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# Blurring Boundaries

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# Blurring Boundaries

## Introduction

One of the questions posed by the coordinators of this forum stood out to us as historians who blur the boundaries of historical analysis through performance and speculative writing. They ask, »do they [creative methodologies] help democratize historical knowledge, or do they risk blurring the line between scholarship and artistic interpretation?« We argue in favour of the first, suggesting that the creative methodologies we employ challenge assumptions about rightness and truth-telling that dominate the academy, while also enabling us to fill silences in the archival record. As for the second, we believe that the blurring of conventional boundaries is not only a risk worth taking, we see it as immensely valuable because it invites, indeed insists, on a rethinking of how we view the world and generate knowledge about it. Without imagination, there is no history.

Traditional scholarship adopts a top-down, unidirectional, view-from-the-outside, telescopic and microscopic approach to knowledge in which distance and objectivity are valued. The authority of the scholarship rests in part on the authority vested in the sources upon which it is based. Yet, as many have acknowledged, these sources, housed in disciplinary institutions such as archives and museums, are the products of processes that are partial and prejudicial and which, intentionally or not, marginalize, disempower, and silence those whose ways of knowing that were deemed to be unimportant or dangerous.[1] Performance and speculative writing are ways in which these silences can be addressed and redressed, imagining possibilities, and making them visible and open for discussion.

## Witchcraft stories: histories that recover and restore

The experiences of those accused of crimes in early modern English society have come down to us primarily through the surviving court archives, and from popular pamphlets which fed off them. The words of the accused are filtered through court officials, those responsible for recording proceedings; they rarely noted anything about the emotional, embodied, and sensory aspects of the trial. Sometimes we have a little more, as in the case of Elizabeth Sawyer. In April 1621, this wife and mother was acquitted of using witchcraft to kill two newborns and some cattle, but found guilty in the death of Anne Ratcliffe and was executed.[2]

Elizabeth was visited by the Calvinist prison chaplain, Henry Goodcole, who in the process of securing her signed confession before witnesses, questioned her and recorded her answers. These, along with the trial records, grounded the pamphlet he published soon after her death, making it, he claimed, both truthful and authentic.

A careful reading tells another story. Goodcole clearly reshaped Elizabeth's words to fit his self-appointed duty to lead others along the path of righteousness. When asked, for example, if the devil has visited her in jail, she says no, and that incarceration means she no longer fears him, a distinctively Calvinistic worldview. Although her voice ghosts the words Goodcole puts in her mouth, we can catch glimpses of Elizabeth when she tells him that the jury had got it all wrong: while she was responsible for the deaths of the newborns and cattle, she had nothing to do with that of her neighbour.

Restaging the interaction between Elizabeth and Goodcole through performance offers an opportunity to rigorously interrogate the source. What happens when, for example, we make her revelation the centerpiece of the dialogue? It displaces the masculine narrative driven by the need to secure a confession and heightens his misogyny, revealed by his prurient interest in her bodily relations with the devil. Gifting Elizabeth words of our own invention is a way of trying out our own imaginative speculations about what happened and why it happened. It permits us to see

1 David Dean, Performing Public History: Case Studies in Historical Storytelling, New York / London 2025.

2 David Dean, Introduction: Histories and Contexts in *The Witch of Edmonton*, in: Early Theatre 21,2 (2018) 121–136.

what feels right and what does not, and then to ask ourselves why they do so. Reading between the lines and around a text drawing on our knowledge of contexts creates possibilities. It restores agency to Elizabeth by generating alternatives to Goodcole's apparent certainties.

Performing the accused enables serious play. Are her words delivered with humble resignation or mischievously or perhaps sarcastically? Is her apparent submissiveness a deliberate ploy on her part? Is her revelation a heartfelt confession or a clever way of bringing scorn and ridicule down on the system that has condemned her to death? Reading legal texts performatively, and then scripting and staging them, releases the historian from the limitations of the source material and the biases and prejudices of those who created it.

