

Into a New Light: Re-Envisioning Educational Possibilities for Biography

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Abstract

The role of biography in education has been challenged in recent years on two interrelated fronts. The first relates to the epistemological question of how knowledge is constructed through biographical inquiry. The second concerns the ontological problem of redefining biography to include for example, all life-writing and the democratizing impulse to value the ordinary as much as the extraordinary. In this article, I address the epistemological and ontological concerns that challenge concretized notions of the role of biography in education, by shedding light upon recent theoretical perspectives that illuminate the biographer's critical stance, deconstruct the socially and historically situated biographer, subject, and reader, and evaluate the various methods employed in the process of reconstructing life histories for the consummation of others.



Je suis un mensonge qui dit toujours la vérité.

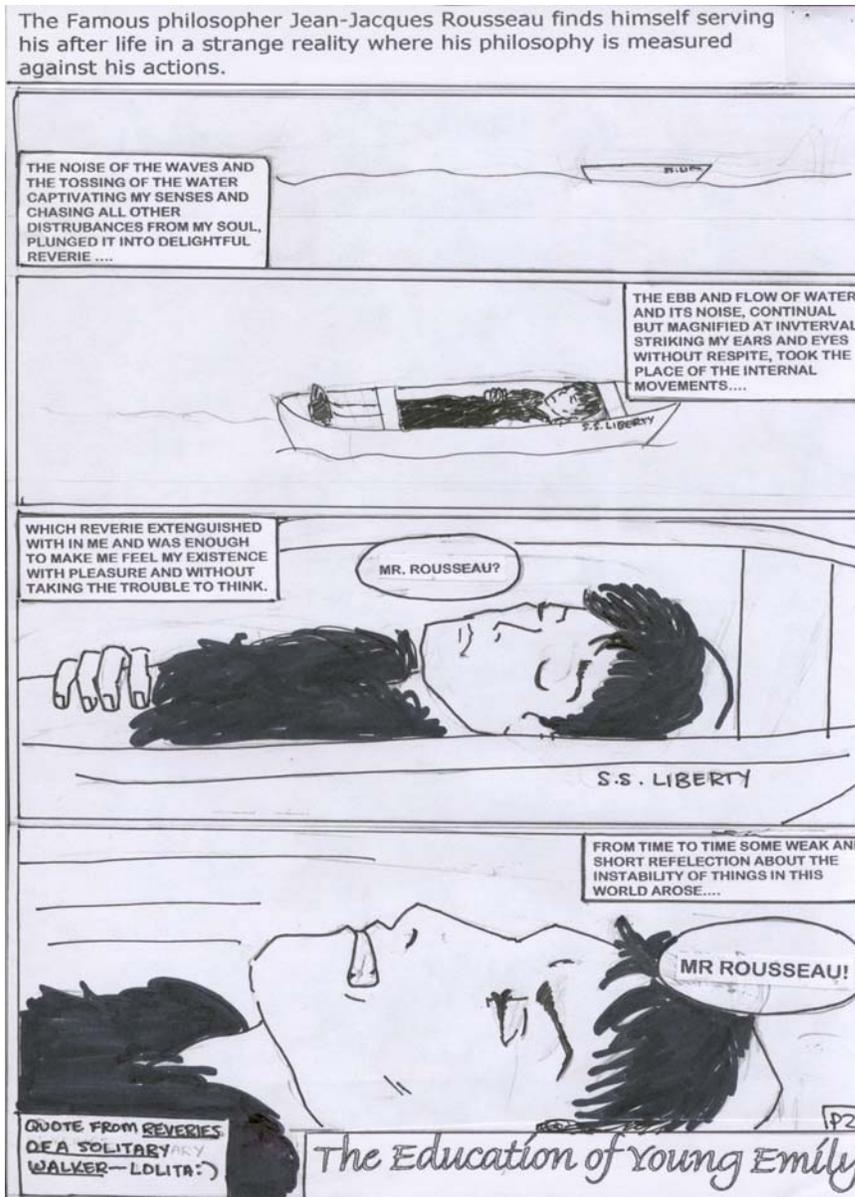
I am a lie that always tells the truth.

