Representing Truth Through Narrative:
The Use of Historiographical Techniques in Creative Non-Fiction

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Abstract
This essay is an attempt to show how certain elements, or techniques of history writing, can be used in creative non-fiction. It uses three major sources of theory. First, there is Charlotte Canning and Thomas Postlewait’s view on “the five themes of historiography,” which are indispensable for researching history: time, space, archive, identity, and narrative. The essay primarily focuses on narrative, because it is connected to representations of human lives, and as such contributes to meaning-creation. Second, the essay employs Hayden White’s concept of the historian’s working process and the notions of chronicle, story, mode of emplotment, mode of argument and ideological implications. Third is the method developed by Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke of the five C’s of historical thinking: change over time, causality, context, complexity and contingency. Although these are separate theories, the essay shows how they can be complementary and help in the development of memoir writing, which is here my creative work, *A Family Memoir in Essays*, in particular the essays entitled “Trimdiniekis,” “Brasiliana,” and “A Sertaneja”.

**Keywords:** Historiography, Narrative, Representation, Five C’s, Canning and Postlewait, White, Andrews and Burke.
Introduction

Historiography, as defined by the *Oxford English Dictionary*, is “the writing of history” which needs to be based on the analytical investigation of sources, a selection of original and credible materials, and the methodological construction of narratives that represent historical events. This is of course not simple and the writing of history has a history of its own. It can be dated back to Ancient Greece when Herodotus (484-413 BC) produced anecdotes by observing his travels in the Mediterranean Sea. Thucydides (460-400 BC), on the other hand, explored the registration of history by gathering and analyzing cause and effect of evidence in an attempt to provide an impartial record. Hayden White (1973) explains how historiography changed in the Enlightenment period. In the search for a common human basis, the idea of a unified world demanded an objective representation in which time and space are neutral and universal. He writes of the 19th century philosopher Leopold von Ranke, who brought up the idea of a scientific approach to historical writing, in a way that the historian should exclude his own personality while immersing in the individuality of a specific epoch, to have an empirical view of how things were in fact. Philosophers such as Hegel and Nietzsche contested Ranke’s idea of objective history. Hegel, for instance, saw historiography as literary art, which was not only based on evidence but was also part of a creative composition. Nietzsche stressed that the historian’s job was to think of history as drama, producing an entire setting out of isolated elements (141-143). They defended the idea of reconstructing history using creative imagination over the sources of evidence. White presents a detailed analysis of how these philosophers, and many others, thought about history, to define a method for historiography. I will return to White and his methods later. For now I wanted to show that historically there have always been connections between historiography and art, in my case creative non-fiction (CNF). In this project, I want to see if certain methods used in modern historiography could be used in the genre of CNF constructively, in particular in my own writing of my family memoir.

Besides looking at specific techniques I find in books on historiography, I also draw inspiration from creative non-fiction writers who have blended genres in their works and successfully given a new perspective on historical events through the narratives of individual characters: W.G. Sebald and Joe Sacco. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001) follows the story of a man who was a child refugee during World War II and
ended up adopted in Britain. While he searches for information on his biological parents, he goes through different archives, which is something I myself have done. Sebald explores the use of archive in the narrative of the character’s life. Sebald’s writing presents both historical facts and individual human experiences. Lynn Wolff writes about Sebald in *W.G. Sebald’s Hybrid Poetics: Literature as Historiography* (2014):

> His prose has been described as a ‘mosaic of several forms,’ and identifies as possessing a ‘generic hybridity.’ Furthermore, Sebald’s texts demonstrate a generic multiplicity in the way that they draw on elements of biography, autobiography, memoir, travelogue, and even mystery novel; thus, his fictional prose cannot be simply considered historical novels in a traditional sense but rather need to be seen as their own genre, perhaps most appropriately termed ‘faction,’ as Peter Craven has argued. (61)

Likewise, the work of journalist and graphic-novelist Joe Sacco explores different writing forms to bring real stories to life. *Footnotes on Gaza* (2010), is an extensive record of interviews that depict the conflict in the Gaza Strip. It contains an impartial summary of events, real individuals’ testimonies, the author’s personal thoughts, and detailed illustrations of the narrative. I too have conducted several interviews, trying to fill in the gaps in the archive, and like Sacco put myself more intimately into the process of telling the histories of my family. I will argue here, specifically, that the narratives of individual lives, such as memoirs, biographies, autobiographies, and other CNF genres, bring an even deeper meaning to the historical events they treat since they are not limited to collective truths. I will bring forward examples of authors such as Sebald and Sacco, and my own memoir, when I speak about the different methods of historical narrative, to analyze how the historical events were affected in the creative works I will mention. I will come back to these examples later, as I explore the theory of history writing.

There are many books on history writing, such as R.G. Collingwood’s *The Idea of History* (1946), Marc Bloch’s *The Historian’s Craft* (1953), or even a more recent input, Peter Burke’s *New Perspectives in Historical Writing* (1992). But what Thomas Postlewait started, first with *Interpreting the Theatrical Past* (1989), and later with *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance History* (2007), was to explore the
methods of historiography in performance studies, in the representation of events. Another contribution of his study was how it incorporated new social perspectives in the historical analysis, such as feminism, gender studies, postcolonialism, postmodernism, and so on. This is relevant because these were subjects that were not addressed in the previously mentioned works and have considerably changed the way society understands itself.

I will now go through more contemporary theories of historiography, explaining the methods used by historians today to create the narratives that shape the way we understand history. I will mainly deal with the notion of narrative and what Andrews and Burke call the five C’s of history writing. Then I will show how the various techniques and general knowledge I acquired from these theories were used in my own CNF.

