
Interpreting the archive through creative practice research

Author(s): Rebekah Elizabeth Lattin-Rawstrone

Email: rebekah.lattin-rawstrone@open.ac.uk

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This paper explores the process of my practice research looking at techniques of ‘critical fabulation’ (Hartman, 2008) and ‘fictive criticism’ (Soobramanien & Williams, 2022) and investigating what it means to ‘grasp reality through imagination’ (Saadawi, 2010) when using the archive to interpret the past through fiction. My novel, *All The Hollow Places*, centres around Gertrude Bell whose role as an administrator of the British Imperial government in the formation of Iraq has left a bloody legacy. Though her life is well-documented, the techniques of ‘critical fabulation’ and ‘fictive criticism’ contribute to the search for new ways in which to reinterpret the past for a modern audience questioning the imperial project. Previous interpretations of Bell’s life have employed a hero’s journey narrative structure that presented her life as a straightforward trajectory into government service. As a distant relative, my fictional interpretation involves personal as well as national explorations of her life and requires an unpicking of this hero’s journey trajectory. Through creative approaches to voicing the silences of the archive, through exploring alternative forms suggested by *écriture féminine*, the work of Preti Taneja, Soobramanien & Williams, and others, as well as looking to alternative storytelling forms from the Middle East, I show how my research is generating a hybrid novel of biography, autobiography, essay, imagery, artefact and archival quotation in a reinterpretation of Bell that offers new possibilities for the novel form.

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Interpreting the archive through creative practice research

Rebekah Elizabeth Lattin-Rawstrone

Creative practice-based research generates knowledge through the production of creative work (a piece of music, an exhibition, a sculpture, an installation, a novel etc.) that invites engagement and curiosity around, and provokes new approaches to, the subject or subjects researched. It privileges the individual experience of the creative work whilst intending a wider cultural response.¹ My creative practice research takes the form of a novel, *All The Hollow Places*, which uses the focal lens of British traveller, writer and archaeologist, Gertrude Bell (1868–1926)—best known today for her involvement in the creation of modern Iraq—to ask questions about the legacy of imperialism in Britain.

As a creative project, the idea of writing about Gertrude Bell came from my distant relationship to her (my great grandmother is the daughter of Gertrude Bell's Great Uncle). Family conversations from my youth claimed Gertrude Bell as an ancestor to be proud of. I grew up knowing only vaguely about her travels in the Middle East,² understanding from my family that she was an independent, intelligent, female pioneer, working for the British abroad. I was told about her travels as ones undertaken without male chaperones—though of course she did travel with many male employees, they just weren't of white European descent—through desert landscapes in which she was sure to always carry her china tea set. From such nepotistic beginnings began a fascination with a woman who, though once renowned in England and whose journey to Hail³ was regularly written about by British school children in the 1930s,⁴ is no longer widely discussed.

¹ I'm applying Graeme Sullivan's inquiry (*Art Practice As Research: Inquiry in Visual Arts*, 2nd Edition, 2010) to other creative art practices.

² Gertrude Bell would have been more likely to use the term Near East before 1918. She would also have referred to Iraq initially as Mesopotamia and the wider area between Egypt and what we now know as Turkey to the north and Persia, as it was then, to the East, as Arabia or the Near East. Though the Middle East remains a fluid term in relation to which exact areas it includes and has also been argued to be a Eurocentric and colonial term, it remains a term easily recognised by most readers, and I use it to stand for the geopolitical region of Arabia, Asia Minor, East Thrace, Egypt, Iran, the Levant, Iraq and the Socotra Archipelago.

³ Outside of direct quotation, I have chosen to use common English spellings of Arabic words and names rather than more formal transliterations and have eschewed use of diacritical marks for ease of readability. For this, I apologise to specialists in the field.

⁴ Priya Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East*, 2008 <<http://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb.08808>> [accessed 11 April 2022].

