

**Action as narration/narration as action:  
reading Maud Gonne's auto/biographical writings as marginalized  
knowledges of the historiographical operation**

Maria Tamboukou, University of East London, UK  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6380-4415>

*Abstract:* Feminist historians have long argued that women have been absent from history, and recovering their position in the historical discourse has been one of the main projects of academic feminism for the last 40 years. But while women's marginal position as historical subjects has been recognized and addressed their actual contribution to the historiographical operation is still a grey area that needs further research and exploration. Narratives are at the heart of how women have attempted to write history and it is this marginalized area that I address in this paper by focusing on Maud Gonne's controversial autobiography, *Servant of the Queen*, as well as on moments of her correspondence with her life-long friend William Butler Yeats. Gonne's auto/biographical narratives are read as discursive effects of fierce power relations at play, but are also theorised as recorded processes wherein Gonne as the author of her political story emerges from the margins of knowledge production and actively inserts herself in the discourses of Irish history.

**Key words:** action, narration, historiographical operation, Maude Gonne, Hannah Arendt

**Introduction: Stories and histories**

'Which of her forms has shown her substance right?'<sup>1</sup> William Butler Yates wonders in his poem 'A Bronze Head', inspired by a bust of Maud Gonne's that he had seen in the Municipal Gallery of Modern Art in Dublin. By the time this poem was written, both Yates and Gonne had grown old and their relationship had already passed through heaven and hell. Yet, they had both become an integral part and a *sine qua non* element of the history of Ireland, the country they both passionately loved and fought for, although in their own ways and from different grounds. Of course, their story has been told and written from a range of angles and perspectives, in numerous volumes, epic and romantic verses, history books, literary essays and theatrical plays. But as Hannah Arendt has written 'the world is full of stories just waiting to be told (1968, 97). In expanding the Arendtian proposition on the plurality and richness of stories we live with, I have further suggested that indeed the world is full of stories not just waiting to be told, but also to be written, retold read and reread (Tamboukou 2015, 37). As Roland Barthes has eloquently put it: 'Those who fail to reread are obliged to read the same story everywhere' (1974, 15).

In recent years, there has been a great deal of interest in narrative research in the human and social sciences and there is today a rich body of literature, which is burgeoning and developing. 'The study of narrative forces the social sciences to develop new theories, new methods and new ways of talking about self and society' Norman Denzin has argued (2000, xi) Of course, approaches vary, according to the disciplinary field they are located, but also in relation to the theoretical and epistemological frameworks they draw on. Moreover, narratives are at the heart of how women have attempted to write history and it is this marginalized area in knowledge production and in the teaching of history that I address in this paper by focusing on Gonne's controversial autobiography, *Servant of the Queen* (1994), as well as on moments of her correspondence with her life-long friend Yeats (MacBride and Jeffares 1992). Gonne's auto/biographical narratives are read as discursive effects of fierce power relations at play, but are also theorised as recorded processes wherein Gonne as the author of her political story emerges from the margins of knowledge production and actively inserts herself and her actions in the discourses of Irish history. The paper unfolds in two parts: first I consider the force of narratives in making spatial, material and political connections and then I consider the importance of these writings in what Michel de Certeau has theorised as 'the historiographical operation' (1998).

### **Places, narratives, politics**

Spaces and places matter in narrative research: they create conditions of possibility for stories to emerge, unfold, understood and analysed. In my work, I have always been drawn to narratives of space, of how we tell and write stories about the meaning and significance of real and imagined places in the context of what Edward Soja (1996) has delineated as 'the inherent spatiality of human life'. According to de Certeau, 'stories carry out a labour that constantly transforms places into spaces or spaces into places' (1988, 118). Narrative research is therefore instrumental in discussions revolving around the spatial constitution of human beings within the matrix of parallel configurations of spaces and places.