Themes of Historiography: Focus on Narrative

My investigation on the methods started with Charlotte Canning and Thomas Postlewait’s *Representing the Past: Essays in Performance History* (2010), which collects fifteen essays from theorists in theater, culture, dance, performance, and critical studies. I am particularly interested in this approach because it speaks of historiography in the performance arts, and that brings forward much more than just history writing (the reenactment of events). This collection of essays discusses the main questions and challenges faced by historians to represent individual lives. It offers an insight into the categories of historical thought that provide researchers with the means to investigate the facts, organize the evidence, select and analyze the archives, and present an explanatory record. This theory started to be reshaped from 1989, in an effort to critically construct a new methodology for understanding history. The new way of looking into these,

could commission new essays that would feature topics, issues and problems in historical methodology (such as kinds of evidence, primary and secondary sources, testimony or eyewitness reports, matters of objectivity and subjectivity, methods for cross-examining the evidence, issues of the credibility and reliability of documents, the problems of forgery and
plagiarism, anecdotes as evidence, oral history, period concepts, and distinctions between possible and probable evidence) (5).

In summary, the conceptual framework that was agreed by Canning and Postlewait introduced something they call the five themes of historiography: time, space, archive, identity, and narrative. I will briefly say something about the first four and then focus on the one I find most important for my thesis: narrative.

The concept of time, as a progressive movement, is explained in the essay “Cyclic Perseverance and Linear Mobility of Theatrical Events” (2010), by the theater theorist, Willmar Sauter. Sauter asks, “Is it possible to create an adequate picture of a historical event by mentally eliminating the events that followed it? Is it appropriate? Do events lose their meaning if they are dealt with separately, apart from what came after?” (117). The idea of a sequence of events makes historians think about developmental progress (117-141). In my memoir, besides developing a chronological timeline, I thought of how I could show how the characters’ actions helped shape ideas that are in focus in today’s society. For example, “A Sertaneja” and “Brasiliana” bring through their characters issues related to feminism, such as women’s rights to have an ID or to perform induced miscarriages.

Marvin Carlson, in “Space and Theater History” (2010), analyzes the concept of space within the theater. His approach, however, brings an interesting point of view that applies to other performance or creative studies, since it sees space as a three-dimensional stage. In other words, the reproduction of space, and thus its examination, is not the mere painting of a picture; it incorporates visual perspective and other sensorial elements such as climate, sound, and scent (195-214). I tried to incorporate this concept in my creative work by defining the physical conditions of the cities in which the events took place. In “A Sertaneja”, the city of Garanhuns is revealed through its weather and vegetation, while in “Trimdiniekis” the sounds of war complement the coldness of Northern Europe.

Christopher Balme, in “Playbills and the Theatrical Public Sphere” (2010), explores the theme of the archive by questioning how a “particular type of material can be read in critical and resonant way” (38). Balme observes, by giving the example of a playbill for an act, that an archive is a reproduction, but not the fact itself. So, the act can achieve different results depending on how the playbill is interpreted. The theater director has a vital role in reading and representing that playbill (37-62). The
data collection for my memoir involved both private and public source material. For “Brasiliana,” I gathered a pile of notes—a sort of diary—from my grandmother, Juraci. It contained details of her life, her family background, stories she heard, places she lived in, and so on, all in a very disorganized manner. For “A Sertaneja,” I used a one-hour interview with my grandmother, Carmen, also bringing events in a non-chronological manner. Another source I had for that story was her book of poetry and prose. “Trimdiniekis,” the story of my grandfather, Nikolajs, required a lot more archival work. I had to interview Juraci and gather a huge amount of letters, which I had to translate from Latvian. I also went through an extensive research of historical background through documentaries on the Latvian participation on the war, German and English official war records, archives from the Brazilian immigration museum, and so on. Therefore, the private sources told me who my grandparents were, while the public sources filled the historical background. And I had to interpret how they worked together to set them in my narratives.

On identity, Catherine Cole analyses in “History’s Thresholds: Stories from Africa” (2010) how the term’s very definition is ambiguous, as it can either be related to cultural and collective property or an individual characteristic (263-281). Identity can demonstrate how a particular people speak or dress, and therefore can give the image of a country or nation. In the same way, it can show an individual’s personal preferences, which makes us understand his or her uniqueness. I dealt with this ambiguity as well, and it was interesting to see the effect of how real the characters turned out. But in the end, it all comes down to narrative.

Narrative as such will be the theme that I will give the most emphasis as it shows how the individual point of view influences the result of the historical inquiry. By dissecting the narrative into subcategories, it is possible to see how history can be deconstructed, that is, how new meaning can be given to facts according to a different reading of the elements that compose it. Hayden White will be one of the primary references used in this thesis. He writes that

Most of those who would defend narrative as a legitimate mode of historical representation and even as a valid mode of explanation (at least for history) stress the communicative function. According to this view of history as communication, a history is conceived to be a ‘message’ about a ‘referent’
I decided to emphasize narrative because it seems to me that it is the theme where all the other four are combined. All the themes connect within the narrative, for example, an archive codifies identities within a certain time and space, but even the archive is a secondary source of documentation, it is not the event itself. There will always be relativism in the facts according to the origin of the narrator, how the narrator exposes the sequence of time, the three-dimensionality of space, how he reads the archives and how he portrays the identities. It is through the interpretation and narration of an event that meaning is given to all other themes. And not only does it give meaning to what is not yet defined, but the narrative also empowers the writer to provide new viewpoints and generate debate. Alun Munslow, in *Deconstructing History* (1997), explains that “deconstructionist history argues that there is always more than a single truth” (102). Therefore, new perspectives can either confirm or oppose a previously stated “objective” truth. An excellent example of history deconstructed is a book by a Brazilian journalist, Leandro Narloch, *Guia Politicamente Incorreto da História do Brasil* (2009). This book takes several events of Brazilian history and analyzes how they are taught in schools, until this day, in contrast with archives that tell a different story. In many of the cases displayed in this book, the truth portrayed through documents and evidence becomes an entirely different one, and it is clear that the truth is shaped by political connotation. Narloch does a great job deconstructing history and analyzing the individual sources of archive, making us question the credibility of what we have learned throughout our entire lives. Of course, he also faced questions with regards to how he used the archives he mentions in his work. However, his narrative gives room to new interpretations. Munslow questions:

