

# Pacts, Paratext, and Polyphony: Writing the Authorised Biography of Robert Wyatt

Marcus O'Dair

Middlesex University

Room TG53, Town Hall Annexe, The Burroughs, Hendon, LONDON, NW4 4BT

m.odair@mdx.ac.uk

07745 875484

Marcus O'Dair is Associate Professor in Music and Innovation at Middlesex University, and convenor of the Blockchain for Creative Industries teaching and research cluster. He has contributed to the edited collections *Jazz and Totalitarianism* (Routledge 2017) and *Punk Pedagogies* (Routledge 2018), as well as to academic journals including *Popular Music*, *Strategic Change* and *IASPM@Journal. Different Every Time*, his 2014 biography of Robert Wyatt, was a Radio 4 book of the week and was shortlisted for the Penderyn music book prize. A former session musician with Passenger, he has also released three acclaimed albums and toured Europe as one half of Grasscut.

## Abstract

The British musician Robert Wyatt has released two top 40 hits and, in 1974's *Rock Bottom*, at least one album that features in the popular music canon. Wyatt has performed on Top of the Pops and has appeared on several magazine covers. Wyatt is not an archetypal celebrity in the terms outlined by celebrity theorists, in that the media continues to focus primarily on his public rather than private life; yet he has certainly achieved cult status among popular music fans. In this article, I critically reflect on the experience of writing Wyatt's biography, focusing in particular on challenges and opportunities related to the book's authorised status. While authorised biography has been criticised as 'autobiography in disguise,' I argue that there is in fact a clear distinction between authorised biography and ghostwritten autobiography, a distinction I frame with reference to the paratext and the autobiographical pact as well as the musical notion of polyphony. Though I focus primarily on my biography of Wyatt, my reflections shed new light on the broader interconnections of celebrity and life writing, particularly in relation to the relatively neglected topic of authorised biography.

**Keywords:** authorisation, autobiography, biography, ghostwriting, popular music, Robert Wyatt

## Introduction

Robert Wyatt has been described by Geoff Travis of the Rough Trade record label as 'one of the greats of English music' (Taylor 2010, 148). As a member of Soft Machine (1966-1971) and Matching Mole (1971-2), Wyatt released six acclaimed studio albums, toured the United States in support of the Jimi Hendrix Experience, and was a member of the first rock band to perform at the BBC Proms. Wyatt's solo albums, meanwhile, include *Rock Bottom* (1974), which has entered the popular music canon (Spicer 1997), and *Cuckooland* (2003), which was nominated for the Mercury music prize. Wyatt has appeared on magazine covers and, in 2010, was a guest editor on BBC Radio 4's *Today* programme – alongside the artist David Hockney, the politician Shirley Williams, and the footballer Tony Adams. He has been the subject of TV and radio documentaries, and of books, for instance by Michael King (1994). Wyatt performed on Top of the Pops in 1974 and, in 2001, curated the Meltdown festival at London's Southbank Centre, joining a roll call of curators that includes David Bowie, Elvis Costello, Patti Smith, Morrissey, Nick Cave, Ray Davies, and Jarvis Cocker.

I approached Wyatt with the idea of writing his biography in 2008, having first interviewed him for a podcast I was presenting for the *Independent* newspaper. It was Alfreda Benge, Wyatt's wife, manager, and creative partner, who asked if she and Wyatt could read the manuscript prior to publication, and I agreed to the request. Both Benge and Wyatt were adamant that it should remain 'my' book, and I examine the issue of ownership in greater detail below. *Different Every Time: the Authorised Biography of Robert Wyatt* was published in the UK by Serpent's Tail in 2014, followed by American, French, and Italian editions. The broadsheet reviews and radio support – it was 'book of the week' on BBC Radio 4, for instance – are illustrative of Wyatt's semi-celebrity status.

Certainly, Robert Wyatt is not Kim Kardashian. Wyatt's social and professional network includes such high-profile names as Björk, Paul Weller, Brian Eno, and David Gilmour, yet his name is absent from the gossip pages, and he is unlikely to appear on reality TV shows. Wyatt is perhaps too underground and reclusive a figure

to qualify as a star. Neither, as a self-proclaimed Marxist, does he play into what P. David Marshall (1997, 93) calls the 'democratic myth of celebrity construction through consumption', the star as 'consumption ideal.' Calling to mind the enduring if controversial definition of a celebrity as someone 'known for his well-knownness' (Boorstin 2012, 57), Graeme Turner suggests that celebrities in the twenty-first century excite a level of public interest that seems somehow disproportionate: 'the modern celebrity may claim no special achievements other than the attraction of public attention' (2014, 3). Wyatt's well-knownness, by contrast, does not seem out of proportion to his artistic achievements, since his records have met with considerable critical acclaim and his status remains to some extent 'cult.' Turner also suggests that a public figure becomes a celebrity 'at the point at which media interest in their activities is transferred from reporting on their public role (such as their specific achievement in politics or sport) to investigating the details of their private lives' (2014, 8). On that basis, Wyatt is not a celebrity: while there has been some interest in his Marxist politics, his periods of depression, his alcoholism, and his paraplegia, the primary focus of articles about Wyatt, in both the specialist and the general press, remains his music. Indeed, Wyatt, perceived by fans and peers alike as a highly credible and 'authentic' musician, might seem to run entirely counter to Boorstin's conceptualisation of celebrity culture as fundamentally inauthentic, relying on 'pseudo events' staged entirely for the media (2012, 45). And yet Turner also acknowledges the following:

