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CHAPTER THREE

How close is too close? The practice and politics of lived experience in contemporary art, academic history and the medical humanities

Daniel Regan and Chris Millard

This text has emerged over some years of discussion between Chris Millard (CM) and Daniel Regan (DR). Chris is a historian of medicine and psychiatry who has written about the use of personal experiences in the medical humanities (Millard 2020), and is writing a forthcoming book about 'the personal' in history-writing. Daniel is a visual artist whose work explores the phenomenology of complex experiences, including his own struggles with mental health. His work brokers dialogues around taboo topics such as mental health, grief, self-injury, suicide and racism.

Talking and thinking across disciplines is exciting and challenging; it is difficult to render such work in the conventional, single-voiced output. We have kept our thoughts distinct but interacting because the politics of personal experience in producing artworks and producing written history are substantially different. But as the conversation goes on, commonalities are revealed. There is only limited value in presenting this similarity at the top, which risks forgetting the distance. The discussion is not resolved, and no firm conclusions are possible. However, there are suggestions for

supporting (funding) those who wish to explore their experiences in their work, and a firm commitment not only to ask questions about experience and its relation to marginality and authenticity, but to be precise when thinking about what personal experience is, and how it relates to different people, and different kinds of artistic and scholarly work.

CM: One striking thing to emerge from our discussions is the distance between our starting points. The significance of 'personal experience' in academic history and the medical humanities is shrouded in ambiguity, ambivalence and defensiveness. Historians appear reluctant to disclose any personal experience that has relevance to their published research, in their published research. This is the case even when they might talk about it more or less publicly in other fora (blog posts, podcasts, interviews, at conferences).

DM: I think that because the origins of my creative practice are so bound up with the onset of my own mental health difficulties as a young person, exploring my personal experiences in relation to a subject matter is often the *only* starting point when I approach making new work. I have not always been as open about this as I am now, simply because of the shame or stigma associated with mental health difficulties. Now, in order for me to *make* something I need to *feel* something, and often it is in the excavation of my own past experiences that something is stirred up and piques my interest. I think often we give permission to artists to make from lived experiences because creating requires a source, a stimulus, a catalyst. It baffles me that in academia a similar passion for and connection to a research subject is not afforded the same permission to acknowledge the roots of why it might personally interest you.

CM: The term 'permission' is apt here because there are places, at the margins of academic texts (in prefaces, forewords, afterwords, epilogues and acknowledgements) that are more permissive regarding personal experiences. Often quite traumatic experiences seem 'dumped' in these places, between the hardback covers of expensive monographs. Sometimes these experiences are deemed to be of fundamental significance to the research. However, the 'main text' often contains no acknowledgement of the significance of this experience deposited at the margins. For example, the acknowledgements to Ellen Ross's *Love and Toil: Motherhood in Outcast London* begins: 'The catastrophe of my little son's ghastly three-month-long hospitalization with a brain tumor and his death in December 1989 transformed this project for me and for everyone who knew me'. For Ross, her book 'took on new layers of significance when I resumed work on it' and even though it was 'unfashionable intellectually' to relate emotionally to the historical actors one was studying, Ross 'took solace and sometimes inspiration from my

historical subjects, mothers themselves, many of whom had also sat at their children's deathbeds, women who carried on with their own lives after doing all they could for the sick child'. This deep emotional investment in the sources and the work is kept at a distance (because, 'intellectually unfashionable'), and instead the book 'has retained the conventional scholarly form I imagined for it' when she commenced the research process in 1984 (Ross 1993: vii). Perhaps because history retains a methodological conservatism, an attachment to a very empirical, objective tradition around sources, and feels a duty to describe a past that really happened, this distrust of personal experience has only recently – with important exceptions (Steedman 1987; Friedlander 1993; Hartman 2006) – begun to soften.

DR: This makes me think about value and the currency of lived experience. Not all artists acknowledge in depth their personal connection to the stories in their work, or cite individual experiences as the inspiration. Yet culturally the value of having an experience close to the work that you have created is often acknowledged and appreciated. We favour novels about the lives of women written by women, or may question the plausibility of a white author's ability to accurately portray the life of a Black protagonist. The currency of lived experience here is that we gain trust and hopefully validity in the creator's work because of their lived experience and connection to the subject matter, not in spite of it. It is interesting that in academic research the presence of lived experience could somehow be seen to jeopardize that validity, that the presence of their humanity could somehow undo the work.

CM: This reminds me of a quotation from literary critic Michael Bérubé, who argues that 'as long as the scholarship in question concerns humans and is written by humans, readers should at least entertain the possibility that nothing human should be alien to it' (1996: 1065). In literary criticism, ideas of 'personal criticism' have been debated and developed since the 1980s; in anthropology the project of 'autoethnography' – explicitly foregrounding the identity of the author who observes their 'own group' – has been around just as long. However, for historians, the idea that one's experiences (or one's identity) might inform one's academic research is still thought dangerous. Women writing about the history of childbirth, motherhood or domesticity risk their work being reduced to their gender; something similar can happen with Black scholars writing about the history of racism, segregation and slavery. But there is also a powerful politics of authenticity – around the history of race, homosexuality or mental illness, for example – where the identity and experiences of the historian become relevant grounds for critical engagement. Jacqueline Jones, a white historian, ends her chapter in the collection *Historians and Race: Autobiography and the Writing of History* in a very defensive way: 'I have always considered the story of African Americans to be the story of America, and I reject the

currently fashionable position that declares certain kinds of history off-limits to certain kinds of people … I suggest that we focus not on an author's background but her footnotes, and avoid reading too much between the lines' (1996: 130). Similarly, in Paul Gilroy's preface to an edition of Peter Fryer's *Staying Power*, an influential history of Black people in Britain, Gilroy notes how: 'As a white, communist Englishman who had not only dared … to take possession of this subaltern history but was also prepared to render himself accountable for his choices, Peter Fryer was often treated unfairly … the destructive, hateful treatment which was dished out by resentful, lazy and hostile community spokespeople … because this particular history of suffering was their own special property' (2010: xii). In both cases, 'the personal' and the 'lived experience' of the historian is acutely relevant but in a different way.

