in Alexander Masters’s biography, *Stuart: A Life Backwards* (2006), which relays the author’s meetings with a homeless man named Stuart over a period of two years. However, despite the apparent progressive approach of Masters including himself as a
character in Stuart’s story, as a middle class author writing the biography of a vulnerable homeless person, Masters can be said to be ‘articulating the other’. This can be problematic in terms of the unbalanced power dynamic, with its inherent potential for appropriation or even exploitation. A number of ethical issues are involved including: Stuart’s vulnerability and ability to give informed consent; relational ethics (as Masters interviewed Stuart over a period of two years, developing a relationship with him; and how Stuart is represented, the notion of exoticising ‘the other’, which can be inferred via the language used in the book jacket blurb:

…the story of an extraordinary friendship between a reclusive writer and illustrator (‘a middle class scum ponce, if you want to be honest about it, Alexander’) and a chaotic, knife-wielding beggar whom he gets to know during a campaign to release two charity workers from prison.

Masters examined homelessness from the ‘outside in’. My project differs in that I am exploring ‘other motherhood’ from the vantage point of a biological and adoptive mother, one could say ‘from the inside’. Although I cannot claim to know what it feels like to be anyone other than myself, and have not experienced what my interviewees have, the overlaps and shared experiences with the mothers interviewed alter the dynamic between researcher and researched. Can I be defined as articulating the other, if I am the other? Clearly, there are still delicate issues to be negotiated. I am not a vulnerable birth mother who felt she was coerced into adoption; I am a PhD researcher seeking to gain an academic qualification from the interviews. I am a White British interviewer interviewing women from cross-cultural backgrounds. There is a fine line between ‘appreciation’, seeking to deepen understanding of another’s experience, and
‘appropriation’, using an aspect of another experience/culture/identity that is not your own for your own personal interest.

Issues of appropriation and authentication needed to be negotiated with all aspects of using the women’s interview material; however, there were particular questions around cultural appropriation when interviewing women cross-culturally. Rubi referred to attitudes of her Indian family with language such as, ‘You know, it’s a typical Asian thing.’ I did not want to present her experience in a culturally stereotyped way; I wanted to capture and convey the reality of her experience, including her family’s response to her infertility and surrogacy, in a way that was authentic. Rubi and her husband, Sunni, both had English sounding names, although deviating slightly from traditional spellings by changing ‘y’ to ‘i’. When I presented her story to my supervisors using the names Ruby and Sunny, my supervisors queried whether I had changed their names from Indian names. Dr Sally O’Reilly, who writes historical fiction, highlighted that sometimes real historical details appear so implausible to the reader that they have to be falsely edited to offer an illusion of authenticity, which I found fascinating. However, I was uncomfortable with the idea of using traditional Indian pseudonyms for this couple, as I did not feel this reflected their identity. In the end, we settled on changing my suggested pseudonyms of Ruby and Sunny to Rubi and Sunni to reflect the nature of their actual names.

In *Art and Ventriloquism*, David Goldblatt uses the metaphor of ventriloquism to examine ‘how the vocal vacillation between ventriloquist and dummy works within the roles of artist, artwork and audience as a conveyance to the audience of the performer’s intentions, emotions and beliefs through a created performative
persona’ (2005, book blurb). This relates to novelists using fictional characters as dummies to direct their own voice through and project ideas, themes and emotions. Thinking about biography, we can also see that the biographical subject can serve as a kind of ‘dummy’ too, with the biographer acting as a ventriloquist, controlling the words allowed to escape through the subject’s mouth in terms of how material is edited and presented, further explored in Chapter 3, *Finding a form*. ‘If the ventriloquist is to be understood as a controlling or at least intentional figure, the dummy is the medium for another voice, one different from the ventriloquist's yet a voice of the ventriloquist’ (Goldblatt, 2005, p. 76).

There are no easy answers to ethical conundrums, no set rules that apply to every situation. Rather there are principles that can be applied, other writers and researchers’ experiences – good practice and mistakes – to draw on.

We do not act on principles that hold for all times. We act as best we can at a particular time, guided by certain stories that speak to that time, and other people’s dialogical affirmation that we have chosen the right stories....The best any of us can do is to tell one another our stories of how we have made choices and set priorities. By remaining open to other people’s responses to our moral maturity and emotional honesty…we engage in the unfinalized dialogue of seeking the good.’

(Frank, 2004, pp. 191-192)

This chapter is an attempt to reflect on the ethical decisions made throughout researching and writing up the *Other Mothers* project, knowing it remains an area of open dialogue. Some of the wider ethical issues involved directly in adoption, surrogacy, egg donation (rather than those pertaining to the researching and writing up of women’s stories) such as inequalities and possible exploitation of women, are explored in Chapter 4, *The personal as political*. 
CHAPTER 3 – FINDING A FORM

Just as there are ethical considerations involved in life writing, there are also artistic considerations. One of the biggest challenges of the research was deciding how to creatively transform the raw material into a compelling read illuminating the other mothers’ lives. On starting the project, I had early ideas about how I might shape the material, mainly in terms of a prose narrative. However, on interviewing the women and attempting to match content and form, these ideas evolved. As I began to assemble the work, I saw patterns emerging that I wanted to replicate, so insights gained during the process of writing informed its direction. It was only after completing a full draft of the life writing that I fully understood the rationale behind the form that I was creating. On reflection, I understood that the choice of form has not only ethical and artistic connotations but also political ones, explored further in Chapter 4, *The personal as political*. This chapter sets out the key artistic considerations encountered when finding a form for my life writing project.

Transforming life into literature

Part of the early research process was exploring the craft of other writers and experimenting with borrowed techniques. Aspects of Jackie Kay and Jeanette Winterson’s writing on their adoption experiences discussed in Chapter 1 – the fragmented, episodic feel – interested me. I was also influenced by the role of the biographer as a character in the text in Alexander Masters’ *Stuart: A Life Backwards*, as discussed in Chapter 2. However, after transcribing the first
interviewee’s recorded interviews, I found her voice so riveting that I wanted to preserve it rather than transform it. I turned to the work of social anthropologist Tony Parker (In No Man's Land: Some Unmarried Mothers) as discussed in Chapter 1, and journalist Svetlana Alexievich (Voices from Chernobyl), as examples of finely edited interviews and set about editing Alison’s transcripts. I grappled with whether such work could be classified as creative writing, sensing that I would somehow be ‘cheating’ in submitting edited interviews for a PhD in Creative Writing. In Alexievich’s interview on receiving the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015, she referred to Voices from Chernobyl as a ‘novel of voices’ (Chayka, 2015), highlighting its artistic value. Parker’s writing has been similarly discussed:

Constructing narrative is more than a matter of transcribing interviews and erasing the questions. It involves communicating character and content in a form that remains true to the subject while commanding the reader’s attention. These are properly the skills of the writer. John Banville, the novelist, makes the point in his review of Parker’s (1991) Life After Life: ‘Tony Parker’s material is tape-recorded speech but he is a very cunning writer. By means of arrangement and pattern, rhythm and tone… he makes out of these tape-recorded testimonies a kind of art that is all the more affecting because it springs from fact.’

(Barton, 2018, p. 251)

Five years into my research, a book was published by Jo Parnell called New and Experimental Approaches to Writing Lives (2019). In the introduction Hugh Craig explains how Parnell’s concept of the ‘literary docu-memoir’ has its roots in Tony Parker’s work, and further explains Parnell’s invented form:

Colour and texture is given by the documentary effect of incidental factual materials and photographs. Literary docu-memoir also creates a three-dimensional experience for the reader, by rendering in detail the context of the interviews and the experience of the interviewer. The interviewer puts
on a ‘fictional cloak’ as a writer, striving, paradoxically, to create truth by acknowledging the context of imagination and feeling for both subject and interviewer.

Parnell takes from Parker the belief that ordinary people in their interaction with a sympathetic interviewer can touch on ‘deeper realities’, philosophical and poetical insights which might otherwise have not emerged over the course of their normal reflective and interpersonal life.

(Craig in Parnell, 2019, p. 3)

My invented life writing form builds on these ideas, in providing colour and texture through a tapestry of creative and factual components. Angier talks about life writers more generally having ‘a sort of immigrant status in literature; admired for their “investigative skills”, but only rarely noticed for the quality of their writing,’ but goes on to say, ‘The truth is that stories are only ever noticed because of the quality of their writing; good research alone is just statistics… every act of giving meaning is creative’ (2010, p.6). Eventually, the creative component of my PhD evolved into a complex hybrid form, combining edited interviews, re-imagined prose scenes, poetry, personal essay and quotation collage.

The Russian critic and literary theorist Bakhtin coined a useful (if over-used) term for this variety. Heteroglossia is the translation of his Russian word raznorecie - literally, "manylanguagedness"... Bakhtin privileged heteroglossia: works that make present the clashes and incongruities of different voices are preferred to those that create a "unified" narrative surface...

(Mullan, 2005)

As discussed in the introduction, my own rationale for using heteroglossia in the Other Mothers was that the juxtaposition of diverse voices and forms, this manylanguagedness, would allow a richer interpretation and understanding of the
labyrinth of ‘other motherhood’, than that afforded by a single voiced or unified account. Creative decisions were made for each woman’s story in turn, and then reviewed and reworked once all the stories had been drafted.

Drafting Alison’s story

The first mother to come forward to be interviewed was Alison, a mother by egg donation and adoption. After transcribing her interview, I was left with the task of experimenting and shaping the material. Initially, I opted for the format of an edited interview, narrated in first person, interspersed with descriptions of childhood photographs (both from Alison’s childhood and of her children). I attempted to replicate the approaches taken by oral historians, Parker (1972) and Alexievich (1997), who convey the uniqueness of each subject’s voice by including the idiosyncrasies of each interviewee, such as conversational tics and repeated phrases e.g. ‘in a way’, ‘like’ etc. The key challenge here was to decide how far to go in editing the original transcript, recognising that although some grammatical ‘errors’ add to the idiosyncrasy of the voice, there is a fine balance between capturing an authentic voice and confusing or irritating the reader. The decision to use descriptions of photographs was also influenced by Janice Galloway’s approach in her memoir, This Is Not About Me (2010), which makes the reader feel as though they are flicking through family albums with her.

I chose to write up the interviews in first person present tense narration as I wanted to position myself as a character in the text, to be overt about my role rather than pretend to write ‘objective’ biography. This is explored further in Chapter 4, The personal as the political. Initially, in ‘The nearly son’, covering
my first meeting with Alison, the first person narration dominates before I retreat into the background, allowing Alison’s voice – and images – to tell the story. Rather than restrict the writing to edited interview format, I opted for a different treatment of Alison’s account of meeting her son’s birth mother, ‘Hers’, writing it as a re-imagined memory – re-entered and creatively transformed in third person present tense. This method allowed me to play around with the material, providing more freedom and elasticity. I ‘invented’ some of the dialogue - although it is heavily based on what Alison told me about her interactions with others, I do not have their exact words in the same way that I have hers from the transcripts. To distinguish between presentation of actual dialogue and ‘invented’ dialogue, I italicised the verbatim dialogue and used quotation marks for the invented dialogue. The mode of re-imagined memory felt more like fiction, so it felt natural to follow the convention of quotation marks. I was also influenced by other memoirists’ use of italicised dialogue (e.g. Kay, 2010; Myerson, 2009).

