‘Accessing the emotional and intangible: combining family history, collaboration and subjectivity as a methodology’

Laura King
University of Leeds, UK

Abstract:
How can we get at the intimate worlds of families in the past? This article reflects on a methodology of collaborative critical family history as a way to better understand both what families did in the past and how those histories have been constructed and passed on. Through a collaborative project with family historians and research into my own family, this research project involved a different kind of researcher subjectivity. This article considers how we might use concepts of feeling like, feeling with, and feeling for research participants, both living and dead, to write more ethical histories, and to write histories inaccessible through conventional archival methodologies.

Keywords:
Collaboration, emotion, subjectivity, history

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Introduction

Understanding the emotional, material, embodied, and sensory worlds of families is notoriously difficult. How can we access the intimate spaces and interactions between family members, as researchers? How can we start to unpick the knots and tensions in the way families interact between different generations? How can we ever hope to do this historically, when it is now impossible to ask questions directly of those individuals? In this article, I reflect on what a collaborative process of working with family historians offers these questions, to me as an academic researcher, and what researching my own family’s history makes possible. In doing so, I engage with three major questions historians and social scientists continue to grapple with: how much critical distance from or proximity to our participants and our material should we have as researchers? Can and should we

empathise with and/or emotionally engage with those we research in history, however recent or distant in the past? And how might the research we do and the pieces we write change depending on our positionality? These questions are crucial to those of us who want to think about families in the past and present, and critically reflect on how and what we know, and the limits of our knowledge.

Different disciplines have faced up to this question of how much to empathise and how much our emotions are a help or a hindrance in our research. Bruno Latour's (2005) thinking on critical proximity provides a counterpoint to the academic attachment to critical distance as a gold standard. As Onyeka Igwe describes, critical proximity as a methodology builds on ideas of auto-ethnography, feminist thought, and a reflexive turn within academic thinking, a methodology she finds useful for its insecurity and ability to challenge colonialism as a practice and in its theoretical underpinnings of academia. This results, Igwe finds, in a methodology of 'all-bodied encounter', and a 'piercing the fabric of the archive' (2021, 35). Here we can see ways of getting outside of the pull towards objectivity or distance, or a need to put ourselves aside when we research. As Ruth Behar described nearly thirty years ago (1996), there is power in being a vulnerable observer, one who merges the personal and academic, or becomes enmeshed in the subject of one's research.

In this piece, I think through the concepts of feeling *like*, feeling *with*, and feeling *for* those we study. I argue that a self-reflective approach can help us do two things. Firstly, I suggest that a careful and intentional emotional engagement with our subjects, alive and dead, can help us write a more ethical, honest, inclusive history, one which allows us into spaces difficult to access historically. Secondly, I argue that by working with our own families and working with the private archives of other families, we can start to better understand not just how families lived in the past, but also how the past infuses the present, how histories shape individuals and their choices, and how those histories are constructed, for and by ourselves as well as others.

The values we – myself and collaborator Jessica Hammett, a postdoctoral engagement fellow on the project – tried to bring to the partnerships we developed with our collaborators – trust, respect, empathy – and the many emotions I felt because of those

relationships – joy, worry, sadness – led to a more ethically written history and a better understanding of the worlds of some families in the past and present. I embraced the critical proximity of this process, to the participants I worked with and the subjects I studied. Working on my own family meant the emotional stakes were even higher, as I was writing about some of the people I love most. As Tanya Evans (2022) has recently shown, family history as a practice is valued by its practitioners precisely because it is deeply emotional, in contrast to academic history, in which we are expected to put our emotions aside. My own emotions and emotional relationships with both the family historians we collaborated with and with my own family members became useful in understanding the histories I was exploring.

Do the advantages of such an approach outweigh the costs? It comes with a charge of being unable to step out of the picture and look across it or have some semblance of objectivity. It comes with the collapsing of boundaries between the personal and the professional. Yet empathy is a crucial tool for historians. Sarah Fox (2023) has recently argued we need to separate our empathetic from our emotional engagement within archival research, putting emotion aside to empathise. Here, I examine what it means when we work with, and are even related to, the individuals whose lives and experiences we study and write about. It's much more difficult when our empathetic relationships and our emotions are entangled with living people.