This fascination, though personally inspired, fuelled research as fascinated by imperial as by family legacy. Gertrude Bell, as the first female British Political Officer and only woman officially part of the Expeditionary Force in Mesopotamia⁵ directly impacted the development of British policy in the Middle East, helping to create and define the boundaries of the Iraq nation and simultaneously, though perhaps not always directly, introduce a form of covert empire through the use of air control⁶ that has left a very bloody legacy whose impact we live with today. Her fall from fame in Britain forms part of one post-colonial approach to history which avoids addressing the continued impact of Empire in Britain today.⁷ When her membership of the Anti-Suffrage League is added to this portrait, alongside numerous recollections of her dislike for women,⁸ Bell's appeal as a historical figure to celebrate is easily diminished, but her appeal as a focal lens for interrogating white British values past and present only increases. Why do British school children no longer write essays about Gertrude Bell? How have British attitudes to women and to imperialism changed? What does it mean to be of service to your country today and how might that be actively anti-imperial? These are some of the questions my novel intends to provoke in its readers. In my practice the question of how my novel might address these enquiries through its structure is also paramount, as this paper will explore.

With these questions and approaches in mind, my first research avenue was the Gertrude Bell Archive at the Robinson Library, Newcastle University—though her letters, books and articles are also archived at, among other places, the British Library, the National Archives and the Royal Geographical Society. The Gertrude Bell Archive contains letters, diaries, photographs and miscellaneous items such as talks and pieces of unpublished fiction, as well as copies of a family magazine, an empty cookbook and the books that formed her personal library. This archive, like all archives, is a curated collection. Until 1976, the letters to Richard Doughty-Wiley, the married man Bell fell in love with in her 40s, were sealed in the archive. Nor can the archive tell us if this relationship was consummated as any references to the affair outside of these letters

⁵ H.V.F. Winstone, *Gertrude Bell*, 2. rev. ed (London: Jonathan Cape, 1980), p. 179.

⁶ Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East*.

⁷ Sathnam Sanghera's *Empireland* (2021) is one exploration of this widespread approach.

⁸ For example, Violet Dickson in her book *Forty Years in Kuwait* writes: "soon after we arrived in Baghdad, Gertrude Bell, to whom I had been introduced, gave a dinner party for us at her home. She was Oriental Secretary on the personal staff of Sir Percy Cox. The other guests were five senior Arab officials, and most of the conversation was in Arabic, but Miss Bell did make one loud remark in English to the effect that it was *such* a pity that promising young Englishmen went and married such fools of women. As Harold [Violet Dickson's husband] had been one of her 'promising young Englishmen' in Mesopotamia during the war, I felt most uncomfortable and was glad when the party was over". See, Violet Dickson, *Forty Years in Kuwait* (George Allen & Unwin, 1970), p. 23.

remain exceedingly discreet given the scandal it would have caused Bell and her family.⁹ Reports of a woman visiting Doughty-Wylie's grave can't be confirmed as Bell.¹⁰ We can't know the full extent of her 'unofficial' work in Mesopotamia—did she dress as a Bedouin to spy on Mesopotamian tribes? It is also notable that the inquiry into her death, mentioned by her biographer, H. V. F. Winstone has been lost not only to this archive, but to the broader government and national archives.¹¹ In addition to this, the main body of Bell's personal archive contains letters to her parents, written to suit their interests and allay their fears, requiring today's unintended reader to cast careful eyes over their contents in an awareness that her unofficial emotional and domestic life has left less impact on the archival page.

As historian Tiya Miles suggests, reading the archive diagonally—that is reading against and along the bias grain, with an awareness of how and who collected it, of what might have been deliberately missed out, or what assumptions might have been held in its generation as well as its collection and storage—becomes essential to interpreting Bell's legacies for a modern audience keen to look at the past from a broader set of perspectives that question the Eurocentric outlook taken for granted in attitudes to history and development during Bell's lifetime.¹² Even with an archive as rich and full as Gertrude Bell's, these gaps and biases in the archive open up opportunities for fiction which can create informed interpretations of events whose factual evidence has been obscured or lost by the archive. Saidiya Hartman gives the term 'critical fabulation' to this process of bringing to life the voices of those silenced in the archive.¹³ Though Bell is by no means silenced or dispossessed, Hartman's approach has inspired a critical engagement with the archive where creative interpretation doesn't provide closure but offers alternative perspectives on Bell's unrecoverable past. This has informed the development of two strands in my novel-in-progress: Gertrude Bell's stream of consciousness, in which I use my reading of the archive to imagine what Bell was thinking through the last day of her life, investigating whether and why she committed suicide

⁹ See the letter to her father Feb 22nd 1918 in which she refers to Doughty-Wylie as 'D' (he was known as Dick) and talks of how the 'sorrow at the back of everything deadens me in a way to all else ... And yet in a curious way it quickens the inner life and makes me live more on thought and memory'. <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=286>. This reveals both the intimacy of her relationship with her father but also the careful terms in which she must broach a topic of such obvious personal pain. Whether or not the affair with Doughty-Wylie was consummated colours an impression of Bell's attitudes and outlooks important to an understanding of her wider character.