The re-imagined memory allowed me to creatively combine material. Alison’s meetings with William’s birth mother, Tracey, are juxtaposed with the birth of Alison’s daughter, Emily. I was struck by Alison telling me that when her daughter was born, she felt like a fraud, because she had conceived using another woman’s egg. She said she felt guilty somehow, a feeling that also resonated with her emotional state on meeting Tracey. Alison’s feeling, that she was ‘not entitled’ to her baby, interested me, linking to the idea of ‘ownership’ which is found in other stories of adoption by both adoptees (Kay, 2010; Winterson, 2011) and adopters (Donovan, 2013; Schafer, 1992) as explored in Chapter 1. I also found Alison’s words, ‘I could only look at her out of the corner of my eye’,
particularly powerful and wanted to weave this in the narrative somehow. I wanted to portray Alison’s unease rather than have this explicitly told in the reported speech sections. I spent a long time thinking about how to portray this before settling on the method used, interjecting dreamlike sequences into the main contact narrative, initially referring to her daughter impassively as ‘the baby’ rather than ‘her baby’ and withholding Alison’s name to create some ambiguity as to whether it was referring to Alison or Tracey. I wanted to juxtapose the idea of Alison feeling inadequate at not being able to comfort her new baby, with the scene where she is called to return to comfort William, assumed to be competent and in control, to be able, even, to stem a nosebleed. The result is a rather fragmented, disorienting narrative, mirroring the bewilderment of new motherhood. The re-imagined third person scene is ‘sandwiched’ between the narrated interviews, a significant structural decision as the re-imagined section feels like the core of the piece, to be exposed once the layers are peeled away.

Writing Alison’s section felt very organic and fluid. After creating the form of combining edited interview with re-imagined scenes, I initially aimed to replicate it and use it for the other stories to create a sense of rhythm and shape. However, it didn’t quite work out this way as the form further evolved, as discussed in subsequent sections.

Drafting Charlotte’s story

The second mother to be interviewed was Charlotte, who donated her eggs for other couples to conceive. The link with Alison’s story interested me as Charlotte
is far removed from Alison’s fantasy of her egg donor being someone coerced or trafficked into donating eggs; juxtaposing their stories therefore seemed appropriate. I tried to mirror the make-up of Alison’s narrative in the way I interwove images with edited interviews, and included a central section consisting of key re-imagined scenes, ‘A day at the races’. Similar to the way I contrasted Alison’s experience as a new mother with donor-conceived Emily and as a foster carer with William, I contrasted Charlotte’s experiences at the time of the birth of the babies conceived via her eggs (Macey and Jake) with her first birth experience with her ‘own child’, Tahlia. As with Alison’s narrative, I have edited material to make sense thematically rather than chronologically, somewhat manipulating the text to fit. For example, Charlotte’s comments about her mother’s background in care have been edited to appear directly above the comment about egg donation, ‘serving to fill a whopping hole’, when actually the two sections of dialogue came at very different points in the interviews.

There are stylistic differences between my treatment of Alison and Charlotte’s stories. The sections interweaving photos differ, as in Alison’s case, we were looking at and discussing photo albums together, whereas Charlotte sent me a Facebook link to images after the interview. This new way of sharing mothering online was discussed at Dr Heather Elliott’s seminar, *Storying Mothering Online*, as an emerging form of publication of stories and voices (Elliott, 2016). Therefore, the interweaving is more artificial; the text does not directly relate. My aim is for the form to work with the content to suggest a disconnect. Some of the themes identified in Alison’s narrative reoccur here e.g. competitiveness and absences. Charlotte’s story also explores new thematic areas
of fate and superstition, which echo in some of the other women’s stories. I was
struck by the way Charlotte uses the idea of destiny as a comfort, a way of
reassuring herself that everything is as it should be. In this regard, there are two
layers to the narrative: what is directly said and what can be inferred (as with
Alison’s narrative). For example, Charlotte says she has no regrets but there is
clearly a lot of repressed anger towards Stephen and Anthony. I found the body
language in some of the photographs, particularly with Anthony and Stephen,
very revealing (e.g. the new fathers on all fours, surrounding Macey, in a
protective stance) and attempted to convey this through visual descriptions of the
photographs woven into the text.

Drafting Rubi’s story

Rubi was the third mother to come forward to interview: an Anglo-Indian woman
who travelled to India to use surrogacy services and now had two children by two
different surrogates and two egg donors. I interviewed Rubi on two separate
occasions in her own home. Deciding how to present Rubi’s material was
challenging. Unlike Alison and Charlotte, Rubi opted to have her husband present
during the interviews - the complication here is that ‘Rubi and Sunni’ very much
came as a pair. Although the interview was with Rubi, she kept calling out to her
husband and asking him to verify information and he drifted in and out of the
room, making comments. In some ways, he is more present in the story than her –
he gave up his job and stayed in India, continuing to provide sperm to multiple
surrogates until one got pregnant while Rubi went back to the UK; he falsified a
pregnancy scan to be sent to his dying mother to pretend they were having a baby before there was any pregnancy; essentially, he pursued parenthood on their behalf after she had given up. Her absence from parts of the story fascinated me and was something I wanted to explore. During the first interview, Rubi did not reveal very much at all, yet during subsequent conversations, once trust and rapport were established, she opened up much more. However, there were still a lot of gaps to fill in. Rubi’s selective storytelling links to the idea of ‘interview as a public performance’ (as discussed in Chapter 1).

One of the key difficulties I experienced with arranging and editing the material was that Rubi contradicted herself often, e.g. at the first interview, she told me that when they started with the first surrogate, Dawn, they used IUI at the clinic, where Sunni’s sperm was injected into her eggs. During the second interview, she told me they started with artificial insemination, where sperm is inserted directly into the surrogate’s vagina. To avoid confusing the reader, the edited version refers to artificial insemination from the outset – although in some ways, the editing loses the way Rubi conceals and possibly ‘sanitises’ parts of her experience. During editing, I have had to strike a balance between rearranging (often repetitive) material to group content thematically or chronologically, with editing to preserve the tension by allowing ‘plot hooks’ to be planted and information revealed later.

On reviewing Rubi’s transcripts, I identified a number of narrative arcs including: Rubi’s childhood and how that provides context for her self-image, relationships and her fertility; and tension with Rubi’s sister-in-law (and the reveal as to the reason). After I had written up the first draft, I had a look at
Sunni’s e-book, which is published online in instalments on his website. As there were a number of images in there, I used visual descriptions of some of these, as I did the visual images from photo albums in Alison’s story and Facebook in Charlotte’s story. Initially, I attempted to replicate the form used in Alison and Charlotte’s stories by including a ‘fictionalised’ or re-imagined constructed memory scene, juxtaposing Rubi meeting the first surrogate for the first time with her teenage experiences with her older sister. This decision was influenced partly by Rubi revealing that the surrogate called her ‘sister’ combined with how she felt inadequate next to her actual sister, highlighting themes of competition (also present in Alison and Charlotte’s stories). My intention was to foreshadow the revelation of Rubi’s eating disorder, low self-esteem and body image, revealed in the final section.

However, following supervisory feedback I decided to remove the reconstructed chapter, which wasn’t working for a number of reasons. There was unnecessary repetition of information between interview and re-imagined scenes; the section was much more heavily ‘fictionalised’ than Alison or Charlotte’s re-imagined scenes, which I would define as prose life writing rather than fiction; and perhaps most importantly, the fictionalised scene included some fairly salacious, unsubstantiated content, inferred from the gaps in the interview, which detracted from Rubi’s account. I decided that I needed to hand the story back to her and decided to completely cut the scene. At this midpoint in gathering the six women’s stories, I was starting to feel somewhat restricted by my own imposed form in attempting to repeat the approach used in presenting Alison’s story, sandwiching a reconstructed scene between edited interview. After removing the
scene from Rubi’s story, I knew something was missing. It was only when I finished transcribing all the stories that I realised what I needed to add.

Drafting Robin’s story

The fourth participant was Robin, who acted as a surrogate mother in the UK. Her story worked well alongside Rubi’s, to provide a voice for the absent surrogate character. In the process of writing Robin’s narrative, I didn’t want to be unnecessarily bound by the structural decisions I made at the beginning with Alison’s story, as I felt it was important to be open to reworking the form. However, to an extent, I did retain the structure: the opening section, ‘Drama queen’, introduces Robin to the reader through our meeting scene; there follows Robin’s edited verbatim voice dispersed with descriptions of what is happening in the room, with the analogy of the green chair taking the place of descriptions of photographs; a middle reconstructed scene, ‘Yes, no, maybe’, focuses on Robin taking her daughter to a surrogacy conference where she met the couple she went on to be a surrogate for. Initially, this was written in third person limited omniscience from Robin’s point of view but later rewritten in her daughter’s perspective.

A key area of supervisory discussion on this story was the extent to which my role as a narrator and character within the text was working. It was felt that my interjections were somewhat tagged on and superficial in the story, and I needed to consider whether to remove myself as a character or enhance my role. I believed it was important that I remained present as a character in the stories for
reasons of transparency (after all, I was there), and to reflect my influence and role within the process. Eventually, after writing up all the interviews, I decided to enhance my role as a character by including two personal essays about my own experiences (one essay on pregnancy loss and one on adoption) to be discussed in the next section on ‘Collage as an evolution beyond narrative’. Supervisory feedback also addressed the reconstructed scene. Robin was a very self-assured storyteller, not revealing any vulnerabilities in the way that Rubi and Charlotte did. I could not ‘get between the cracks’ of her story very easily. Robin’s story is very much Sara’s story – the motif of the other mother as a haunting absence does not occur here. These factors resulted in her reconstructed chapter being more ‘straightforward’ and less fragmented, and as a result, less compelling. After supervisory feedback, I decided to interrogate the gaps in her story by rewriting the scene from her daughter’s point of view, in an attempt to get inside the mind of a child tasked with deciding whether or not her mother should act as a surrogate. The final section explains exactly what happened in Robin’s words, mixed with descriptions of photographs. Quite a bit of ‘technical’ information about surrogacy is delivered in this section. (I asked her a lot of probing questions on exactly what happened to try to get this clear.) However, after supervisory feedback it was agreed that to avoid confusing readers who may be unclear about fertility processes, additional factual content would be presented via a contextual note to be included at the end of the stories.

Although I retained the form of sandwiching a reconstructed scene within the narrated interviews, I was left with a nagging feeling that something was
Drafting Lorraine’s story

Lorraine was the next woman to volunteer for interview. She was an adoptive parent of two siblings, who had herself been adopted as a baby. Lorraine opted to be interviewed twice, both in public places. At this stage of interviewing, I had a vague idea that I might include some separate autobiographical writing about my own experience of adopting, and connect it with Lorraine’s story. As a result of this thinking, I experimented with keeping myself fairly absent from the text in Lorraine’s story, resulting in minimal authorial intervention, in contrast with the previous narratives.

After trying out a different point of view in Robin’s reconstructed scene, I decided to use a dual perspective to create a re-imagined scene, ‘Perfectly polite’, for the meeting between Lorraine’s birth mother and adoptive parents. The meeting is recounted in the alternating perspectives of Lorraine’s birth mother and her adoptive mother, contrasting their experiences. The re-imagined scene is more heavily ‘fictionalised’ in the sense that I have not interviewed these women but imagined the scene from Lorraine’s detailed descriptions of how both her mothers acted.

During our first interview, Lorraine told me:

‘I gave a talk to the Natural Parents Network, it was a group of women in their fifties and sixties, birth parents who would have been mothers around the time I was born. I was there in a dual role as an adoptee and adopter so I was liked and disliked in equal measures. I saw how painful it was for these women.’

