

## HOW TO INTERPRET AUTOBIOGRAPHIES

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Autobiography is a term for a particular practice of life narrative, a concept which celebrates the impact of the autonomous individual, but also the universalizing meaning of the life story.

Autobiographical methods are very useful in connection with a postcolonial view, as these representations highlight questions about how *personal* legitimacy and testimony is articulated. All of these contextual narratives – voices that integrate *place* (i.e. Latin America), *time* (i.e. late modernity), *specific society* (i.e. Mexico) and *special circumstances* (i.e. ethnicity, gender, class, religion, etc), and the reasons (i.e. political, economical etc.) for mainstream acceptance (publication) of a specific story (testimony/witness) – have to be considered critically. In other words, we must regard how certain individuals' work makes sense and illuminates societal conflicts through their narratives of texts that point out structural contradictions and processes in society.

In an epistemological point of view autobiography as a method represents both a partial *truth*, and a very *personal* one. This is nonetheless vital material for verifying that individuals' life experiences are interconnected and can thus be understood from many different angles. It makes autobiography a central tool for understanding the multiplicity of individuals and thus society.

Literally, an autobiography could be called a life narration which includes particular attributes. On the one hand it is a *story*, what the *narrator* writes about, and on the other hand, the *story* which is influenced by what the *readers* imagine. This last point is of importance, in the sense that autobiographies are representations of the everyday situations and events that are experienced differently by different people. I state that the everyday situations are narrated (reconstructed) both materially and through imagination, under similar and opposite contexts and points of views. Thus they are a central form of material in reflection about the complexities of objectivity

A life narrative (an autobiography) is not a novel, although in many cases autobiographical scenes are mixed within a novel style. In that sense, the autobiographical story is based on real facts interrelated with fictive details. The fictive details often add a dramaturgical touch, although the character, dialogues, and contexts are adapted to certain realities. Aspects of

central importance in the understanding of how autobiographies are written are not only self-referential, but also a result of constructions (social and imaginary). In other words, that imaginative scenario represents the way in which many writers take liberties in rewriting realities from complex angles.

The central aim of this article is to reflect on how to read autobiographical texts. But there also exists an ambition to discuss the autobiography as a testimony (witness), from a feministic point of view.

### **Autobiographies are constructed by social acts**

The narrators' central inspirational source is her/his life, saved as *memories*. But what is memory and how does it work from a sociological point of view?

Narrated stories are the result of reconstructions of the past, through a sample of memorized acts.<sup>2</sup> This reconstruction entails a process of learning, about how individuals make a selection of her/his different life experiences and about why it is important that those are narrated to others. Individuals in societies live in different ways, and are influenced by societal expectation and reaction – by being actors of their own lives. An autobiography can be seen as a reflection of history, but it can also in many ways represent a question about what did not happen/occur in the society.

Memories entail processes of remembering events in life and how acts are internalized by individuals (subjective/ contextual or none contextual); at the same time no social acts happen as miracles. What happens in society is always connected to social situations (objective/contextual or non-contextual). To remember entails associating events of importance for individuals (or for societies). Events, on the other hand, are never isolated, because events both in narrations and in the everyday are always connected to context and meaning of a social character (collective memory). Events in particular are what happened and what was experienced by individuals or groups. These events do not only follow a single life story, but also highlight facts which make sense for the memory of an (imaginary) community.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, experiences that represent life stories excluded from that (imaginary) community are in many cases radical interpellations or articulations, in the sense that these may reveal social contradictions (racism). These experiences may in many cases play a central role as sources of inspiration for other citizens who are writers.<sup>4</sup>

Communities construct their own memories by giving acts/events a social meaning. These social events have collective impact, because they are seen as key knowledge about how belonging (or exclusion) is created, and of course how norms, views, and rules make sense for citizens in general. Social acts extend beyond the acknowledged motive for why they are needed and wanted, to be remembered or forgotten. Social acts/events that transform the collective memory give individuals' lives a political foundation.

Collective memory symbolizes the main focus of a nation, because it is constructed and constituted by actors (citizens) – both those who are integrated and those who are excluded. In the sense that nation has for the majority, it is a story of belonging in a political translation.<sup>5</sup> It is a structure which means that not everybody in civil society has the option to be accepted as *similar*, but may also be accepted as an *outsider*. To be excluded from the collective memory (political construction) of a nation represents being a witness of a *non-civilized* act; it is a situation which nobody would like to experience, under any circumstances. Thus being a witness in society comes with a great responsibility, not only socially but also most likely politically. For example, people who live in *exile* (citizens in many cases) are not totally integrated (and maybe experiencing exclusion). Furthermore the outsider might develop ambivalent feelings in terms of belonging to that nation – as belonging to more than one nation is a central part of his/her life narrative.<sup>6</sup>

### **Autobiographies are testimonies**

In writing a life history, the writer uses different kinds of evidence. If the story is autobiographical, the use of memories is the central source of inspiration. Memorized evidence is constructed by a direct correlation to realities that are affected by the imagination. In other words, the act of remembering integrates intersectional (re)views. The main ambition in this kind of narrative is to make testimonies, which means telling what happened in society.

In many cases autobiographical narratives have a testimonial meaning. The narrator becomes the reader of her/his own experience, doing narrations as *acts* by claiming *authority of experience* both explicitly and implicitly,<sup>7</sup> where the writer is an outsider in the dominant culture. Her/his experiences become explicit evidence for the majority. The question is in what manner dominant culture can read these narratives, making sense of them as part of a collective memory from an outsider-inside society.