Do we really expect historians to reconstruct the past as it actually was? Perhaps it is better to view history as a kind of literature written in the name of seeking truth? Can we, ultimately, believe in the past only because of the substantial amount of agreement among historians about what happened through the creation of historical facts? How do deconstructionist historians
derive so-called historical facts, and what degree of reliability can we place on them? Can history ever be objective? (104)

These questions help us clarify ideological “truths” within narratives. They function as a guide to research about the past and to find a specific interpretation of how it represents identities. As Canning and Postlewait write:

This idea of representation carries two basic yet contradictory meanings: Mimesis I: to mirror accurately, to present a truthful, faithful copy; and Mimesis II: to substitute, to offer an alternative version. When historians discuss the idea of representation they often take sides. The aim of telling the truth about past events is a necessary first principle of historical inquiry, but whose truth, what truth, which truth? (10-11)

So, even an objective truth is influenced by the narrator. Susan Leigh Foster, in “Textual Evidences” (2010), analyses narrative by observing the definitions of two theorists about the history of dance (333-349). First, we have Claude François Menestrier, a heraldist, intellectual, who studied performance and ceremonies among the nobility. His approach in the origins of dance was influenced by the monarchist/absolutist regime in France, and thus rendered a relation to the social sciences. Menestrier viewed dance as a ritual, a ceremony for the Gods, with symbolic significance. Second, we have Louis de Cahusac, a dramatist and critic of dance. Cahusac was influenced by the late Enlightenment, which gave privilege to the individual human being over political and social systems. Therefore, his approach to the origins of dance is one that emphasizes the psychological and universal nature of the human being, exploring the physical expressions of sensations. To him, the gestures are a mode of expression of a universal language of the human being. This is an example of how personal views on a particular subject can be read and narrated differently. Due to the narratives presented by both theorists, that differ entirely, all the other themes (time, space, archive, and identity) gain different meanings.

In the same way that historians can show different truths in their narratives, individual characters in biographies and memoirs, for instance, can and necessarily will represent history through new perspectives. The narrative brings in the voice, the point of view of the writer or character. Thus, it is vital to transform pre-established
truths or to confirm them. Around the turn of the 19th century, there happened a significant epistemological change in the way the historical narrative was seen. It was a shift that took into consideration individual lives in past events. This became known as the “linguistic turn,” a term first used by an American philosopher called Richard Rorty, which was thoroughly developed by the American historian Hayden White.

So, to have a more profound understanding on the theme of narrative, I will first follow White’s concept of the historian’s working process shown in *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (1973), and then complement it with Thomas Andrews and Flannery Burke’s method of the “five C’s of historical thinking.”

As a historian, White has been criticized for dealing with historical writing as a form of literature. George Iggers, discourses about the controversies of White’s view of historiography as an art form in his essay “Historiography between Scholarship and Poetry: Reflections on Hayden White’s Approach to Historiography” (2000). Iggers compares White’s works with that of other historians that defend the writing of history as objective science. However, I will not focus on the reliability of this comparison. Instead, I will follow the method suggested by White, as it is interesting for creative writers and it gives room to the individual interpretations of events. In White’s words, this method shows “appropriate ways of endowing human processes with meaning” (60-61). The historian’s working process developed by White divides the narration into chronicle, story, mode of emplotment (a plot-related term), mode of argument and mode of ideological implications. In this model, White discourses about the value of narrativity in the representation of reality. He makes a careful study about how the historical narrative changed and gained new form in the eyes of philosophers and historians according to shifts in the social order. I will now take a look into each of the concepts within this method.

Chronicle is where the writer selects and orders the facts according to when they occurred. It is merely a list of data that organizes a timeline, but with which one cannot go without when going through historical events. Chronicles, according to White, are “open-ended” and “they have no culminations or resolutions” (6). So, I had to think for my stories what would be their timelines. A simple look into the chronicles of each story already helped to build the world around the characters. In “Trimdiniekis,” I had to go through a lot of research to draw its timeline, but it showed me that I would start by seeing the occupation of Latvia by Soviets, then the
Nazi summon of Latvian boys to their army, going through the years of war, displaced persons camp and mass immigration to the Americas. For “Brasiliana,” I would have the mass immigration of Italians to Brazil, the birth of a social and economic forces in São Paulo, and the industrial development of the region. As for “A Sertaneja,” I would see the construction of the Brazilian capital in the 50s, the historical ruling of Colonels in the Northeast, the mass migrations from people of the Northeast to the Southeast and Central Brazil. And then, once the chronicle is set, the writer/historian sets it into a particular kind of story. These were the chronicles of my stories.

The story sets the spectacle within the chronicle, with a beginning, middle and an ending. By turning chronicle into a story, the events that are arranged in a temporal order gain new characteristics. Events can be seen as inaugural, transitional or terminating. As such, “Trimdiniekis,” which is a story about a Latvian boy becoming a soldier of the SS and then a refugee in Brazil, has as an inaugural event the Latvian occupation, World War II as a transitional event, and the start of a new life by immigrating to Brazil as a terminating event.

“Brasiliana,” which is a story about a young woman with an Italian background going through her romantic adventures to find her true love and raise a family, has the immigration of Italians to Brazil as the inaugural event. Meeting her Latvian husband, who arrived at her city to work in the industry, is the transitional event. And his death, for having worked in the industry, is a terminating event.