-Jean Cocteau

Introduction

Seeking a way to enter into philosophical debate, a discipline in which women were historically rendered voiceless, Farra,¹ an undergraduate student in a models of education course, turned to biographic method. She researched the life and work of Jean Jacques Rousseau to produce *Her Story: The Education of Young Emily*, a feminist comic book in which she skillfully inserted herself into a contemporary dialogue within some of the real-life events of this eighteenth century French philosopher. “Re-positioning” herself in the “figured world” (Beach, 2004) of biography allowed Farra to create a philosophical discourse that enabled her to work through female aphasia and in Montaigne’s (1877) terms, breath life into what would otherwise be “this dead and mute painting” (online).

¹ The images and text of *Herstory: The education of young Emily* are reproduced with the permission of artist/illustrator Farra Yasin. The work was completed in response to an assignment for the course EDUC 3400 Models of Education at York University held in the fall of 2004.



Traditionally, biography has served an educative function by presenting the life of an exceptional person as an exemplum. In the hagiographic sense, exceptional lives provided the standard against which we measured such things as one's moral character, contribution to humankind, intelligence, feminine virtue, and masculine courage. Accordingly, such an approach actively contributed to cultural reproduction by implicitly re-inscribing normative values and attitudes and maintaining gender role constructions.

The role of biography in education has been challenged in recent years on two interrelated fronts. The first relates to the epistemological question of how knowledge is constructed through biographical inquiry. The second concerns the ontological problem of redefining biography to include for example, all life-writing and the democratizing impulse to value the ordinary as much as the extraordinary (Hawthorne, 2003b). In order to address the epistemological and ontological concerns that challenge concretized notions of the role of biography in education, we must shed new light upon recent theoretical perspectives that illuminate the biographer's critical stance, deconstruct the socially and historically situated biographer, subject, and reader, and evaluate the various methods employed in the process of reconstructing life histories for the consummation of others. In this paper, I explore the issues surrounding the interpretation and application of biography and biographical inquiry within language and literacy practices.



Heroification in Educational Textbooks

In *Lies My Teacher Told Me*, Loewen (1995) refers to the hagiographic practice adopted by official curricula and textbook publishers as heroification. Our faith in textual authority makes possible “a degenerative process (much like calcification) that makes people over into heroes. Through this process, our educational media turn flesh-and-blood individuals into pious, perfect creatures without conflicts, pain, credibility, or human interest” (p. 19). As Loewen explains, the insertion of strategically placed biographical vignettes throughout history textbooks as a means of instructing by human example is not necessarily a bad idea. What he condemns is the process of hero-making that excises from the portrayal of a life anything that might offend the buying public or be deemed counterproductive to instilling hegemonic values and attitudes.

To illustrate how certain historical figures are made sympathetic to as many people as possible, Loewen (1995) details the lives of Woodrow Wilson and Helen Keller. Woodrow Wilson’s racist convictions and actions and Helen Keller’s life as a socialist and radical activist are largely, if not completely omitted from American history textbooks because both racism and socialism are essentially repugnant to the American public. Biographical accounts that ignore the last sixty-four years of Keller’s life focusing only on her ability to overcome her disability, subscribe to the “no curriculum” which selects the history that is the most culture-serving and myth perpetuating. Loewen (1995) explains, “We teach Keller as an ideal, not a real person Keller becomes a mythic figure, the ‘woman who overcame’—but for *what?*” (p.33). As an American hero, Helen Keller, social philosopher and activist, appears no more substantive or multi-dimensional

than a cardboard cutout. Ironically, as Loewen (1995) points out, “Keller, who struggled so valiantly to learn to speak, has been made mute by history” (p. 20). Loewen (1995) deconstructs the events that shaped the Wilson administration to reveal how biographical accounts can successfully disguise ‘a wolf in sheep’s clothing’ in order to avoid the ambiguity of a president who professes “liberty and justice for all” and at the same time exercises his power in ways to support and maintain colonialism, racism, and anticommunism. Granting ontological privilege to the written word performs a convenient ideological function in terms of grounding our social behavior (Hawthorne, 2003a). The blatant heroification of an outspoken white supremacist served to sanctify the office of president and could only have been written from a white perspective. Re-envisioning the potential role of biography within the educational context should include opportunities for engaging in cultural critique and an assessment of our own implications and investments in maintaining the myth.