Though we tried to position ourselves as facilitators rather than project directors, there to enable rather than necessarily lead, the hierarchies of professional/amateur and academic/family historian proved hard to disassemble within a collaborative process of research. We learnt from our family historian collaborators, but the idea of academic voice as carrying particular weight was hard to push against. In working with living people, at times I upset and angered my collaborators in how I treated the materials and stories those collaborators so generously shared with us. These are people who I care about, in a different sense to any individual we might encounter in an archive. It's a messier issue then, when we take the question of empathy into the contemporary period and to methodologies in which we develop relationships with our participants. But if we grapple with this messiness, rather than seeking objectivity, rather than seeking to keep distance, and make

ourselves vulnerable within the process, rather than pretending to have the answers, there is a lot to gain. As Behar puts it, 'when you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably' (1996, p.16).

Working with feeling

What role should our emotions play, in working in collaboration with families and in working with our own families? I think a distinction here between feeling like, feeling with, and feeling for those we study helps. We might try to feel like those we study, imagining the emotions, but also the senses, and experiences they had. Such attempts might be futile or ill-advised. Rob Boddice and Mark Smith take a particularly strong view (2020, 29):

> the assumption that we understand our own experience well enough, without serious examination of the webs in which we are caught, to be able to apply it to *any* past, is a conceit that emotional and sensory historicism ought to have shattered. If this assumption goes unchecked, then historical reconstruction is nothing more than temporal colonialism or archival ventriloquism.

If we are clear we can never actually feel like those in different periods did, is it a useful exercise in itself to try to imagine those feelings? More importantly, can we ever stop ourselves from doing so? If, as historians and scholars of emotions, the senses, and experiences, we look to find how people felt in the past, that imaginative leap is never going to go away, regardless of whether we think it might be useful or not. Feeling like is that position we take in the archive, or as we interview, of imagination. But we know we can never feel like those in the past did. So what next, as we start to analyse and write about the research we do?

Perhaps we turn to feeling with. Feeling *with* is a slightly different kind of act. In collaborative history, we might choose to position ourselves alongside our participants, to try to 'travel' with them, as Saima Nasar and Gavin Schaffer (2023) have recently put it. Feeling *with* our participants, to use spatial metaphors, means sitting, standing, thinking alongside those we work with, to enable not only a more trusting collaboration but a better understanding of the world and worldview inhabited by those we study. It means trying to get inside those spaces in which family stories are told, to figuratively sit at that kitchen table with those aunts who tell stories, or pull up a chair by the fire and look at the photos on the mantelpiece, or to listen in on the arguments and whispering of family secrets. It

means doing that empathetic work Fox highlights, that imaginative practice of constructing the worlds of our subjects through our hard-won knowledge of historical context as well as our understanding of their emotions and feelings. Katie Barclay makes such a move when trying to empathise with Gilbert Innes, a man who she came to dislike through her archival encounters with him (2018). Feeling with, whether we can talk to our participants or whether they are long dead, isn't about collapsing any sense that emotions are temporally and culturally contingent. It's about using our knowledge as historians, our knowledge of the context of the world in which our subject has lived, and how that has changed over time, to think through the way they might have experienced affects within that specific context – and taking a further step to think through what those affects and emotions might have been like. We cannot *feel like*, but we might position ourselves as a bystander, a time-traveller of sorts who positions themselves alongside our subjects, alive or dead, to feel *with* them, within those spaces of family life.

Feeling *for* is different again. Rather than trying to empathise through putting aside our emotions, as Fox suggests, feeling for someone might mean embracing and confronting those emotions we feel as a researcher and using them in our methods and analysis. Feeling for can be a radical and political act, of moving beyond any notion of objectivity. It is something we all do and have always done as historians and as researchers. Barclay starts her piece on her emotional relationship with Gilbert Innes with a tale of shedding tears in the archive; many researchers have done the same. Saidiya Hartman (2007) writes of the disarming and undoing of the self because the archive has thrown up more horror than could be imagined or realistically any researcher could cope with. Within a contemporary context, Magda Nico, Maria Gilvania Silva and Ana Caetano (2023) discuss ways to establish intimacy and the sharing of 'secrets' by foregrounding family histories and family trees through the construction a space of trust and empathy between researcher and subject. The idea of experiencing our own emotions, positive or negative, in encounters in the archive or in collaboration with those we study is a common and perhaps accepted one; we are human after all. But in scholarly analysis and writing, there remains a sense we should set such emotions aside.