(Quote included in the Other Mothers, volume 1)
This stayed with me afterwards as I prepared to meet the final participant, a birth mother in her seventies whose child was adopted, she felt by coercion.

Drafting Margaret’s story

Birth mother, Margaret, was recruited through the Natural Parents Network that Lorraine referred to. I am aware that I delayed seeking out a birth mother to interview until the end of the project, reflecting my anxiety about this meeting. How would she view me, a woman who adopted another woman’s child? How would I feel on meeting her, a woman who was unable to raise her baby and felt she had no other choice but to allow a woman like me to adopt her child? As anticipated, Margaret’s interview was the one I found the most personally challenging. Coming face to face with a birth mother whose child had been raised by another mother, hearing her pain and witnessing the impact of the loss of her child triggered complex emotions in me as I imagined the experience of my adopted son’s birth mother. Maybe one day I will meet her, if my son decides to trace her and is successful, and if he wants me to be part of that journey, and if she wants me to too. There are a lot of ‘ifs’. Maybe interviewing Margaret is the closest I will come.

Unlike the other narratives, Margaret’s story, ‘Never forget’, is one continuous section without a re-imagined scene, and is significantly shorter, partly due to her reticence and the fact that we only had one meeting together. After becoming increasingly frustrated by the limitations of my own self-imposed
format, and following my own emotional response to Margaret’s interview material, I decided here to experiment with a different response to the material: as an alternative to the re-imagined scene, I produced a set of six poems. These poems are not exclusively related to Margaret’s story - some fuse ideas from various stories and other influences. In discussing the creation of the submitted poems, I would like to draw on the work of Sarah Hesketh and Dave Swann, who both created poetry arising out of interviews (in Hesketh’s case with elderly people with dementia, and in Swann’s case with prisoners), while also discussing the influence of poets Jackie Kay, Carrie Etter and Selima Hill. On her blog, ‘Where The Heart Is’, poet Sarah Hesketh (2014) discusses her project with Age Concern Central Lancashire, working with the staff and service users in four dementia care settings: ‘The established model for writers working with people with dementia is to record the words of the person with dementia and for the writer to then perform the role of editor, shaping those words into poem-like texts’ (Hesketh, 2014). This is the approach I have taken in my first poem, ‘Sorry not sorry’, which takes verbatim words from different sections of Margaret’s interview and rearranges them. There was an interesting link here with memory, as the slogan of Natural Parents Network is ‘We never forget’ yet Margaret had repeatedly forgotten key details. I was interested in juxtaposing Margaret’s anger and need for an apology from the government with her anger and need for an apology with her (now late) mother, which seem very intertwined. The lines in italics (My mother kept telling me/ It would kill my father if he knew/ She just did what she wanted) relate to her discussing her mother and the non-italicised lines (having looked at all the evidence/I don’t want to hear about what happened to
you/it’s not worthy of an inquiry/adoPTION is completely different now) relate to the government response. However by juxtaposing them, a new meaning is created – what I ‘heard’ reading between the lines of the interview – that her mother didn’t want to hear about what happened, and that it would have been Margaret’s maltreatment rather than the adoption that would have killed her ‘kind’ father. I was also influenced here by Jackie Kay’s use of typography/alternating fonts in her poetry collection, *The Adoption Papers*, to reveal the alternating ‘voices’ of birth mother, adoptive mother, and adoptee.

In Swann’s poems, rather than use the interviewee’s own words, he variously presents his own voice or a fusion of partly ‘fictionalised’ voices. Swann talks about the influence of Tony Parker’s work and how it reminded him ‘to concentrate not only on the words, but on the patterns hidden within cadences and syntax, and to watch for elliptical, fragmentary, and evasive turns-of-phrase’ (Swann, 2017). In his poem ‘Denial’ he fuses the confessions of two ‘evasive prisoners’:

The fusion of the two inmates seemed to be demanded by the poem, which hankered after the physicality granted by trees and cameras. Otherwise, the poem would have lacked a material grounding, and the voice would have floated away. To that extent, I was learning not only about the fictionalisation made possible by poetry, but about the need to balance verbal utterances with concrete detail, so that the work operated through a wider range of senses.

(Swann, 2017)

My poem, ‘Care’, is similarly a fusion of real life stories: Margaret's suggestion that everyone wanted blonde blue eyed babies and the idea that the adopters were told they could return the baby if it didn't work out; an adopter friend who adopted a fourteen-month-old baby who was eventually diagnosed with foetal alcohol
syndrome (FAS) aged ten, after she spent years trying to get help for him due to his disturbing behaviour (e.g. holding a knife behind her back) but was told it was down to her parenting and sent on parenting courses instead; stories on Adoption UK forums (torturing pets is apparently quite a common behaviour among children adopted from care due to abuse and neglect as is prostitution); a training session I recently attended on Child Sexual Exploitation about how disused properties are used by groomers. I wrote ‘Care’ as a prose poem, setting it out as prose rather than verse, while utilising some poetic devices such as fragmentation, compression, repetition (When you, you might not, you might, you will) and sound patterns such as full rhyme (wetting/getting) assonance/part rhyme (fantasising/hanging/candy, room/soon) and alliteration (picturing play dates and packed lunches), metaphor (pass the parcel) and juxtaposition of childhood innocence suggested by words such as 'Christmas and candy' with the sexualized words 'fantasizing, stockings, strangers' which foreshadows the flash forward scene aiming to create a stark and poignant effect.

The prose poem form here was influenced by the form used in *Imagined Sons* by Carrie Etter, which consists of a series of first person prose poems narrated by a birth mother imagining her son in all different guises, from a businessman to a prisoner. Etter’s ‘imagined sons’ are interspersed with Birth Mother’s Catechisms, which repeat questions to reveal different answers, forming the basis of ‘The wrong mother (part I)’, where the answers twist to reveal the narrator’s inner turmoil. I also decided to write an autobiographical counter poem in the voice of an adoptive mother, ‘The wrong mother (part II)’, using a first person voice to describe how I felt when I saw the photo of my son’s birth mother.
– a very bizarre, almost violent reaction. I was told by the social worker that this was positive as it was about me feeling he was mine and having protective instincts. The line ‘I couldn’t bear your face’ also refers to me being unable to ‘child bear’ the baby who looks like her.

‘Elephant’ explores Margaret's attempted 'abortion', using the serpent-like imagery of the douche tube fused with the elephant's trunk and phantom umbilical cord (the elephant being the symbol of The Natural Parents Network). This is as close as I got to incorporating mythology: the mythological symbol of the serpent (variously representing fertility/phallus, and good and evil) and the reference to Lot's wife (opening with 'pillar' and ending in 'Don't look back', i.e. the opposite of never forgetting.) In addition to symbolic imagery, I've used sound patterning and enjambment. This poem was also partly influenced by Selima Hill’s work, often anchored in ‘domestic domains’ using juxtapositions and surrealism to illuminate emotional truths, particularly the poems in Portrait of My Lover as a Horse (2002), such as ‘Portrait of My Lover as a Swan’ and ‘Portrait of My Lover as an Elephant’.

My final poem, ‘Blue’, is a ‘simpler’ poem using imagery, metaphor and rhyme, written in a first person voice to narrate an experience of loss that happened in the past but is very present for the narrator (‘so long ago/that it’s now’). It was inspired by the idea of birth mother Margaret ‘never forgetting’ but also echoes the post-traumatic stress of pregnancy loss discussed in Robin’s story. In the first stanza, imagery centres on water evoking waves as contractions, waters breaking, and the moon, a key symbol of the menstrual cycle. The second stanza explores a partner unsure how to console her, grief depicted by the blanket as a
shroud and the infantilising action of patting on the head. After experimenting with writing poetry as an alternative to the re-imagined scenes, I was creatively energised to experiment with other forms. Now that I had gathered the material from all the women’s interviews in its entirety, it was time to look again. This is when the hybrid format started to take off.

**Collage as an evolution beyond narrative**

In the summer of 2018, a change of personal circumstances resulted in me taking a six month study break, the first of two, extending my six year project into a seven year one. Returning to my PhD after the six month break gave me the opportunity to look at the creative draft work with fresh eyes and consider different ways to experiment with form. Before the break, the writing had taken the form of edited interviews, re-imagined third person scenes and emerging poetry. I began by rereading Alison’s story and two aspects stood out for me: firstly the embroidered quilt that her mother-in-law created to tell the family story and secondly, the silver locket Alison bought to give to her son’s birth mother, which has echoes of the film, *Annie* (1982). The notion of the quilt, a tapestry, a rich woven artistic product encompassing different images, threads and stories seemed an interesting metaphor for the way the project is unfolding, combining different voices, registers, stories and forms. From my mini viva, I was wary of the examiners’ caution about ‘throwing everything but the kitchen sink at it’, with one suggestion that I might like to cut the re-imagined scenes and restrict the form to edited verbatim interview. However, I also felt (although I was not yet able to
articulate the reasons why) that hybrid form was an integral part of the work and something I needed to further explore before perhaps reining back in.

During the period in between writing up the interviews and looking at them afresh, I was influenced by some of the creative nonfiction materials I had been teaching as a visiting lecturer at the University of East London, focusing on a wide range of forms within creative nonfiction. I was interested in Roland Barthes work, *A Lover’s Discourse*, which includes a note on ‘How this book is constructed’, which essentially serves as a note on how to read it. This is a book which requires the reader to do some work, not least in working out how to approach the reading:

What is proposed, then, is a portrait – but not a psychological portrait; instead, a structural one which offers the reader a discursive site; the site of someone speaking within himself, amorously, confronting the other (the loved object), who does not speak.

(Barthes, 1984, p.3)

Inspired by the hybrid layered forms encountered on the syllabus I was teaching, I began to apply similar thinking to the *Other Mothers*, which requires the reader to work, providing a ‘structural portrait’ of other motherhood, a ‘discursive site’ from which to explore voices and stories and themes. In this case, each interviewee speaks in a way that confronts ‘the other’ in terms of the other mother(s) to their child, who does not get to speak here. For example, Alison confronts the idea of birth mother Tracey, not to speak to her but about her. Inspired by the idea of Alison’s embroidered quilt as a method of storytelling led me onto consideration of a collage approach as used by David Shields in *Reality*
Hunger and I decided to experiment with building/assembling/stealing/creating a response to Alison’s story via collage. According to Robert Root’s ‘Collage, Montage, Mosaic, Vignette, Episode, Segment’, a collage is ‘the technique… of assembling disparate images into an integrated whole which expresses a specific theme… through the interrelationships of the parts’ (Root and Steinberg, 2005). Shields’ book is itself a collage of numbered quotations, with intentional ambiguity surrounding which quotes are Shields’ own words and which (the majority) are from other sources. Shield’s opening chapter consists entirely of quotations about collage.

Conventional fiction teaches the reader that life is a coherent, fathomable whole that concludes in a neatly wrapped-up revelation. Life, though – standing on a street corner, channel surfing, trying to navigate the web or a declining relationship, hearing that a close friend died last night – flies at us in bright splinters.