## Asylum stories: histories that repair and remember

Children's asylum experiences are difficult to access. Their perspectives were erased or supplanted by adult voices in the archival documents. Yet, case files offer the best opportunities to unpack patient experiences.[3] They reveal how legal frameworks were put into action, and very little about how individuals made sense of madness and incarceration. Creative methodologies allow historians to imagine in the place of absence while engaging in a reparative history. For psychiatry, a reparative approach reckons with patient experiences and how they have been storied. It also holds psychiatry accountable for its oppressive structures.[4] Through creative methodologies historians can centre the experiences of children to work towards repair.

Sixteen-year-old Tess was admitted to the Toronto Asylum in 1921. Under the Immigration Act, the asylum was classified as an immigration station. Tess' case file about her month-long stay at the Toronto Asylum contains no words of her own. Through blended writing, I (Kira) imagine Tess' experience:

> Tess caught sight of the nurse who usually escorted her to the visiting room. Eager to find out more information, she peeled away from the group of women who gossiped after breakfast.
> *»Miss. Goode!«* Tess called and waved her hand. The nurse was adorned in her usual attire, a long dress covered by a white apron. As she got closer to Tess, she smelled a faint linger of lilac.
> *»Why wasn't I taken for the visits? My sister is coming.«*
> *»I'm sorry, Tess, your sister is not here,«*
> Miss. Goode explained, *»but perhaps next time your friends will return.«*
> At first Tess stared at Miss. Goode. Surely this was a mistake. Today was Sunday. Her sister promised to visit. Tess' chest tightened, her cheeks flushed, and her eyes welled. Before the nurse could reassure her further, a flood of tears streamed down her rosy cheeks.

This exchange is based on a note in Tess' clinical chart. A longer story would explore her feelings about her impending deportation, which took Tess away from her family. The story would also highlight how the superintendent's findings about Tess were in direct contradiction with the reason for her deportation. The Children's Aid Society declared that Tess had failed a mental examination. At the Toronto Asylum, the doctors remarked that Tess was bright and well oriented.

Still, the archival records offer limited insight into Tess' emotions. Blended writing allows authors to explore emotions as a way of knowing. Further, it can work with archival absences for people who have been marginalized. Through speculation, historians reveal the impacts of immigration and lunacy legislation. As an act of repair, blended writing puts the humanity of mad people at the centre of storytelling. Blended writing also challenges the documents left behind and their intended interpretation. It focuses on empathy, which is a pathway to unravel systems of judicial bias and prejudice. Blended writing is one method to centre emotions, empathy, and repair.

3 Kira A. Smith, Mad Children: Stories of Youth in Canadian Insane Asylums, 1880–1930, PhD diss., York University 2024.

4 Jonathan Sadowsky, Kylie Smith, Reflections on the Use of Patient Records: Privacy, Ethics, and Reparations in the History of Psychiatry, in: Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences 60,1 (2024), https://doi.org/10.1002/jhbs.22260.

## Conclusion

Creative research approaches such as performance and blended writing enable historians to generate new knowledge, challenge archival absences, and expand our analytical framework. They offer the possibility of restoring agency to those whose voices have been marginalized, repair the damage done to historical actors by institutional archives, and register alternative memories. This reparative work requires sincerity, compassion, and empathy for those like Tess whose perspectives have been lost to time.[5] It requires humility, honesty, and an openness about our own subjectivities as we create new scenarios for those like Elizabeth whose voices have been mediated and curated by unsympathetic others.

Employing creative methodologies offers a way of engaging with emotions, the senses, and lived experiences that elude us when we limit ourselves to traditional historical practices. We will never really know what Tess was thinking when her sister did not turn up at the asylum nor what Elizabeth thought of Henry Goodcole, but employing creative methodologies gives historians the tools by which they can offer possibilities.

■

5 Kira A. Smith, Using Fiction to Tell Mad Stories: A Journey into Historical Imagination and Empathy, in: Rethinking History 26,3 (2022) 492–519; Smith, Mad Children (fn. 3).