The point is that we can't *not* feel. We are human beings, we are individuals with lives, with our own families, problems, traumas, and prejudices. We might seek to set aside some of our emotions temporarily when we examine an individual life in the near or distant past. We might, as Fox argues, seek to empathise without getting too emotionally involved. But ultimately we *do* feel, and we shouldn't pretend otherwise. In seeking to step away from emotional engagement or entanglements with our subjects, historians and other researchers are at risk of falling back towards the trap of a sense of objectivity. As Michel-Rolph Trouillot put it in 1995, history remained at that point dominated by 'a view that any conscious positioning should be rejected as ideological. Thus, the historian's position is officially unmarked: it is that of the non-historical observer' (2015, 151). We are never objective, and to pretend to be, to take away those emotions, those markers of our identities, those experiences that shape the way we approach our research is a way to protect the powerful and maintain their position, as Trouillot writes. The same applies whether we're researching histories of empires, nations, communities, families, or some mix of them all.

When we examine families in the past, it is an emotional experience. The question is how to reckon with and use the feelings we do experience. Here, collaborating with family historians offers a lot; as John Heath and Ashley Barnwell (2023) describe, family historians and descendants have pioneered best practice in relation to archives, such as the photographic collections of taken by a photographer of indigenous Birrpai families in Australia. Being a descendant of a particular family offers a particular perspective; Heath's work in ensuring photographs of indigenous people from the past are used in consultation with and with the permission of their descendants is a powerful example, in which being an insider of a group and a family offers the opportunity to work towards more emotionally careful and ethical research.

Does being part of a family, a descendant of a particular individual, offer an insider or 'emic' perspective? As Linda Alcoff explored in the early 1990s, there was a growing recognition that an individual's identity and position would affect what they wrote as a scholar, and moreover, that the practice of privileged individuals speaking for or on behalf of those marginalised in some way, on the grounds of race, for example, was problematic or even

dangerous. Whilst being part of a family might offer insider access, to objects, documents, stories, inherited knowledge, claiming a particular insider positionality because of a biological relationship holds all sorts of problems. Why should a link based on blood matter more than other shared characteristics, such as locality, or sexuality, or anything else for that matter? Yet, numerous family historians do feel a particular emotional resonance when researching their ancestors, even far back in time (Evans, 2022).

As a historian, speaking for and about others carries particular risks, as often those perspectives cannot be directly challenged by those now dead. There are different kinds of power dynamics at play, of the living over the dead. Working with family histories is messy, as past and present intertwine; a family event a hundred years ago may continue to 'act' within that family today, as a secret or story passed on. There is an opportunity here, to bring together the often very different ways of thinking and seeing the past of family historians and academic historians, on an individual or collective level, to think through this question of how different emotional claims on the past shapes those histories we research, analyse, and share. At this interface between academic and family history is a potentially productive tension around whether a biological or familial link offers a different perspective on the past.

A collaborative methodology

To try and get inside the worlds of families in the past as well as present, in 2017, as part of a project examining changing practices around death and remembrance of the dead, I recruited a small group of family historians, loosely defined as those interested in finding out more about their family members in the past. This research project emerged from two broadly distinct areas of inter-disciplinary scholarship: death studies and work on the family as a key memory community. My aim was to understand how knowledge of the dead is passed between generations, and the role that the dead continue to play in the lives of families and their individual members. The research covered roughly the mid-nineteenth century to the present, with a focus on Britain. Though all participants were now living in and around Leeds and most had British roots, their families, unsurprisingly, had connections all over the world. The entire group had predominantly white British heritage. Most had

working-class backgrounds, and came from families whose lives are, for the most part, little recorded in archives.

Through interviews, co-writing, collaborative research, and me rifling through the cupboards, boxes, and folders of my collaborators, I have accessed the lives of families who do not appear much in archives, to get beyond the prioritisation of the white, the male, the elite, which institutional and state archives preserve in both their collections and processes. These opportunities presented by family archives are even more valuable in colonial contexts: as Rose Miyonga describes in her work on the Mau Mau rebellion and post-colonial Kenya, the 'tin trunk archives' of individuals can stand in defiance of the purposeful destruction of official colonial archives (2023). Family historians bring their own expertise, as both skilled genealogists as well as experiential and emotional experts of the families they are part of and study, as well as experts in local, community, and other types of history.