The discourses in play within the media representation of celebrity are highly contradictory and ambivalent ... celebrity is a genre of representation and a discursive effect; it is a commodity traded by the promotions, publicity, and media industries that produce these representations and their effects; and it is a cultural formation that has a social function we can better understand. (2014, 9-10)

Celebrity, then, is far from homogenous: it is, variously, a genre of representation, a discursive effect, a commodity, and a cultural formation. Chris Rojek suggests that we can also distinguish between celebrities on the basis of how their celebrity is acquired: 'ascribed' through blood relations, as is the case for the British royal family; 'achieved' in competition, as by sports stars; or 'attributed' by the media, as for television personalities (Rojek 2001). These are useful categories, even if, in reality, there is often significant overlap between them. To the extent that he can be considered a celebrity, Wyatt would fall into the 'achieved' category – a type of celebrity quite different from the ascribed celebrity experienced, for instance, by Prince Charles or the attributed celebrity experienced by, for instance, Jedward, the Irish singing and TV presenting duo who rose to prominence on *The X Factor*. Arguably, even those who have 'achieved' their celebrity can be distinguished by industry: Marshall (1997) suggests that the music star, who articulates meaning through discourses of 'authenticity,' typically experiences a type of celebrity that is different to that experienced by the film star, whose celebrity is constructed through the discourse of individualism, or the television personality, whose celebrity is constructed through conceptions of familiarity. It is interesting that Marshall reaches this conclusion even though his popular music case study is a 'manufactured' group: New Kids on the Block. It would seem that Wyatt, to a much greater extent than New Kids on the Block, fits within such a discourse of authenticity. He is seen by Paul Weller, for instance, as 'someone who's always stuck to his guns' (qtd. in O'Dair 2014, 391), and Brian Eno makes a similar point:

I think a lot of other artists admire him [Wyatt] because he seems to have developed a personal vision which is *intact*, somehow. The political and social part of it belongs together with what actually happens musically. He's the best

example of his philosophy, and quite often that is not the case. Quite often, people are the *worst* examples of their philosophy; they sort of expect somebody else to do it when they don't. But what's impressive about Robert, I think, is that he lives his life and, as far as I can see, there aren't any glaring inconsistencies between what he claims to believe in and what he does as a person and as an artist. So that's a bit of triumph to have pulled that off. (qtd. in O'Dair 2014, 392)

Wyatt appears to lack the 'tier of promotion, publicity and image management' that scholars such as Turner regard as fundamental to celebrity (2014, 15). He appears unmediated, an artist without 'gatekeepers.' Together with Bengé, Wyatt runs his musical career as something that can appear close to a cottage industry, at times playing all the instruments on an album while Bengé contributes lyrics and cover artwork, as well as management. Wyatt has for some time corresponded directly with his fans through letters and postcards, thereby creating with fans what Rojek (2015) calls 'presumed intimacy,' linked to what Horton and Wohl (1956) refer to as 'para-social relationships.' Yet Wyatt is not entirely without gatekeepers. He has a PR representative at his current record label, Domino, a relatively large independent label; he has previously worked with other significant independent labels including Rough Trade and Virgin. Bengé has proved herself a very competent manager, successfully negotiating, for instance, with a young Richard Branson back when Wyatt was signed to Virgin. We should not, then, overplay the lack of mediation. Celebrity or non-celebrity status is far from binary; instead, there is a continuum stretching from cult status to A-list celebrity, and Wyatt exists somewhere on that spectrum. Cult status is usually thought of as antithetical to the 'mainstream' of consumer culture (Hollows 2003), as somehow 'authentic' and endowed with subcultural capital (Bourdieu 1984; Hebdidge 1979; Thornton 1995). For Mark Jancovich, however, the notion of the mainstream and commercial as the 'other' of the cult and subcultural is 'contradictory and problematic' (2002, 306), encouraging a misguided sense of cultural superiority.

Having established that Wyatt, though not an archetypal celebrity, can certainly be considered within that framework, I wish, in the rest of this article, to discuss my authorised biography. In doing so, I hope to shed new light on the genre of authorised biography more broadly, particularly in terms of its distinction from ghostwritten autobiography.

