

# Geography matters: Spatiality, geography and auto/biography

John Barker and Emma Wainwright

## Introduction

Starting an argument can often be troublesome for us as academics, and deciding where to begin this section of the handbook was no exception. Inspiration came whilst reading Daniels and Nash's article *Lifepaths :Geography and Biography* (2004) which begins with the well-known rhyme:

*'The art of Biography  
Is different from Geography  
Geography is about Maps  
But Biography is about Chaps'* (cited in Daniels and Nash, 2004, p449)

Geography matters, and in this section of the handbook of auto/biography we build an argument which (aside from a much-needed feminist critique of 'chaps', a term symbolic of a more misogynistic historical period implying the world of Geography and maps was only accessible and understandable by men) systematically challenges the above statement. This section focuses on the theme of spatiality, exploring interconnections between geography and auto/biography, exploring how auto/biographies draw upon and can be navigated in geographical ways, we bring together academics from a range of disciplines, including Human Geography, Youth Studies, Sociology and Education. The first part of this section introduction considers four interrelated key concepts at the heart of Human Geography: space, place, scale and flow, exploring the relevance and use of these four concepts within auto/biographical research. Following an introduction to each of the subsequent chapters in this section, linkages between geography and spatiality are identified, discussed and theorised, illustrating some of the diverse interconnections between auto/biography and

spatiality.

### **Geography matters: Connecting geography and auto/biography**

Space is at the heart of geographical analysis. The social and the spatial (that is, landscapes, places, spaces, regions) are inseparably interconnected, in a process referred to as spatiality (Keith and Pile, 1993). The rhyme we began our discussion with implies that whilst geographers accord primacy to the spatial, those interested in auto/biography have focused more attention (either implicitly or explicitly) on the temporal. Auto/biographies are situated within historical *time* periods, and are classically seen to have (significantly in a *temporal* sense) a beginning, middle and end (McGeachen et al, 2012).

However such distinctions between geography and auto/biography are becoming increasingly blurred. Auto/biography often considers mundane, ordinary lives (Garner, 2004), exploring the experiences and identities of a diverse range of subaltern, marginalised social groups (Gale and Gardner, 2004, Schur, 2002). Identity is constructed partly through space, and therefore '*identity is a profoundly geographical concept*' (Horton and Kraftl, 2014, p160). Baena's (2007, pvii) assertion that '*life writing must be located within specific historical and social contexts*' needs to be extended with the additional recognition of *spatial* contexts.

A range of Geographers (see Roche, 2011) and others (Hipchen and Chansky, 2017) have begun to consider intersections between spatiality and auto/biography, for example, in exploring health (Milligan et al, 2011), mobility (Rau & Sattlegger 2018) and urban life (Valentine and Sadgrove, 2014). Historical geographers have adopted auto/biographical approaches to explore a range of historical time periods and experiences (see Philo et al,

2015, McGeachen et al, 2012, Naylor, 2008) as well as the contested historical auto/biographies of academic geographers (Wainwright et al, 2014) and geography itself (Johnston, 2005, Driver and Baigent, 2007). The spatial has been implicit in many auto/biographical projects - for example Hipchen and Chansky's (2017) article '*Looking forward: the futures of auto/biography*' uses the word 'space' 48 times, though arguably the term is rather fuzzy and undefined. Greater recognition of the links between spatiality and auto/biographers is beneficial, since '*the arts of geography and biography appear closely connected: life histories are also, to coin a phrase, life geographies*' (Daniels and Nash, 2004, p450). We now outline some ways in which this endeavour has begun, though due to limited space, we can only briefly allude to a range of complex debates (e.g. Cameron, 2012 explores radically different post-structural and post-human connections between geography and auto/biography). Whilst geographers have long explored a range of spatial-related concepts (see Johnston and Sidaway, 2015), this chapter briefly explores four key interrelated and often hotly contested concepts - *space, place, scale and flow*.