The Crisis of Representation

The crisis of representation in the human sciences (Marcus & Fischer, 1986) may be attributed to what Geertz (1980) termed “blurring the genres” as he attempted to account for the “fluid borrowing of ideas and methods from one discipline to another” (Marcus & Fischer, 1986, p. 7). We are witnessing an unprecedented hybridization of genres which makes the idea that all works fall into narrowly defined categories untenable. No longer limited to autobiography and biography, life writing figures in historical fiction, fictional biographies, biographical fictions, historical non-fiction, narrative inquiry, autoethnography, historical inquiry, and performance ethnography and other forms of arts-based qualitative research. Within the curriculum field,

autobiographical reflection goes to the heart of praxis and is at the center of the phenomenological method of *currere* that “focuses on the educational experience of the individual as reported by the individual” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995, p. 414).

As both cultural artifact and interpretive document, biographical writing represents a hermeneutic enterprise emerging from the interactions between the biographer and her subject and the subject’s relationships to others. It is shaped by the process or method undertaken, the critical or theoretical perspective adopted, and the biographer’s adherence to a particular discipline or interpretive community. In addition, biography is shaped by both the biographer’s imagined audience and the active contribution of the reader. Inevitably, biography exists as the intersections of competing voices. As Sumara (2002) points out, post-structural theories have caused human science researchers to reexamine the relationship between knowledge and literacy and literary representation practices. Drawing on Derrida, he argues that an understanding of language as a continually emergent system challenges “the commonsense belief that researchers [including biographers] are able to represent, unambiguously and exactly, the experience of others” (p. 239). A paradox emerges from the representational crisis in life writing which extends the epistemological question of what we know and how we know it to consider the possibility that fiction makes a valid contribution to biographic method and our understanding of an objective world.

Historiographic Metareflexion

The challenge to blur the traditional lines bifurcating fictional and biographical writing is evidenced in the work of both Carol Shields and Margaret Atwood. In “How to

Do Things with History: Researching Lives in Carol Shield's *Swann* and Margaret Atwood's *Alias Grace*, Niederhoff (2000) describes the similarity of plot construction in both novels that depends on "historiographic metareflexion" (Hutcheon, 1988) which foregrounds "the problems associated with historical research, explanation and narrative" (p. 71). Shields and Atwood actively integrate authentic documents and methods of biographical inquiry in their fiction to narratively construct and revise our worldview. As Shields (1989) writes in *Swann*, "The charm of falsehood is not that it distorts reality, but that it creates reality afresh" (p. 163).

In *Alias Grace*, Atwood relates the life of Grace Marks, a real nineteenth-century woman who ranks as one of the most notorious and enigmatic women in eastern Canada during the Victorian era. Marks was convicted in 1843 at the age of sixteen for her involvement in the heinous murders of her employer and his housekeeper. In order to pen her novel, Atwood relies on archival evidence such as newspapers reports, photographs, prison records and the journals of Susanna Moodie, an English emigrant who wrote of her experiences in the Canadian backwoods. In her journals, Moodie recorded details of her meeting with Grace Marks at Kingston Penitentiary and her later meeting with Marks at the lunatic asylum. In a brief interview with the author that appears at the end of *Alias Grace*, Atwood (1996) explains how she reconciled the deliberate dependence on biographical evidence to write her Giller Prize-winning fiction.

When there was a known fact, I felt that I had to use it.... But when there were gaps or when there were things suggested that nobody ever explained, I felt that I was free to invent. (p. 569)

Within the hermeneutic project of “trying to make sense of the relationship between experiences of being human and practices of making and using knowledge (Sumara, 2002, p. 240), collapsing the objectivity of biographical writing is legitimized through the author’s acknowledgement. Interestingly, the chance to grant the real Grace Marks a voice in her own narrative depends on the introduction of fictional character Dr. Jordan. Ironically, it is through fictional interviews with Dr. Jordan that Atwood challenges the authenticity of historical accounts.