### **Auto/biography, Authorship, and Authorisation**

There is surprisingly little literature on the process of biographical authorisation, and authorised biographies of living subjects and of non-literary figures, for instance popular musicians, have been particularly neglected. It seems likely that the question of what is at stake in writing the authorised biography of a living subject is neglected in the academic literature because most popular press biographers of living subjects are not scholars and are therefore unlikely to reflect critically (at least in print) on the process of writing. Crucially, those academics who do produce biographies as part of their contribution to a field or discipline are typically either writing unauthorised biographies or authorised biographies of deceased subjects; 'authorisation' in this instance is typically located in the estate of the subject. To write a biography authorised by a living subject is, I suggest, a significantly different process, and one that is particularly unusual within academia, perhaps because an authorised biography would imply a financial advance for the author and thus crosses over the trade/academic publishing divide.

The lack of scholarship on authorised biography might also be because the form is looked down upon by scholars: to Hans Renders, authorised biography is autobiography 'disguised' as a biography (2017, 160-161). I now wish to address this point by unpacking the difference between authorised biography and autobiography. Renders states that a 'biography is "authorised" if the subject of the biography has read the text and declared the facts revealed within to be correct' (2017, 159). Ghostwriting, meanwhile, is defined by John Knapp and Azalea Hulbert as 'the writing of material by one person (the writer) for use by another (the client) who will be credited with its authorship, and where both parties agree that the writer's role will be invisible to readers or hearers of the words – hence the term ghost' (2017, vi). The main difference, it might seem, is the extent to which that first individual is credited with authorship. The distinction, in other words, could be understood to relate to what Gérard Genette calls the paratext: those 'liminal devices and conventions, both within the book (*peritext*) and outside it (*epitext*) that mediate the book to the reader' (1997, xviii). For Genette, it is in ghostwriting that we can see most clearly that the attribution of authorship is more legal than factual, since 'signing' a book is not 'a straightforward statement of identity ("The author's name is So-and-So")' (1997, 40). Genette continues:

[The attribution of authorship] is, instead, the way to put an identity, or rather a 'personality,' as the media call it, at the service of the book: 'This book is the work of the illustrious So-and-So.' Or at least the illustrious So-and-So claims to be the author of this book, even if some insiders know he didn't exactly write it himself and perhaps hasn't read the whole book, either. (Genette 1997, 40)

The consequences of this difference in attribution between ghostwritten autobiography and authorised biography are profound and can be conceptualised by means of the narratological notions of the 'real author' and 'implied author' (Booth 1961). First introduced in connection with the notion of the unreliable narrator, Wayne Booth's distinction was between the real, flesh-and-blood author and the 'implied author' that can be reconstructed from a given text by the reader. This distinction was developed by Seymour Chatman (1978) and Shlomith Rimmon-Kenan (1983), for whom the distinction between the 'real' and 'implied' author was a means to problematise the 'transmission' model of the way in which meaning is transferred from author to reader, with its assumption that an isolated individual author simply encodes a set of meanings to be decoded by the reader. For Chatman (1978) and Rimmon-Kenan (1983), the implied author fits into a model not of simple 'transmission' but, rather, of six 'narrative levels,' all of which complicate the transmission process. The 'real author' and 'real reader' are the human beings at either end of the communication process; the 'implied author,' 'narrator,' 'narratee,' and 'implied reader,' meanwhile, exist between those two poles, and – unlike the 'real author' and 'real reader' – actually appear within the text.

For our purposes, it is the distinction between the real author, implied author, and narrator that is most important. The narrator is the narrative 'voice' of a text; the implied author is the organising principle; and the real author, finally, is the 'real life' individual responsible for the actual writing. In an authorised biography, the biographer is the real author; the biographer, so far as s/he can be reconstructed from the text, is also both implied author and narrator. The scenario for a ghostwritten autobiography is very different. Though the ghostwriter is the real author, the subject is both implied author and narrator of the text. In ghostwriting, then, the distinction between real and implied author is acute: the implied author, rather than the real author, is credited with authorship. If, as Genette suggests, the

subject has not actually read the text, then s/he at least accepts legal responsibility for it. The subject's 'signing' in this instance is an assertion of what Philippe Lejeune (1989) refers to as the 'autobiographical pact': a promise that the author, narrator, and protagonist are one and the same person. The difficulty, as I have suggested, is that there are two types of author: and while the narrator, protagonist, and *implied* author of a ghostwritten autobiography may be one and the same, they are not identical with the *real* author. For an authorised biography, in which the distance between real and implied author is, in comparison, greatly reduced, the author/narrator is not the same as the protagonist; there is no autobiographical pact. It is true that, as Renders suggests, an authorised biography carries the implicit declaration, by its authorising subject, that the book is factually accurate (2017, 159). Yet it also carries, as stated author, the name of its authorised biographer – and it is with the biographer that legal responsibility resides. Given that our modern sense of authorship emerged in parallel with the birth of copyright, as David Saunders (1992) and Martha Woodmansee (1994) have suggested, this is of no little significance. It is this dual signing, by authorising subject and authorised biographer, that represents what we might, with reference to Lejeune, refer to as the 'authorised biographical pact.'