Quote 319 (Lance Olsen, 10:01) in Shields (2010)

‘I’m interested in collage as (to be honest) an evolution beyond narrative’ Quote 328 (Shields, 2010). ‘Momentum, in literary mosaic, derives not from narrative but from the subtle, progressive buildup of thematic resonances’ Quote 334 (Shields, 2010). These quotes resonated with me as they fit with my experience of working on the Other Mothers project. It isn’t one neatly wrapped up story; it’s a myriad of stories, some narrated, some existing in the gaps between lines. Interviewing the mothers, reading and researching other sources was an overwhelming experience of bombardment, of material flying ‘in bright splinters’. The ‘subtle, progressive buildup of thematic resonances’ has emerged.
with through-lines of ‘ownership’, ‘competition’, ‘otherness’, ‘absence’ etc. Reflecting on Barthes and Shields made me feel strongly that Other Mothers needs to be presented in hybrid form, that marrying content and form in this way is the only approach that could work for such a project, where a linear narrative, or series of mono-voiced edited interviews, would fail to provide the necessary ‘discursive site’ or ‘literary mosaic’. This gave me confidence to further experiment in my response to Alison’s story, presenting a collection of thirty published quotations linked to the material.

I couldn’t get the image of the silver locket Alison gave to Tracey out of my head, and this became the central symbol for a clustering exercise, starting with the film Annie (1982), lyrics from its show tune ‘Tomorrow’ influencing the quotation collection title, ‘The sun will come out tomorrow’, leading to the Johnny Cash song, ‘You are my sunshine’ (Pine Ridge Boys, 1939). This led to sunshine as a motif, leading to the poems (extracts) featuring sunshine and the line from the Little Miss Sunshine film about competitiveness, a theme which is features in Alison’s story. The locket from Annie led to me researching foundling tokens in orphanages, which led to the idea of a transaction, which led to Carrie Etter’s quote and so on. I wanted to the quotes to lead on to one another almost in a story spine, as well as providing contrasts between quotations, and oblique connections (such as Bible quotes to highlight the hypocrisy of religion). Ultimately, I wanted the collage to act as a kind of kaleidoscope, presenting different views and perspectives, not demonising any parties, but illuminating common humanity.
‘The sun will come out tomorrow’ consists entirely of published quotations. Unlike Shields, I have not included my own words within the quotes. I believe my response can be felt by the way the material is shaped, shown rather than narrated. Elsewhere in the wider project, I do include my own words, e.g. as poetry, re-imagined scenes and personal essay. Having created poetry in response to Margaret’s story and curated a quotation collection in response to Alison’s, I went back over the other women’s stories to consider how other forms best fit my response to the material. I wrote the personal essay, ‘I Like Mine with a Kiss’, after rereading Charlotte’s story of being an egg donor. I knew I wanted to write something linked to eggs, ovulation and pregnancy, in other words, the quest for biological motherhood but I wasn’t quite sure what, so I started to freewrite to generate raw material. I hadn’t planned to write something quite so personally revealing but this was the response that emerged, recalling the start of my personal journey into ‘other motherhood’. Writing a personal essay served as an act of discovery rather than a premeditated form.

Yet few other genres commit the writer’s “I” so relentlessly and few other genres are able to force the writer to confront himself so absolutely. The personal essay allows writers to discover their own complexity — and that includes their hatreds, as well as the rawness and sustainability of their wounds. Among the legacies of the personal essay is that it has been used to describe so many different kinds of pain and self-discovery.

(Kriegel, 2008)

The process of writing the personal essay encouraged me to examine the ‘rawness and sustainability’ of my ‘wounds’, to ‘confront’ myself and my pain. The essay title comes from a line in the song ‘D’Ya Like Your Eggs in the Morning’, which goes:
How d'ya like your eggs in the morning?
I like mine with a kiss
Boiled or fried?
I'm satisfied, as long as I get my kiss
(Brodzsky and Cahn, 1951)

Trying to conceive can end up feeling like a cold, clinical experience; the line, ‘I Like Mine with a Kiss’, sums up the desire for love and affection to be part of the process.

Much of what characterizes true essayists is the ability to draw out a point through example, list, simile, small variation, hyperbolic exaggeration, whatever. The great essayists have all had this gusto in fleshing out an idea, which becomes not a chore but an opportunity.

(Lopate, 1995, p. xxxix)

Structurally, my essay begins with a specific memory scene and recounts a series of linked vignettes about the experience of trying to conceive a second child. I decided to splice these with quotations from the NHS website about the stages of pregnancy. This serves the dual purpose of juxtaposing increasingly emotional content with ‘clinical/factual’ content, and also of informing the reader how an embryo develops to the stage it would have been when I experienced an ectopic pregnancy. We then reach the ‘reveal’ of the ectopic pregnancy, which sets up the ‘turn’ for wanting to adopt, although this is not fully reconciled. I left the essay on a ‘cliff hanger’ about what happens next (which was continued in the second personal essay, ‘No Babies’, about my experience of applying to adopt). I attempted to use metaphor in the piece, e.g. the opening ‘faded black knickers’ which are now ‘worn, patchy material, barely held together by nearly snapped elastic’ is a metaphor for my psychological state at this stage of trying to conceive. Mimicking the splicing, I also juxtapose imagery – the clinical
‘antibacterial soap’ and ‘thermometers’ with sexually suggestive phrasing ‘stick it in my mouth and suck hard’. I have also used hyperbolic exaggeration, e.g. ‘I am drowning’, as well as imagery and lyrical language in the final scene. In mentioning other mammals (dolphins, skunks and cats), I attempt to relate the human experience with the wider animal experience, reinforcing the idea of reproduction as a ‘natural’ occurrence.

After deciding to use the personal essay in response to Charlotte’s story, I saw the following pattern emerge:

Collage of quotations; personal essay; poems; collage of quotations; personal essay; poems

This led me to write a quotation collage in response to Robin’s story, a personal essay in response to Lorraine’s and a poetry sequence in response to Rubi’s. As the first quotation collage focused on adoption, I decided that the second one, following Robin’s account as a surrogate, would curate quotations focusing on the female body as a vessel/biological motherhood/pregnancy and birth. As the first personal essay focused on pregnancy loss, I decided that the second (placed after Lorraine’s stories on adoption) would recount my own experience of preparing to adopt; here I replicate the form of the first essay by interweaving interview personal testimony with published quotations, in this case, highlighting powerful statistical information on adoption. As the first poetry sequence written (in response to Margaret’s story) focused on adoption, I decided that the second one to be written (placed first in the final order) would be on
Volume 1, the life writing, was not written in chronological order. It was only after writing poetry in response to Margaret’s story that I decided to go back and write poetry in response to Rubi’s story, aiming to explore the themes raised using a range of poetic forms. Although not originally written in the order presented, I was conscious of how they worked against one another and decided to re-order them as a sequence with their own narrative arc – opening with the longing and jealousy in ‘Babies’ (which was eventually separated from Rubi’s story and placed at the beginning of the manuscript), we move on to the judgment and desperation in ‘A Good Life’, through the sadness leading to hope in ‘Wisdom,’ the unravelling and trauma fall-out of ‘The Beds in my Head,’ the anxiety leading to joy in ‘In Her Belly’, and the tender ending of ‘Everything Can Be Fixed’.

The continuous breathless text of ‘Babies’ with its lack of line breaks makes it read almost as a prose-poem. However, it does make use of poetic devices, most importantly sound patterning, including full rhyme (e.g. ‘on trains, on planes’, ‘in the park, in the dark’, ‘I stare at them, glare at them’) and slant rhyme/assonance (e.g. ‘in vans, in prams’). The poem has a sing-song quality, mimicking a children’s story book, inspired by Dr Seuss’s style of lyrical prose. About halfway through the poem, the theme of longing turns to something darker, ‘they take root in my brain, drive me insane’. The poem then uses imagery and metaphor, representing the babies as ‘fat slimy worms … crawl out of my eye sockets’, moving onto the experience of periods signifying the lack of pregnancy,
‘slide out of me monthly, flush down the drain, swim through the sewers, miniature mermaids’ building to the crescendo of suffocation and emptiness.

‘A Good Life’ is a ‘found poem’ created entirely of words from the interview text. Distilled into seven lines, alternating lines representing words spoken by Rubi with lines representing reported words spoken to her (by her husband, wider relatives and a potential surrogate), I aimed to convey both Rubi’s desperation and the impact of the external messages she receives. Images from the verbatim text take on new metaphorical meaning with the juxtaposition of lines, e.g. ‘curtains’ works with the idea of being gossiped about in the previous line, the idea of ‘curtain twitching’, of being watched, scrutinised.

In ‘Wisdom’, the opening lines in each stanza are ‘This womb/This body/This woman/This marriage/This family’ widening the focus of Rubi’s ‘faulty’ reproductive organs to the family she eventually creates in her own way, with the enjambment before ‘together’ marking the turn. The poem also uses full and slant rhyme to hold it together.

I use refrains in the next three poems to create different effects. ‘The Beds in My Head’ repeats ‘I line up the beds in my head,’ to create a nightmarish, almost obsessive account of Rubi’s journey to motherhood. I played with a more traditional form of end rhyme with ‘In Her Belly’, consisting of quatrains with an AABA rhyme scheme, written in a lullaby style as words spoken to a child birthed via a surrogate. The poem uses the refrain ‘When you were in her belly’, to move from the narrator’s anxiety while her baby was inside the surrogate to her amazement on bringing her baby home. I have attempted to play with cliché with the ending to capture the surreal nature of obtaining a baby without going through
pregnancy but perhaps this needs further transformation. ‘Everything Can be Fixed’ uses a refrain, ‘It’s okay, it’s okay’, but in a much more fluid and unstructured way. This is a narrative poem, telling a mini-story of a broken teapot as a metaphor for the series of ruptures and fixes of the mother-child bond.

The final hybrid form was assembled as follows:

‘Babies’ (a poem)

**Alison’s story** *(mother by adoption and egg donation)*

The nearly son *(edited interview)*

Where it all began *(edited interview)*

Hers *(re-imagined scene)*

Celebrate *(edited interview)*

The sun will come out tomorrow *(collage of quotations - mainly focusing on adoption)*

**Charlotte’s story** *(egg donor)*

The lady of the house *(edited interview)*

M.O.T. *(edited interview)*

A day at the races *(re-imagined scene)*

Holes *(edited interview)*

**Shanta’s story** *(biological and adoptive mother)*

I like mine with a kiss *(personal essay – focusing on my experience of secondary infertility/pregnancy loss – the turn considering adoption)*

**Rubi’s story** *(mother by surrogacy)*

Would you like something stronger *(edited interview)*

Passage to India *(edited interview)*

It all started with my legs *(edited interview)*

*(Poetry sequence)*:

A good life

Wisdom

In her belly

The beds in my head

Everything can be fixed

**Robin’s story** *(surrogate mother)*
Drama queen *(edited interview)*  
The farm and the full moon *(edited interview)*  
Yes, no, maybe *(re-imagined scene)*  
Half a kiss *(edited interview)*

She’s got it *(collage of quotations – focusing on the female body as a vessel/biological motherhood/pregnancy and birth)*

**Lorraine’s story** *(adopter/adopteep)*  
Damned if we do, damned if we don’t *(edited interview)*  
Summer of love *(edited interview)*  
Perfectly polite *(re-imagined scene)*  
It is what it is *(edited interview)*

**Shanta’s story**  
No babies *(personal essay – picks up where the other left off, focusing on adoption training/assessment ending on meeting son)*

**Margaret’s story** *(birth mother)*  
Never forget *(edited interview)*

*(Poetry sequence):*  
Sorry not sorry  
Care  
The wrong mother (part I)  
The wrong mother (part II)  
Elephant  
Blue

In this way, I began to view the entire form as a sort of collage – a collection of pieces slotting together to form a whole. The final form also includes a foreword, afterword and contextual note. Incorporated edited interviews and weaving in personal essay, quotation collage and poetry in response, completed the hybrid form, the rich tapestry curating and creating voices of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation.
Chapter 2 cited Boyd Tomkin talking about a new wave of biographical literature over the past two decades. He also comments on the move away from linear form:

If this new biographical – or even post-biographical – literature tends to rob both writers and readers of faith in the solid, full-dress portrait, it yields many compensations in return. It feels closer in its sidelights, speculations and digressions to how we understand people we know… And if it often shatters the subject of biography into multiple fragments, pieces of a jigsaw that might never wholly fit, then it can also show us how the smallest life can illuminate not just its times but our shared condition.