One answer might be that these kinds of testimonies are represented and interpreted as political interventions. Thus these experiences are not easily welcomed as evident parts of the collective memory, or accepted as evidence in the main society. Such interventions (testimonies as a narrative includes the readings of them) tell *subjective* good/bad experiences caused by *objective* structures of social injustice. Of course, these kind of active narratives mean going out and unleashing the truth both in telling one's life story and in grasping and respecting anyone else's.

Interpreting autobiographical testimonies will entail understanding a process of consciousness. For instance, readers (including investigators) may notice the emphasis on particular acts of remembering, but also why they play a significant role for the writer as citizen. *Texts* work as self-reflexive tools and thus as integrated social senses within the narrative.<sup>8</sup>

### **Experiences of consciousness**

Experiences represent a central topic in discussing autobiographical testimonies.<sup>9</sup> But experiences are not an unconscious part of writing or reading narratives. One could say that they are both the reason and the result around which subjectivity is constructed.<sup>10</sup> In other words, they are the way in which people learn to understand themselves including the writers themselves.

By understanding how everyday experiences are sampled and narrated from different angles, we can certainly reiterate that experience/(re)construction comes through multiple domains of discourses. These domains serve as sources for what experiences internalize and display as acts of central importance for individuals in *reproducing* social patterns.<sup>11</sup> In other words, a dialectical relationship between experience/knowledge and norms correlate. For example, experiences can be reconstructed in terms of *infertility*, in the sense that individuals' life stories/biographies are not accepted as part of the shared history of a particular society, mainly because every society has its own political and social *biography* that is reproduce by *fertile* life stories. These may include biographies that reproduce history in harmony between experiences/knowledge and the ruling norms.

Individuals do not consciously need to know this discursive relationship, and thus social patterns are often reproduced or questioned, even though that is not the purpose. Central to understanding one's own experiences is the knowledge that experiences are always results of social relationships which are original in a conscious or unconscious way. That is why *infertile* experiences also can be understood as *social weapons*, for example in social struggle. By acting thus experiences overlap and change over time for all citizens. One reason can be that individuals influence one another, but also because experiences are chosen, go through social constructions, and become social representations. It is in these dynamic relationships with paradoxical experiences that people find the inspiration for telling their stories. That particular story must enter the domain of social discourse in order to become public. For example every form of text, new or old, is categorized and limited by the ruling cultural discourse.<sup>12</sup> My point is that opposing live stories/biographies become *infertile* parts of the common history, simply because they are categorized as infertile. They are accepted as parts of society but excluded from the (re)writing of history. In order to become fertile they have to be adopted as parts of a collective counter discourse.

The discursive nature of experiences entails thus a need of self-reflection about what we/others understand as *our experiences* and what we/other think we mean when we tell about experiences as collective. There are always people who highlight differences, but *differences* should also be appreciated and remembered.<sup>13</sup>

Experiences of inclusion or exclusion are parts of an autobiographical testimony and fulfill a documentary form. From a narrative point of view the everyday is remarked and declared social. Autobiographical audiences (readers) may take the opportunity to broaden their experiences by reading these narratives. Hence this kind of narrative is transformed into a *multicode* autobiography, and thus the reader grasps the narrative as *facts* that are processed in relation to personal experiences by imagination. In other words, the reader projects the story.

Many readers or audiences have the expectation of exchanging life experiences. They do this by imagining and identifying with that reading's experience. Indeed, because identities are constructed not only by a one-way reaffirmation but also by reactions in the form of expectations from what we would understand as opposite to a reaffirmation of the self.

In the cases where narratives imply active acts of differentiation they become autobiographical testimonies telling of the politics of identities. Identities are manifested in many ways (gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, class, generation, nationality, political ideologies), and are not only referred to in terms of *place* or *displacement* of the *ones* involved. They are also referred to in terms of other multiple contextual situations – such as *why* we act in the way we do, and *what* it means in social terms.

In social terms, identities have to be understood as discursive, in the sense that identities are not essential, but socially constructed. Identities are conscious positioning from an individual's point of view. I propose that identities always entail interactive processes which involve conscious acts and unconscious internalization. In other words, the fact that the narrator includes or highlights other voices is not only a cause of symbolic practice. Her/his ambition is to keep the biography vivid by witnessing encounters, and in this way (re)construct (her)story/(hi)story through identifications (and of course non-identifications) linked to the notion of the concept of a *nation* for citizens and society at large.

Autobiographies embody witnesses' testimonies, not only as legitimizing aspects of the story, but also as unconscious intersectional processes. Nevertheless, witnesses materialize historical approaches by a subjective way of understanding. In contrast to the objective ways, collective memory (history) is rewritten as a way to confront ordinary knowledge of what is considered as normal or public domain. This means in terms of a "politic of agency" a kind of *situated knowledge*, born out of other opposing experiences,<sup>14</sup> and, brought into a struggle against coercive influences from society (counter-discourse). In this counter-discourse people have the opportunity to rewrite their biography by their own rules.

This article's aim was to reflect on how to read autobiographical texts. The major ambition was not to follow a model of understanding, but to make a point about the political meaning of testimonies.

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<sup>6</sup> Avtar Brah, (1996).

<sup>7</sup> Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson, (2001).

<sup>8</sup> Cavarero Adriana, (1997).

<sup>9</sup> Scott Joan Wallach, (1999).

<sup>10</sup> Teresa De Lauretis, 16(1993):4, p. 393-403.

<sup>11</sup> Feminism & Foucault, (1988).

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Scott Joan Wallach, (1999).

<sup>14</sup> Judith Butler, (1999).

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