Given Renders's notion that authorisation reflects the biographical subject's declaration that a text is factually correct, it is necessary to examine the authorised biographical pact in terms of its relationship with truth. To examine this link, we can shed some light upon popular music life writing by examining popular music biopics. The fact that biopics tell 'a true story,' as argued by Lee Marshall and Isabel Kongsgaard (2012, 353), is central to the pleasure they offer: the guarantee that an authentic individual exists behind the image is what gives a biopic, and celebrity more generally, its affective power. Yet Marshall and Kongsgaard argue that the biopic can never be a literal retelling of what 'really' happened, not least because the very idea of a 'true' life story is a fiction: 'Indeed, an actual "true story" would not be accepted as true as it would not live up to our ideas or what pop stars are like' (2012, 359). The pertinent point, in terms of the relationship between authorisation and truth, is that biopics often strive to assert their truthfulness by featuring, typically as executive producers, people 'who were really there': John Carter Cash in *Walk the Line* (2005, dir. James Mangold), a film about Johnny Cash, or Deborah Curtis and Tony Wilson in the Ian Curtis biopic, *Control* (2007, dir. Anton Corbijn). 'These kinds of strategies,' state Marshall and Kongsgaard, 'ensure that the biopic appears *author*-ised and is thus granted *author*-ity to speak on the subject' (2012, 355). Again, there is a legal dimension: one reason for filmmakers to seek the authorisation of their subject or their representatives, suggests Ellen Cheshire (2015), is that the approval of the subject or his/her representatives reduces the dangers of being sued. On the other hand, Cheshire points out that subject approval may result in hagiography (2015, 3). There is, then, an inherent tension in both the biopic and the biography: authorisation is desired by audiences, to the extent that it can be seen to confirm the 'truthfulness' of the account, yet simultaneously resisted due to concerns of whitewashing. The question, perhaps, is precisely what is being authorised: checking 'for factual accuracy,' for instance of interview transcripts, is distinct from full 'copy approval,' whereby the subject is permitted to influence the interpretation of that interview data.

In the following, I will critically reflect on the effects of authorisation on my biography, particularly in terms of methodology and the interpretation of data.

### ***Different Every Time: methodology***

Even when ghostwriters collect multiple accounts, they tend to privilege the account of their autobiographical subjects. If their approach, typically, is one of depth rather than breadth, then this is because autobiographies tend to rely for their value proposition on Lejeune's autobiographical pact: the implicit promise that the book's (implied) author, narrator, and protagonist are one and the same. The default methodology, accordingly, is one of interviews between ghostwriter and subject. The ghostwriter then develops this interview data into a manuscript, which is presented for the approval of the subject and/or the subject's representatives and, finally (and perhaps more than once), revised by the ghostwriter in response to feedback. Occasionally, as in Grace Jones's 2015 autobiography, written with Paul Morley, such books may include quotes from a respondent other than the subject – in that instance, from Jones's record label boss, Chris Blackwell. Additional voices also appear within Ahmir 'Questlove' Thompson's self-consciously metareferential 2013 autobiography, written with Ben Greenman. These books, however, are exceptions: interviews with individuals other than the subject are rare in autobiography. Neither do ghostwriters typically carry out extensive desk research. Like biopics such as *Control* and *Walk the Line*, they are marketed on the basis of a claim to 'truth' that derives from the fact that the account comes 'straight from the horse's mouth.' For the very same reason, however, again like the biopics discussed above, they may be perceived by some readers as unreliable.

The biography in which the biographer is not only the real author but also, to the extent that s/he can be reconstructed from the text, both implied author and narrator, presents a very different scenario, and very different methodologies are employed. *Unauthorised* biographies will typically feature no primary interviews with the subject, but only quotations from interviews conducted with the subject by other authors and journalists – although they may, of course, feature original interviews with other respondents. In the context of popular music, for instance, Albert Goldman reportedly interviewed 1,200 people for his unauthorised John Lennon biography (1988; dust jacket of hardback version). Unauthorised biographies may, on the other hand, feature no interviews at all: Simon Reynolds, in conversation with Jerry Thackray (2015), has questioned the value of interviews to popular music biography, and Greil Marcus also tends to eschew the research method.

Even an *authorised biography* may not feature interviews with its subject, not least because that subject may no longer be alive: biographies, as I have suggested, can be authorised by the subject's estate as well as by the subject. Authorisation does typically bring with it some type of enhanced access, but it might be to an archive of letters and diaries, for instance, rather than to particular interviewees. For those subjects still alive, however, biographical authorisation does typically involve interview access to the subject. As a rule, since they place data from interviews with the subject at their core, authorised biographies feature interviews with fewer respondents than their unauthorised counterparts. Barry Miles, for instance, lists a paltry twelve interviewees for his Paul McCartney biography, *Many Years From Now* (1997, xiv); although he states that he has also drawn on prior interviews with an additional four respondents, the core of his book is made up of the thirty-five interviews Miles conducted with McCartney himself. At the same time, Reynolds goes too far in contrasting authorised biographers, in his view indistinguishable from ghostwriters, with 'prudent biographers,' who 'will certainly make use' of their subject's stated views 'but should do so only as one of the many different facets that make up the final result' (2017, 162). The use of interview data as simply one of the many source types is, in fact, something that can be found in *authorised*, as well as unauthorised, biographies. For his authorised biography of Steve Jobs, published in 2011, Walter Isaacson reportedly interviewed more than a hundred respondents, in addition to conducting forty interviews with Jobs himself (2011, dust jacket of