Speaking of the power of space narratives then, this paper develops out of a keynote speech that I was asked to give at the 1st Irish Conference on Narrative Inquiry, at the Institute of Technology, Sligo, on April 10, 2014. In preparation for this conference, it was impossible not to think about Yeats and Gonne, as well as the way Irish landscapes saturate their correspondence:

This evening at about a quarter to 7 o'clock I was driving across the Gap by Glen Ersk lake into your beautiful county of Sligo. I thought I would get you to come and show it to me, so *I went to you*<sup>2</sup> and putting my hand on your shoulder asked you to come with me. We stood by that beautiful lake and the twilight shadows (in MacBride and Jeffares 1992, 89)

This is an extract from a letter Gonne wrote to Yeats on March 16, 1898 from

Tubbercurry, one of the places she had visited after her return from the US, organising nursing for those suffering from famine fever, arranging school feeding, but also promoting her plans for a fish curing plant as an alternative food source. As her letters to Yeats reveal, she was deeply concerned with the startling conditions of poverty along the western seaboard: 'The poverty here is AWFUL' (in MacBride and Jeffares 1992, 86), she had written in February 1898 from Belmullet in County Mayo.

Places do things to us: they anchor memories, evoke feelings, unleash narrative forces and incite action, both real and imagined. As Alfred Whitehead has rightly put it, the world does not emerge from our perception, we rather emerge from the world and we feel it. (1985, 88) Thus although I had never written about Gonne or Yates before, the idea of going to Sligo initiated trains of thought that made me look back into my work and retrace my intellectual encounters with Gonne's persona. It was indeed while working with Gwen John's letters, a Welsh expatriate artist living and working in Paris in the beginning of the twentieth century, that I had first 'met' Gonne as an epistolary figure (see Tamboukou 2010). The link between the two women was John Quinn, a New York based Irish American lawyer, patron of the arts, but also a firm financial supporter of Gonne's work, most importantly of her campaigns to feed the schoolchildren in Ireland. Having known both women Quinn had repeatedly insisted that they should meet. This is what he had written to Maud on March 2, 1914:

Would you care to know Miss Gwen John, the sister of Augustus John the artist? I have never met her. John tells me she is a mystic and more or less a recluse but I *do* know that she is a fine artist. I am sure you would like her work but of course I shall not write to her about you unless you should care to meet her. (in Londrville 1999, 122)

Although it took a year for the two women to finally meet, they immediately liked each other: 'She was very beautiful and charming' John wrote to Quinn in May 1915 after meeting Gonne<sup>3</sup>; 'I liked Miss John very much and hope to see more of her when I return to Paris [...] She has a quiet and sincere way of looking at things, I liked very much',<sup>4</sup> Gonne wrote to Quinn in July 1915. Quinn had probably felt their shared interests, most importantly their mystic trends and their passion for painting, despite their many differences.

I had therefore 'met' Gonne before, but it was the Sligo conference that inspired me to return to her and fully immerse myself in reading her political autobiography, her numerous biographies, as well as her letters to Yeats and Quinn. This is the beauty of narrative research: it can take you in places you had never thought about.

There are a number of themes already implicated in the story of how I met Gonne's auto/biographical writings: the pluralistic and relational character of stories that bring forward the unpredictability and contingencies of life in general and human relations in particular; the strong affects and bonds stories can generate and sustain, but also the way biographical and autobiographical

stories are entangled in the constitution of what feminist philosopher Adriana Cavarero (2000) has defined as the desire of the *narratable* self to listen to her story being told. It is through stories that we enter the web of human relations, Hannah Arendt has argued and it is through narration that not only do we create meaning in our lives, but also understand the world we emerge from, and by sharing meaning we act in concert in-the-world-with-others. As Julia Kristeva has beautifully put it about Arendt's understanding of narratives within the political: 'action as narration and narration as action are the only things that can partake in the most "specifically human" aspects of life' (2001b, 41).