**Space:** In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, quantitative geographers (influenced by positivist, scientific approaches) conceptualised space as an inert, physically measurable, politically neutral and bounded landscape or container for social action (Johnston and Sidaway, 2015, Horton and Kraftl, 2014). Since the 1970s, a long, diverse tradition of geographers, including feminist, critical, cultural, post-structural and post-humanist geographers (for more exploration of these wide-ranging distinct viewpoints see Johnston, and Sidaway, 2015, Cameron, 2012) have critiqued this assertion (Thrift, 2009, Gibson-Graham, 2002). Rather, space is *generative*, helping to produce personal experience, social life and culture (Horton and Kraftl, 2014, Haraway, 2008, Fuchs, 2002). For example, Foucault's work on institutions (Foucault, 1977) has been re-analysed by geographers to show how spatial

configurations within prisons help to shape and generate behaviour (Philo, 2001, Philo et al, 2015), whilst more recent post-humanist theorisations consider spatial relations between the human and non-human, and how ‘matter matters’ in the production of space and social life (Cameron, 2012, Haraway, 2008, Barad, 2007). Thus a geographical perspective can map the role of space(s) within the production of auto/biographies. Fuch (2002) prompts us to consider this through two questions:

*‘in what ways do land, ocean, and therefore space, shape our lives and our memories? In what ways do our narratives about land, ocean and space impact our other narratives, our autobiographies and biographies?’* (p.v)

Given our earlier assertion that space is not simply inert, telling the ‘*spatial stories of lives*’ (McGeachen et al, 2012, p170) can help to explore how auto/biographies can be laden with a range of spatial dynamics, contradictions, tensions and socio-spatial inequalities, enabling us to think through the workings of power. For example, Schur’s (2002) analysis of Patricia Williams’ 1991 autobiography links her individual account to structural processes of discrimination, ethnocentrism and racism within the very public spaces of retail shops and advertising billboards. However, some post-human approaches critique connections between personal accounts, space and broader social issues of power, discourse and inequality (Gibson-Graham, 2008). Rather, these focus on interactions and assemblages between the human, materiality and space in the generation of auto/biographies (Cameron, 2012, McGeachan et al, 2012, Naylor, 2008). For example, Jackson’s (2010) life history interviews with food producers and retailers note the significance of non-human ‘materialities’ (such as animal flesh, production lines, packaging) which help to shape auto/biographies around food production and retail spaces.

**Place:** Place has gained increasing prominence amongst geographers. Places are neither natural nor given- they are generated through social processes. Places can be real (that is, a mappable point in space), virtual or imagined (Holloway and Hubbard, 2001). Places are usually characterised by their locality, particularness and uniqueness, producing distinctive meanings and ‘a sense of place’ (Massey, 1994). In an age of plural and hybrid identities (Plummer, 2003), discussions around place(s), either as directly experienced or as sites for meaning, are often central in/to the production of distinctive auto/biographies. As Cresswell 2004 states:

*“place is also a way of seeing, knowing and understanding the world. When we look at the world as a world of places we see different things. We see attachments and connections between people and places. We see worlds of meaning and experience”* (Cresswell, 2004, p11).

Since *‘life writing is invariably place writing’* (Fuchs, 2002, p. vi), stories and identities are always ‘placed’- we talk about places and attach meaning to them as (for example) places of violence, fear, love, conflict, safety, oppression and liberation. For example, Philo et al (2015) discuss how Scottish Highlands residents construct their rural communities as places of surveillance (particularly around who sees, who is seen, what is concealed or denied), specifically in relation to mental health issues.

Post-humanist attention goes beyond how places are given meaning by individuals, to incorporate how the non-human also generates place-making (Barad, 2009). By following ‘things and their stories’ we can explore how the *‘material practices and relations through which ‘things’ matter’* (Cameron, 2012, p578) and become productive in generating experiences of place, and *‘biographies of objects and places’* (Naylor, 2008, p269). For example, Wylie (2005) analyses his walk along England’s South West Coast Path,

discussing how physical landscape combines with his own human experience, generating a range of affective senses and emotions (e.g. exhilaration, anxiety) to create a sense of place whilst walking.