hardback version). The result, *Steve Jobs*, could be conceptualised in the terms set out by Roland Barthes as 'a tissue of quotations' (1977, 146). I employ here, instead, a term from musicology that denotes music in many parts or voices, introduced into literary studies by Mikhail Bakhtin (1984) to refer to the simultaneity of voices and points of view within a particular narrative plane: *Steve Jobs* is a *polyphonic* biography. Jobs's views are present but, to cite Renders, 'only as one of many different facets' (2017, 162) that make up the final book. This is in direct contrast to the ghostwritten autobiography: even if, in reality, the voices of the ghostwriter and the authorising subject are both evident in the eventual text, as perhaps are those of other mediating forces including managers and PR officers, such texts are presented as *monophonic*.

In a sense, then, the characters in *Steve Jobs* are liberated from the control of the authorising subject, with significant consequences for the 'ownership' of that text, or at least the *perception* of ownership: *Steve Jobs* is an authorised biography, but, to a much greater extent than it would had Isaacson drawn only upon interviews with Jobs, it can be seen as *Isaacson's* book. The important point, however, is that neither the famous autobiographical subject/authorising biographical subject, nor the ghostwriter/authorised biographer is ever in complete control. Instead, 'the celebrity is authored in a multiplicity of sites of discursive practice, and... in the process, unauthorised identities are produced, both for the celebrity and for her diverse authors' (Coombe 1994, 101):

Star images are authored by studios, the mass media, public relations agencies, fan clubs, gossip columnists, photographers, hairdressers, body-building coaches, athletic trainers, teachers, screenwriters, ghostwriters, directors, lawyers and doctors. Even if we only consider the production and dissemination of the star image, and see its value as solely the result of human labour, this value cannot be entirely attributed to the efforts of a single author. (Coombe 1994, 105)

I strove to make *Different Every Time*, like *Steve Jobs*, a 'polyphonic' biography, and the effects on my methodology were profound. I carried out extensive desk research to provide necessary context and to allow me to some extent to 'decentre' Wyatt, presenting him not as 'lone genius' in the Romantic tradition but as constituted by factors outside some putative inherent whole. In the words of Virginia Woolf, my intention was to include the 'stream' as well as the 'fish' (1985, 80).<sup>1</sup> Desk research also allowed me to cite interview data from those subjects I was unable to reach, including those who were no longer alive. In addition, I carried out a significant amount of primary research: I interviewed seventy-five subjects in addition to the approximately fifty hours I spent interviewing Wyatt. These interviews took place between August 2009 and July 2013, with most conducted in 2010 and 2011. Marking a clear distinction between the authorised biography and the ghostwritten autobiography, I selected these respondents without any consultation with Wyatt. When arranging interviews, I contacted all respondents myself; I could not guarantee that they would not then check with Wyatt, but this reduced the chances of respondents being 'influenced' by the subject.<sup>2</sup> As Isaacson found with *Steve Jobs*,

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<sup>1</sup> The individual life, for Woolf, should be placed in the context of family, inheritance, influences, environment, and so on. The specific quote runs as follows: "I see myself as a fish in a stream; deflected; held in place, but cannot describe the stream." (Woolf 1985, 80.)

<sup>2</sup> The only exception to this rule were those few individuals with no public profile and whom I could not feasibly reach myself, for instance Wyatt's son, Sam Ellidge.

collecting multiple accounts for the biography increased the chances of coming across views that differed from those of my authorising subject: *Different Every Time*, as a polyphonic biography, is thus distinct from the subject-centred, ghostwritten autobiography, which is not, in fact, monophonic but presented as such. There is an important sense, however, in which, by striving to create a 'polyphonic' biography, I was, paradoxically, acting in accordance with Wyatt's stated wishes: he expressed a desire, at the start of the process, for the book to recognise his numerous collaborators, in particular the lesser known ones.

Since I interviewed Wyatt and Bengé on multiple occasions, I had the opportunity to discuss certain topics with them in more than one interview. Although I do not believe that there were subjects I avoided discussing with Wyatt or Bengé, it is probably the case that I approached certain sensitive subjects – for instance, Wyatt's suicide attempts, alcoholism, and paraplegia – more cautiously with them than with other respondents. Moreover, the fact that no subject was formally declared 'off limits' does not mean that my interviews with Wyatt were not subject to self-censorship. I must have sensed, if not necessarily entirely consciously, that the entire project relied on an ongoing relationship that was at least cordial, while also being aware of the need to maintain a certain critical distance. Subjects and biographers can be too close: that is the charge levelled at Miles and McCartney, who were friends before they collaborated on *Many Years From Now*. A very different approach is taken by Adam Sisman, authorised biographer of John le Carré:

Though my biography was written with my subject's cooperation, it would be disingenuous to pretend that there was no strain between us during the four years I spent writing his [le Carré's] life. I don't think that I should have been doing my job properly if there hadn't been: I saw it as my job to uncover the truth, however painful that might be. (2016)

For evidence of that 'strain,' we need only to look to the fact that le Carré published his own autobiography, *The Pigeon Tunnel: Stories from my Life*, within a year of his authorised biography. Clearly le Carré, as authorising subject, did not consider his authorised biography an autobiography in disguise.