It is the fold between narration and action that I take up now, as I follow the story of Gonne's first public speech, which would become a refrain in her agonistic politics throughout her life. It was June 1890 and Maud had been persuaded by Tim Harrington, MP, head of the National League to campaign against the English government at a by-election in Barrow-in-Furness, in Cumbria:

Next morning Harrington and I were on the boat for Liverpool [...] Some of the election committee met us at the station and said a meeting was in progress [...] Harrington insisted that I should come to the meeting as it would make canvassing easier if I were seen on the platform. I was soon seated on the right hand of the elderly chairman, facing an audience of 1,500 English people. The chairman asked if I would speak next. 'I am not a speaker, I have come to help canvass.' I did not know it, but he was stone-deaf, and to my horror I heard him announce in a loud voice: 'Miss Gonne, a young Irish lady, will now address you' [...] I got up: 'Ladies and Gentlemen', my voice, owing to my stage training, rang out alarmingly clear, then I stopped. 'Tell them about the evictions you have seen', prompted Harrington, and I began. It was easy telling a straightforward story of the scenes which I had witnessed and which were so terribly in my mind. I told of the old couple driven out of the house they had built fifty years ago; of the woman with her one-day-old baby left on the roadside, of the little children trying in vain to kindle a fire in the rain; of the desolation of the overcrowded workhouse and the separated families. I forgot where I was and then suddenly I remembered and I became aware of a dead silence, of thousands of eyes looking at me and my mind a complete blank. I stopped in the middle of a sentence, my knees began to shake and I sat down and I began to cry; I would have given worlds to hide, to disappear. (Gonne 1994, 120)

This is no doubt a moving story on many levels of interest, that I won't have time to expand on given the limitations of this paper. What I want to do instead is to use this story of Gonne's first public speech to highlight the power of stories to ground abstractions, flesh out ideas and thus create a milieu where thought can emerge from the actuality of the recounted event. As Arendt has forcefully put it:

I have always believed that, no matter how abstract our theories may sound or how consistent our arguments appear, there are incidents and stories behind them, which, at least for ourselves, contain as in a nutshell the full meaning of whatever we have to say.' Thought itself [...] arises out of the actuality of incident, and incidents of living experience must remain its guideposts by which it takes its bearing if it is not to lose itself. (Arendt 1960, 1)

What is particularly interesting in the last sentence of this extract that comes from the paper 'Action and the Pursuit of Happiness' that Arendt delivered at the Annual meeting of the American Political Science Association in New York, in September 1960, is the link between the cognitive and political aspects of storytelling: 'incidents of living experience must remain the guideposts of thought' Arendt argues, otherwise thought is in danger of 'losing itself'. By further referring to 'incidents of living experience', it is not just stories but life histories or biographies that Arendt highlights as important in how meaning emerges, ideas are shared and action is reactivated. For Arendt, Kristeva notes, story making fulfils life as it contributes to the pursuit of both meaning and action: 'the revelatory character of action as well as the ability to produce stories and become historical, which together form the very source from which meaningfulness springs into and illuminates human existence' (Arendt 1998, 324).

Arendt's understanding of the biographical discourse is equally unique however. Life histories generate meaning, but this meaning is only accessible to the tellers and listeners of the stories, not to their protagonists. This is because the actors are already in 'the middle of the pack, where there is pushing, shoving and mutual constraint' as the mathematician and philosopher Whitehead once put it to his students using a metaphor taken from the world of rugby (Stengers 2001, 468). Human beings live their lives in 'the fleeting now' whose meaning always evades them; they thus need others to tell the stories of their actions, and these stories consequently become archives for historical understanding. Moreover, political actors can never control their actions as the latter are entangled in the web of human relations and are therefore conditioned by 'innumerable conflicting wills and intentions' (Arendt 1998, 184). Consider for example the accidental fact of the deaf chairman, which ended up in Gonne's first public speech. Consequently, it falls to the historian, the biographer or the storyteller, who is external to the sphere of action, to seek for meaning by telling or writing a story about the actor, her words and her deeds. Here it is important to remember, Kristeva notes, that given that stories keep on unfolding, the revealed *who* is subsequently dismantled, 'dispersed into "strangenesses" within the infinity of narrations' (2001a, 27). Moreover, although life and history are full of actors and storytellers, the authors of life histories can never be pinned down:

That every individual life between birth and death can eventually be told as a story with beginning and end is the prepolitical and prehistorical condition of history, the great story without beginning and

end. But the reason why each human life tells its story and why history ultimate becomes the storybook of mankind, with many actors and speakers and yet without any tangible authors, is that both are the outcome of action (Arendt 1998, 184).