Like Atwood, Shields is ‘up front’ about her innovative manipulation of biographic method. The critically acclaimed biographer of Jane Austen, Shields (1993) relies on historiographic metareflexion in *The Stone Diaries* to pen the fictional autobiography of a woman who wasn’t there in an attempt to illustrate the erasure of women’s lives. The line between fiction and autobiography is further confounded by the inclusion of “real life photos” predictably placed in the middle of the book and used to depict the life of Shields’ absent subject Daisy Goodwill. The deliberate inclusion of the photos constitutes one of the “semiotic tools” (Kress, 2004) that Shields effectively employs to move her fiction into the realm of biography. In *Daisy*, Shields successfully creates the postmodern ambiguity in the duality of being both observer and participant. The linearity of the metanarrative is further undermined as Daisy is invested with knowledge of the events surrounding her birth that she could not have possibly known. According to Schnitzer (1995) these “tricks of consciousness” bring “clarity and vividness to events often blurred and circumspect” (p. 33). More familiar to some, is the way children’s author/illustrator, Chris Van Allsburg masterfully employs similar “tricks of consciousness” by inserting himself into the narrative account of his publisher’s

fictional client to establish the existence of the provoking illustrations and captions that provide the material for *The Mysteries of Harris Burdick*.

Perhaps the most intriguing example in contemporary biography of the non-existent subject is Melanie Hawthorne's current study of Gisèle d'Estoc. Hawthorne's investigation into the life of a woman reputed at one time to have been nothing more than a literary hoax is foregrounded in the problems surrounding knowledge claims.

Hawthorne challenges the traditional parameters imposed on reconstructing a life and questions the authority with which the lines defining legitimate biography were drawn.

While characterizing herself as a literary historian, Hawthorne nevertheless is engaged in the anthropological project of the "double narrative" or writing the story about getting the story, which to her is as important as the story of the life itself. Her work emphasizes the contextualized subject. The idea for the biography of d'Estoc grew out of her investigation into the life of French writer Rachilde and is embedded in a bigger narrative that relates to recovering women writers. However, it is not d'Estoc's extraordinary talent that draws Hawthorne to her subject. By all known accounts, d'Estoc's writing did not distinguish her among leading French women writers but d'Estoc is representative of thousands of women working in the arts who seemingly 'pass below the radar' into obscurity. It is d'Estoc's status as ordinary that establishes her as a vehicle for verifying knowledge claims and asserting counter claims.

Hawthorne set out on a biographical quest to resolve the controversy over whether d'Estoc actually existed or whether she was merely a literary hoax as some claimed in the 1930's. More importantly, Hawthorne's work sheds light on a question that begs to be asked about how such a puzzle could exist in the first place. Where Atwood interweaves

fiction with fact to reconstruct reality in *Alias Grace*, Hawthorne's search for facts reveals the fiction. Her biographical investigation uncovered inconsistencies and ambiguities in archival evidence that brought into question how knowledge is transmitted and that undermine our faith in bureaucracy. Hawthorne's experience teaches us to pay attention to rumor—to the things that don't become part of the official record. Similarly, while researching the real life events for *Alias Grace*, Atwood too, found herself in the midst of conflicting evidence. Her search for information about Thomas Kinnear, Grace Marks' employer and alleged victim revealed two individuals with the same name, a false death record, and the possible cover up by Scottish relatives who might have adhered to the belief that being murdered is as scandalous as committing murder. Furthermore, my own personal experience with international adoption in a country where adoption evidently carries a stigma has taught me that all official documents are suspect. For example, officials regularly documented the place of birth on children's 'revised' records as that of the adoptive parents. To trouble the notion of assigned identity further, in our haste to obtain passports for our infant twin sons, my husband mistakenly matched the wrong photograph to each boy's passport. Biographical research has a way of usurping the authority of the official record and confounding the answer to the question, "Who are we?"