In the terms set out by Catherine Marshall and Gretchen Rossman (2006, 73), my interviews with Wyatt and Bengé were both more 'intensive' (in terms of the amount of time spent in the setting on a given day) and 'extensive' (in terms of the duration of the study) than those with other respondents. This in itself could have affected the interview data, since interviewing, as James Holstein and Jaber Gubrium make clear, is an 'active' process: 'meaning is not merely elicited by apt questioning nor simply transported through redundant replies' (1995, 4), but rather actively assembled in the interview itself. From a social constructionist perspective, the person collecting the data will inevitably influence that data, since meanings are contextually grounded and emerge through interaction (Mishler 1986). After all, as David Silverman (2014) notes, the interviewer does not only ask questions. Non-verbal actions, such as nodding, and apparently innocuous vocal noises ('hmm', 'mmm') are likely to influence the answers that are given or not given. The suggestion that a different interviewer, asking different questions in a different order, would have produced different data is quite distinct from the fact that he or she would also have interpreted that data differently, an issue I go on to examine below. I note here that, while Wyatt was adamant that the book should be 'mine,' the interview data itself was co-created. It is also a mistake to assume that interviews necessarily provide a full account of phenomena: interviewees may be unwilling, as Marshall and Rossman (2006) point out, or, indeed, unable to share all that the interviewer hopes to explore, and the line between 'unwilling' and 'unable' is not always clear. This is most striking in relation to

the 1973 accident – a fall from a fourth-floor window – that left Wyatt paraplegic. In our interviews, Wyatt insisted he was too drunk at the time of the accident to remember any of the circumstances of the fall itself, though he did describe both the circumstances immediately before and after the accident. Of course, I have no way of knowing whether or not this is true. Either way, the lack of interview data from Wyatt himself on the subject leads to a significant ‘narrative gap’ in the biography – one on which I critically reflect below.

### ***Different Every Time: Interpretation of Data***

Earlier in this article, I outlined what we might refer to as the ‘authorised biographical pact’: for Renders, this means that the subject, in authorising a biography, is effectively declaring it factually correct. In reality, however, the situation is not quite so simple. For one thing, from a social constructionist perspective, the very notion of facts is open to challenge – as are those of objectivity, reason, and knowledge (Gergen 2009, 2). To constructionists, Kenneth Gergen outlines, ‘our practices of language are bound up within relationships, and our relationships are bound within broader patterns of practice’; the way in which we understand the world is not shaped by ‘what there is’; rather, ‘the ways in which we describe and explain the world are the outcomes of relationships’ (11-12). Such a viewpoint is in stark contrast with positivist beliefs in the authenticity of human experience and the accompanying assumption that interviews will provide direct access to a given ‘experience’ and that people attach only a single meaning to that experience. For Elliot Mishler, the central issue in the interpretation of interview data is to understand ‘the relationship between discourse and meaning,’ and to acknowledge the joint construction of meaning (1986, 12). Questions take on a particular, context-bound meaning as an interview develops; comments made by the respondent will be shaped by prior exchanges with the interviewer. The very fact that I was conducting interviews in the role of Wyatt’s authorised biographer, for instance, will have affected the data I gathered. In that context, as I suggested above in relation to biopics, the notion of ‘facts,’ of information as simply true or false, is overly simplistic. The very idea of a true life story is a fiction.

A second point to make in relation to Renders’s assertion that the subject, in authorising a biography, is declaring it factually correct is that factual accuracy is not necessarily the key criterion by which data should be assessed. Certainly, there is such a thing as factual credibility, and this can be checked. If I asked whether Wyatt played the trombone, or was born in 1843, or was Chinese, there is a correct answer, which, in all three cases, is no. Yet, as interviewer, I also asked questions of a different sort, often along the lines of: ‘How did you feel about X?’ It would have made little sense to evaluate the answers to such questions in terms of ‘truth value.’ Following Pertti Alasuutari, we might distinguish between a ‘factist’ approach, in which texts are ‘assessed as more or less honest and truthful statements about outside reality,’ and a ‘specimen’ approach, in which data is treated not ‘as either a *statement about* or a *reflection of* reality’ but, rather, ‘as *part of* the reality being studied’ (1995, 63). While most journalists, for instance, tacitly treat interview data as having ‘truth value,’ it can also, as in oral history, be treated as ‘specimen.’ Oral history, for Laura Marcus, does not claim to show ‘how it was’ as much as ‘how it is remembered as having been’; the aim is to create an account that is ‘subjective, a spectrum of lived experiences of people who participated in the events’ (1994, 277). As Alessandro Portelli states, oral history ‘tells us less about *events* than about their *meaning*’ (2016, 52).