¹⁰ Georgina, Howell, *Queen of the Desert: The Extraordinary Life of Gertrude Bell* (London: Pan Books, 2015).

¹¹ Winstone, *Gertrude Bell*, p. 263.

¹² Tiya Miles, *All That She Carried: The History of a Black Family Keepsake, Lost and Found*, (London; New York: Random House, 2021), p. 300.

¹³ Saidiya Hartman, 'Venus in Two Acts', *Small Axe*, 12 (2008), p. 11.

(my choice of steam of consciousness reflects the experiments happening in the novel during Bell's lifetime, experiments that were in turn influenced by foreign travelogues, war and the huge societal shifts engendered by both and both of which Bell was directly involved in, as I will go on to begin to explain); and the third person imagined voice of Bell's lady's maid, Marie Delaire of whom very little is retained in the archive. As a lower middle-class employee, Marie Delaire's voice is one little represented by history, allowing her fictional voice to cast new perspectives on Bell.

Using the creative imagination to grapple with facts is a radical approach to the archive but not to writing fiction. As Nawal El Saadawi would have it, 'To my mind, facts and fiction are inseparable, like body and mind. Through creative writing we undo the false opposition between emotion and reasons, between the irrational and rational, between the scientific and the literary or fictional. I write fiction to tell the truth. We grasp reality better through the imagination'.¹⁴ Writing that attempts to embody characters' voices through multi-sensory description (that is writing that evokes a character's response to their environment through their sensory perceptions) gives a reader a different grasp of the realities of those characters. Combined with the techniques of 'critical fabulation', Bell's life and legacies are presented in my novel-in-progress in ways that offer potential new interpretations of what might truly have happened, interpretations that evoke the sounds of the past whose echoes reverberate but whose sources are no longer tangible.

Further research into Bell has had additional implications for the structure of my novel-in-progress. As Priya Satia¹⁵ has shown in her monograph on spies in Arabia, Bell was one of many British contemporaries who saw the desert as a mystical, mythical and overall fictional space, in both geographical and representational terms, filled with a people whose nomadic, timeless lifestyle had continued unchanged since Biblical times; a barren place uneasy to define geographically that therefore inspired the imagination.¹⁶ Bell wanted to become part of the story of this fictional desert imagined through the Bible, *The Arabian Nights* and the travelogues of previous

¹⁴ Nawāl El Sadāwī, and Adele S. Newson-Horst, *The Essential Nawal El Saadawi: A Reader, Zed Essential Feminists* (London, New York: Zed Books 2010), pp. 8–9.

¹⁵ Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East*.

¹⁶ You can clearly see this interpretation of the desert at work in Bell's *Palace and Mosque at Ukhaïdir: a study in early Mohammedan Architecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914) where she writes, for example, 'the gaunt walls and towers of the palace rear themselves out of the solitudes of the desert – in all that barren waste sole vestige of mortal energy, of the fleeing splendour of mankind' Bell, *Palace and Mosque at Ukhaïdir: a study in early Mohammedan Architecture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1914), pp. 3–4.

Arabian adventurers,¹⁷ and like her fellow British intelligence officers in Arabia, Bell approached her travels and work in Iraq through this romantic, Orientalist lens that led to a misplaced sense of empathy with the local population in an often brutal pursuit of imperial control.¹⁸ For my novel-in-progress, it is Bell's way of seeing her travels through the eyes of fiction, myth and intuition, as Satia's monograph explains, and an understanding of history based on the stories of great men and the efficacy of time to judge the morality of present action (views expressed by Oxford History graduate Bell in her letters describing the round the world journey she took with her brother, Hugo, in 1902–3), that makes challenging standard narrative structure inherent to challenging her imperial legacies.