**Scale:** Geographers have, in an increasingly globalised world, also shown great interest in the concept of scale. This concept provides an opportunity for geographical analysis to go beyond individual places and spaces, to explore other scales of experience, from focusing upon the small scale spaces of the body, home, school and local, to consideration of the larger scale of the urban, regional, national, supranational and global (Cresswell, 2004, Herod, 2009). Scale is an essential geographical analytical tool for three reasons: firstly, for investigating human agency, power and relations between people and places at a range of different levels (Horton and Kraftl, 2014); secondly, for linking together different local places (Cameron, 2012); and, lastly, for exploring whether and how relations between people and places at one scale might be influenced by processes occurring at other scales, such as globalisation (see Holloway and Hubbard, 2001). Different metaphors have been used to conceptualise relationships and connections between spatial scales, including ladders, concentric circles, nesting dolls and networks, each offering different ways of thinking about scale, connections, power and agency (Herod, 2009).

Scale also helps us to rethink other key geographical concepts; rather than envisioning space and places as bounded, the interconnections suggested by scale leads to a re-conceptualisation of space and place as more open, porous and connected (Thrift, 2009, Castree, 2009). For example Massey's (1994) classic 'Progressive sense of place' describes Kilburn in North London as a unique place precisely because of its interactions and connections with other places and processes at a variety of spatial scales.

The geographical concept of scale illuminates how auto/biographies assign meaning to personal experience, social life, power and agency at a variety of levels of social life. For example, at the intimate, minute and small scale, bodies can be seen as significant places through which accounts are generated, especially for those who experience illness/ disability (Philo, 2001, Milligan et al, 2011). Embodied accounts can re-authorise one's own subjectivity and contest and challenge professional, public and oversimplified notions of difference and (dis)ability (see for example Mintz, 2016, and Young 2016 on AIDS memoirs). Working at a larger spatial scale, auto/biographies often highlight the importance (and often complexity) of national identity and the significance of territory, and auto/biographies are often inscribed with broader processes such as globalisation and post-colonialism (Hornung, 2016).

**Flow:** As well as focusing upon space, place and scale, geographers and others have become more interested in flow, movement and mobility in an ever-mobile world. This concern is manifest in many forms (Urry, 1999): the flow of commodities; the rapid exchange of ideas, information and news via social media and the internet; the day to day mobility of individuals (Massey, 1994, Urry, 1999) and longer migration and movement (Hornung, 2016); and whether flow and mobility is chosen or forced (Hipchen and Chansky, 2017; Fuchs 2002).

Flow, mobility and movement increasingly feature as central to auto/biographies (Hipchen and Chansky, 2017). Migration generates accounts replete with metaphors and experiences of flow and mobility, including around displacement, '(extra)territoriality' and feeling 'out of place' (Hornung, 2016). Valentine and Sadgrove's (2014) research focuses upon the significance of mobility and immobility, illuminating issues around power and socio-spatial

inequality (particularly around ethnicity, disability and sexual identity). The contemporary prevalence of flow and circulation lead Hipchen and Chansky (2017: 145) to see mobility as a key future trend within auto/biography, commenting to how the *'the future is in motion'*. With this in mind, this section of the Handbook responds to Hipchen and Chansky's (2017: 153) urge for auto/biography to incorporate space and time:

*'we are now talking in auto/biographical studies about the movement of people as transit, a concern at first glance about space (the nation space, the space of an ocean, the border space). What if it were treated as concerning time? What if in looking at the spaces of life narrative, we thought about them as spacetime... but imagine too, the effect of rethinking spacetime in/as narrative, or compressing what we see as the space of the self into what we see as the time of the self?*

As this suggests, thinking about space, as well as time, can be a powerful analytical tool to make sense of auto/biographical accounts.