I came to think of this as a methodology of getting at the aunts and grandmothers, as one way of getting inside the kitchens and bedrooms of families in the past as well as present – as far as that is possible. In this sense, I am trying to build a historical version of sociological work which values the home as a site of research (e.g. Hurdley, 2013; Woodward and Greasley, 2017). These were the many benefits of such a methodology: the sources it opened up, the knowledge gained from participants over time, the sense of being able to analyse both the histories of families and the way those histories had been created and shaped. The knowledge that resulted was co-created: not just through interviews, but in our handling of objects, and often in our standing within the homes that contribute to the meanings and understandings of family, a co-creation built on empathy, the sharing of emotions, and attention to each other's feelings, especially when it came to histories of violence and trauma. My collaborators, Jessica and I together interrogated these histories, and interrogated the processes that made them, a process opened up by Jessica's and my affective relationship with those collaborators. This process also allowed us to – again, together – think through which family members were well remembered, and which individuals had been lost even within a family archive. We considered how some stories were privileged over others, and the silences which persisted as much as the stories loudly told. In doing so, this methodology facilitated ways of thinking about the family members

who didn't 'fit' in so well, to the non-normative bits of family life as well as the grandparents, parents and children who are often more easily recorded in family trees and genealogical research.

Such a methodology, involving working with participants and a respect for their expertise as historians as well as members of those families, draws on long traditions of co-production and collaboration in my own discipline of history as well as using ideas and practices from other disciplines. It draws upon oral history as a movement, body of theory, and set of practices, and in particular the ways in which oral history forces us to critically think through what we bring as interviewers to an encounter, and how our inter-subjectivity with our interviewees shapes the history produced. It draws upon long-established work to expand who is considered to be a historian in Britain, and work started by the History Workshop movement to expand our understandings of where knowledge and historical expertise lies. It borrows ideas and practices from the social sciences, of the co-production of research and finding ways to work with and alongside research participants. It comes from a place of understanding that there have long been historians outside of universities and that families and communities have long curated and passed on their own histories, those 'historians without portfolio' (Field, 2022).

My methodology also sits in conversation with newer practices of critical family history, responding to Christine Sleeter's approach of bringing together a critical framework to family histories, to better understand the dynamics of power and privilege in the past (2020). I brought a particular academic viewpoint, a way of questioning and interrogating; the family historians brought methodological expertise and a willingness to embrace emotion in ways I enjoyed trying out and taking on, over my academic training towards objectivity and distance. All of this led to a desire to work *with*, and *alongside*, to get somehow *inside* the lives of a small numbers of families in the past, or to write with rather than about or from above, as Stéphane Gerson explores (2022). It's no coincidence these are spatial metaphors: I wanted to place myself differently in this collaboration to how I had worked as a historian in the past (Lloyd and Rivett, 2023). I wanted to place myself within those private spaces; by working within private 'archives' I could position myself within the insides of families' lives in the past.

The methodology, then, is a sort of history from below, a sort of oral history, a sort of collaborative critical family history. This methodology also allowed access to those most difficult parts of family life, from suicides to stillbirths, and abuse of all kinds, to the outright lies family members told each other. By working with families over a long period, I built up relationships of trust which helped enable the telling of those stories. But there were complex ethical questions here, of what to do with those experiences. Some were caveated with a request not to write about them or pass them on, whilst others were there to be shared more widely. Yet these silences were revealing too. A family history angle doesn't solve these problems; there are still histories that are too difficult to write, and being close to trauma and violence, both temporally and emotionally, can make those events even more difficult to grapple with. But working with family historians and working with my own family history did start to at least allow discussion of and the reckoning with, to some extent, some of the darker parts of families' pasts. It allowed me to better understand the absences, in collaboration with those family historians and my own family. Whilst I couldn't talk about all the secrets and traumas of the families I wrote about, I could start to at least understand a greater portion of them, allowing me to contextualise the parts of those families' histories I did write about.

Working with someone else's history

As I began to write a book emerging from this collaboration, I jotted down thoughts and worries in a notebook. On 20 October 2022, I wrote to myself 'I can't realistically "criticise" these families. Can I step out of the story + reflect on them?' Even a couple of years after our period of working together regularly, I felt my place was naturally *within* those stories, rather than as an outsider studying from afar. Looking back to an article I wrote, with the input of one of the family historians I worked with, I wrote 'analysis is not moral judgment. But it can feel like it, given my academic "authority", voice, platform, position'. When I gave a paper on this work at the Sorbonne, I grappled with this question in conversation with the audience, who pushed me on whether I could fully analyse the individuals I was studying if I was that close to them, and if they had some say in what the final piece of writing looked like. Such a question reflected the power structures I tried, and often failed, to push against, in which an academic voice is seen to carry a certain authority. When we have a long-term,

invested, and emotional relationship with the people we're studying, far beyond even the parameters of oral history, what does it mean to come to conclusions about the stories they have told us? Working in collaboration opens up new knowledge and thinking but it can stymie us too, making it more difficult to feel we have the authority to analyse the history in front of us (Thomson, 1999).