“A Sertaneja” is the story of a woman’s struggles to raise her children on her own while fulfilling her dream of becoming a writer. Her inaugural event is when she meets her husband and starts having children in the Northeast. As a transitional event, we can see how her husband begins not to be present, going through long travels to work in other regions, and eventually abandons her. The terminating event of her story would be her migration to the Southeast, where she managed to finish raising her children and invested on her writing career.

Therefore, organizing the chronicle into stories, and categorizing the events into beginning, middle and ending, provides the writer with a synchronic structure in which his characters will change. This is the structure that will explain the “what,” “how” and “why” things happened. Chronicle and story are simple concepts, but without them, the timeline of any narrative is incomplete, and so it loses historical value.
Coming to this point, once the writer shows what happened in a chronicle, how the characters made it happen and for what reason did they do what they did, he has to present a meaning that explains his story. White writes that there are several ways of showing the meaning of a story. He divides these ways into an explanation by mode of emplotment, explanation by mode of argument, and explanation by mode of ideological implication. I will go through each of the modes of explanation below.

Since the historian confronts a vast number of events that have already occurred, he needs to choose the ingredients that he wants to use to tell his story. Thus, he focuses on some elements while excluding others. It is a process that will establish a certain type of story, a plot. The mode of emplotment can be

1) Romance—a story in which good wins over evil and the world becomes a better place. In a romance, a character will overcome the struggles of the real world and come out a better person. It is a story of redemption. This is a typical mode of emplotment present in the history of religion. White gives the example of Christ in Christianity, but it can also be seen in the construction of public heroes such as Ernesto Che Guevara, often portrayed as a gallant man who changed his path becoming a savior of the people.

2) Tragedy—a story about the clash of human difficulties versus universal laws. In a tragedy, there are no celebrations, except minor ones that are not at the center of the story. It is a type of story in which the protagonist may suffer a bitter ending, but one that will render the audience with an epiphany, a sense of learning and growth.

3) Comedy—stories focusing on scenes of everyday life representing facts on a larger scale. In a comedy, the historian does not focus on the change or transformation of the character. Instead, he is interested in finding the momentary success of the character against the world.

4) Satire is the opposite of a romance. In this type of plot, the character is a prisoner of the world’s ways. He does not win or lose; instead, his efforts are never enough to overcome his enemies, may they be physical (a person, or death, for example) or emotional/intellectual (anxiety, or depression, and so on). It is a story where different interpretations argue against a pre-constituted truth.
Each of these plot structures gives the historian the means to explain the event. It offers the reader an original image of that event. I will now go through the mode of argument, in which nominal elements reach the explanation. In this concept, the argument can be

1) Formist—the explanation of the story is described by every experience, every object or element that composes the story. It is an ideographic way of looking into and explaining the events. It focuses on the particularity of the story, what makes it unique. When the historian shows how the uniqueness of the objects works in a particular field, he establishes a formist explanation to the story.

2) Mechanistic—the story is explained by cause and effect, and it tends to look into the acts of the agents. The laws of causality determine the outcome or the meaning of the story. History is explained by the analysis of actions of the characters inserted in it.

3) Organicist—the story is illustrated by one common context. This concept envisions the micro-macro relation of the elements that compose the story. Therefore, it explains the meaning of what happened (how and why) by exploring a single subject (a story about migrations, for example) and making the individual have the same level of importance in the macrocosmic reality.

4) Contextualist—the story works on a specific part of history and connects to the contexts around it. This means that an event is explained through an analysis of the context in which it was inserted in, that is, why it happened is explained by the relation it had with other events. What happened in history can be explained by the functional interrelationship between the agents that compose the event.

As for the explanation through the mode of ideological implications, White observes how we perceive the studying of the past and how that affects our own time. By ideology, White means the social praxis that acts upon the world, and he also divides this line of thought into four categories, which are anarchism, conservatism, radicalism, and liberalism (although he states that these are names for general ideas and not symbols of specific political flags). I will not analyze these four as they demand a much more sophisticated study of the social-political ideas they represent,
and because they speak of collective thoughts. I am interested here in the individual narratives.

Concluding the analysis of this concept of historical thinking, White observes that he has no particular preference over the working process of a narrative, only that it is the historian’s role to examine the narratives of the past, inspect the emplotments, create the structure according to topics, and explore the strategies of critique.

I present in this thesis a memoir divided into three essays based on the lives of my grandparents. I used White’s method to organize the narratives and to see how the historiography techniques proposed by him would work on a CNF piece. I have already stated how this has worked within the chronicle and the story concepts, but I also tried to find the explanations in the modes described by White. Therefore, I took a look into what composed these stories. My grandparents’ backgrounds have as a common ground the fact that they have traveled long distances to establish their lives and raise their families. So, the multiculturalism in their migration stories, containing aspects of local and external laws, provided a perfect canvas for a tragedy. The tragedy can be seen in all three stories, as the characters do not necessarily win against the world. In fact, they all lose important things in their lives. However, in the end, they leave a message that explains to the reader the events that happened in that bit of history. As for the mode of argument, the one that better fit the project was the organicist, and the element that drove all of the stories was the idea of migration movements. When writing the stories, I focused on the effect of these travels in the narratives, and they gained deeper meanings–from being the lives of characters, they became stories of overcoming borders and cultures. Therefore, the mode of emplotment and mode of argument helped shape the meaning of each piece.