### **Introduction to the chapters**

Cullen et al's chapter focuses on the geography of care and caring within student carers auto/biographies. In doing so, they offer new ways of thinking about intersections between time, space, care and identity. Using Lefebvre's rhythmanalysis and a range of feminist work exploring gendered dynamics of care, they map the spatial and temporal rhythms of women students who have caring responsibilities. These are explored both in terms of everyday and longer term rhythms. The chapter explores how participants' auto/biographies identify how carers skilfully negotiate the complex, shifting and multiply-intersecting rhythms across space and time to undertake care and also to construct identities as both carer and student. Student carer auto/biographies, replete with notions of juggling care, study, care across time and space operate in contradistinction to dominant neo-liberal discourses which produce University spaces for and identities as 'autonomous', 'independent' learners. Whilst



Lefebvre offers insight into exploring the spatial rhythms of care, a more critical feminist analysis reminds us of the great stress, burden and cost that many student carers face in engaging in their responsibilities within contemporary late modernity and broader economic realities.

Wainwright et al draw on two different research projects with social housing residents to explore the spatialities implicit in auto/biographical narratives of encounter. They argue that any focus on auto/biographies is inherently relational; auto/biographies are shaped in relation to things, people and place. They argue that auto/biographies are shaped by embodied personal encounters and relationality – to our homes and families; to social housing agencies and officers; and to wider discourses of welfare, dependency and individual responsabilisation. Auto/biographical accounts are impacted by *where* we are and *who* we are, with the urgency of place experienced through the threat of displacement, loss and dislocation. Through this chapter, the immediacy of the spatial is highlighted, allowing the everyday complexities and intricacies of research participants' lives to emerge.

Hayes' chapter focuses the auto/biographical debate on ethical and moral tensions implicit in the doing of research. Here, the focus of the encounter is between researcher and researched and the auto/biographical narrative of the former. The research project that this argument forms around relates to young people's use and experience of public space, notably their relationship with nature. The power of the research and the researcher underpins this chapter, and Hayes argues that recognition of the *powerful* requires the need to be *careful*. That is, in writing about ourselves and our experiences, we must pay attention to the complex ways in which thinking, seeing and hearing shape auto/biographical research.

### **Emerging themes: Spatiality and auto/biography**

Each of the three chapters in this section offer distinct contributions to an understanding of intersections between space, Geography and Auto/biography, illustrating how life writing is indeed interlinked with place writing (Fuch, 2002). In doing so, the chapters employ a wide range of different epistemological and theoretical approaches (including critical realism, post-structuralism, feminism and post-humanism) and disciplinary insights (from education, geography, youth work) that can be used to further analyse space and auto/biography.

In different ways, each of the chapters illuminates the importance of space. Each chapter maps how auto/biographies are situated within, draw upon and become embodied in/about/through different kinds of spaces (primarily those of home, education, employment and public space). Auto/biographical accounts construct these spaces as important places, with significant meanings and attachments (Cresswell, 2004). The chapters link individual accounts to broader social processes at a variety of spatial scales. For example, each paper considers social identities within space (as carer, student, social housing resident, young person) and explore connections, relations and interactions with others (between researcher and participants, student carer and professionals, and social housing tenants and officers). The accounts also connect to a range of broader socio-economic processes and policies, for example, those shaping higher education, housing and welfare. Thus, each chapter explores how auto/biographies always involve belonging, connection and enmeshment between the self and other people, processes and places (Hipchen and Chansky, 2017).

Building upon these insights, each chapter also plots spatial expressions of emotion and affect; whilst Cullen et al explore the stress and burden of student carers' juggling responsibilities and identities, Wainwright et al consider the vulnerabilities of housing and

accommodation, and Hayes reflects on challenges and anxieties around researching public space. Similarly, each chapter considers spatial expressions of agency, inequality and power. Whilst Cullen et al debate the agency of student carers who are clearly also experiencing inequality and oppression, similarly Wainwright et al explore inequality and struggle experienced by social housing residents. Furthermore, the papers highlight complex configurations of the relatedness of social life; relationality is not just simply between humans, but also between the human and the non-human. Space, material and matter (as University spaces, homes, public space) are not simply the backdrop for social action, rather, reflecting post-humanist approaches, each chapter prompts further consideration of the generative effects of space (Fuch, 2002).