(Tomkin cited in Cline and Angier, 2010, pp. 149-151)

This idea of ‘the smallest life’ illuminating ‘its times’ and ‘our shared condition’ will be discussed further in Chapter 4, The personal as political. This final chapter explores how the choice of forms used to present the women’s stories – curating both their recorded voices (as edited verbatim material) and published quotations (in collage form), and creating poetry, fictionalised scenes and personal essay (with consideration of the wider inclusion of the ‘I’) – can be viewed as a political act.
CHAPTER 4 – THE PERSONAL AS POLITICAL

I think that without the women’s movement, there would not have been opportunities for women artists to find expression for their own understanding of gender and politics… none of the women we now celebrate would have had the support required to be so visible… It took a revolutionary change in thinking about who can speak and who can be heard to make this possible.

(Morreau in Sumner, 2011, p.155)

‘The personal as political’ is a mantra of second-wave feminism that still carries significance in contemporary life writing and oral history projects today. Recording the personal stories of mothers can be seen as a political act in itself, highlighting the importance of women’s experiences of motherhood, essentially saying, ‘this is worth hearing, it's worth recording.’ In the late 60s to 70s, Anne Oakley carried out two research projects, one about housework and one about transitioning to motherhood:

Both projects employed in-depth interviewing as a way of generating personal narratives about experiences which, at the time, were viewed within mainstream social science (and society more generally) as unimportant, because they are private, domestic and belong to women’s lives.

(Oakley, 2005, p. 246)

In 1977, Adrienne Rich published Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience. She says she wrote it as resistance to the idea that ‘the abstract’ is a ‘more developed or “civilized” mode than the concrete and particular’ and to ‘the ascription of a higher intrinsic human value to men than to women’ (Rich, 1977, p. ix). She wanted to examine motherhood – her own
included – in a social context, as embedded in a political institution: in feminist terms.

Although things have undoubtedly changed for women since the seventies, asking whether women’s voices – indeed mothers’ voice – are being heard remains a valid question. Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, there have been a spate of published memoirs focusing on motherhood, such as Rachel Cusk’s *A Life’s Work: On Becoming a Mother* (2002) and Anne Enright’s *Making Babies: Stumbling into Motherhood* (2005), which sought to capture the complexity of individual lived experience. *Making Babies* opens with a chapter titled ‘Apologies’, in which Enright says that when an essay from her book, discussing pregnancy, was featured in *The Guardian* magazine, ‘there was a ferocious response on the letters page. Who does she think she is?’ (Enright, 2005, p. 1). ‘MARRIED WOMAN HAS CHILDREN IN THE SUBURBS – it’s not exactly a call to arms, and I genuinely apologise for being so ordinary’ (Enright, 2005, p.2). ‘My only excuse is that I think it is important. I wanted to say what it was like’ (Enright, 2005, p.4).

Motherhood is a subject touched upon, but very rarely explored, in both autobiographical and biographical accounts of women’s lives. If female experience has been sidelined by “male” conceptions of selfhood and self-importance, maternal experience has been doubly silenced and ignored. (Harman, 2001)

Harman’s paper, *Motherhood and life writing*, published in the *Encyclopedia of Life Writing: Autobiographical and Biographical Forms*, charts the development of motherhood in life writing, looking at the way women's life writing reflected the social context of the times. Prior to the seventeenth century,
women’s autobiography focused mainly on spiritual experience, and although women diarists in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries began to touch on motherhood, in the nineteenth century, women’s writing moved away from motherhood to focus on ‘their contributions to public life, their literary and artistic achievements, and their political struggles’, reflecting the new role of women in public life. Harman concludes that by the twentieth century, women had begun to write autobiographically about motherhood within certain confines: ‘Although many of motherhood’s experiences are being explored in writing, some of the most painful stories – of termination, miscarriage, infertility, or the death of a child, for example – seem rarer than ever’ (Harman, 2001). The six stories produced for the Other Mothers deal with many of these experiences: Alison, Rubi and Loraine’s infertility, Margaret’s attempted termination and loss of her child through adoption, and Charlotte’s pain from both the estrangement of her own mother, and her strained relationship with the parents of the child she ‘gifted’ them through egg donation.

Added to the fact that women, like Enright, still apologise for publishing accounts of motherhood is that fact that contemporary explorations of motherhood in life writing have, with a few notable exceptions, primarily focused on the biological mother raising the child she gave birth to. Yet the landscape of motherhood is changing. As many women delay entering motherhood to focus on their careers, and women become mothers in same-sex couples or as single mothers, many are building families by the so-called ‘alternative routes’ of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation. This chapter sets out the wider significance of such personal narratives – ‘the personal as the political’ – drawing on feminist
theory, focusing on what Other Mothers can offer in this realm, and how it makes an original contribution to knowledge.

As highlighted in the introduction, this research uses experimental life writing to explore my own personal experience of motherhood and the experience of other mothers, connecting these autobiographical and biographical stories to wider cultural, political and social understandings. It borrows from an autoethnographical approach in that it embraces and foregrounds the researcher’s subjectivity rather than trying to limit it; autoethnographers reject the idea of social research as objective and neutral knowledge (Ellington and Ellis, 2008). Brochner and Ellis (2016) set out two forms of autoethnography: analytic and evocative, the former developing theoretical explanations of phenomena and the latter offering a narrative presentation that opens us conversations and evokes emotion. This thesis can therefore be said to offer an evocative autoethnographical exploration of ‘other motherhood’ via the method of experimental life writing.

**Is motherhood intrinsically worthwhile?**

In Mothers: An Essay on Love and Cruelty, Jacqueline Rose points out that ‘everyone needs mothers, or at least some women to become mothers’ (Rose, 2018, p.24). Rose takes this to its natural conclusion that women could end humanity if they decided against becoming mothers. Of course, then, motherhood is worthwhile for the greater good of humanity: the very survival of our species depends on women becoming mothers. In this context, Rose uses the phrase ‘to become mothers’ as synonymous with ‘to conceive and bear children’; my
research discusses other ways that women may become mothers, e.g. through adoption or via a surrogate. Despite advances in fertility treatments and babies being conceived in ‘test tubes’, we have not yet reached a stage where foetuses can be grown to term outside a woman’s uterus, a process called ‘ectogenesis’ (Overall, 2013). Ergo, some women bearing children is essential to the survival of our species, though there are also ethical debates around the risks of overpopulation versus extinction (Overall, 2013). The intrinsic value of mothers raising children is a more complex matter, e.g. hypothetically, could women bear children and men exclusively raise them? In the future, will ectogenesis be possible? Will women’s bodies continue to be needed to procreate? Will society need mothers or simple male and female gametes, i.e. eggs and sperm? Could there be a future where child rearing is no longer seen as an individual responsibility but a communal or societal one?

On an individual level, the need for some women to bear children does not necessarily mean that motherhood (in its widest terms of conceiving, bearing and/or raising children) is ‘worth it’ for women themselves, or at least not for all women. Not all women want to bear or rear children; not all women enjoy motherhood. In her controversial book, Freeing Ourselves From The Mad Myths Of Parenthood (2000), psychotherapist Susan Jeffers explores the downsides of becoming a parent, voicing the taboo ‘bad thoughts’ that parents may have but feel unable to share. She ‘confesses’ that after becoming a parent, she did not feel like raising a child was a good fit with her personality or life, and explains how on divorce she agreed to her son going to live with his father. In the book, she draws on conversations with a range of other parents, and their answers to the question
of whether they would still have chosen to have children, if they knew then what parenting would be like. Although the stories in Other Mothers speak of the longing for motherhood, the thesis is not intended to imply that all women long for motherhood. Women who are child free by choice may proudly assert that decision; others may have made peace with the realisation that they will not become mothers (Pine, 2018).

Few mothers confess regret at having had their children. The birth mothers’ stories researched for my PhD speak of yearning for the children they gave up. It is rare to find an autobiographical account of regret at having – and keeping – a child, although fiction explores this terrain. Joan Barfoot’s novel, Gaining Ground (1980), is narrated in the first person by a woman, Abra, who walks out on her family when her two children are babies, to live as a hermit. It opens at the point when Abra’s now teenage daughter, Katie, has traced her, and follows their fraught reconciliation as they gradually try to rebuild a relationship, which eventually shatters as Abra once again rejects motherhood, portraying the sensitivities of a woman deemed as ‘abnormal’. Of course, fathers who walk out on their families receive a different societal reaction and judgment from mothers who do the same. It strikes me that researching the experiences of mothers who walk away from their children, opting not to participate in raising them, would be a fascinating area for further life writing study.

A mother writing about mothering

It’s hard not to feel guilty that you are not doing the research and writing projects you planned to do; that you are doing the research and writing projects you planned to do; that you can no longer spend the entire
weekend prepping and grading; that you do sometimes spend the entire weekend prepping and grading; that you are no longer as available for school [university] events; that you are not available enough for family events; that you are happy in the maternal sphere; that you are happy in the career world…

(Chun et al in Evans and Grant, 2008, pp. 244—5)

It would seem remiss to reflect on the process of researching mothers’ lives without addressing my own role as, and the inherent challenges of being, a mother of two children, aged two and nine years at the beginning of my PhD and nine and fifteen at the end. I undertook my PhD part-time over seven years (with two study breaks) at the same time as teaching creative writing both within the OU and outside of it. Harman writes that ‘the mother who would write is so often gagged - by forces that range from the mundane (lack of time) to the highly theoretical (a Lacanian view of language that would forever separate a mother from the words in which she might describe her experience)’ (Harman, 2001).

There have been several significant anthologies of personal essays by mothers who are creative practitioners in various disciplines, which have spoken to my practice. In *The Fruits of Labour: Creativity, Self-Expression and Motherhood*, artist Jacqueline Morreau writes: ‘The first need of an artist is solitude. How can she find it within a ten-to-twelve-hour working day, such as I had when I was a single, working mother and a mature student…’ (Morreau in Sumner, 2011, p. 154). Being a single, working mother and a mature student has presented me with many practical challenges; finding the time that Harman speaks of and the solitude that Morreau raises have been constant struggles throughout my PhD. Of course, it was my choice to undertake this research when my children
were young (although I was not a single parent at the beginning of my PhD but part of a partnership which broke down during the PhD). The obsessive passion for the project came about shortly after adopting my youngest son; if I hadn’t had this experience, I wouldn’t have been motivated to undertake the PhD. Hence, motherhood has been an intrinsic part of my research process, acting as both a driver and at times, a barrier. My PhD work has been carried out almost exclusively when my children have been at school, at afterschool clubs or in someone else’s care. The Covid pandemic complicated this arrangement, especially during the nationwide schools closure which necessitated another six month study break.