“Trimdiniekis” is a piece about a Latvian war refugee, and the central meaning achieved with the emplotment and argument was that it is a story about “learning to forgive.” “Brasiliana,” the story of a descendant of Italian immigrants, gained the meaning of “the acceptance of goodbye.” And “A Sertaneja,” the story of an independent mother and writer, reached the meaning of “overcoming with joy.” Also, the narratives of the different migrations that take place in each of the essays of my memoir explain the formation of the character’s multicultural backgrounds. The essays seek to show a piece of history to understand how the past has shaped itself into the present and how we, as a global community, have become identities that are no longer stuck to our nationalities, which would also speak to White’s ideological
implications if I were to develop this concept. Just as an example, in “Trimdiniekis,” the character is faced with two important political ideologies, Nazism and Communism, and his nationalism is then affected by these implications. Therefore, with White’s method of historical thinking, the story becomes a medium in which the past can tell us something about our present. In other words, it is a way of seeing and understanding ourselves in history.

**Thomas Andrews & Flannery Burke: The Five C’s of Historical Thinking**

As a tool to help answer the questions faced by historiographers in their investigation of a particular event, Andrews and Burke have developed a method called “the five C’s of historical thinking,” explained in “What Does it Mean to Think Historically?” (2007). They are:

1. Change over time
2. Context
3. Causality
4. Contingency
5. Complexity.

By using the “C’s” in the construction or analysis of a historical narrative, writers and readers gain not only empathy with history, but they learn how to investigate and make meaning out of it. Similarly, in my CNF, I seek to build scenes for my stories that contain meaning on a larger scale. I will argue here how this method of history writing was complementary to my memoir.

**1. Change over time**

Andrews and Burke point out the obviousness of this concept, but they emphasize its importance. The inspection on the continuity of culture and the shape-shifting of a place within a timeline helps people to see the changes in the story. However, the wrongful use of it may highlight some events while neglecting others. Therefore, Andrews and Burke explain their strategy to make their students understand the importance of a well-made analysis of change over time,

In our U.S. survey class, we often ask students to interview family and friends and write a paper explaining how their family's history has intersected with
I contemplated this exercise in the creative segment of my thesis. I went through interviews with my relatives while researching the timeline in which the events happened. One of the examples used by Andrews and Burke to demonstrate the changes over time is how photographers try to reproduce old pictures of landscapes to show how time affected those places. Sometimes they change completely, and sometimes they stay the same. I tried to use this concept in my memoir by analyzing the change over time not only in the space but also in the characters. The three stories follow the lives of the narrators from childhood to old age. Through their eyes, the world around them changes due to global events, and their cultures are affected by some of these events, although, at the same time, some cultural aspects of their background remain intact. The effect of change over time in my memoir can be seen in the hybridization of cultures of the characters. For instance, in the timeline of “Trimdinieks,” two major global events take place–World War II and the Cold War with the rise of the Soviet Union. We see how these changes affect the character’s life, space-wise and culturally. This story is categorized by the exile of the war refugee, coming from Latvia to Brazil after the war. It features the reshaping of Europe before and after the rise of the Iron Curtain and, in parallel, the shaping of Brazil as a new society. Therefore, its timeline includes the Latvian Independence, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact, World War II, Nazis and the Red Army and the story of Displaced Persons being moved abroad to start a new life. While going through these political and geographical changes, the character also changes his social-political view.

After that battle, I ripped off all the emblems from my uniform. They did not represent me. That was all nonsense. They were just more symbols of hate, and I was done with hatred. In haste, I took a knife and cut off my tattoo. I took some ice and tied my arm with rags. That would be the only scar I would carry in my life, the only thing that truly hurt me in that war. My mission was now with God, I owed him, I owed him to find myself a new way. (7)
His view on nationalism changes as he is no longer accepted in his homeland and is given a second chance in a multicultural country. Thus, the ideology behind his war struggles become pointless to him.

The timeline of “Brasiliana” also shows significant changes in Brazilian society by demonstrating how the integration of foreign citizens, and individuals from other regions of the country, have shaped the local culture, whose influences are seen to this day. These stories, as well as “A Sertaneja,” were made through the use of personal archive and interviews, along with historical research. The survey on individual lives has proved to be a useful tool to show changes over time not only in the space but also, in the case of the stories presented in the creative piece, the changes that built the multicultural identities of the migrant populations.

Another good example of the successful use of individual stories to show change is seen in the works of Joe Sacco. As previously mentioned, in Footnotes on Gaza (2010), Sacco performs a series of interviews with local individuals. The reports of the marginalized people sometimes differ from the “official” broadcasted version, and they usually bring more information about the changes felt by humans, both in their emotions and their spaces. His narrative shows facts that cannot be compacted into a strip in the newspaper or a one-minute report on the television news. His coverage of war zones employing interviews with local population gives new meaning to what the mainstream media broadcasts and it shows readers a point of view of what that experience really felt like and how it has changed a particular place or person.

2. Context
Writing a complex scenario with detailed information on the environment helps create the world in which the storytelling is set. Good history writing is indeed good storytelling. To understand the behavior of the people inserted in the story, it is essential to know how they dress, what they eat, how they speak, what language they use, what are their politics, what is their technology, architecture, customs and so on. Andrews and Burke always point out how the C’s work and also how the wrongful use of them might result in a not so good representation of history. In this case, the inadequate representation of the context can sometimes exaggerate particular details and display an inaccurate reality. Hence, the writer must always search for as many possible sources and pay close attention to the reliability of each of them before
connecting them into a bigger picture. But once the stage is well set and the evidence is interpreted within this complex universe, the individual stories and the collective history unfold into a firmly connected and elaborate jigsaw puzzle.