Writing Women's Lives: The Challenge to Cultural Plausibility

Despite the diverse nature of the three works described ranging from Atwood's fictional reconstruction of a life, to Shields' biographical construction of a fictional character, to Hawthorne's story of writing the life history of a non-existent subject, one detects a common thread leading toward a growing feminist solidarity in writing

women's lives. Since 1791 with James Boswell's *Life of Samuel Johnson*, biography in the Western world was written about the public lives of prominent male subjects with an emphasis on their accomplishments. The wives, mothers, and daughters of male subjects figured into biographical writing only insofar as they stood as the 'woman behind the man.' Women like George Eliot, Colette, Georgia O'Keefe, and Georges Sand brave enough to claim their own identity had to expel themselves from conventional society. As Wagner-Martin (1994) explains writing women's lives is problematic for two reasons. First, traditional societal expectations have ensured that few women have had the kind of public success deemed worthy of the reader's attention. And second, women's biography is likely to be based on private events that for reasons of misplaced propriety or assumed lack of interest may be purposely kept hidden from the public. Up until recently, women's lives were largely written according to a male script. In the postmodern openness created in the deliberate collapse of (male) objectivity, women have challenged androcentric literacy practices to reclaim their own narrative.

Contemporary biographies of women's lives include those works that threaten to disrupt the very boundaries we use to define our identities thus leaving us with more questions than answers. In *Suits Me: The Double Life of Billy Tipton*, Diane Wood Middlebrook (1998) chronicles the life of Billy Tipton, a female jazz pianist who, for more than fifty years cross-dressed her way into becoming a self-made man. The extent to which Billy Tipton becomes an outlaw from patriarchal conventions constitutes a narrative that successfully violates the norms of cultural plausibility. Middlebrook draws the parallel between the duality of Billy's sexual identity and the "racial schizophrenia" that was jazz in the 1920's and 1930's. Sexuality and desire are discussed in a context

that defies the bifurcation of lesbian and straight to challenge our perception of gendered realities. Middlebrook pens a biography of Billy Tipton that compels us to reexamine gender as a performative act and once again, leaves the reader questioning, “Who are we?”

Biography as a Dialogic Construction

Traditional biographies attempted to complete the life narrative by seeking to impose a coherent unity to the events of an otherwise incoherent life (Wagner-Martin, 1994). The critical reader is likely to remain unfulfilled with such oversimplification. For those of us who have never completely bought post-structuralism’s demise of the author, we are likely to find comfortable ground in a dialogic approach to interpreting biography that works to reinstate the voice of the author without compromising the active role of the reader or the intertextual life of the subject. In Bakhtinian terms, the self is an ongoing dialogic collaboration, one that from a biographical point of view continues beyond our temporal existence. Within the literary context, meaning emerges in the process of critical collaborative exchange among author, text, and reader. Interpretation becomes a sustained conversation in which the author and reader are interlocutors charged with the responsibility to see that the text functions ethically (Clark, 1990). Dialogically engaging the reader depends on biography remaining open to inquiry. Recent developments in writing women’s lives have made a significant contribution to the postmodern ethos of the open text by introducing the dialogue between public and private lives, between the official and the unofficial story, and between the extraordinary and the ordinary. As a result, the life history of a person becomes a contested terrain of competing voices.

Dialogic engagement is of course not restricted to writing women's lives. The fact that there exist numerous biographies about a particular subject suggests that there are multiple ways of interpreting a life and that biographers often engage in a process similar to Kuhnian verification/falsification. The dialogic evolution of a life history is perhaps best demonstrated in the biographical accounts of a subject that has long held public attention. In an interview I held with Whitman biographer Jerome Loving, Loving (2003) conceded that biography is based largely on hearsay—what others say, what the subject says, letters and documents that we assume to be true. Biography as a construction of a life is hardly objective, but it is the biographer's job to verify and seek out the facts. In *Walt Whitman: The Song of Himself*, Loving (1999) is dialogically engaged in responding to claims made in previous biographies of Whitman and asserting new ones in response to previously undiscovered evidence. His work is an intertextual collaboration in the sense that it builds on its predecessors and synthesizes information from a vast array of sources in original ways to provide readers with fresh insights.