Her letters show further preoccupation with the idea of becoming a 'Person',¹⁹ someone useful to the wider community, someone others consider when making decisions, someone like the great men of the history books she studied at university. These ideas were encouraged by her family, as her work with her stepmother on the social study of steel workers at the Bell plant evidenced. This attitude, combined with the Orientalist desire for travel in territories unmapped by British hands, not only channelled her ambitions for academic and political success, but encouraged her to view her life in the mould of the great man of history. In Damascus on the 27th of February 1905, having just come from the Jebel Druze, she wrote to her stepmother, Florence Bell: 'I have become A Person in Syria!'²⁰ This in turn made it easy for her family and friends to present her life in this light. In the introduction to Bell's collected letters, her stepmother says they 'show

¹⁷ See Bell's letter to Doughty-Wylie of 17th April 1914 in which she writes with great pleasure and anxiety about her guide telling her that the story of her desert journey will be told by future generations, quoted in Gertrude Bell's *The Arabian Diaries, 1913–14* 'I try to remember that they will tell how I came.' She also carried Charles M. Doughty's *Travels in Arabia Deserta* (1888) on many of her Middle Eastern journeys, using it, despite the distance in years, as a guide to the people, architecture and landscape. Bell, *The Arabian Diaries, 1913–1914*, ed. by Rosemary O'Brien, (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2020), p. 116.

¹⁸ Satia, *Spies in Arabia: The Great War and the Cultural Foundations of Britain's Covert Empire in the Middle East*. Satia's argument explores links between the development of Arabian travelogues, spy literature and the rogue, genius intelligence officer. Ian Rutledge's *Enemy on the Euphrates: The Battle for Iraq 1914–1921* offers similar arguments for the mutual influence of fiction and espionage, while Patrick Brantlinger's *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* offers further insight into the imperial narrative at work in literature of this period.

¹⁹ Georgina Howell's chapter, 'Becoming a Person' in her biography of Bell, argues that Bell was grappling with the idea of becoming the kind of person John Stuart Mill propounded in his utilitarian philosophy, someone who pursued happiness without compromising the good of the community, someone who worked towards the common good.

²⁰ <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=1487> In another letter to Florence on 1st June 1917, she is still thinking about her standing as a person: 'I told you about Fahad Beg didn't I – Mr Storrs says his affection for me is almost compromising. NB he's 75 *bien sonné*. We had a conference with him one morning in which he ended by describing the powerful effect produced by a letter from me last autumn – I wrote to him from Basrah [Basrah, Al (Basra)]. "I summoned my *shaikhs*" he wound up (I feel more and more of a person as he proceeded) "I read them your letter and I said to them Oh *Shaikhs*" – we hung upon his words – "this is a woman – what must the men be like!" This delicious peroration restored me to my true place in the twinkling of an eye. We took him to see an exhibition of flying yesterday to his immense delight. He said he had never enjoyed anything so much.' <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=241>.

such an amazing range of many-sided ability [...] Scholar, poet, historian, archaeologist, art critic, mountaineer, explorer, gardener, naturalist, distinguished servant of the State, Gertrude was all of these, and was recognised by experts as an expert in them all'.²¹

Bell's work was done in service of what she understood to be British interests, but crucially, her views were not always in agreement with those of Her Majesty's Government or those of her colleagues and she was not afraid to say so,²² making the final judgement over her status as a 'Person' one only she was fully capable of making, a status that remained in the balance right up to the end of her life. She wrote to her mother on the 21st October 1925, less than six months before her death of an overdose, 'I almost began to think I were a person' and then on the 28th of October to her father, 'In spite of all I have said of my activities in the office, you must please remember that I am not a person.'²³

This idea of mapping a trajectory onto Bell's life, turns her into a character whose dramatic structure follows the hero's journey model frequently endorsed by creative writing handbooks;²⁴ a model that privileges certain experiences over others, merges and even elides events, emotions and opinions that don't complement its carefully constructed trajectory. Ursula Le Guin in her essay 'The Carrier Bag of Fiction' (1988) argues that reducing narrative to conflict, as expounded in the 'linear, progressive, Time's-(killing)-arrow mode of the Techno-Heroic' hero's journey model, is absurd.²⁵ She writes, 'The novel is a fundamentally unheroic kind of story. Of course, the Hero has frequently taken it over, that being his imperial nature and uncontrollable impulse' but she seeks a form that better grasps the reality of beginnings without ends and suggests an expanded definition of narrative that replaces the hero's journey, arrow mode, with a concept taken from a tool used before the weapon, that of the carrier bag. Rather than structuring a story as a series of intensifying conflicts as symbolised by the arrow, the novel as symbolised by a carrier bag has a more embracing structure which can