There are practical questions – when we have been let into the private worlds and collections of families, should we send any materials for review to those families, our collaborators, before we publish them? And this one is of course an ethical question too – what role should the academic historian play in evaluating an experience in the past? There are possibilities for conflict (Caretta and Pérez, 2019; Borland, 1991). I felt like I got this wrong more than once; on sending a piece of writing to one of the family historians I worked with, I upset her. She told me she cried when reading the piece I wrote, and not just because of the emotions at play in what was a difficult experience, but because she felt I had misjudged the telling of the story. If when seeking to explain the past, we can only write within the bounds of what family members feel comfortable with, does that not eliminate the value of collaboration? Dismantling the kinds of power dynamics which position academic perspectives as the most important might help; our perspective would become just one amongst many possible interpretations.

There are different practical routes available to us, of course; we might not choose to share work with our collaborators before publication. Vinciane Despret's thinking (2021) is useful here, though, for getting outside of this question. Reflecting on the experiences people have with the deceased, and their recognition of signs from them, she writes that we must seek not to explain but to 'honour' experiences, and to explore the multiple possibilities stories, signs and encounters with the dead offer. But her thinking applies to my conundrum too; what I tried to do was honour and think with the stories family historians shared with me, rather than offer judgment.

Working so closely with members of the families we study forces us to be more careful in our analysis too; in another notebook entry, in November 2022, I wrote of the 'constant thinking through of whether I am interpreting what people say correctly'. But more

importantly, working with closely with collaborators with whom I had an established relationship, and who had deep emotional relationships with those we both studied, their relatives and ancestors, shed light on a different kind of question, too. The kind of care we are forced to undertake when we work with people, and even more so, when we work with our own family, tells us something about how we treat our subjects, however far removed they are from us in both time and our emotional worlds, and whatever kind of history we might write.

A historian's work is one of both care and cruelty. As social historians, our aim is to write intimately, of the lives of people we think are important, and often those we think should be seen as more important in the historical record than they are. Our hope to spotlight lives that are in some way currently oblique is a hope born of empathy, care, and often a particular political stance. For historians interested in the more private aspects of social life, in our practice of working with those intimate moments comes a relationship, a subjective and an emotional relationship. With our own families, this is often an impulse borne of love, too. Interviewing my 97-year-old maternal grandfather, for example, was a way of showing my respect and affection for him. His life may well be interesting to other historians; an electrical engineer, he played a role in developing anti-aircraft artillery technology in the Second World War and had an esteemed career in academia. But for me, interviewing him came from a place of love, for both him and my mum, of wanting to do something for my family. Writing about my dad's family, as I do in my forthcoming book *Living with the Dead* similarly came from love, from wanting to value their lives, their experiences, their characters in the longer term, to provide some sort of historical posterity. In contrast to my maternal grandfather, my paternal grandparents were from working-class Northern Ireland, migrants to the Black Country, and people whose lives left little trace and had little historically distinctive about them. In writing about my paternal grandmother, I sought to do something that had political as well as emotional importance. I asserted that her life, which no historian could realistically know about from any archive, mattered as much as anyone else’s. By working with our own families’ histories, or by working in collaboration with descendants, we can find out about lives like my grandmother’s.

But our work as academic historians is cruel too. It contains within it a brutal tension, of us wanting to do our subjects justice but at the same time, putting ourselves in a position of authority in which we are judge, jury, and executioner, we are voyeur, we are the nosy neighbourhood gossip, however much we may try to resist this positioning. Histories are based on the cruelty of past actions and the cruelty of the archives and how they position individuals. Archives are brutal, documenting the cruelties of empires, of genocide, of slavery. They reproduce oppression and eradication, privileging the voices of the powerful. Historians, of course, challenge this, reading against the grain, in acts of rescue, resuscitation, remembering. But at the same time, we as academic historians become that powerful voice, even if in an act of care. As Gerson puts it, historians are 'always thieves' (2022, 931). In a discussion marking the twentieth anniversary of the publication of his book *Remembering Ahanagran*, a work emerging from what he describes as a 'difficult collaboration' with his mother as he wrote from her stories about her family in Ireland, historian Richard White reflected on this emotional balancing act. He describes how he couldn't and wouldn't have published it without his mother's input and agreement, but the fact he 'had to have her complicit' was a 'final act of cruelty'. It was cruel because, with or without his mother's involvement, his was the narrative and analysis that would prevail. He reflects that such a cruelty, of endangering individuals' status, sense of respectability, and secrets, of owning their stories, applies whether we are related to those we speak about or not: 'there's no way to be a historian without engaging with that kind of cruelty'. Yet, because working on the history of his own family brought this cruelty to the fore, White also tells us that he gave the people he studied in subsequent work more respect and was a more empathetic historian because of this work. It made him realise that 'empathy has to be part of the historian's toolkit' (White, 2018). Working with this cruelty and this empathy, and working with emotions such as shame, can be a fruitful way to better understand such histories and their meanings (Matthews, 2021). By confronting our emotions as historians, we stand to better understand those archives we work with, their construction, and the significance of those power dynamics over time.