Academia is not always conducive to supporting mothers, especially single mothers, and institutional barriers still exist. *Mama, PhD: Women Write about Motherhood and Academic Life* edited by Elena Evans and Caroline Grant (2008) explores the continued inequality of the sexes in higher education:

> The sociologist Arlie Hochschild observes that the feminist revolution stalls as soon as one has a baby. Academy’s no ivory-tower exception. Even this far into the second wave, nothing’s been done to fix the fact that our prime childbearing years coincide with the years in which we are supposed to move all around the country for postdocs and visiting positions, brave the job market, prepare new courses, publish our dissertations, and get tenure.

(Sanders in Evans and Grant, 2008, p. 247)

> ‘Prime childbearing years’ may not be so relevant to those of us who become mothers through adoption, surrogacy or egg donation, yet as a mature PhD student, I am essentially in a similar space. For example, when asked to present on my PhD research at a recent OU online departmental research meeting,
although I was grateful for the opportunity, it presented me with practical challenges as a single mother. At this time, my children were back at school and I was able to work uninterrupted during the school day. However, afterschool childcare options were still highly restricted due to the continuing Covid pandemic, and the meeting was being run from 4pm to 6pm, when my children would be home (and in need of their tea). Thankfully, at this time, support bubbles and childcare bubbles had been legalised, allowing my mother to travel to my house, look after my children and prepare their tea downstairs while I balanced my laptop on my bed. However, the options were severely limited and it was only by luck that I was able to present. Running research meetings after school at key parenting times disproportionately effects women who still tend to be the primary carers of young children. This remains a political issue.

As an antidote perhaps, *Mamaphonic: Balancing Motherhood and Other Creative Arts* edited by Bee Lavender and Maia Rossini (2004) is an anthology of practical role models:

> We collect other mothers in our heads – mothers who have published books, mothers who have opened show, mothers who sell their art, mothers who act in movies, mothers who sell millions of records, mothers who go on the road.
>
> We repeat their names like prayer: Toni Morrison, Louise Erdrich, Exene Cervenka, Kim Gordon, Sinead O’Connor, Diane di Prima, George Sand, Kristen Hersh, Erma Bombeck, Mary Wollstonecraft, Patti Smith, Tillie Olsen, Grace Paley, Ursula le Guin, Muriel Rukeyser, Diane Arbus, Lorrie Moore, Louise Nevelson, Sally Mann, Maya Angelou, Loretta Lynn.
>
> …
>
> Somehow they did it, we think. So we can do it too.

(Lavender and Rossini, 2004, pp. 2—3)
The politics of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation

*Half a Million Women* (1997), written by a group of social workers, provides insight into the experience of an estimated half a million women who, at the time of the book’s publication, had given children up for adoption in the UK, outlining the social context of adoption. Before embarking on my research, I held, perhaps naïvely, the belief that adoption past and present were two radically different realities: in the past, adoption was a result of young, unmarried women being pressured or forced to give babies up for adoption, whereas in recent times, adopted children were more likely to have been removed from their birth families by social workers on the grounds of abuse or neglect. However, authors Howe et al present this is a slightly different way – that society’s views on what constitutes a fit or unfit mother shifts over time. At the time of The Adoption Act 1926, unmarried mothers who wanted to keep their babies were deemed ‘mentally unstable’ and social workers therefore operated under the moral standards and psychological perspectives of the time, just as they do now (Howe et al, 1997, pp.12-18).

As highlighted in the Foreword, a recent research study by the Nuffield Foundation on Inequalities in Child Welfare Intervention Rates (2014) found that women living in the UK’s poorest neighbourhoods were ten times more likely to have their children taken into care than those in more affluent areas. There are also socio-economic inequalities involved in egg donation and surrogacy. As shown in Rubi’s story, women from poorer nations may become egg donors or surrogates for financial reasons (it is illegal to offer financial reward for surrogacy
or egg donation in the UK), often to provide a better life for their own children (Wilkinson, 2003, p.p. 168-197; Deveaux, 2016, pp. 1-48). There are additional ethical issues involved in adoption, surrogacy and egg donation, including ‘the nationality of the baby, the role that religion and race should or should not play, the adoptive parents’ age and sex/gender … that are different or at least thought to be different from the issues about having one’s own biologically related child’ (Overall, 2012, p.12).

Some of the interviewed women’s stories raise difficult ethical and political questions to which there are no easy answers. My PhD attempts to give a voice to other mothers in widely different circumstances, to present their stories, with all their complexities, stories which are open to multiple readings and interpretations. Mainstream media, on the other hand, often appears to have an agenda in how mothers’ stories are interpreted. *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How it Has Undermined All Women* (2005), written by Susan Douglas and Meredith Michaels, details research into the way motherhood has been represented in the media over a thirty year period. Chapter 5 ‘Threats from Within: Maternal Delinquents’ (2005, pp. 140-172) explores how both surrogate mothers and ‘abusive’ mothers are portrayed in the media. Analysis of the media portrayal of the 1986 custody battle between surrogate mother, Mary Beth Whitehead, and the ‘legal mother’, Dr. Stern, discusses how both women were caricaturized. It looks at the ways in which mothers are cast in various roles as ‘unfit’, ‘antimother’ and ‘she-devils’. Discussion of media imagery of ‘crack babies’ explores how the media characterises mothers via an ‘us/them account of decent folk versus abusers’, failing to show complexities,
such as ‘a crack mother who cared about her kids’. These motifs of saints, victims and villains were touched on in Chapter 1 when analysing portrayals of mothers in the life writing text, *No Matter What: An Adoptive Family's Story of Hope, Love and Healing* (Donovan, 2013). The explicit intention of my creative output for the PhD is to avoid all forms of stereotyping and caricature, and to present the women featured (both those directly interviewed and those who appear as absent characters) as complex, fully individualised characters.

**The politics of form (and the nature of truth)**

Feminist scholars, Adrienne Rich and Ann Oakley, both write in the first person, reclaiming the ‘I’, deviating from the traditional patriarchal mode of the ‘grand narrative’. Rich says that *Of Woman Born* ‘was both praised and attacked for what was sometimes seen as its odd-fangled approach: personal testimony mingled with research, and theory which derived from both’ (p. x). Rich justifies her approach, discussing her distrust of the absent author who ‘lays down speculations, theories, facts, and fantasises without any personal grounding’ (p. x). Using a hybrid form for the *Other Mothers* allowed me to include my own reflections on motherhood in the form of poetry and personal essay and in the selection and arrangement of quotations from a range of sources. In this way, my response to the interview material adds a seventh voice to the project.

In *Writing a Woman’s Life*, Heilbrun says, ‘there still exists little organised sense of what a woman’s biography or autobiography should look like’,
discussing how some of the narratological issues of constructing a biography are deeply entwined with the way we see women in society (1988, p. 27).

There is no objective or universal tone in language for however long we have been told that there is. There is only the white, middle class, male tone. But the question is not only one of narrative and tone, it is also one of language. How can women create stories of women’s lives if they only have male language with which to do it?

(Heilbrun, 1988, p. 40)

This is not only a feminist issue but relates to wider historical and political context. Jerome de Groot's *The Historical Novel* (2010) explores postmodernism and the historical novel, rejecting ideas of authenticity, absolute truth and ‘grand narratives’ (p. 110). History itself is seen as an imaginative narrative, using metaphor and narrative style, ‘to interpret a version of something that is innately other and unknown’ (p. 113); this can also be applied to life writing, which reinterprets personal histories, re-imagining lived experience. De Groot talks about metafiction ‘as a way of turning away from traditional methods that correspond to ordered reality’ e.g. chronology, linearity, the omniscient narrator etc., ‘demonstrating the play of the linguistic and representational system and loss of assurance in articulation’ (p. 117); a similar metanarrative can be applied to life writing. Choosing to be transparent about my role as a (subjective, biased, human) researcher and mother, I have inserted myself within the text of the life writing, making my research processes, such as the interviewing context, explicit, thereby providing a metanarrative to the life writing. De Groot’s concept of ‘turning away from traditional methods that correspond to ordered reality’ in historical fiction can also be seen in the approaches of many life writers:
Of course that is not the whole story, but that is the way with stories; we make them what we will. It's a way of explaining the universe while leaving the universe unexplained, it's a way of keeping it all alive, not boxing it into time. Everyone who tells a story tells it differently, just to remind us that everybody sees it differently. Some people say there are true things to be found, some people say all kinds of things can be proved. I don't believe them. The only thing for certain is how complicated it all is, like string full of knots… Claw it, chew it, rearrange it and at bedtime it's still a ball of string full of knots. Nobody should mind.

(Winterson, 2011)

Vesna Goldsworthy’s memoir, Chernobyl Strawberries: a memoir (2005), written for her son after being diagnosed with breast cancer is presented in a fragmented way, reminiscent of Winterson's approach. The chapters focus on themes, rather than presenting a chronological account. For example, chapter 1 The Beginnings, All of Them, offer a range of starting points. The Afterword (almost a critical commentary) dated London, 27 July 2004, includes some interesting reflection on memory and writing process, where she talks about autobiography as a ‘doubly edited life’: ‘Memory edits the first run, the writer edits the second, as she imposes provisional boundaries on her recollection’ (2005, p.p. 186–187):

[Memory] connects people and places and things which may superficially seem unconnected, and imposes its own patterns across time. To have written a linear narrative of my life – from birth to the present – would have been to force my story to acquire a shape which it doesn't have in the way I remember it, and to jettison those very patterns and leitmotifs which seem to me the most interesting.

(Goldsworthy, 2005, p. 186)

To have constructed linear narratives from the other mothers’ interviews would have felt similarly forced; discovering the emerging patterns, themes and
symbols was the most interesting aspect of curating and creating the text. Fiona Sampson, when writer-in-residence at Age Concern Swindon, says of her experience of creating poetry out of verbatim material: ‘When I type up the poem for an exhibition, I am like a photo-journalist framing and cropping the image…’ (Sampson, 1988, p. 131). This aspect of Sampson’s creative writing gives a voice to marginalised people: when one of the residents saw her own words, she did not attribute them to herself; she found it difficult ‘to believe that what she said had a literary shape or even a textual one’ (p130). This raises the idea of writing as reification: ‘Reified as text, literary and imaginative writing… has a higher status than whatever they might say in conversation…’ (p. 139), a concept which resonated with me as I considered both Rubi’s and Margaret’s voices being reified through the poetry written from their interviews, as well as the edited interview text itself (which is also a construction of voice and story). In some ways, all the creative forms in the project, including those not created from verbatim words, can be said to reify the women’s voices and experiences as a collection of artistic representations. The project transforms the raw material of reported experience into a carefully constructed and sculpted artefact.

In *Interpreting Interviews*, a text on social sciences research, Mats Alvesson states that ‘some people would argue… all knowledge is metaphorical in that it emerges from or is “constructed” from some point of view.’ He goes on to talk about our experiences and ways of thinking and seeing as being organised by metaphors. ‘Metaphors can be seen as crucial elements in how people relate to reality’ (Alvesson, 2010, p. 63). ‘The ability of metaphors to explore and express experiences… indicates shared ground between poets and researchers’ (p65). Of
course, in creative writing research, we do not differentiate between ‘poets’ and ‘researchers’; they are one and the same thing, but identifying common ground between social science researchers and creative writing researchers is particularly relevant here. The ‘fictionalised’ or ‘poeticised’ sections in *Other Mothers* are no less ‘true’ than the verbatim sections. As a researcher using creative writing to explore and express women’s experiences of ‘other motherhood’, I believe that the use of metaphor and imagery is a powerful tool in the creation of voice and story, and ultimately in ways of seeing and understanding experiences of motherhood.
CONCLUSION

I would like to conclude by returning to the stated aims of my research, as set out in my application to the OU Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC) at the beginning of my PhD in 2014:

Ultimately, it aims to contribute to new knowledge by applying and extending existing life writing methodology to the uncharted territory of ‘other motherhood’… The aim of the project is to create a collection of biographies which extend our understanding of what it means to be a mother. This study will contribute to discourse which challenges the assumptions that to be a mother a woman must be biologically related to her child/and or have given birth to her child, helping to broaden understanding about the complex nature of mothering. It will also explore the unique and hidden relationships that exist between adopters and birth mothers, egg donors and women who become mothers through egg donation, and surrogates and women who become mothers through surrogacy.