In my memoir, the investigation of context, within the historical timeline traced in the “change over time” section, drew the environment with such rich details that gave to the reader a lot more than just the inner world of the characters. Memoirs are mainly concerned with that inner vision. Sue William Silverman, in “The Meandering River: An Overview of the Subgenres of Creative Nonfiction” (2009), describes memoir writing as “the examination of self”, which is “about exploring the subject’s psyche.” She also mentions the “innocent” and “experienced” voice, and how the first relates to the actions and facts, while the second employs metaphor, irony, and reflection to reveal what the facts mean intellectually and emotionally (189-191). But thinking of the stories as historical pieces and analyzing the context around them, showed more than the characters’ psyche, it showed how the world around them shaped their personalities. In “A Sertaneja,” there is detailed information about the farm in which the character lives, her relationship with her husband and in-laws, the long travels she has to endure, the loss of her possessions (thoroughly described), and so on. This builds the environment that makes the reader understand the role of the woman in the patriarchal society in which she lives, and empathize with her struggle to raise her children while achieving small victories and realizing her dreams.

There was a meadow in front of the house with a small weir, which my father-in-law filled with Tilápias and Tucunarés. Beyond the weir was a water tank. So we planted sugarcane and tomatoes. One day, my husband had gone to Recife, and there was a waterspout that brought down the wall of the weir and washed everything away, taking turkeys, pigs, chickens, steers, the whole plantation. There were 2500 tomato roots planted, all washed away. It looked like a sea. *O Sertão virou mar.* And I prayed to God not to take any people with it. It was horrible (37-38).

“Brasiliana” also brings detailed information about the houses that the character lived in throughout her story. The setting is composed of objects that portray the time as well as the social status of the family, which is complemented by
the economic situation of a city in the burst of an industrial moment. “Trimdiniekis” shows the decay of a country, where the character’s childhood and youth are demonstrated by the social relations he has with his family and employers. All these elements are put together to draw the universe of the story. The historian’s job, as is of the creative non-fiction writer, is to represent this universe accurately not only to be true to history but also to engage the reader with history just as much as he would if reading a fictional epic piece composed by a complex universe of characters, setting, language, and inventory.

3. Causality

By building upon the context, change over time and causality, the historian designs the justification of his story. The interpretation of the archives and sources are the basis of the historian’s arguments for the explanation of an event that in itself may contain multiple explanations. The purpose of a good argument, according to Andrews and Burke, is to “develop persuasive explanations of historical events and processes based on logical interpretations of evidence.” By displaying the causes that led an individual to perform a certain action, migrate from one place to another, for example, the reader is confronted with an argument that does not alter the past, but may very well give him new information and provide him with a new opinion. Causality will always generate debate, and that is a good thing because reaching a public consensus in history is never guaranteed. History has the need to be continuously reviewed. Even if the public opinion on a particular event is firm, a subjective perspective on the causes of that event may show things differently.

The causality in “Trimdiniekis” put the character of Koļa in conflict with Communism and Nazism, which forced him to leave his country and denied him the opportunity to return.

One day I saw a truck on the road filled with young men and workers of the field. I heard they were going to Germany to sign up for the army. The word was that they offered accommodation, food and a salary. It was too good to be true. It was my ticket out of there, a job in Germany, away from the Russians and all the bullshit. I told my mother I would go. She was very distressed and repeatedly asked me not to, “Germans are just as bad as Russians. Don’t be fooled by them, mans dėls. Your home is here, with us.” But nothing would change my mind. I was going to work abroad, wear a fancy uniform, and not
worry about food and accommodation. And I liked the uniform, it was very appealing, elegant, it carried Perkonkrusts (3-4).

Koļa’s former identification with his culture dissipates when he is given a second chance in a faraway foreign land. The causes that made him leave are the causes that made him reshape his own culture. The reader is given a sense of how Nazism and Communism affected the character. The causes explain how the ideologies shaped him. At the same time, the story serves to deconstruct the generalized image of the German soldier as a villain. Had I simply started telling the story of my grandfather using the mere fact that he was a soldier of the SS, the reader would immediately assume that he was not a good person, since that is the main historical connotation, while my intent was to show a more complex character and a simple trope. Connotations of famous tropes are also due to the representation of particular groups in literature and movies. For example, Carl Boggs and Tom Pollard discussed in Hollywood and the Spectacle of Terrorism (2006) how narratives use the exoticized image of subalterns as a menace to society. Their essay analyzes how films have used Middle Eastern characters as historical villains ever since the outbreak of modern terrorism. However, this is also the fact for African-Americans, Native-Americans, Germans/Nazis, Russians/Communists, Eastern Europeans, Japanese, and so on (335-351). Causality forms arguments that help break these stereotypes and give the reader a more in-depth insight on the individuals that experienced a historical event. In my grandfather’s story, the causes that led him to enlist in the German army explain that it had nothing to do with the Nazi ideology, but instead, it was a consequence of having a miserable childhood, of being abandoned in an occupied country, and so on. The idea of cause and effect, here used in creative non-fiction, gives answers to why things happened the way they did. Applied in a memoir, such as mine, it made a complete difference as to how the reader may see the character and also through his individuality, hopefully, a more nuanced sense of history as well.

4. Contingency
This notion sees history as the result of a variety of conditions that happen in a chain sequence, like a butterfly effect. This line of thought supports the idea of an individual character having a crucial role in the making of history, i.e., the person’s actions having a strong influence in the bigger picture. This concept implies that the world is widely interconnected and that if a single piece of its puzzle had been
changed at some point, the outcome would have been drastically different. For instance, if Napoleon had not been born, Europe today would undoubtedly have a very contrastive reality than the one we know. Since stories about migration, such as mine, tell about the lives of families, entire populations, and their struggles moving from one place to the other, and adapting their cultures, they imply that each individual plays a fundamental part in the making of the collective history. Stories of whole cities and regions are built by the contingency of sole adventurers. Such is the case of my memoir, in which contingencies in the region of São Paulo—a city that contains the larger Italian community outside of Italy, the larger Japanese community outside of Japan, the larger Lebanese community outside of Lebanon—have made it possible for the three stories to be connected even though they narrate isolated events. It is a place where the struggles of expats and outsiders have met and reshaped the reality of an entire country, for the hosting of foreign cultures have not only increased the economy but also encouraged internal migration movements from Brazilians from the North East to the South East, for example.