DR: In most arts contexts, we elevate a person's experience because it makes sense that they would make work about their lives and its events (regardless of whether you like the work). There are however difficult conversations in relation to socially engaged arts practices, particularly around working with marginalized communities. Questions arise about who should (or could) be working with participants, such as those from refugee backgrounds or within psychiatric hospitals. I am really interested in how the value of lived experience – in these examples connection to culture, experience of being an asylum seeker, or having been hospitalized – can be seen as assets in the work that artists do. Can having similar life experiences – whilst also having the professional skills and adequate recovery/support – create a greater experience for the beneficiaries of socially engaged creative practices? From my perspective it is not either/or – you may have a connection to a community's lived experience but lack the practical and creative skills needed to teach and facilitate. Similarly you may have excellent creative skills but lack the interpersonal skills to hold space, regardless of whether you identify with that community or not. Sometimes an artist's lived experience can be a hindrance in participatory practices – it can render too close to the surface and trigger trauma responses, even with time having passed. In my own participatory practice I avoid working on certain projects in specific places because it is *too close* to my lived experiences.

CM: These are exactly the difficult conversations that I think historians struggle to have. How close is too close? It's vital to have this space for considered discussion. There is another aspect too, when 'lived experience' shades (unremarked) into ideas of identity. Having certain experiences *can* certainly become the basis of an identity – an experience of severe mental ill-health, or of being sectioned, can mean that one becomes a 'psychiatric survivor'. In the same way, experiencing child abuse or cancer can mean that one has an identity as a 'survivor' of those things. But this is a different

relation to the experience of racism, and the identity of being Black. In this case, the latter identity does not easily or simply depend on the experience of racism. Similarly, is it useful to talk of 'lived experience of being gay'? Is this different to 'identifying as gay'? And what about those who are not marginalized – can one have 'lived experience' of being heterosexual? I am not sure how useful it would be to claim that.

DR: The politics of labels and ownership is interesting to me given my intersecting identities as a queer person, with a disability, of mixed heritage. The terminology around lived – and even living – experiences is fascinating because it is so uniquely individual and informed by our experiences and can become a semantic minefield. Examples can include people's personal identification within mental health services (patient, client, service user etc.) and how difficult experiences in our lives inform what we want others to know about us (i.e some wear the label of survivor proudly, others less so).

We all have lived and living experiences, but it seems we identify or reclaim them when these experiences sit outside of the norm, or when that identity is marginalized and/or one that is minoritized. One can have a lived experience of being white and heterosexual, but within the cultural context of being within the majority, we assume (rightly or wrongly) that these identities pose less of a potential struggle given their afforded privilege. In the work that I do in mental health the term 'lived experience' is synonymous with having experienced ill mental health specifically. The understanding of the term 'lived experience' is as varied as the actual experiences people place under the term itself.

CM: How one learns how to be a historian – the years of graduate training and work towards a PhD – is crucial. Much PhD training and supervision has no sense of how one might include one's personal experiences (if they are relevant to the topic at hand). In fact the training process in history often encourages the active removal of anything personal, and the adoption of a 'scholarly tone' that is distanced and supposedly 'objective'.

DR: I cannot say that my experience in studying at art schools proposed anything different from what you have described. Whilst making my works – which were deeply personal about my mental health experiences – I felt like my tutors were unsure of how to support me. At times they simply suggested that I not make the work at all.

In my own teaching I have noticed a rise in students making personal works relating to their own mental health experiences. In the past two decades the stigma of some mental health difficulties (namely anxiety and depression) has undoubtedly reduced. The prevalence of mental health issues amongst students has also risen – from 2010/11 to 2020/21, conditions reported by students increased by nearly 7 per cent (Lewis and Bolton 2023).

Whilst it is encouraging that some students feel more comfortable to use the arts to unpick and navigate their challenges, it may also compound the pressure placed on staff to navigate difficult discussions, and the impact that sharing their work has on their peers. This can be another stressor on already overstretched and under-resourced staff who are now trying to sensitively facilitate sessions on often emotionally heavy content without additional support themselves, and often without an understanding of trauma-informed pedagogy.

Conclusions

Despite the different starting points, there is plenty of common ground here. The issue of training and teaching is one that would repay detailed further study. The question of different lived experiences, different identities and the problem of proximity (or 'how close is too close?') are also very interesting to explore further. This discussion has brought out how complicated 'lived experience' is when one looks closely at it. Ideas of authenticity, marginality, power and privilege swirl around it. It also raises urgent questions about providing (and funding) appropriate support in both history and art to help students and practitioners explore *how* lived experiences might interact with the artwork and scholarship being produced. Artworks and histories are produced by humans – how these objects relate to the conditions of their production is a broad and complicated question. But personal experience is always a part of the story.

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