Although however, Arendt has argued that life is a story that can only be told after one's death within the discursive limits of biography, Cavarero has suggested that both biography and autobiography are constitutive processes of the *narratable* self: 'biography and autobiography are bound together in a single desire [...] they result from an existence that belongs to the world, in the relational and contextual form of self-exposure to others' (2000, 33-34). This philosophical proposition seems to be deployed in Gonne's autobiographical extract above. In writing her story at the end of her life, Gonne seeks to understand the meaning of a life that had evaded her while in action, 'in the rush of immediate transition' (Whitehead 1985, 129).

It is this idea of a life lived as action that can be narrativised and shared by others, who did not necessarily participate in the narrated action, that makes the Arendtian conceptualization of narratives so compelling and so relevant to her overall work as a political philosopher. Indeed, Arendt's philosophical take on biography suggests that 'we need to find a discourse, a *lexis* that can answer the question "Who are you?" [...] *Narrative* will fulfill this role, the invented story that accompanies history' (Kristeva 2001a, 15). What is exactly the relationship between the 'invented story' and history? In Arendt's thought, Kristeva notes, there is a discrepancy between the actor and what constitutes a heroic action. As already discussed above, actors make history only if their action is recorded and becomes memorable and this memorialization is the role of narratives: 'One immortalizes one's self by becoming a "*who*" that acts within political space, thus giving rise only to a memorable narrative.' (Kristeva 2001a, 19) How is this memory constituted? 'It is *spectators* who complete the story in question, and they do so through *thought*, thought that follows upon the *act*. This is a completion that takes place through *evoked memory*, without which there is nothing to tell' (Kristeva 2001a, 16).

In this light, Kristeva further comments, life story and history are bound together in Arendt's philosophy in an Aristotelian mode that 'differs, in its originality, from both the formalist theories of narrativity and the theories of Paul Ricoeur' (Kristeva 2001a, 15). Why is that? Arendt is not concerned with the narratologists' obsession on narrative coherence and she actually thinks that stories should reveal what sequence often covers: 'the story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain the unbearable sequence of sheer happenings' (1968, 104). Rather than following the imperative of the beginning, middle and end of the Aristotelian *Poetics*, Arendt's interest therefore lies with the importance of narrative agency and closure in Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics*. As Kristeva pithily notes in this philosophical text 'the art of narrative resides in the ability to condense the action into an exemplary moment, to extract it from the continuous flow of time, and reveal a *who*' (2001a, 16). This interest in freezing the exemplary moment wherein

human beings reveal themselves to the world through action and speech, also differs from Ricoeur's theories that focus on the interrelation between temporality and narrativity, the importance that he assigns to the plot in the formation of narrative identity and the way he dismisses the 'now' as concealing the 'true constitution of time' (Ricoeur 1981, 166). Gonne's story of her first speech is such an exemplary moment, I argue, revealing the 'whoness' of the doer, 'the wildness' that Yeats had admired so much. It goes without saying that *Servant of the Queen* is a carefully edited version of Gonne's political life. But there is nothing exceptional here. Elsewhere in my work, I have used the notion of 'political autobiographics' to configure the way women political activists have shaped and moulded their autobiographies (Tamboukou 2016).

In employing the notion of 'political autobiographics' my point is that Gonne's autobiography is read and conceptualized within the polyvalent network of discursive limitations and constraints that have created conditions of possibility for this particular narrative to emerge. But as I have elsewhere written auto/biographical narratives are effects of discourse at the same time of being themselves sites of discursive production, as well as 'narrative assemblages of technologies of the self' (Tamboukou 2015). Seen from this angle, in writing her autobiography at the end of her life, Gonne remembers and recognizes herself as a subject and in doing so, she actively rewrites herself in the discourse of History. Her autobiography is an assemblage of auto/biographical fragments, carefully selected and inserted into the plot of her life story.