A long-time Whitman scholar, Loving admitted that he set out to rescue the American bard from being woven into the fabric of ideological politics and a metonymic existence. He had noted that in recent years the criticism surrounding Whitman had drifted away from the text and began to focus primarily on the psychoanalytical. Claims by some critics and members of the gay community that Whitman was homosexual elevated the poet to the status of cultural icon and issues of sexuality began taking center stage in discussions about Whitman's life and work. After years of research, Loving conceded he could not say with certainty one way or other whether Whitman was gay. Seeking to present a more balanced account, Loving presents all available evidence

concerning Whitman's friendships with men and women and lets readers judge for themselves. While deliberate attempts to deny the possibility of Whitman's gay identity contribute to the representational absence of groups marginalized because of their sexual orientation, at no point in Loving's biography does he deny this possibility. Whitman's sexuality is presented as only one of many interrelated concerns of a multi-faceted life.

The question of Whitman's sexuality and the numerous biographies of Whitman written from diverse perspectives establish biography as a social and political act. Historical analysis varies from text to text, nation to nation. For example, in deconstructing the myths, today's American history students find themselves asking whether Columbus should be presented as saint and hero, or villain and marauder (Slattery, Krasny, & O'Malley, in press). Jane Yolen and David Shannon's (1996) picture book *Encounter* depicts a biographical account of Columbus's discovery from the perspective of a young Taino boy that is distinctly different from the accounts traditionally recorded in twentieth century textbooks and reified in the form of a national holiday. Adopting a dialogic approach to interpreting biography ensures that the life history of a subject is "suspended in the ongoing process of collaborative judgment" (Clark, 1990, p. 30).

Without evoking the ethical responsibility of authors and readers, both readily succumb to the temptation of "falling back on the truth that works" (Loving, 2003). According to Bakhtin (1981), all utterances take on a dialogic simultaneity. In other words, all utterances continue to accrue meanings once they are in the dialogic sphere and are no longer the exclusive property of the speaking subject. Loving suggests that the move to use the life and work of others to support a particular ideological

perspective implies a kind of *chronocentrism*, or the tendency to take an event or existence from another time and judge it by current standards. Returning to the debate over Whitman's sexuality, how individuals construct and value gendered and sexual relationships emerges from historical intersections of social class, race, religion, and region (Sears, 1997). Middlebrook's chronicle of Billy Tipton's developing sexual identity also demonstrates the possibilities that life writing holds for exposing "shades of difference" (Fausto-Sterling, 2000, p. 3) against an ever-changing historical backdrop. Ironically, Whitman experienced difficulty publishing *Children of Adam* because at the time it was considered too candid about *heterosexism*. Evidently, the dialogic life of the subject far exceeds the temporal limits of a physical existence. As Bakhtin (1986) writes:

There is neither a first word nor a last word and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even *past* meanings, that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)—they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. (p. 170, emphasis in the original)

As one Bakhtinian scholar (Emerson, 2000) suggests, death becomes the ultimate aesthetic act as we leave our life as a text open to the continual interpretation, reconstruction, and consummation by others.

The Contribution of the Unconscious

The discussion thus far has focused on biography as a linguistic construction. Dialogism and even post-structural critique cannot help but implicate the linearity of language insofar as knowledge is either constructed or deconstructed through the

possibilities engendered by the word. Yet, I argue that the affective and non-verbal aspects of experience make a contribution to the emergence of knowledge through biographic writing and reading.