(Everington, 2014, excerpted from HREC documents, which can be found in the Appendix following this conclusion.)

In revisiting Chapter 1, I assert that just as Sally Cline speaks of biography as serving as a window on the times, that her writing on Zelda Fitzgerald’s life ‘became not merely a window into a destructive marriage but also a window into an unjust time in history for women who wished to achieve’ (2010, p. 25), my biographical portraits on ‘other mothers’ illuminate the diverse and changing landscape of motherhood. Curating and creating stories of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation obtained via interviews with other mothers caused me to reflect on the wider context of the subjects’ lives, leading to a deeper understanding, not just of one particular life, but of the wider social and cultural factors impacting on motherhood via adoption, surrogacy and egg donation. In the 1986 introduction of
the updated *Of Woman Born*, Adrienne Rich discusses the fuzzing of ‘the personal is political’ with a ‘New Age blur of the-personal-for-its-own-sake’ (Rich, 1986, p. x), causing me to reflect on the wider relevance of the other mothers’ personal narratives as ‘collective empowerment’ as opposed to ‘individualistic telling’, as differentiated by Rich. The juxtaposition of diverse stories and voices, alongside my own responses to the edited interview material in the form of poetry, fiction, personal essay and quotations, allows a richer interpretation and understanding of the labyrinth of ‘other motherhood’, than that afforded by a single voiced memoir.

The research’s original contribution to knowledge lies in its approach to the untold stories of ‘other motherhood’, in its expansion and analysis of life writing techniques, and in its exploration of ideas of ‘authorship’. The editing of the interviews is a creative act, allowing highlighting patterns, motifs and themes to emerge, while revering the interviewee’s individuality and personal diction. The work broadens a reader’s understanding about the multi-layered idea of ‘mothering’ and in particular, exposes and explores the relationships between adopters and birth mothers, egg donors and women who become mothers through egg donation, and surrogates and women who become mothers through surrogacy.

It is a political work, drawing on autoethnographical approaches, showing how personal experience is always socially and culturally rooted and how that rootedness has consequences. The curation of the mother’s stories is offered context and texture by the inclusion of quotation collage, and further supported by the creation of original material, namely poems, reimagined scenes and lyric essays. By including my own personal experience and responses as a seventh voice, I aim to embrace and foreground the subjectivity and experience of myself.
as the researcher. The resulting experimental life writing – with its roots in oral history, creatively developed using a collage approach – finds the hybridity of form that is required to embody the complexity of its concerns.

What next?

The thesis will be developed into a book to be published by Routledge in 2023 as *Another Mother: Curating and creating voices of adoption, surrogacy and egg donation.*

I believe that the experimental approach to writing lives undertaken here – a literary tapestry, a hybrid form of curated material (edited interview) and created material (poetry, reimagined scenes and lyric essay), accompanied by a critical meta-narrative – could be used in future research to explore other aspects of motherhood, and indeed other social topics. I have spoken of Adrienne Rich writing *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Institution and Experience* to examine motherhood – her own included – in a social context, as embedded in a political institution: in feminist terms. In chapter 4, I highlighted that researching the experiences of mothers who walk away from their children, opting not to participate in raising them, would be a fascinating area for further life writing study. A related area I am interested in is navigating the menopause, the end of women’s childbearing years, and their changing identity, emotions and socially constructed roles.

As a writer-researcher, I am also interested in further exploring practices of co-authorship. For this research, I was subject to the stipulations of the HREC,
which meant that I was unable to share the edited interviews with the participants for approval. Adams, Holman and Ellis identify four goals for evaluating autoethnographical approaches: i) contributes to knowledge, ii) values the personal and experiential, iii) demonstrates the power, craft and responsibilities of stories and storytelling, iv) takes a relationally responsible approach to research practice and representation, which includes being as collaborative, committed, and reciprocal as possible (Adams, Holman and Ellis, 2015). With these principles in mind, a future focus would be to further critique my role as researcher in terms of power dynamics, and further develop a collaborative process of co-creation with interviewees.

Readers of this work may be interested in exploring other research blending creative and critical approaches, in the fields of creative writing, experimental life writing, autoethnography, as well as research expanding ways of conceptualising motherhood. The bibliography provides some useful starting points.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


Lion (2016) Directed by Garth Davis [Film]. The Weinstein Company.


Luke 1:34-37, Revised standard version of the Bible.


Penny, S. (2016) ‘I just want to go see my camels! Creative use of drama and


Pine Ridge Boys (1939) You Are My Sunshine, Atlanta, Bluebird Records.


Robinson, E. (2018c) Adoption and Separation – then and now, Christies Beach, Clova Publications.


*Secrets & Lies* (1996) Directed by Mike Leigh [Film]. Film Four Distributions.


APPENDIX:

OU HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE DOCUMENTS

I) Excerpt from HREC proforma application
II) Information sheet for participants (Plain English version)
III) Consent form (Plain English version)
IV) ‘Favourable opinion’ memorandum from HREC Chair
EXEMPLARY FROM HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HREC) APPLICATION; HREC reference no.: HREC/2015/1922

Methodology

All participants will be recruited through third party gatekeepers, as set out in the Recruitment section. No unsolicited contact will be made by the principal researcher (here on referred to as 'the researcher'). Direct contact will only be made by the researcher after the initial approach has been made by the agency and the participant has come forward and volunteered to take part. Please see the Recruitment section for further details.

Once a participant has volunteered to take part and has emailed the researcher to this effect, an informal, confidential telephone conversation will be arranged to discuss the project and confirm that the participant falls into the research categories of: an adoptive mother, birth mother, mother through egg donation, egg donor, mother through surrogacy or surrogate. If a prospective participant does not fall within the scope of the study, the researcher will explain the parameters and thank the prospective participant for her time.

Email addresses and any other contact information that participants and prospective participants may share with the researcher will be held electronically
on the OU server on an encrypted file, which is dedicated to the storage of sensitive materials; copies of emails exchanged will also be stored in this way.

Potential participants will also be assured of their anonymity, the security of their contact details, and that no information about them will be shared without their consent. Questions can be asked, and participants will be given contact details for a third party contact at the Open University, with whom they can discuss concerns if necessary. This will be Dr. Sally O'Reilly, as the lead supervisor for the PhD project with which this research is involved. Contact details of an independent person outside of the supervisory team will also be provided. (We plan to provide the contact details of the Head of Department – however, as the post holder is due to change shortly, the exact details are currently being confirmed by the Department. These will be inserted into the consent form before circulation.)

People will then be asked to confirm that they are willing to participate and once this has been confirmed the following additional profile data about the prospective participant will be taken over the phone:

- number, gender and ages of any children (living with them or apart from them)
- sexual orientation
- disability
- ethnic origin
- whether they are single or parenting as a couple
- whether they have contact with their child(ren)'s 'other mother'
This data will be taken to assist the researcher in selecting a diverse group of participants. The researcher aims to select 6 women (one adoptive mother, one birth mother, one mother through surrogacy, one surrogate, one mother through egg donation and one egg donor) to work with further as biographical subjects. If more than 6 possible participants are identified, the researcher will make a final decision, with the support of the supervisory team, regarding which women to work with.

Participation of these 6 women will take the form of 4 informal face-to-face meetings (which will be audio-recorded). It is envisaged that the meetings will be spaced between 2 to 4 weeks apart depending on the participant's convenience – the total participation will therefore take between 8 to 16 weeks. All participants will be anonymized using pseudonyms. Pseudonyms will also be used for any other people mentioned in the interviews. Where there are other details which it is felt could identify the subjects, e.g. locations, this may also be omitted or changed before writing up for the thesis and any resulting publications. A disclaimer will be inserted into the thesis and any resulting publications to explain that names and some other details have been changed to protect confidentiality.

The researcher will get back in touch with the women selected as biographical subjects and a meeting date and location will be agreed. The meeting may take place in the participant's home or another setting where they feel comfortable. For safety purposes, the researcher will notify a third person of the date, time and
location of the meetings in advance and make contact with the third party once a
session has ended.

At the start of the first face-to-face meeting, the researcher will go through the
'Information for participants' information sheet and consent form to the
participant, who will then be asked to sign the consent form. Details of a BACP
accredited counsellor will also be provided for optional debriefing (see the section
on Risks).

Each of the four meetings will have a different focus, as follows:

• Childhood photographs – looking at photos from the participant's
childhood and photos of her children (where relevant)

• Day in the life - shadowing the participant in her everyday life (with or
without children present) for a morning or afternoon

• Objects – looking at an object that is significant to the participant as an
'other mother'

• Important dates – discussing birthdays, Mothers' Day and other
celebrations

During the meetings, the researcher will ask participants about their experiences
as a woman who has become a mother through adoption/surrogacy/egg donation,
or as a birth mother/surrogate mother/ egg donor, as appropriate. Once a rapport
has been established, participants will also be asked about their experiences with
and feelings towards their child's 'other mother' – a mother through surrogacy will
be asked how she feels about her child's surrogate mother; a mother through egg
donation will be asked how she feels about her child's egg donor; a mother
through adoption will be asked how she feels about her child's birth mother (and
vice versa). This expectation is made clear on the 'Information for participants'
sheet, in order that informed consent to participation can be given.

There will not be any set questions, as it is expected that the conversations will to
some extent be led by the participants. The researcher intends to be flexible with
the focus of each meeting to allow relevant material to surface.

Participants will be asked whether they give consent to any unidentifiable
photographs being taken by the researcher. The level of consent, and any
provisos, will be recorded on the consent form. For example, a participant may
agree to unidentifiable photographs, e.g. do not show faces, being used and
potentially published; a participant may allow photographs of objects and
surroundings to be taken but no photographs of people; a participant may allow
photographs to be taken by the researcher for the purpose of using them as a
visual aid when writing their stories, without consenting to their publication,
presentation or any other sharing with a third party.

It is important to note that the research is for a PhD in Creative Writing (Life
Writing) and that the researcher is essentially working as a biographer. The
material will be used by the researcher to write a multi-subject biographical work,
interweaving autobiographical aspects, with a through-line of 'other motherhood'.
Life writing techniques will be used to transform the material into narrative, to portray the mothers' life stories. The PhD involves research into the craft and techniques involved in life writing and 'creative practice as research'. This is performed through readings of life writing texts, examining technical considerations such as characterisation, voice, structure and use of analogy, followed by experimentation and adaptation of stylistic devices and evaluation of the effects. The output of the PhD will be a collection of narratives based on actual life stories, imaginatively entered and creatively transformed, accompanied by a critical commentary. The commentary will explore the traditions of life writing, ethical and methodological issues, interdisciplinary connections, the nature of truth, and debates around creatively transforming life into literature, analysing the creative processes involved in the research. The methods of interviewing, creatively inhabiting and transforming experience into narrative will be analysed, drawing on theoretical approaches, such as narratology (Herman et al., 2005) and interdisciplinary approaches (Thomson et al., 2011).