In thus highlighting the importance of stories in creating meaning, Arendt makes the distinction between revealing meaning and defining it, thus pointing to the impossibility of pinning down what stories are about or what subjects should be or do. 'It is true', she notes 'that storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it' (1968, 105). But the meaning of this story of course will always be negotiated by the audience, the community of memory that stories are addressed to, since as Sheldon Wolin has commented, for Arendt 'audience is a metaphor for the political community whose nature is to be a community of remembrance' (1977, 97). In this light, it is important to remember that closure refers here to the power of stories to reveal the meaning of actions and thus complete them, it does not refer to the closure of the story itself, the Aristotelian *telos*, the end of the plot. As Olivia Guaraldo has therefore suggested, 'history as a togetherness of stories' creates conditions of possibility for forgotten or marginalised stories to be re-enacted, and thus stories are instrumental in creating a vantage point from which to retrace other possible paths between our past, our present and our future (2001, 25).

But apart from revealing meaning about lives and political actors, storytelling for Arendt is 'a way of representing political reality by preserving the contingency and freedom that characterize the realm of the *vita activa*, Guaraldo has pithily remarked (2001, 4). Gonne's autobiographical stories as well as her letters to her friends constitute an excellent Arendtian paradigm

of the power of stories in conveying the unexpected effects of life events, as well as the unpredictability of political action within the life of an individual and beyond. It is precisely in the unexpected possibilities of life as action that freedom resides for Arendt and in this light 'freedom is not an abstract principle [but] the modality by which our human condition actualizes itself' in Guaraldo's analysis (2001, 34).

'You that have not lived in thought but deed, can have the purity of a natural force' Yates wrote about Gonne in his 1919 poem, *The People*, when he was still deeply tormented by his unrequited love. In writing this poem, Yates was perhaps thinking of an incident in June 1897, during a series of counter-demonstrations to Queen Victoria's Diamond Jubilee. On that particular occasion Yeats, locked Gonne in the National Club where they were having tea to protect her from some fierce riots with the police, during which a woman lost her life: 'Maud Gonne got [up] and said she was going out and somebody else said she would be hurt. I told them to lock the door and keep her in ... I refused to let her out unless she explained what she meant to do' Yeats wrote in his *Memoirs* about this incident (1972, 113). Here is how Gonne responded in February 1898:

My dear Mr Yeats,

Many thanks for your very charming letter. Yes we are friends, we will always remain so I hope. You have often been of great help to me when I was very unhappy.

Our friendship must indeed be strong for me not to hate you, for you made me do the most cowardly thing I have ever done in my life. It is quite absurd to say I should have reasoned and given explanations.

Do you ask a soldier for explanations on the battlefield? Of course it is only a very small thing, a riot and a police charge but the same need for *immediate action* is there – there is no time to give explanations. I don't ask for obedience from others, I am only answerable for my own acts. I less than any others, would be capable of giving lengthy explanations of what I want and I intend to do, as my rule in life is to obey inspirations which come to me and which always guide me right.

For a long time I had a feeling that I should not encourage you to mix yourself up in the *outer* side of politics and you know I have never asked you to do so. I see now that I was wrong in not obeying this feeling more completely and probably you were allowed to hinder me on that comparatively unimportant occasion to show me that it is necessary you should not mix in what is really not in your line of action. You have a higher work to do – With me it is different, I was born to be in the midst of a crowd. (in MacBride and Jeffares 1992, 72).