For example, celebrated children's author Maurice Sendak writes and illustrates to give expressive form to his inner psychological life. Having undergone Freudian analysis, Sendak's famous trilogy including *Where the Wild Things Are*, *In the Night Kitchen*, and *Outside Over There* constitute a healing fiction (Hillman, 1992, pp. 129-138) to animate the triumphant integration of the unconscious. *In the Night Kitchen* is Sendak's autobiographical account of the endless hours spent contemplating the imaginary descent to the depths of the underworld to return the next morning, nourished and refreshed, ready to face the trials and tribulations that dawn brings. John Cech (1995) explains that Sendak's psychic cooking derives its ingredients from the memories and artifacts of his Brooklyn childhood—a jumble of vintage jars, milk bottles, product coupons, and kitchen utensils create the surreal New York skyline against which a trio of Oliver Hardy bakers meet Mickey to accompany him on his psychic journey. In *Where the Wild Things Are*, one enters a primordial fantasy that conveys to both children and adults that narrating “the reality and urgency of their dream lives...[are] as important as and, in some ways, more important than those of their waking lives” (Lanes, 1980, p. 189). Mickey and Max, the stories' protagonists are Sendak's psychical tricksters moving between his conscious and unconscious to provide us with the kind of insights into the author's life that are seldom revealed in traditional biographies.

Sendak's works demonstrate the fictional and transformative possibilities of a biographical method that strives to make conscious the unconscious. Sendak's personal

catharsis places readers in a “living mythology” (Kerényi, 1969, p. 5) through its capacity to address our “deep inner problems, inner mysteries, inner thresholds of passage” (Robertson, xvii). The act of reading invites us to rewrite our own psychological narrative. Norman Holland (1980) suggests that when we interact with text, the identity re-creates itself, making the text part of our own psychic economy as we derive from it our own characteristics and patterns of desire and adaptation. He continues to explain that in the final stages of re-creating the identity through encounters with text, we feel the need to synthesize the experience and “transform the fantasy into a total experience of esthetic, moral, intellectual, or social coherence and significance” (p. 126). For Sendak, crafting word and image to animate the dream life is the productive path leading to self-knowledge.

Conclusion: Illuminating Educational Possibilities

Re-envisioning biography in the educational setting means teachers and students actively engaged in (auto)biographical inquiry. My investigation into biographic method suggests that the democratizing impulse to value the ordinary as much as the extraordinary and to include multiple perspectives in biographical writing can potentially inform the way teachers and students view how life histories are taught, read, and written. Brunner and Tally (1999) describe the shift from “neat history to messy history.” Neat history presents “a coherent, agreed-upon, linear narrative, and by delivery systems such as textbooks and lecture-and-slide presentations” (p. 40). Messy history, on the other hand, resembles the actual work done by biographers and historians. It encourages students to “pose speculative questions, browse in old archives, mull over old photographs, collect oral histories, propose speculative answers, argue and debate

interpretations with others, ...write and publish monographs, and even write historical [or biographical] fiction” (p. 41).

The chance to read multiple biographies about a particular subject provides teachers and students with the chance to recognize that the plurality of theoretical perspectives is representative of different interpretive communities, each with its particular operating ideology. Biography becomes a catalyst for engaging in critical forms of self-consciousness as opportunities to deconstruct the socio-historical situation of the author and subject enable students to examine their own membership in various interpretive communities. A post-structural approach to biography works to subvert prevailing power structures by uncovering the idiosyncratic, episodic, and individual phenomena that have been suppressed by dominant discourses. While it is likely that at some level biography will continue to remain as a vehicle for cultural reproduction, it is nevertheless, subject to interrogation.

Re-envisioning the role of biography in education would include opportunities for experimenting with genre. Returning to the example of Farra’s comic book, the option of responding to the philosophical theories described in Gaarder’s (1991) *Sophie’s World* through alternate text formats was extended to the entire class. Life writing and the process of historiographic metareflexion became the means through which a number of these teacher candidates dialogically engaged with the ideas of such thinkers as Plato, Aristotle, Descartes, Locke, and Rousseau. In addition to traditional scholarly papers, I received a collection of picture books, fictional diaries, a short story, talk show transcripts, and a sitcom script. Students used the in-depth knowledge gained through their investigation into the social and historical conditions of their subject to “fill in the

blanks.” At first, many young women in the class confessed to being uncomfortable with the prospect of challenging the patriarchal authority of Western philosophical thought. But as Wagner-Martin (1994) explains, engaging in the legitimate “blurring of genres” allows us to overcome “the difficulty of writing about subjects forced to be voiceless” (p. 163). In Farra’s case, she chose to give as much voice to her own personal thoughts as those of Rousseau. She crafted a piece that was as much *herstory* and it was *history*. More importantly, in the process of historiographic metareflexion, students and educators come face to face with the fallibility of the authoritative voice.

