



BSA Auto/Biography Study Group
Centre for Biography and Education

Fragments of Auto/Biography
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Abstracts

Photography and Auto/Biography: Fragments of Life/Light Writing, Albums and Narratives

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Photographs have been used extensively in post-1945 auto/biographies, which is not surprising if we consider that family snapshots are invaluable and easily accessible documents about the individual and collective past. As fragments (or 'deposits') of life characterised by their biographical and existential potential, they are as important for autobiographers and biographers; in this respect, we can rightly talk about a photobiographical genre – or photobiography –, a neologism that refers to 'a person's biography or autobiography as revealed through photographs',¹ be they reproduced or merely described within the text.

The nature and function of photographs in this genre or sub-genre of life-writing vary greatly. Some photobiographers use photographs as a 'support' or 'prop' to literary life-writing, a series of illustrations to accompany the fictionalisation of a life as a coherent plot. Others use the photographic archive as a means to revisit the past as 'present', of capturing it 'sur le vif' before it has been inserted into the plot of 'a life' (and from a temporal and experiential distance that may have become all-too significant). Schematically, the integration of photographic images in auto/biographical works has prompted two main tendencies: a fragmentary, album-like structure emphasizing the discontinuous and fragmented nature of the self and of corporeal experience; a narrative form attempting to give an impression of unity and coherence and to bridge the gaps which separate various snapshots.

In this paper, I will examine how the use of photographs affects the form and structure of auto/biographical texts (and how these texts are produced and read). I will focus on several European and American auto/biographies, encompassing Daniel Mendelsohn's *The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million*; Robert Frank's *The Lines of my Hand*; Hervé Guibert's *Ghost Image*; Sophie Calle's *True Stories*; W. G. Sebald's *The Emigrants* and *Austerlitz*; Orhan Pamuk's *Istanbul: Memories of a City*. All these authors tend to blur generic boundaries, blending biography with autobiography, or fiction with reportage and the essay; using images in their respective works as they do, and therefore producing hybrid assemblages, they all contribute to anchor the auto/biographical genre in a new paradigm of the archive and an aesthetics of the fragment that are prevailing in contemporary life-writing.

¹John Algeo, *Fifty Years among the New Words: A Dictionary of Neologisms, 1941–1991* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 135.

The Unity of Fragments - the suicide of Marilyn Monroe and the execution of Marie Antoinette

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Hollywood is a place where they'll pay you a thousand dollars for a kiss and fifty cents for your soul

(Marilyn Monroe)

Spoken to the executioner after she stepped on his foot, Monsieur, I beg your pardon

(Marie Antoinette)

Biography, *sui generis*, is never more than the study of fragments. It is *how* the fragments are studied that is significant for the auto/biographical enterprise. While the study of single lives is the typical form of biography it is the case that the examination of these fragments, across different lives, can clarify the nature of the single life. The purpose of such comparative analysis with its concentration on difference and resemblance is to illuminate the consequences of the features of social formations and how such features can affect agency and circumscribe the lives and selfhoods of individuals. It is in these terms that we wish to look at aspects of the biographies of two seemingly widely differing women, Marilyn Monroe (1926-1962) and Marie Antoinette (1755-1793).

As well as being separated in time by two centuries and coming from different continents Marilyn Monroe and Marie Antoinette were also of hugely divergent social origin - Marilyn Monroe being born the poor, illegitimate child of a mentally unstable mother and an unknown father and Marie Antoinette being born into ease and security as an Archduchess of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Their ends were different too - Marilyn Monroe committed suicide alone and Marie Antoinette was executed before a mob. Marilyn Monroe was an exceptional personality and Marie Antoinette was quite ordinary. Nonetheless, there are resemblances and parallels in their lives – from them a) being required to follow established rituals of compliance to b), as a result of betrayal and exploitation, their early and tragic deaths. To elucidate the connectedness of their biographies we will examine a series of topics and events specific to them both: namely, i) becoming famous, ii) dress and self-image, iii) vilification and slander, iv) circumstances of death.