In reading Gonne's letter to Yeats above, within the seriality of her correspondence, we have a brilliant narrative moment I argue, wherein the epistolary story becomes a trace of 'who' Gonne was in her unrepeatable uniqueness, as a doer acting in concert in what Arendt has called 'the interest' (1998, 182) and what Gonne calls 'the midst of the crowd'. Here it is important to remember that for Arendt, 'each human being is unique, not in the sense that each possesses unique qualities, but conversely insofar as she/he can give birth to the unpredictable. Uniqueness, for Arendt, can come to the fore only in action, only in front of others, and it is strictly dependent upon the testimony of others in order to be (Guaraldo 2012, 99). Thus, the 'unique existent', the revealed *who* in Arendt's and Cavarero's philosophical thought has nothing to do with the individual of the dominant philosophical discourse. As Guaraldo succinctly puts it, '*Who I am* can be told only in the form of a narrative recount of my appearance in the world. To appear means to stand before somebody else, and to depend upon that somebody in order to receive in return a confirmation of my existence' (2012, 99).

In this light, the 'whoness' of the doer supersedes the 'whatness' of Gonne: Was she Irish or English? a colonel's daughter or a revolutionary? a liar or a mystic? Yeats' muse or Ireland's Jean d'Arc? Such binary oppositions and disjunctions seem to preoccupy the vast bodies of literature that have been amassed around her or rather around her relationship with Yeats. Indeed she has mostly been considered in his shadow, his muse at its best, but most often 'the troubling of his life' as he famously put it in his *Memoirs* (1972, 40), although there have been some notable exceptions from feminist engagement with Maude Gonne's life and work.<sup>5</sup> It is on these marginalized interventions and their role in 'the historiographical operation' (de Certeau 1998) that I want to focus in the next section of this paper.

### **Writing from/in the margins**

In her influential essay, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis'<sup>6</sup>, Joan Scott raised a series of critical questions that would position gender at the heart of political histories: 'why (and since when) have women been invisible as historical subjects when we know they participated in the great and small events of human history?' she asked (1997, 174-5) Over the last 20 years since Scott's essay feminist theorists have certainly created a rich field of scholarship wherein gender has shaped research questions, analytical concepts and methodological strategies. In this context, women's marginal position in the discourses of history has been a hot area of debates and interventions, particularly so in the field of education.

In this light, when exploring Gonne's political autobiography and its nuanced connections with narrative and history, the famous couplet of memory and forgetting becomes crucially important: 'Under history, memory and forgetting. Under memory and forgetting, life. But writing a life is another story. Incompletion', Ricoeur has famously written (2004, 506). Gonne was fully aware of the historical importance of the events that she was participating in. She had also understood the silent discourses and practices

that go on in the black box of writing history, what de Certeau has called the 'historiographical operation' (1998). Writing is crucial in the making history, but it is also the most silenced practice of 'the historiographical operation' for de Certeau. As Liz Stanley has commented such silenced practices include 'scribbling notes, making quotes from secondary sources, transcribing documents; and also of different kinds of writing 'proper', in book reviewing, making conference presentations, drafting and writing chapters, articles and books' (2016, 35).

While acknowledging the incomplete and interpretative character of the historiographical operation, which always works under the shadow of forgetting, Ricoeur has nevertheless argued that it is the task of historiography to work against its grain and sometimes even against the sacred body of 'collective memories'. This is also the realm of what Foucault has theorised as *counter-memories* (1986, 97), a mode of remembering that transforms 'the historiographical operation' into effective history. It is precisely in the agonistic site of *counter-memories* that Gonne's mnemonic practices have been unfolded, either through her political writings or through her autobiographical narratives. In this context, the salience of forgetting and the struggle against it has become a core theme not only in the analysis of Gonne's memoir, but also in feminist interventions in (re)writing history more widely.

But there is more than writing in the making of history. According to Michel-Rolph Trouillot there are four crucial phases that tacitly underpin the project of making history: 'the moment of fact creation (the making of *sources*); the moment of fact assembly (the making of *archives*); the moment of fact retrieval (the making of *narratives*); and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of *history*) in the final instance' (1995, 26). It is easy to see how Gonne's political autobiography responds to Trouillot's phases of the making of sources, archives and narratives. The fourth phase however, the moment of 'retrospective significance' does not depend on Gonne or indeed on any protagonist of history, even if they have lived long enough – like Gonne – to write it. As already discussed in the previous section, Arendt has shown that 'the making of history in the final instance' is something that the viewers, spectators and later readers of historical actions can actually do. This is where the role of the biographer and the historian becomes so crucial for Arendt, but this is also the point where education becomes so important.