²¹ Gertrude Lowthian Bell, and Florence Eveleen Eleanore Olliffe Bell, *The Letters of Gertrude Bell: Volumes I and II* (London: Benediction Books, 2009), p. 3. Her university friend, Janet Courtney wrote of Gertrude's work in the Middle East: 'Looking back it seems almost as if she had been set apart for such service ... almost imperceptibly she had been led on to devote her gifts as traveller, archaeologist, historian, to acquiring the knowledge which her country needed' Janet E. Courtney, 'Gertrude Bell', *The North American Review*, 223.833 (1926), pp. 656–63.

²² See the letter to her father June 14th 1920 where she recounts falling out with Sir Arnold Wilson, Civil Commissioner of Iraq. <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=395>.

²³ Both letters from the Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University.

²⁴ From Joseph Campbell's idea of The Hero's Journey, this method of writing for film was developed by Christopher Vogler in *The Writer's Journey* and has continued to be referenced by creative writing handbooks for both film and novel writing ever since. This structure, which also borrows from the dramatic arcs of Aristotle and Freytag, follows a hero, or protagonist, as she/he is called to action in a series of rising conflicts that lead to a climactic event after which some form of resolution or return to stasis is achieved.

²⁵ Ursula K. Le Guin, Yi Pul, and Donna Jeanne Haraway, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction* (London: Ignota, 2019), p. 36.

hold 'things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us'.²⁶ She argues: 'Conflict, competition, stress, struggle, etc., within the narrative conceived as carrier bag/belly/box/house/medicine bundle, may be seen as necessary elements of a whole which itself cannot be characterised either as conflict or as harmony, since its purpose is neither resolution nor stasis but continuing process'.²⁷ Therefore, my novel-in-progress, in response both to Le Guin and to the controlling aspects of personhood that preoccupy Bell and her biographers, seeks a form that privileges 'holding things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us', that privileges 'continuing process' in an echo of Cixous's *écriture féminine* (1976) which calls for forms that refuse to enforce the phallogocentric economy but instead aim for mutability and multiplicity.

Picking up this call, contemporary writers like Preti Taneja and Soobramanein and Williams, have recognised the controlling properties of certain narratives and see a need to challenge not only the phallogocentric but the imperial economy at work in these structures.²⁸ Taneja in her book, *Aftermath*—which is a lament for a terrorist attack on a creative writing teacher colleague and students, an attack carried out by a student she also taught—argues that the 'dominant mythic' of the hero's journey that we crave in moments of loss cannot save us, that we need new forms to tell the truths of our modern world.²⁹ As such her work is aphoristic, repetitive and uses alternative layouts to hold 'things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us'. It is monstrous (portending and enacting a break from the hero's journey form) and mutative and without an easy resolution because it continues to be transformative; it is a work of 'continuing process' that holds things in powerful relation to one another and us.

This call to challenge the hero's journey model, questions the attempts of Bell and her family to construct her life in the shadow of the 'Person', and asks my creative practice to learn from research and attempt a structure that offers 'continuing process', inviting a reader's curiosity as it intends to hold things in powerful relation to one another and to us.

One of the things that my novel-in-progress needs to hold up in relation to others is my personal connection to Bell. In order to approach Bell 'ethnographically', as Antoinette Burton³⁰ describes it, my own interests and biases as a researcher need

²⁶ Le Guin, Pul, and Haraway, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, p. 34.

²⁷ Le Guin, Pul, and Haraway, *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, p. 35.

²⁸ This exploration of the imperial economy working in the hero's journey narrative structure, is a theme I hope to explore in future papers.

²⁹ Preti Taneja, *Aftermath* (Sheffield, London, New York: And Other Stories, 2022), p. 13.