Alfred Ernest Jones – A politician in psychoanalyst's clothing

Julie Greer, University of Southampton



Like him or loath him, you cannot deny Ernest Jones his place in the history of psychoanalysis in Britain, and indeed worldwide. Summarising opinion of him, Maddox in *Freud's Wizard*, refers to his 'alleged arrogance, autocracy, dishonesty and not least, hagiography', the latter referring to his reverential biography of Sigmund Freud. But that is only half the picture; he is also described by various others as having prodigious energy, administrative skill, literary ability, acerbic wit and as being 'undoubtedly the finest organizer and politician in the first generation of Freud's followers'. Joan Riviere claimed in one letter that Jones was 'irresistible to women', and wrote many pages to him devoting her love, but then as many words expressing her distaste for him, (whether as a result of being caught up in the transference between analyst and analysand, or bereft from a love affair remains unclear). It is however clear that he had drive and ambition from an early age and I hope to examine some of the less well known papers and archive material that may shed some light on the man who was able to charm, revile and rally so many influential people, whilst creating the British Psychoanalytical movement.

Fragments of a life, fragments of research, fragments of a legacy

Anna Lyon, University of Sussex

This paper is drawn from my doctoral study of the life of my great-grandmother Lily Clifford (1853-1921). As no family memories of memorabilia have survived from her life, I have relied on fragments of information from which to reconstruct her life-story. It is a story which touches on class, gender, nineteenth century law, international travel and family legacy. These snippets of information have come from external, impersonal sources such as newspapers, public records and the internet.

I shall examine some of the fragments I have used to develop the study, discussing some of the choices I have made in piecing them together to create a narrative that may – or may not – be a truthful representation of the life of Lily Clifford.

Writing family history is a curious process, as the subject tends to become deeply personal. I shall also share some of my responses and reflections on discovering some of these fragments of my family's past.

Losing your head: an auto-bio-ethno-graphic tangle of school governance

Mich Page, Open University

This research focuses on competing narratives used by members of a Board of Governors during the process of selecting a new executive head teacher for 'Market Town' school. The research has borrowed and reworked a framework first put forward by Hume in 1817 to help structure the analysis of the various aspects of school governance, according to his four criteria of Logic, Morals, Criticism and Politics (1911:5).

The findings reveal some entrenched antagonisms, exemplified by competing and divergent ways of interpreting evidence presented by candidates at interview. These interpretations are examined within the context of life stories. This study is therefore based on an exploration of biographies which 'reveal the relationship between the private and the public worlds [that] individuals experience' (Merrill, 2002).

The discovery, that the school is now firmly embedded within a discourse of post-professionalism, supports other research findings from other schools, but is nevertheless disquieting, as it calls into question the role of the school governor and the power relationships of governance, as well as the popular notion of local empowerment.

This research shows that the role of school governor involves various responsibilities, but the effective operation of these is undermined by a discourse that, in effect, seriously hampers some individuals in the exercise of their role. The governor/governance dilemma can be summarised as individual governors being encouraged to participate, while simultaneously discouraged from doing anything, thus creating and maintaining the illusion of local democracy. In other words, school governors are required to turn up and shut up!

Piecing together the fragments of a silenced life – unravelling death by suicide

Saffron Scott

“My father died as a result of the inhalation of town gas He deliberately caused this to happen”.

“Only since his tragic passing have I come to understand the true meaning of the devastating effects of the horrific events he suffered during his lifetime. He went through hell - and worse, if worse is possible. Indeed it is a miracle he survived for as long as he did, before life became so unbearable that he had no choice other than to bring it to an end himself”.

These are extracts taken from an online memorial set up by an individual bereaved by suicide. The author uses the narratives of his online memorial to explore traces of past events and fragments of evidence in order to search for clues, decipher signs, make deductions and create some coherence from the chaos of his bereavement.

By piecing together fragments of memories, family stories, photographs and letters he creates a memorial which takes the form of a mystery or crime narrative. The suicide of his father provides the opening crime scene and the author's role is that of detective and chief suspect.

This paper will explore how by placing the memorial online it became a vehicle for telling the untold story of a life and death silenced by the stigma of suicide.

Little hours and short years

Aidan Seery, School of Education, Trinity College Dublin

Fragments can be material, spatial or temporal and in this paper it is a temporal fragment that is the focus. In an exercise in auto-biographical analysis, I examine one of the most influential fragments of my life that was defined by, shaped and lived in a vowed religious community. I read my own life-fragment in its remembered stories and its abiding, formative residue, using Nancy Klein Maguire's *An Infinity of Little Hours* as a source of resonating themes and tropes. Infatuation, fear, romantic ideals and noble intentions appear in this analysis as common to the beginnings of both young [and naïve!] Jesuit and Carthusian life as do the reasons for abandoning this way of life. An attempt is also made to assess the nature of the abiding power of a limited experience of religious/monastic life on life's later relationships, choices and decisions in both cases.