A turn to my own family

As Tracey Loughran describes, claiming expertise as an academic historian could be seen as directly incompatible with claiming expertise as a member of a family, the move that

Richard White made in 1998 (2020). Such dual positionality is a privilege only recently afforded to a wider range of people; Field's article in *American Historical Review* (2022) charts the way this privilege was denied pioneering Black historians and scholars in America, scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois, who in the twentieth century were unable to take on such a positionality, despite wanting to write about his own family's past. Into the twenty-first century, a wider range of academics have researched and written about their own families. Writing from both perspectives, as well as being risky, is downright difficult. But at a point in time at which the academic discipline of history is changing its position on researcher subjectivity, it is worthwhile move. As Loughran (2020) also describes, writing academic history can and often should be deeply personally and emotionally subjective, whether or not it relates to your own family. This genre has developed substantially from a use of personal histories for illustration to a rigorous analysis of the multiplicity of family forms, of forgetting as much as remembering, of starting to unpick the power dynamics at work in any family. By looking at the workings of histories within a family, we can unpick how families function, and how history-making happens so fundamentally within the spaces of the family. And we can take on Gerson's challenge, in his review of academic historians' works on their own families, to pay closer attention to historians' 'own requests and interventions', which would allow them to 'illuminate the politics of intergenerational familial relations, the social life of secrets, and the stakes of their unveiling' (Gerson, 2022, 929).

So, what does this move to look at our own families do, at a pragmatic level to the research we write? With time, with access to more stuff, with established relationships with my relatives, there are straightforward advantages. I can know more of what has and hasn't survived in the case of this family, the Kings (though of course, in reality, there are many members with many different surnames). In my dad's family, there are bits and pieces, mostly of my grandmother, Anne, known universally as Nanny King – a ring or two, a cookbook, a griddle pan, none of them that old. Photos, a few from the 1930s, most from the 1950s onwards, of their home in the Black Country in the West Midlands, and their holidays back to see my grandmother's family in Ireland. Working on my own family also allows me to think through who knew what when, who has access to what information, what stuff. For example, my dad had never seen this photo (below) of his mum, aged about 18 or 19, until I found it in my aunt Sylvia's collections after she died, two years ago,

whereas my aunts were familiar with it. It comes with the stories of the lives and the boyfriends of my grandmother and her sisters in Belfast in the 1930s; that, for example, one sister was the least preferred as a dancing companion because her 'thick ankles' put off potential male company.

[figure 1]

Figure 1: My grandmother, Anne Wright, in Belfast c.1930

[alt text: a black and white photo of a young woman stood outside a house, holding a bike, looking into the camera. She is wearing a cap, a short-sleeved top, shorts, socks and high-heeled shoes].

I can not only map things – tangible and intangible - but what they mean to people and what role they have played within my family. I can trace the way stories have been told; how stories of my grandmother's choices as a young, unmarried, pregnant Catholic woman in Northern Ireland were shaped by my aunt, her daughter. I can unpick how my aunt wanted to understand her mother as having some degree of choice in this situation, and how my aunt interpreted her mother's marrying my Protestant grandfather and moving to England as having a sense of agency. My aunts, uncles and my dad, Anne's six children, all had slightly different takes on their parents' move from Ireland to England. I have heard different stories from two of my aunts and my dad: Sylvia constructed the story as her mother having a 'cunning plan': 'the only way she was going to get out of the kind of matriarchal oppression in Ireland was to marry a Proddie, so she'd have to leave. So that's what she did. Mom was… Mom was ambitious actually. Mom was a thinker. She was looker ahead and I swear to God that's what she did'.[1] Another aunt, Cath, the eldest sibling, prioritised how my grandfather was probably a 'good prospect' - good-looking, respectable, with a decent job, he courted her well. My dad highlights how Anne would have been under pressure from her mother and other relatives to marry after becoming pregnant, in his view accidentally. Being able to track the different stories helps me get inside them. As a member of this family and as an academic historian, I have a unique inside-out view, of being able to

[1] Interview with Sylvia King by [author], 11/6/2021.

interrogate the mechanics of the stories, their shifting shapes, and the reasons they were told differently by different people. It allows me to see how histories are constructed.