My own approach to data in *Different Every Time*, which was influenced by constructionism as well as by oral history, was more 'specimen' than 'factist.' In autobiography, it is the subject (the implied author) whose interpretation is paramount, thereby diminishing the degree of control exercised by any ghostwriter; in biography, by contrast, the biographer (or real author) exercises a much greater degree of control. Yet control is never total. To assume, as Renders seems to, that there is a single individual – the subject – in control of a ghostwritten autobiography or authorised biography is a mistake. It is increasingly recognised that no biographer can keep his or her own life distinct from the life of his or her subject (Banner 2016, 103). The relationship between a subject and his/her ghostwriter is more complex than that of employer and employee. A celebrity may 'outrank' his or her ghostwriter in economic terms, suggests Hannah Yelin, but this does not necessarily translate into agency; instead, 'agency must be negotiated between ghostwriter and subject' (2016, 363). This is even more true of authorised biography: at least in my own case, there was no financial relationship between me, as authorised biographer, and Wyatt as authorising subject. In that dual signature of the authorised biographical pact is an acknowledgement that agency is shared. To acknowledge this, however, is not to admit that the authorisation process results in whitewashing: even the *unauthorised* biographer does not exercise complete control over a given text. Apart from anything else, the subject can still block access to interview respondents. Barney Hoskyns's unauthorised biography of Tom Waits (2009) illustrates the significant challenge of securing interviews without the co-operation of the biographical subject: correspondence with subjects who turned down his interview requests at the behest of Waits and his wife and manager Kathleen Brennan is presented in an appendix. In the case of Michael Holroyd's biography of George Bernard Shaw, meanwhile, Midge Gillies states that Shaw's estate were in a position 'to withdraw their authorisation if they felt the book was badly written' (2009, 50); though they could not stop its publication as an unauthorised life, they could charge fees for quotations that would otherwise have been free.

The point is that authorised biographies, like autobiographies, are better understood as 'assemblages' that 'interact with, redress, seek to reconcile, and implicitly contain a multiplicity of overlapping, interconnecting, often competing narratives' (Yelin 2016, 369). All star images are multiply constituted and complex webs of mediation (management, branding, PR, etc.) that may well surround subject and writer alike. Claims of unrestricted expression of subjectivity, therefore, should be treated with caution (Yelin 2016, 361). What we can imagine, then, is a 'see-saw' of narrative control, the authorised biography sitting somewhere between the autobiography, on the one hand, and the unauthorised biography, on the other. Authorised biographies can indeed read, as Renders alleges, like autobiographies in disguise: Miles's *Paul McCartney: Many Years From Now*, for instance, was criticised as a hagiography (Sheffield 2012). Yet authorisation cannot necessarily be conflated with whitewashing; it does not even necessarily mean that the subject is happy with the biographer's interpretation. I have already suggested that *Steve Jobs* features the views of a number of respondents other than Jobs; notably, Jobs seems to have authorised the book without attempting to influence the not always positive way in which the book portrays him.<sup>3</sup> Patrick French's authorised biography of novelist V. S. Naipaul, published in 2008, is also of interest in this respect: Naipaul read it in manuscript form, and later told Teju Cole that he found the experience 'painful,' yet did not request changes (Cole 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> Jobs does, however, seem to have been interested in how he was portrayed on the book's cover, a key part of the paratext (Isaacson 2011, xviii).

I stated earlier that biographies could be polyphonic in the sense of being made up of many voices that together do not necessarily project a single, unified view, a concept that Bakhtin applies to literature. We might think here, in particular, of Bakhtin's work on the novel, in particular his notion of 'heteroglossia': the 'double-voiced discourse' in which a given character expresses both 'the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author' (1981, 324). The result is an unstable text, full of competing voices and, to some extent, beyond the control of any single individual. This is particularly true of authorised biography, sitting as it does in the centre of the 'see-saw' of narrative control. I have already touched on the potential for self-censorship during interviews, and this is hardly surprising: as Simon Frith notes, in the specific context of popular music, 'rock biographies are most commonly written by rock fans. They start from the author's own commitment to an artist' (1983, 272-3). I would suggest, however, that self-censorship is also evident in *unauthorised* biographies, which also often begin with the author's own commitment to an artist. True, there are biographers, notably Albert Goldman (1981, 1988), who are notorious for their obsession with the most scandalous aspects of the lives they depict. Yet not every unauthorised biography is a pathography, and it is a mistake to assume that unauthorised biographies are necessarily 'warts and all.' Participating in a panel discussion on music biographies at Stoke Newington Literary Festival in 2015, for instance, the music journalist and biographer Chris Salewicz suggested that he was suspicious of authorised biography due to their tendency to whitewash. Yet he went on to concede that he omitted certain details relating to Joe Strummer's womanising from his *unauthorised* biography of the Clash frontman, due to concerns over upsetting Strummer's widow.