³⁰ Antoinette Burton, 'Introduction: Archive Fever, Archive Stories', *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), p. 24.

to be taken into account. This has inspired a further strand of the novel-in-progress in which I directly address my personal approach to Bell allowing the reader to assess my biases: an autofictional strand in which a version of myself considers the whole novel as a museum exhibition, offering photographs of artefacts and images alongside my text. My autofictional self imagines what I might ideally want to include in an exhibition about Bell, inspired by a fictional Bell Exhibition that celebrates the centenary of her death. This interest in museum curation relates directly to Bell who, in her later years, was much engaged in the establishment of the Museum of Iraq in Baghdad and in drafting the Iraq Antiquities Law, both of which did much to establish a sense of Iraqi nationhood based on its ancient past, which has also been manipulated over the years.³¹

To quote from my work-in-progress, this strand, which I call Exhibit D: 'is my attempt to understand how my family have, through the focal lens of Gertrude Bell, taken an active and a passive part in Empire. Exhibit D puts my white, privileged position on trial. Exhibit D examines what Gertrude and her peers thought it meant to be English and whether it means any of those things for me. It asks whether a certain kind of Englishness can be decolonised and remain anything like the self it once was and whether any of what it was is worth retaining (listen carefully for the servile echo in the word 'retaining'—a linguistic heritage both burdening and beguiling). It asks what being white and English might look like washed back up on its own shores after submitting it to the ravages of an oceanic journey.' There may be some irony in introducing a further voice of privilege to the novel, given Bell's background as the daughter of industrialist Sir Isaac Lothian Bell whose personal contacts included many members of parliament, diplomats and journalists, but on the other hand the voice of privilege is the one that most needs to redress imperialism.

This autofictional strand of my novel-in-progress uses what Natasha Soobramanein and Luke Williams in their collaborative work, *Diego Garcia*, call 'fictive criticism'.³² *Diego Garcia* is a novel which exposes Britain's ongoing occupation of the Chagos Islands, as well as looking at different forms of grief and loss at individual and collective levels. Its main characters are searching for new ways to employ stories that address social and political inequalities in our modern world. The narrative interrogation of government documents, its use of interview and essay techniques

³¹ Ali A. Allawi, 'Faisal I, Gertrude Bell and Sat'i al-Husri: The Politics of Archaeology in Iraq', lecture given to the British Institute for the Study of Iraq on 22nd November 2012 <<https://www.bisi.ac.uk/event/faisal-i-gertrude-bell-and-sati-al-husri-the-politics-of-archaeology-in-iraq/>> [accessed 10 November 2021] and J.E.D. Meharry, 'The Making of Iraq's Antiquity Law and the National Museum' from *The Extraordinary Gertrude Bell* ed. by Mark Jackson and Andrew Parkin, (Tyne: Bridge Publishing, 2015), pp. 29–31.

³² Natasha Soobramanien, and Luke Williams, *Diego Garcia*, (London: Fitzcarraldo Editions, 2022), p. 238.

also has the characters, both of whom are writers, considering their uses of these modes of narrative. The female protagonist ‘thought about an idea for a story or maybe not maybe an essay but more fictional and why not a kind of fictive criticism?’ as a way of bringing the Chagos Islands and their occupation to a wider public.³³ This character writes about being inspired by the techniques that Svetlana Alexievich uses in her novels in voices where testimony combines with the force of narrative fiction to generate a powerful force for saying something different. So, while ‘fictive criticism’ informs my autofictional strand, *Diego Garcia* also informs a further narrative strand in my novel-in-progress through its use of multiple archival voices in combination with narrative fiction.

The final strand of my novel-in-progress offers multiple opposing archival quotations from various sources, including articles, history books, newspapers, letters and autobiographies, about and by Bell as part of this multiple voice effect and as a way of holding things in powerful relation to one another and to us. These quotations are intended to provoke thoughts, not only about Bell, but about the authority of citation (I pick up on this process of authentication in reference to Mediaeval Arabic prose literature below).

All four strands of the novel-in-progress—Gertrude Bell’s stream of consciousness; Marie Delaire’s imagined experience of dealing with the death of Gertrude Bell; my autofictional strand; the multiple archival quotations—create a hybrid novel of various narrative strands that actively avoids the hero’s journey structure of conflict and elision in seeking to hold ‘things in a particular, powerful relation to one another and to us’, privileging ‘continuing process’, by inviting reader engagement and curiosity that is written with what Saradha Soobrayen³⁴ describes as ‘a sense of failure’ because no one creative piece is capable of accurately expressing every opinion about Bell, her life and her legacies in Iraq and beyond. The novel-in-progress is my creative practice research intended to spark curiosity and engagement around Gertrude Bell’s life and legacies and to present a more deliberately multi-dimensional and fractured novelistic space that invites the reader to make or reject implied or inferred connections.