When we encounter such stories, such histories, we became entangled with them. I change these stories and these histories by writing about them, too. I am another filter and another shaper of the story, and I too bring my own perspective even if I try to faithfully capture the detail of how the stories are told by my relatives, as both academic historian and family member. My emotions and my telling are part of that story, too, of how histories get made. Bringing an academic perspective, trying to undo those knotty bits of family life, trying to unpick the workings of the insides of stories changes their original meaning, both with my own family, and with the families I collaborated with. As Harriet Bradley reflected, over twenty years ago in an article on the 'seductions' of the archive, history writing leads us to 're-create the past in new forms' (Bradley, 1999, 109). We must be self-reflective about that process.

Looking at my own family has been particularly valuable in getting at the intangible, the tiny everyday things that harked back to a particular relative, along with the silences, forgetting and lack of remembering, and the reality of blurred boundaries of what 'family' is, from the voice of my grandmother echoing down generations in her Scottish-Irish phrases to the stories repeated on different occasions about my great-grandparents' lives 'back' in Ireland and those that reflected and symbolised my grandmother's strong Catholic faith. Here are the practices that form their own archive of doing, those that 'seep down through intergenerational networks' (Baughan, 2023). There is an opportunity here to think about the embodied and sensed, too, another realm of family life difficult to access historically. As Miranda Francis puts it in her recent thesis on motherhood and memory: 'Touch acts like a conduit or a transmission line between mother and child and carries its own emotional language and vocabulary across generations' (2023, 40). Such glimpses of the past – the voice of a grandmother, the touch of care between mother and child, the smells and tastes that resonate across generations – are often only accessible, meaningful, and comprehensible to those within that family.

Studying my own family has also meant a better grasp on the absences. I know a little of what I don't know. I can think through why and how some of my relatives are much better represented than others. What I've come to understand better, through working with my own family's collections and histories, as both a member of that family and as an academic historian, is the work collections and their histories *do*. Families' histories exclude and include. Whilst institutional and national archives both wittingly and unwittingly prioritise some groups over others, in families too there are processes at work of whose lives are recorded, which histories are passed on, and what is edited out.

The collections of my family, as I've studied them, show me various things, if I look across them as well as at the things, documents, photos, stories, and intangible traces that constitute them, and constitute us as a family. One is that these collections provide evidence of the ways that individuals are labelled, categorised, and remembered, and how the gaps between collections and stories about them might reveal different parts of individual lives. Take my grandmother, Nanny King, for example. Examining the traces of her in my family's scattered collections and stories and phrases and tastes show how she was loved as a grandmother, aunt, and mother, but they also hold traces of other parts of her life. Some items highlight that maternal side: that griddle pan comes with the stories of the potato bread and pancakes she made. These are the stories that get valued by her children and her grandchildren. Here, we can see the workings of authorial authority, of the collaborative construction of stories within families over time, of the power dynamics of whose interpretations last, of whose 'take' on events and people in the past dominate and persist.

Anne's battered cookbook points to that maternal side too, a textbook-cum-recipe book she gained on a cookery course, sent by her employer. Reading it makes my dad think of the smell of baking and the taste of her scones, naturally the most delicious he ever tasted. But look inside the cover and there's something else, too. There's a trace of the way she wanted to portray herself, as 'Miss Nanette Wright' rather than plain old Anne. Most of her sisters were known by names other than how they'd been baptised – Jean was actually Jane, Peg Margaret, Min Mary. Nanette was the 'glamorous' name she'd given herself. This battered, mass-produced cookbook gives different hints of my grandmother. There's the baking

granny who made the best scones, but there's also the way my grandmother wanted to portray herself as a young woman. Without insider knowledge of my family, you wouldn't know that 'Nanette' was significant.