Thirdly, each paper offers insight into methodological and reflective engagements with space and auto/biography and how reflection and writing ourselves back into our accounts constructs 'space' for thinking about auto/biographical research. Hayes firmly focuses upon the reflective spaces created by auto/biographical research. By talking through their own care experiences, Cullen et al discuss how auto/biographical analysis can be simultaneously shaped by and help to shape (as writers) our own positionalities, academic interests and current engagements. Wainwright et al reflect on the physical dislocation of researcher and research participant in the conducting of research that draws on the very details of lived experience and embodied relations.

Therefore, we end this introduction with a hopeful note that this section prompts further deliberation, discussion and critical consideration of the multiple intersections between space and auto/biographies. In so doing, we find a more comprehensive understanding of auto/biography that necessarily combines the temporal with the spatial for more critical

inquiry.

## References

- Baena, R. (2007) 'Introduction: Transculturating Auto/Biography: New forms of life writing', in Baena, R. (ed.) *Transculturating Auto/Biography: Forms of life writing*. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. vii-xii.
- Barad, K. (2007) 'Meeting the universe halfway; realism and social constructivism without contradiction', in Nelson, L. and Nelson, J. (eds.) *Feminism, Science and the Philosophy of Science*. Dordrecht: Kluwer Academic, pp. 161-194.
- Cameron, E. (2012) 'New geographies of story and storytelling', *Progress in Human Geography*, 36(5), pp. 573-592.
- Castree, N. (2009) 'Place: Connections and boundaries in an interdependent world', in Clifford, N., Holloway, S., Rice, S. and Valentine, G. (eds.) *Key Concepts in Geography*. London: Sage, pp. 153-172.
- Chansky, R. (2017) 'Introduction', in Chansky, R. and Hipchen, E. (eds.) *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-4.
- Daniels, S. and Nash, C. (2004) 'Lifepaths: Geography and Biography', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 30(3), pp. 449-458.
- Driver, F. and Baigent, E. (2007) 'Biography and the history of geography: A response to Ron Johnston', *Progress in Human Geography*, 3(1), pp. 101-106.
- Foucault, M. (1977) *Discipline And Punish: the Birth of the Prison*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- Fuchs, M. (2002) 'Autobiography and Geography: Introduction', *Biography*, 25(1), pp. iv-xi.
- Gale, M. and Gardner, V. (2004) 'Introduction: Women, theatre and performance:

Auto/biography and performance’, in Gale, M. and Gardner, V. (eds.) *Auto/biography and identity: Women, theatre and performance*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 1-8.

Gardner, V. (2004) ‘The three nobodies: Autobiographical strategies in the work of Alma Ellerslie, Kitty Marion and Ina Rozant’, in Gale, M. and Gardner, V. (eds) *Auto/biography and identity: Women, theatre and performance*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, pp. 10-38.

Gibson-Graham, J.K. (2008) ‘Diverse economies: Performative practices for “other worlds”’, *Progress in Human Geography*, 32, pp. 613-632.

Haraway, D. (1997) *Modest\_witness@\_millenium.FemaleMan©\_meets\_OncoMouse*™: *Feminism and Techoscience*. New York: Routledge.

Haraway, D. (2008) *When species meet*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Herod, A. (2009) ‘Scale: the local and the global’, in Clifford, N., Holloway, S., Rice, S. and Valentine, G. (eds.) *Key Concepts in Geography*. London: Sage, pp. 217-235.

Hipchen, E. and Chansky, R. (2017) ‘Looking forward: the futures of auto/biography’, *a/b: Auto/biography studies*, 32(2), pp. 139-157.

Holloway, S. and Hubbard, P. (2001) *People and place: the extraordinary geographies of everyday life*. Harlow: Pearson.