Within the field of educational research and teacher education, biography can serve to open new paths to interpretive understanding. In “The Educational Researcher as Artist Working Within,” arts-based educational researcher Patrick Slattery (2001) explains how the life of modern abstract painter Jackson Pollock serves as an example of an artist using the unconscious to direct his work. Slattery draws inspiration from Pollock to create an art installation exploring the regulation of the human body and human sexuality through schooling practices. For Slattery, his autobiographical works act as a medium for surfacing the unconscious and non-conscious aspects of experience. Influenced by his personal experience with Jungian analysis, Slattery, like Sendak recognizes the importance of the “cooking of psychic stuff that goes on in the night” (Hillman, 1979, p. 135), recording from time to time, the images and events that manifest themselves in dreams. He adds, deletes, and shapes his work in response to feelings and images released throughout the process of creating his art.

Citing Kristeva, Deborah Britzman (2006) argues that psychoanalysis is an invitation to narrate one’s story of learning and not learning and is necessary to making

“apparent the aesthetic conflicts needed for any representation and reflection on it to matter” (p. 2). For the educational researcher and teacher, penning personal mythologies embody more than cathartic possibilities. They confront problems that arise from contradiction or paradox, “something which is beyond the power of reason or rational logic to resolve” (Robertson, 1980).

Personal narratives are frequently used in teacher education as a self-reflective means of making sense of the teaching experience within the wider context of a postmodern world. In “Storying the Self: Life Politics and the Study of The Teacher’s Life and Work,” Goodson (1998) argues that “storying the self” is a potential force in enabling us to contend with the new conditions associated with the drastic repositioning of modern social life and modern social selves by the electronic media. He explains that the experience of social life and self “is more fluid, uncertain, and complicated than in previous epochs” (p.4). To engage in autobiographical reflection is to engage in a process of self-interrogation in order to locate oneself within the situational geography of modern life in which “identity is no longer an ascribed status or place in an established order; rather, identity is an ongoing project, most commonly an ongoing narrative project” (p. 4).

Rebecca Luce-Kapler (1999) also describes how autobiography and memoir are ways of initiating “performances of meaning that subjunctivize reality” (p. 267). She suggests that they offer writers a site of possibility—an *as if*—rather than a chronicle of settled certainties by broadening the possibilities for experiencing, acting, and creating. In her doctoral research, Luce-Kapler engaged in an action research project for the purpose of interpreting her experience writing in collectives of women writers. She observed how

fictionalization allowed the women to see how deeply they “imagined” their lives to be. Luce-Kapler’s work uncovered how she and the other writers came to recognize that subjectivity is constructed through discourses and that writing constitutes a means of shifting identity. She details the ways the women “re-imaged” their experiences before writing by choosing and organizing ideas in response to an imagined audience.

Liz Stanley (1992) suggests that while facticity has long been the cornerstone of biography and autobiography, both are artful enterprises in which the narrator selects, shapes, and produces an unnatural product. Bringing biography into a new light suggests that it is our capacity for reflection—the chance to see ourselves and others in multiple refracted images—that enables us to emerge with the knowledge that comes from facing the challenges brought on by the representational limits of language. Through biography, students build knowledge from the artifacts, objects, and narratives that constitute a personal archive. Consequently, writing and reading become a testimony of life lived and re-lived. In an educational context where knowledge is increasingly seen as standardized outcomes abstracted from experience, reading and writing biography might counteract the continual effect of attempts to operationalize perception and promote the kind of “productive ambiguity” (Eisner, 1997) and “literary identifications” (Sumara, 2002) which establish the self as the site of knowledge.

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