In “Brasiliana,” we have a case of such contingency. Although the main character is not a part of any migration, her whole reality was shaped by people that came from different places and met at a common ground. Her ancestors were Italian immigrants, her boyfriends were American engineers and students from other Brazilian regions, and her husband was a Latvian war refugee. If any of these people had taken another path, the character simply might not have existed:

I met my husband in a Festa Junina, that happens every year in the Santo Antônio Asylum. He arrived in São José at the age of twenty-two, coming from São Paulo, the capital. He was from Eastern Europe and was accompanied by his Austrian friend, Johan. They were working in a new car shop in the city and lived downtown in a boarding house. I went to the party to work at the Quermesse as “Correio Elegante” – that was an old system of anonymous letter delivery, which young people used to send to their flirts. My friend, Raquel (Quelita), worked with me. Our uniform was a navy blue skirt, with a white shirt and a little bow tie. So off we went in search of young people who wanted to send a note or a letter to their crushes or partners. This night I decided I would also ‘play,’ sending someone a note. (16)
If the character Koļa in “Trimdiniekis” had died, Juraci, in “Brasiliana,” would probably have married a different guy. If Juraci had not worked at the party that day, she would not have met her husband at all. In the same way, if the husband of Carmen, in “A Sertaneja”, had not abandoned her, she might not have ended up in São Paulo. Put all this together, and this dissertation would not have been written, for the daughter of Juraci and the son of Carmen got married, and became my parents! The contingency in the narratives of the transnational cultures of my memoir explains how the identities of my characters were built, however improbable its mixture of elements was. Consequently, the contingency also shows how drastically a chain of events can affect a place, by creating a collective culture. Furthermore, for historians and readers, the contingency is an affirmation that the future is not yet written and that every action may change the world, however subjective or small it may seem. The very idea of Futurology, that is, the assumption of future events, is based on contingency.

5. Complexity

The analytical view of history is what separates it from subjective opinion. By studying the moral values implied to a particular culture at a given period, and by understanding how this culture gained the knowledge that they had at that time, the past is then explained in a non-nostalgic way. Although this method may not be interesting for causing empathy, it renders a more accurate and objective reading of the past. It may annul the notions of good or bad by merely demonstrating what the common sense of a culture was. For example, it is a consensus that smoking during pregnancy is harmful to the baby. However, not many decades ago it was a common practice and sometimes even encouraged by doctors. So, were these mothers bad mothers? The complexity of history will say no. Accordingly, for the creative non-fiction narratives that intend to show a piece of a historical event through the eyes of its characters, this complexity must be evident in between the lines of the narration. The reader must understand the circumstances in which the character’s decisions and acts were taken to judge the morality of the story. By applying this concept in my memoir, history makes the reader understand that a character’s behavior is not always linked to personality. The character’s inner world, as is developed in memoir writing, gains a partner in the explanation of his thoughts and actions. Complexity gives support to the character’s voice.
In “A Sertaneja,” we have some examples of how complexity plays a role of showing the world to the reader, despite the actions of the characters. In the occasion that the risk of having a miscarriage takes the protagonist, two things happen. First, the doctor immediately suggests an induced miscarriage. This is something that still today is ethically discussed and that a doctor would only make that decision if certain of its necessity. However, since at that time there were no ultrasounds, his best assumption was that the fetus was dead. Second, although a very modern woman for her time, the protagonist decides to keep the fetus, holding onto a religious belief and later stating that she was entirely against induced miscarriages. It can be argued that a woman who was much ahead of her time would not have that kind of opinion. However, the complexity of the historical facts of that time and the region in which the character lived, show that the general education people had was indeed a very religious one. Such is the fact that all of the character’s daughters have composed given names that start with Maria. An interesting fact is that in the true story of “Brasiliana,” Juraci’s three daughters are also Marias, and for the same reason. However, since she lived in a multicultural environment, a cosmopolitan city, where the rigidness of religion was not the same as the one found in regions such as the Brazilian North East, her approach towards forced miscarriage was precisely the opposite.

I quickly looked for a girl that lived on my street, who was a lot more adventurous than me. I knew that she went to the dances by herself in other cities, had many boyfriends and all. So I talked to her, and she said she would take me to a lady that performed clandestine induced miscarriages if I wanted to. I took some money from my father without his knowledge—I would take little by little from the register at the bar—and saved the necessary amount. And there I went with her. (23)

The complexity described in the narratives explain the characters’ customs and reveal how their cultures may be affected by the circumstances that surround them. It explains how common knowledge plays a role in the actions that the character or the society represented in the story may take. In addition, the reader gets a sense of the morality of the characters and the stories.
Conclusion

In this project I have used the theories of the “five themes of historiography,” in particular that of narrative, the “historians working process,” and the “five C’s of historical thinking.” My goal was to see how these theories could be applied in the process of writing creative non-fiction, in this case in my memoir. What I found most useful in my work were White’s modes of emplotment and argument, and the causality, contingency, and complexity from the theory of the C’s of historical thinking. They helped me achieve a better structure within which to narrate the voices of those family members that I interviewed and whose personal written archives I used. This way, the stories did not become mere memoir-essays of the character’s personal statements about their lives. The investigation I had to go through, using the theories, made these stories gain historical value. They helped me present, and shape, characters that avoided stereotypes, and as such these characters helped me give meaning to historical events they were part of.