What I am suggesting is that texts are much less unified than they might at first appear, and this is true of authorised, as well as unauthorised, biographies. This is a point made by Pierre Macherey with reference to literary production in general. A given work, for Macherey, is not 'organic' and unified but rather made up of a series of conflicting elements; 'though it may appear finite and closed, the work is perhaps torn and gaping' (2006, 22). Macherey continues:

To explain the work is to show that, contrary to appearances, it is not independent, but bears in its material substance the imprint of a determinate absence which is also the principle of its identity. The book is furrowed by the allusive presence of those other books against which it is elaborated; it circles about the absence of that which it cannot say, haunted by the absence of certain repressed words which make their return. (2006, 89)

For Macherey, who was influenced by Freud and the notion of the unconscious, a book 'is necessarily accompanied by a *certain absence*, without which it would not exist. A knowledge of the book must include a consideration of this absence' (2006, 95). This leads Macherey to his examination of 'narrative gaps.' The most significant narrative gap in *Different Every Time* concerns the 1973 accident that left Wyatt paraplegic. The book includes only about two hundred words from Wyatt on the incident, taken from interviews I conducted, and also makes brief reference to the fact that Wyatt has described the incident in slightly different terms over the years. The fact that I do not include accounts of the fall by others who were present is in part due to practical reasons: I was not able to interview many respondents who had been present at the time of the accident, and none were willing to discuss it on the record. The important point, from an ethical perspective, is that Wyatt did not specify how he wanted me to treat the incident in the biography. I cite Vivien Goldman's euphemistic phrase – 'a typical party tangle' – and allude to the ambiguity of Wyatt's own accounts, and leave it at that. Following Wolfgang Iser (1989), we can understand these narrative gaps, or 'indeterminacies,' as being filled by the reader. I

have also suggested that a simple model of mono-directional transmission from writer to reader can be challenged; instead, for Iser, 'the message is transmitted in two ways, in that the reader "receives" it by composing it' (1989, 31). There is a clear link here not only to Barthes (1977) and the 'birth of the reader,' but also to Bakhtin, and the notion that the reader is free to find authority where he or she chooses, regardless of the intentions of the (real) author and authorising subject. While *Different Every Time* was received by some critics as definitive, I would present the book instead as simply one interpretation, or, a number of partial interpretations, of the available data. Far from definitive, the book remains, to cite Macherey again, 'torn and gaping.'

## Conclusion

Renders laments the rise of authorised biography as follows:

In American bookstores it is – regrettably – common to see biographies wrapped in a ribbon with the word 'authorised' printed on it in big letters. What was introduced as a warning, meant to inform readers they were dealing with untrustworthy trash, has in these past few years been turned into a mark of quality. (2017, 163)

Christian Klein, similarly, writes dismissively of those 'hastily written popular publications that present the life of a celebrity, which often have been produced in close collaboration with this person and serve primarily to perpetuate his or her self-presentation' (2017, 83). No doubt, there are authorised biographies that deserve such disparagement, but the comments are excessively sweeping. Nicholas Murray goes as far as to state that the very notion of the authorised biography has 'an unsettling Stalinist ring to it' (2010, 137-8); his point is a general one, but the accusation is particularly stinging in the case of my own biography since Wyatt, for some time a member of the Communist Party of Great Britain, has himself been called a Stalinist. Despite – or quite possibly because of – such accusations, Wyatt was in fact adamant that *Different Every Time* should be 'my' book. Free speech, as he told me more than once, was essential. My own experience, then, runs contrary to Renders's assertion that an authorised biographer is simply a ghostwriter by another name. In fact, however, the notion of ownership is problematic, since I have attempted to create a polyphonic biography comprising multiple voices – and those voices may, at times, pull against one another.

Complete narrative control does not lie with the authorised biographer, whom we might consider the 'real author'; nor does it lie entirely with the authorising subject. If interviews with the authorising subject make up a substantial part of the book, then the subject has some control over the creation of that data as well as over its interpretation. At the same time, at least some subjects are apparently willing to authorise life stories that are not entirely flattering. Subjects may also allow, even encourage, the biographer to conduct interviews with a number of other respondents, even though this increases the chances that a biographer will encounter accounts that to a greater or lesser extent conflict with the account of the authorising subject. Even if some whitewashing *does* occur in a biography, it may be the result of self-censorship on the part of the biographer rather than the result of any action by the authorising subject – and self-censorship can occur in unauthorised biographies too. To conclude with a return to the motif of polyphony, it may be that the job of the biographer, as Sabina Loriga suggests in her work on biography and historical time, is that of the historian: 'not to create unity from heterogeneous material, nor to construct a single discourse about the past, but rather to enrich the orchestral score

of multiple discourses' (2017, 38).

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