Hornung, A. (2016) ‘Out of place: Extraterritorial existence and autobiography’, in Chansky, R. and Hipchen, E. (eds.) *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 183-187.

Horton, J. and Kraftl, P. (2014) *Cultural Geographies: An Introduction*. London: Routledge.

Jackson, P. (2010) ‘Food stories: Consumption in an age of anxiety’, *Cultural Geographies*, 17 (2), pp. 147-165.

Johnston, R. and Sidaway, J. (2015) *Geography and Geographers: Anglo-American*

*Geography since 1945 Seventh Edition*. London: Routledge.

Johnston, R. (2005) 'Learning our history from our pioneers: UK academic geographers in the *Oxford dictionary of national biography*', *Progress in Human Geography*, 29, pp. 651-67.

Massey, D. (1994) *Space, place, and gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

McGeachan, C., Forsyth, I. and Hasty, W. (2012) 'Certain subjects? Working with biography and life-writing in Historical Geography', *Historical Geography*, 40, pp. 169-185.

Milligan C., Kearns, R. and Kyle, R. (2011) 'Unpacking stored and storied knowledge: elicited biographies of activism in mental health', *Health and Place*, 17 (1), pp. 7-16.

Mintz, S. (2016) 'Transforming the tale: the auto/body/ographies of Nancy Mairs', in Chansky, R. and Hipchen, E. (eds.) *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 130-138.

Naylor, S. (2008) 'Historical Geography: Geographies and historiographies', *Progress in Human Geography*, 32(2), pp. 265-274.

Olney, J. (2016) 'Autobiography and the cultural moment: a thematic, historical and bibliographical introduction', in Chansky, R. and Hipchen, E. (eds.) *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 5-14.

Philo, C. (2001) 'Accumulating Populations: Bodies, Institutions and Space', *International Journal of Population Geography*, 7(6), pp. 473-90.

Philo, C., Parr, H. and Burns, N. (2015) 'The rural panopticon', *Journal of Rural Studies*, 51, pp. 230-239.

Rau, H. and Sattlegger, L. (2018) 'Shared journeys, linked lives: a relational-biographical approach to mobility practices', *Mobilities*, 13(1), pp. 45-63.

Plummer, K. (2003) *Intimate Citizenship: Private Decisions and Public Dialogues*. Seattle: University of Washington Press.

- Smith, S. (2016) 'The impact of critical theory on the study of autobiography: Marginality, gender and autobiographical practice', in Chansky, R. and Hipchen, E. (eds.) *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 82-88.
- Schur, R. (2002) 'Critical race theory and the limits of auto/biography: Reading Patricia Williams's *the Alchemy of Race and Rights* through/ against Postcolonial Theory', *Biography*, 25(3), pp. 455- 476.
- Thrift, N. (2009) 'Space: The fundamental stuff of Geography', in Clifford, N., Holloway, S., Rice, S. and Valentine, G. (eds.) *Key Concepts in Geography*. London: Sage, pp. 85-96.
- Urry, J. (1999) *Sociology Beyond Societies: Mobilities for the Twenty-First Century*. London Routledge.
- Valentine, G. and Sadgrove, J. (2014) 'Biographical Narratives of Encounter: The Significance of Mobility and Emplacement in Shaping Attitudes towards Difference', *Journal of Urban Studies*, 51(9), pp. 1979-1994.
- Wainwright, E., Barker, J., Ansell, N., Buckingham, S., Hemming, P. and Smith, F. (2014) 'Geographers out of place: institutions, (inter)disciplinarity and identity', *Area* 46 (4) pp. 410-417.
- Wylie, J. (2005) 'A single day's walking: narrating self and landscape on the South West Coast Path', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30(2), pp. 234-247.
- Young, H. (2016) 'Memorializing memory: Marlon Riggs and life writing', in Chansky, R. and Hipchen, E. (eds.) *The Routledge Auto/Biography Studies Reader*. London: Routledge, pp. 139-144.