As my creative practice research continues, I am looking for further alternative narrative structures from the Middle East inspired by Bell’s knowledge of Arabic literature and the geographical setting of two of the strands of the novel-in-progress, Gertrude Bell’s and Marie Delaire’s, to further inform the developing creative work. So far I have

³³ Soobramanien and Williams, *Diego Garcia*, p. 238.

³⁴ Soobrayen Saradha, ‘Out of Place, out of Language, out of Home’, *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture* (Intellect, 2019), pp. 55–69.

identified three forms for further research: the loose-beaded structures of the *qasida*, the pre-Islamic ode in which Bell was well versed,³⁵ frequently quoted in her published works,³⁶ and which venerates the fighting prowess and history of a tribe and is usually focussed around the contemplation of an abandoned desert camp in which a loved one has been lost;³⁷ Mediaeval Arabic prose literature which is embroiled in a process of authenticating itself through a historical chain of transmission; and the frame narrative of *The Arabian Nights*, a work which Bell knew well³⁸ and which she used to inform her own fictional writing,³⁹ that allows for a group of variant stories to be held together in one collection, each story containing others as Scheherazade attempts to hold the attention of the Sultan by never quite reaching an end in order to save her life.

These forms currently influence my writing in the following ways. Bell's close third person looks back upon her life, contemplates the loves she has lost and the battles of her British tribe, channelling the structures, preoccupations and attention to the rhyme and rhythm of the language of the *qasida*. The archival quotations, as well as aspects of the first person autofictional account, pick up on the chain of transmission process of Mediaeval Arabic prose literature and set it in motion with the 'fictive criticism' approach. And all of the narrative strands interweave and interlink, with Marie Delaire's discovery of Bell as one frame, the last day of Bell's life as another, and the fictional exhibition as a third, each generating cross-narrative resonance in a multi-layered novel that holds one tale within another as does *The Arabian Nights*.

Though this continues to be a work-in-progress, written with 'a sense of failure' invoking curiosity that welcomes criticism of my ethnographic approach,⁴⁰ my research is generating a hybrid creative practice of biography, autobiography, essay, imagery, artefact and archival quotation in a reinterpretation of Bell that offers new perspectives on the British imperial legacy and new possibilities for the novel form.

³⁵ For example, she wrote to her stepmother, on February 7th 1905, about conversing with Sheikh Fellah: 'we had had a discussion as we rode as to the proper word for the traces of former encampments, and at dinner I produced the *Mu'allaqat* (pre-Muhammadam poems) and found three or four examples for the use of various words. This excited much interest, and we bent over the fire to read the text, which was passed from hand to hand, then came dinner'. <http://gertrudebell.ncl.ac.uk/letter_details.php?letter_id=1470>.

³⁶ For example, Bell quotes the pre-Islamic poet Taabata Sharran at the opening of *The Desert and the Sown* and quotes the pre-Islamic poet (who then adopted Islam) Labid Ibn Rabia at the opening of *Amurath to Amurath*.

³⁷ Robert Irwin, *The Penguin Anthology of Classical Arabic Literature*, (London: Penguin books, 2006).

³⁸ Her letters often reference *The Arabian Nights*. In a letter to Florence Bell written between the 13th and 16th March 1900, she writes: "I have to ride often for my horse eats his head off otherwise, and what is worse, he eats the groom's head off. The latter came in this morning very *penaud* with his fingers done up in rags because my horse had bitten him. He said he was an afreet, which my Arabian Nights memories enabled me to understand".

³⁹ Emma Short, "Those Eyes Kohl Blackened Enflame": Re-reading the Feminine in Gertrude Bell's Early Travel Writing', *Journeys: The International Journal of Travel and Travel Writing* 16 (1) (2015), pp. 17-18.

⁴⁰ I use 'ethnographic approach' here to indicate my attempt to express my research and personal bias in the autofictional strand of the novel.

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