When I look through my family's collections of things, when I hear the stories, when I think about those traces of the past that survive in my cousins' tastes in music, in the kinds of jobs we do, in the idioms and phrases that start to emerge at family get togethers, in my role as a historian, I prioritise some events, stories, emotions, people, experiences and narratives over others. I find what I want – that photo of my grandmother sticks, the stories of her going out in Belfast as a young woman with her sisters is the part of her life I feel attracted to, the fact my brother has recently started to play Irish music with a group of friends feels significant. There are parts of my history and my family's past I choose to grapple with, parts of my relatives' lives I want to remember and pass on, as both an academic and as a member of that family. But that's precisely it – with the right self-reflective lens, we can start to unpick those processes by which we construct ourselves through our and our family's pasts. I can not only analyse how my aunt interpreted and highlighted different parts of her mother's life, but how I too, as both an academic historian and as a member of this family, choose to focus on different parts of our history and feel an emotional and political pull to understand my relatives' choices. Working with our own families and their archives and building a picture beyond the family with other types of methodologies, we can start to better understand not just how families lived in the past, but also the way the past shapes the present, how histories influence individuals, and how those histories are constructed, for ourselves as well as others. With self-reflection, we can understand how we shape those histories too; as Bradley puts it, when we research in any kind of archive, 'what we hear is not, perhaps, the lost alterity; above all, what we find in the archive is ourselves.' (Bradley, 1999, 119) We can start to dismantle those power dynamics that shape those forces, of how families lived, constructed themselves and passed on their histories, and also see from the inside out how families are in themselves agents of history and agents of change.

A final note on this move: it has human consequences for researchers. Working on our own family histories, working closely with collaborators, and engaging with our emotions as we

research further collapses that already gossamer-thin boundary we might want to preserve between work and our personal lives. It's a hard distinction to maintain at the best of times. As Jessica Hammett (2021) and Jennifer Crane (2021) have recently explored, the mental health of researchers and historians must be better protected by universities; emotionally engaged research, especially with traumatic subjects, can be extremely draining. But the idea of dissolving this boundary, whilst personally disorientating and unnerving at times, can also be freeing. Much as writing about people who we know well, or people we've known all our life, or our own experiences, might feel more exposing and potentially vulnerable, it can feel good. I reflected on this in my notebook, noting that when I sent off the first chapter to a work in progress session with some fellow academic historians, I 'weirdly' felt less of my 'self-worth' was invested in my writing, even though it was far more personal than anything else I'd written.

I'm researching people with whom I have deep and significant emotional relationships. Not everyone can do this, of course. For those academic historians working on earlier periods, it's not possible in the same way. For some, family histories are impossible to trace further back, perhaps most notably for those whose ancestors' identities were erased within brutal regimes of slavery. For many, a turn to their own history might be impossible because those histories contain trauma, say, or those relationships are too delicate. Families are complex, family histories are always cans of worms. There are ethical minefields here. And this will result in a patchy history, a history of some families and not others. There are issues of representation to deal with – as always with the histories we write. But again, if we can be more self-reflective as historians, if we can make ourselves vulnerable and open and think through why it is we can (or can't) write about our own histories, we can start to overcome problems of representativeness. If we do make this move, as I think at least some academic historians should, we gain a lot straight away, and if we can use the right self-reflexive lens to interrogate the dynamics of power and politics which shape the making of these histories, including the work of our own hand as part of that, we stand to open up new ways of doing history unavailable through other means.

Conclusion

Methods of collaboration, involving sustained and emotionally engaged relationships with those we work with, and a methodology of drawing on our autobiographical and personal family histories offer a lot. They make possible the impossible through archival research, revealing new stories, access to those marginalised by archives, and to different kinds of subject matter – the emotional, the intangible, the felt. A focus on collaborative family histories and working with our own families provides ways of accessing and understanding the way collections of things, inheritances, and histories act on families and their emotions from the outside. We cannot do this work without our own feelings being part of our methodology, without our own capacity as human beings to seek to empathise being part of the dynamic with which we research. The question is how to think through, analyse, and put to use those urges to feel, rather than seek to set them aside. By not only empathising, but using our emotions, to feel with and for those we study, we can get inside those histories and better understand them.

Working with our own family histories makes a political statement; that we are open to making ourselves vulnerable. That we as academic scholars do not stand above, observing others, but are part of the worlds we study, as inheritors of our families' pasts and as feeling and embodied individuals ourselves. Emerging from a collaborative process of family history, I realised that we cannot ask others to do this kind of dismantling of their family histories without considering doing it ourselves, collectively at least. As White (2018) reflected, on his family history, 'if I cannot do this to my own family, what authority do I have to do it to anybody's family?'

Looking at our own families, as an institution and as people we have emotional relationships with, can help us untangle some questions of method, of how we deal with and use empathy or other feelings for those we study. With our families, we can't ever pretend to be objective. We can no longer as a discipline be tied to a premise of objectivity. Working with our own family histories forces us to confront the problems of that position, and of what feeling like, feeling with, and feeling for might mean for and bring to our research.

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