**Participants**

The researcher will be targeting the following women for the project:

- adoptive mothers
- birth mothers
- women who have become mothers through surrogacy
- surrogate mothers
women who have become mothers through egg donation
egg donors

It is hoped that the sample of women will include some diversity in terms of race, religion, age, social class, sexual orientation etc. However, due to the nature of the project, the life writing will not attempt to present a 'representative sample'.

All participants will be over 18 at the time of their participation in the study. All participants will be asked to confirm that they are over 18 on the initial consent form.

Recruitment procedures

The researcher will liaise with charitable intermediary organisations, such as those set out below, to act as gatekeepers to recruit potential participants. The researcher will pass on the project details including the 'Information Sheet' and 'Consent Form' to the agencies and ask them to circulate the project details directly to their membership to identify interested parties. In addition, charities may 'advertise' the research project in their membership newsletters or online communications. The researcher's email address (and the independent contact's email address) will be included in the communication but no phone numbers will be given out. In this way, a call-out for participants will be communicated to charity members through the agency's official communication channels. No direct request for participation will be made by the researcher to any individual.
Adoption:

The researcher (as an adoptive parent) is a member of UK membership charity, Adoption UK, and will liaise directly with this organisation regarding potential adoptive mothers who may wish to be interviewed.

The researcher acknowledges the potential difficulties and sensitivities involved in finding a birth mother (i.e. whose biological child has been adopted by another family) to participate. The majority of cases of modern day adoption involve children who have been removed from their birth parents by social services, rather than children who have been voluntary given up for adoption. It is acknowledged that birth mothers whose children have been removed may be vulnerable due to mental health, learning disability, alcohol or drugs dependency, or other factors, making it more difficult to obtain informed consent. Furthermore, it is felt that participation in the study may be particularly stressful for this group. For these reasons, the researcher will attempt to identify and approach a birth mother who gave her baby up for adoption in the distant past, who may now have traced or been traced by her biological child. The researcher will make contact with Post Adoption Support services to pass on information about the project to this potential group. However, the researcher will be open to initial approaches from any woman who would like to share her story under the project.
Egg Donor Conception:

The researcher has mentioned the planned project to the UK membership charity, Donor Conception Network, and they have suggested that they may be able to assist with identifying potential mothers (egg donors and mothers via egg donation). Further contact will be made once the ethics process has been approved.

The DCN e-Bulletin February 2015, which was emailed to all members, contained a call-out for a related project by a final year Creative Writing degree student who was 'creating a verbatim play about parenting which uses real words and stories to create a truthful exciting production'. The student was looking for parents who had used egg donation to take part in interviews by Skype or in person.

DCN have indicated that they would be happy to include a similar call-out for The Other Mothers project.

Surrogacy:

Two similar UK charitable organisations for surrogacy have been identified, Surrogacy UK and COTS (CHILDLESSNESS OVERCOME THROUGH SURROGACY), which may be able to assist with recruiting a surrogates and a mother via surrogacy.
Consent

Potential participants will be given an 'Information for participants' sheet and an 'Agreement to participate' form (consent form), both supplied. The consent form states that participation is voluntary and that participants may cease to participate at any time by simply saying so. It states that they may withdraw consent for their material to be used up until 30 days after the final (fourth) meeting. This statement will also confirm that the participant is over 18, and that they have been given the opportunity to ask questions, together with the details of a third party at the Open University (either my primary supervisor, Dr Sally O'Reilly, or the Head of Department tbc) whom they can contact if they wish.

If participants wish to withdraw from the study, any data relating to them will be destroyed, and their email address, and any other contact information, deleted from the records held by the researcher.

Location(s) of data collection

Meetings are expected to take place in the participant's home or another place which suits the participant, chosen by the participant, in which they are comfortable. It is important that the participant feels at ease and in control of their surroundings in order for trust and rapport to be established.
Schedule

The researcher will begin to make contacts to identify potential participants once the ethics process is complete. Data collection will commence no later than the beginning of the 2015-16 academic year.

Each participant's involvement is expected to take between 8 to 16 weeks.

Key Ethics considerations

Published ethics and legal guidelines to be followed

The OU Ethics Principles for Research Involving Human Participants
The OU Code of Practice for Research

Data Protection

Any personal data, including photographs, voice recordings and transcriptions, will be stored securely, on an encrypted file on the OU server, with an additional encrypted file backup on a USB stick, for the duration of the study. The names and contact details will be stored separately from the other data and pseudonyms from transcription stage onwards. Withdrawal of consent will result in the destruction of any data relating to the particular individual.
The OU Data-Protection Co-Ordinator has been made aware of the research and the nature of the data being collected.

Following completion of the PhD and debriefing of participants, any personal data will be destroyed, unless participants give further consent for contact details to be retained by the researcher for purposes of updating them on any relevant publications.

Audio recordings will be deleted once transcribed and transcriptions will be deleted 5 years after submission of the PhD thesis.

**Recompense to participants**

Recompense will be made for expenses only, if any incurred. This is expected to be minimal.

**Deception**

There is no need to withhold any information about the study from participants.

**Risk of harm to participants or researcher**

As the participants may be discussing emotionally sensitive information, the researcher is aware that upsetting material may possibly surface and that the participant may be in need of emotional support after the meetings. Such risks will be flagged up on the information sheet, to allow potential participants to consider
and think through before agreeing to take part. The research team fully accept the responsibility towards participants within the boundaries of the project. An arrangement will be made with a BACP accredited counsellor to provide a maximum of two (hourly) funded counselling sessions as debriefing for any participant who requests this (at a cost of approximately £50 per session, i.e. a budget of £300-£600 for the project involving six women). This may be offered as face-to-face or telephone counselling, as appropriate. A potential counsellor has been identified through a member of the Department. Details will be provided to participants at the first meeting. Where longer term support is needed by a participant to work through emotional issues, every attempt will be made to signpost the participant on to other services, including those run by the gate-keeping agencies.

It is possible that participants' children may be present at the meetings. However, as stated in the 'Information for participants' sheet, the participant will retain full responsibility for supervising children at all times, and the researcher will not be left alone with a child at any time. The researcher has had an enhanced DBS check within the last three years (and is willing to renew if deemed necessary).

The choice of venue will be the participant’s and therefore the researcher needs to be aware of the potential risks associated with home visits, ensuring that a third party is aware of their location and that they have the means to get there and back independently.
Debriefing

As mentioned in the previous section, debriefing with a BACP accredited counsellor will be offered to participants. The researcher will inform the participants about the outcome of the PhD and, if the thesis is published in book form, participants will be supplied with a complimentary copy.

Project Management

Research organisation and Funding

The Open University, Faculty of Arts and Humanities (fees funded place)

Other project-related risks

No risks beyond those indicated above are anticipated.

Benefits and knowledge transfer

The aim of the project is to create a collection of biographies which extend our understanding of what it means to be a mother. This study will contribute to discourse which challenges the assumptions that to be a mother a woman must be biologically related to her child/and or have given birth to her child, helping to
broaden understanding about the complex nature of mothering. It will also explore
the unique and hidden relationships that exist between adopters and birth mothers,
egg donors and women who become mothers through egg donation, and
surrogates and women who become mothers through surrogacy.
The Other Mothers – A Life Writing Project

What am I studying?

I am interested in finding out about adoption, surrogacy and egg donation through life writing (writing about people’s lives). I will be talking with women and writing their stories.

Who do I want to talk to?

- adoptive mothers
- birth mothers (whose children have been adopted)
- women who have become mothers through surrogacy
- surrogate mothers
- women who have become mothers through egg donation
- egg donors

What will participation involve?

First, we will have a chat on the telephone. If we both want to go ahead, we will arrange to meet in person so that you can tell me about your story. We can meet at your home or another place that suits you. I will record the meetings on a voice
recorder. We will meet one or two times, depending on how long your story takes. We may also talk again on the telephone.

It would be useful to look at photographs to help me understand your story. This might include photographs of you as a child with your family. It might also include photographs of any children that you have, whether or not they live with you. Your children might be grown up now. You can bring anything else you think might help you tell your story.

Your real name will not be used. All names will be changed to protect privacy. Some other details may also be changed to make sure nobody can find out who the stories are about.

Sometimes, people get upset when talking about things that happened to them. It is important that you feel supported. You might want a friend or relative to be with you while we talk. I will give you the details of a trained counsellor who you can speak to afterwards if you would like to. You can talk to the counsellor on the telephone or face-to-face for up to an hour, for two sessions. The counsellor can also tell you about other support services.

What will happen to the material from the meetings?

I am doing this work for a degree called a PhD. I will write up your story and the stories of other women using pseudonyms (made up names). I am putting the stories together for a book which I hope to get published. I may also publish the stories separately or talk about them at conferences. If you consent (agree) to participate, you consent to my using your story for potential publication in all media. Real names will never be used. Real (audio-recorded) voices will never be shared in any way.
Taking part in this study will not affect your right to write and publish your own version of your story in the future.

If the stories are published in a book, I will provide you with a free copy.

Any contact information you share with me will be kept securely and never shared with a third party. Recordings and transcripts of recordings will be confidential and kept securely.

**How can I find out further information?**

Please email me, Shanta Everington, via: XXXXX

You can email me any questions you might have and/or we can arrange a time to talk over the telephone. All enquiries will be treated in confidence.

In the event of a problem, you can contact my supervisor, Dr Sally O'Reilly at The Open University, via: XXXXX

Or you can contact the Head of Department, Dr Fiona Doloughan, via XXXXX

The project is approved by the OU Human Research Ethics Committee.
The Other Mothers – A Life Writing Project

AGREEMENT TO TAKE PART

I, ____________________ (print name) agree to take part in this project.

I have had the project explained to me and have read the information sheet (or had it read to me).

I agree to the conversations being audio-recorded. I understand that the audio-recordings will not be broadcast but the write ups may be published, as set out in the information sheet, as long as real names and identifying details are changed.

I understand that taking part is voluntary and that I may stop taking part at any time by saying so. I may withdraw my agreement (consent) for my material to be used up until 30 days after the final meeting.

I have been assured that my confidentiality will be protected as set out in the information sheet.

I assign the copyright for my interviews to the researcher for use in their PhD research, and other publications. I understand
that this will not affect my right to publish my own story in the future.

I understand that if I have any concerns or difficulties I can contact the researcher, Shanta Everington, via: XXXXX

If I want to talk to someone else about this project, I can contact the researcher's supervisor, Dr. Sally O'Reilly at The Open University, via: XXXXX or I can contact the Head of Department, Dr Fiona Doloughan via XXXXX

I confirm that I am over 18.
Signed: ______________________________
Date: _____________________________
MEMORANDUM

From Dr Duncan Banks
Chair, The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee
Email XXXXX
Extension XXXXX

To Shanta Everington, Faculty of Arts and Humanities
Subject “The Other Mothers: A Life Writing Project.”
HREC Ref HREC/2015/1922/Everington/1
Submitted 12 March 2015

This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, has been given a favourable opinion by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee. Please note that the OU research ethics review procedures are fully compliant with the majority of grant awarding bodies and their Frameworks for Research Ethics.

Please make sure that any question(s) relating to your application and approval are sent to XXXXX quoting the HREC reference number above. We will endeavour to respond as quickly as possible so that your research is not delayed in any way.
At the conclusion of your project, by the date that you stated in your application, the Committee would like to receive a summary report on the progress of this project, any ethical issues that have arisen and how they have been dealt with.

Regards,

Dr Duncan Banks
Chair OU HREC