Piecing together some Celtic fragments

Dennis Smith, Loughborough University

This paper explores the contrasting trajectories of two Celtic lineages that culminated in the presenter's own parents, united in the English Midlands. One genealogical stream passed from the Forest of Dean, home of ancient liberties, and through the coal-mining valleys of South Wales, strongholds of the labour movement. This stream was watered by the utopianism of settler communities, by the radical yearnings of families who sought something better for themselves, certainly in heaven but preferably also here on earth. The other stream crossed from Sligo in the heart of Connaught, Ireland's 'wild' province west of the Shannon river, passed through the soft hills and plains of Kildare, just south of Dublin, then diverted into Limerick with its warlike reputation. Only this time, the family line carried policemen, priests and soldiers, bringers of justice, as they saw it, from above. This paper presents some early returns from an inquiry into the broader significance of these powerful clashing currents, which may perhaps be related to the larger narrative of British/Irish 'nation(s)-building'.

Good night and good-bye: temporal and spatial rhythms in piecing together auto/biographical fragments

Maria Tamboukou, Centre for Narrative Research, University of East London

Fragments of autobiography are everywhere, particularly when you work in archives with letters, diaries and journals. There is always something missing, either because not everything found a place in an archive, because of serendipity, because of intentional selections and deselections as well as because of specific rules of taxonomy and classification that allow certain documents of life to be preserved and others to become obscure and marginalised. Discontinuous and interrupted as they are, auto/biographical fragments create their own rhythms of archival existence and it is on specific spatial and temporal rhythms that this paper focuses. The question I want to address is on the importance of actual and virtual space/time blocks within which auto/biographical fragments emerge and unfold, thus offering analytical trails for the researcher to follow. In doing this I will draw on my recent archival work with Emma Goldman's papers at the University of California Berkeley.

Life story themes of female social workers – capturing pieces of biography

Francisca Veale, University of Southampton

Having undertaken research with female social work students and qualified social workers it became apparent that the biographical information they provided remained fragmented. Based on my research focus to ascertain their motivation why they wanted to become social workers their autobiographical information was tailored to their professional persona and possibly left out autobiographical information about their personal self. Even so, I subscribe to the axiom that 'the personal is political and the political is personal' and I wanted to investigate as to whether or not personal experiences had influenced their professional choices, only a small number disclosed this information during the research. However, not surprisingly, more autobiographical information was volunteered in the semi-structured focus groups and the interviews, than in the structured questionnaires.

I came to the conclusions that it was the fragments of their biographies was partly due to my narrowed down research focus and resource constrains, but equally due to the private nature of personal information shared with a 'stranger' researcher. Interestingly, those research participants who I had known and worked with in the past, were more comfortable to disclose more personal autobiographical information. Their personal experiences such as having been in the care system, or those who had family members working in the social work profession gave a fuller picture of their personal and professional identity.

As a feminist researcher, I had to characterise my social location and 'social identity' (Ardevini-Brooker 2002:5), as it undoubtedly influenced what was known. Hence my autobiographical narrative was inter-woven in the text, because it shaped what is known, or what I know. Having included 'pieces' of my personal life in the research, I had to make allowances that my autobiographical information was quite fragmented, because of the context of the thesis.

The questions auto/biographical researchers and writers need to ask themselves are: how we can shine light on those fragments of auto/biographical information and evidence so that we have genuine accounts of people's lives and it does justice to the person we are portraying. And if we have only 'pieces' of information about self or others how can these be interpreted to gain insight and understanding of motivational dynamics, for example why women want to become social workers.

'We are decent people; only we had to pay a very high price, not to hurt the other people concerned': Three lives in a letter

Gaby Weiner, University of Sussex

This quotation comes from a letter sent by my mother to my fiancé prior to our marriage in 1963 which disclosed the fact that she and my father were not married. I learnt of its existence only five or so years ago when embarking on research into my family's history, and long after my mother's death in 1969. I have only recently seen the original. Written some 20 years after they met in the mid 1940s, this biographical fragment gives an account of how my parents met, what it was like to be a refugee from Nazism who did not know what had happened to her family, and what it was like to bring an illegitimate child into the world at that time. Achieving respectability and taking responsibility were central tenets of my mother's life, values which are clearly visible in the letter. This paper presents a deconstruction of the letter, discussing its main implications against the background of London in the 1950s and 1960s.