Historiography is indeed constantly changing. But the way historians have applied different methods and how writers have made use of multiple genres to bring forward their narratives of real events has a lot to do with the audience. The continuous change in history writing is a consequence of our ever-changing society that unceasingly demands new products. As human beings, we are consumers of knowledge, and we are not satisfied with a single source. Family history has become a subject of interest in recent times since researching about their family history reconnects individuals to the broader notion of history. This was indeed the case of my memoir. Reading a story of an individual character that has gone through or whose life has been affected by a major historical event, such as Sebald’s Austerlitz, can help a reader to understand the emotional load that event carried with it. What I have learned from this is that, although genres in literature have the purpose of categorizing and helping to understand the message transmitted in whatever story, no actual rule forbids a writer to mix them. In fact, a good writer knows how to make use of this mixture of techniques. Sebald has proven to be successful at this. He shows that it is possible to achieve excellent results in storytelling by knowing how to find the balance within the genres, find the best use of techniques and knowledge from different disciplines and genres of writing.
I was particularly interested in seeing how I could use the techniques of historical writing in my memoir, and I found that they functioned many times as guidelines to portray the time, space, and social backgrounds behind the individual stories I was telling, especially when I needed to fill in the gaps left in archives and interviews. Since I had much fragmented information, divided into letters, interviews, and notes, I had to build the world around that to provide a space where the story could continue. This process was a lot more evident in “Trimdiniekis,” which demanded thorough historical research on Latvia, and the war, but was also used in “Brasiliana” to explain the character’s family background and consequently her personality. In “A Sertaneja,” on the other hand, I have made use of poetry to illustrate some of the passages of the story. The effect of using this mixture of genres, such as historiography and poetry, for example, rendered a much more impactful effect in the scenes of my memoir.

I found that the methods of historical thinking are complementary to memoir writing and in turn that the narrative based on individual characters renders a unique point of view on historical events. By making use of some of the techniques described in this thesis, I was able to improve the readability of my memoir. This way, they went from merely being my grandparents’ stories to being part of the history of places where the events occurred. For instance, the story of my grandfather moving to São Paulo is backed on the one hand by a social-political situation that put Europe in war, and on the other, by the economic circumstances of the industrial development of a specific region of South America. This is information that can be tracked, and thus make the memoir speak through the archives.

In the process of writing the memoir, the methods of historical thinking have put me in the historian’s territory. I have found that the detailed study of time, space, archive, identity and narrative, together with the specification of chronicle, story, mode of emplotment, mode of argument, mode of ideological implications, and the five C’s of historical thinking, only adds to the craft of writing creative non-fiction. The combination of the techniques renders an almost inverted idea of how to think of history dramatically. If White argued that historiography is a literary art, in this case, we could argue that literature is a form of historiography. It sounds like the same thing, but the order does make a difference. The first sentence thinks of history first, and tries to examine the form and add drama(turgy) to gain envisioned results. The second has drama a priori, and that is what constructs (or deconstructs) history. By
doing this, the reenacting of past actions into a contemporary discourse develops original creative pieces of historical study. But let me emphasize that one genre does not substitute the other, nor do they necessarily hybridize. Instead, they complement each other. I gave the examples of Sacco and Sebald. Sacco combines journalism and graphic novel in a way that one genre does not overshadow the other. In fact, they perform together and achieve something greater than the sum of the parts. Sebald is an example of how historiography, biography, and fiction can work together and create a hybrid narrative that also offers an exciting view of historical events.

On memoir writing, Silverman wrote about the use of voice to explain the self within the world. An effective voice is what will engage the reader and make the story believable. We learn how it brings culture, language, accent, perspective, inner life, tone, sound, age, and so on. The voice authenticates non-fiction and it is developed with different approaches whether it is a biography, autobiography, memoir, immersion journalism, or travel writing. They all give different types of reenactments, but the bottom line is they are all concerned with the self. What I am saying is that what CNF gains with historiography is that this voice is elevated beyond the self—it becomes far more relevant, as the world is revealed within the self. By building the narrative voice using the techniques of historiography, a culture becomes complex, a perspective is explained by causes and conditions, the inner life communicates with the outer world.

The look into individual lives gives writers and readers new perspectives on how to see the world. By using the themes of historiography and the “Cs” of historical thinking in memoirs, it is possible to build rich cultural identities and settings that not only share their personal issues but also bring significant information regarding events of the past. The type of narrative chosen by the writer has the function of showing to the reader what the story is about and, consequently, how to look into history through that perspective. Since creative non-fiction somehow deals with the truth, the writer has the responsibility of going through the puzzle of the methods of historiography to understand his characters, to give original voices to them, to be true to the story he or she is writing, and to provide readers with meanings that go beyond the facts. In the same way, although my research and practice did not go into that direction, it is encouraging for historians to make use of creative writing techniques, searching for the real voices within data, to be more impactful and to generate debate over history.
History will always be rewritten, and it can be done so in many different ways. It can manifest through music, cinema, documentaries, literature, archeology, architecture and so on. But the way it is narrated can and will affect how we see it and how we relate to it. There will always be more than one truth to any story, and we have to be open to explore the unique meanings of these narratives to understand the world and to understand ourselves. The methods of narrativity in historiography are not a checklist of how to study history. However, writing history or creative non-fiction of historical thinking is an exercise that is beneficial for understanding the world. As a final comment, I suggest that the study of historiography, and its methods of narrative, become encouraged in any creative writing course. This genre should be seen as a necessary primary tool to investigate real events, before the voices of the characters in non-fiction bring meaning to them. Creative non-fiction writers should be aware of the responsibility of transmitting true stories, and the techniques around history writing are only helpful for the writers’ formation.
Works Cited