History is not only about past recollections and present understandings; it is also very much about future imaginings. In her most recent book on *The Fantasy of Feminist History*, Joan Scott has invited us to reconsider the role of fantasy in the making of feminist history: 'it is fantasy that undermines any notion of psychic immutability or fixed identity, that infuses rational motives with unquenchable desire, that contributes to the actions and events we narrate as history' (2012, 5). Without abandoning her previous analyses of gender as a discursive construct, Scott conceptualises gender as 'a historically and culturally specific attempt to resolve the dilemmas of sexual difference, to assign fixed meaning to that which ultimately cannot be fixed' (2012, 5).

In this context, she has configured two fantasy figures: 'the female orator and the feminist maternal' (2012, 54). The figure of Gonne, as the revolutionary woman 'standing at the podium, giving a speech' (2012, 55), has set in motion processes of phantasmatic identifications, operating 'as a fantasy echo, replaying in time and over generations the process that forms individuals as social and political actors' (2012, 54).

In teaching and learning about history, we go back to the things that matter and in doing so our experience is ultimately transformed. It is in this process of transformation that education becomes so crucial. While we look back at marginalized histories, we see the role they have ultimately played in changes and future imaginings and we thus understand that we need not be determined by the past. Marginalized histories show the power of re-imagining our future in ways that were out of step at the time of their actualization, but which nevertheless created conditions of possibility for radical futures. Although by learning history we create a robust basis for understanding present formations, marginalized histories unleash lines of flight, which take us from the grounds where we stand and into the world, where everything is possible. It is such possibilities that Gonne's political autobiography has created despite its many restrictions and limitations as an intellectual project in the black box of the 'historiographical operation'.

### **Conclusion: Teaching marginalized histories**

In this paper I have considered entanglements between auto/biographical writings, politics and the making of history through an Arendtian reading of Gonne's personal and political writings. Although Arendt was the first to thematise entanglements between politics and storytelling, her intervention has however remained largely unnoticed and it is relatively recently that her contribution to the narrative/politics and/or personal/political field of inquiries and research has been revisited and reassessed within feminism and beyond (see Cavarero, 2000; Guaraldo, 2001; Honig 1995).

What I have suggested is that Arendt's understanding of the role of life writings is a useful theoretical framework that can help us understand nuanced relations between narratives, politics and history. Gonne's political autobiography is a powerful instance of the complex interrelations between discourses and practices that have revolved around important events in Ireland's modern history. What I have finally argued is that teaching feminist histories that emerge from marginalized positions and sources, is an important contribution to the process that Trouillot has theorized as 'the retrospective significance' (1995), despite the truth games that are inevitably involved in any area of life-writing, Gonne's controversial political autobiography included.

### **Note on contributor**

Maria Tamboukou (BA, MA, PhD) is Professor of Feminist Studies, at the University of East London, UK. Her research activity develops in the areas of philosophies and epistemologies in the social sciences, feminist theories,

narrative analytics and archival research. Writing feminist genealogies is the central focus of her work. She is the author of 7 monographs and more than 80 journal articles and book chapters. Recent publications include the monographs *Sewing, Writing and Fighting*, *Gendering the Memory of Work*, *Women Workers' Education*, as well as the co-authored book *The Archive Project*.

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<sup>1</sup> William Butler Yates, *A Bronze Head*, 1939.

<sup>2</sup> 'went to you' refers to their mystical encounters and communication.

<sup>3</sup> Gwen John to JQ, letter dated May 5 1915, in New York Public Library, John Quinn Papers, General Correspondence, Box 23, John Gwen 1910-1924. (NYPL/ JQP/B23)

<sup>4</sup> MG to JQ, letter dated July 15, 1915, in Londraville 1999, 156.

<sup>5</sup> See Pratt 1983, Ward 1990, Cullingford 1993, Innes 1993, Steele 2001.

<sup>6</sup> This essay was first presented at the meetings of the American Historical Association in December 1985