

Epistolary lives:

fragments, sensibility, assemblages in auto/biographical research

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Letters are important 'documents of life' (Plummer 2001) in revealing meaning about socio-historical practices and there is an interesting body of literature about their use in auto/biographical research in the humanities and the social sciences, as well as different trends and evaluations within this literature. (see Barton & Hall, 2000; Stanley 2004, Jolly 2008, Tamboukou 2016)

'Many of us came to letters through an interest in autobiography', Margaretta Jolly has noted (Jolly and Stanley 2005, 1) highlighting and theorising the many entanglements between epistolarity and auto/biographical analyses. Keith Plummer (2001) has maintained however, that the overwhelming, fragmentary, unfocused and idiosyncratic nature of letters cannot provide useful sources for sociological analyses in life history research. Liz Stanley has taken issue with Plummer's (2001) reluctance to recognize letters as useful 'documents of life', arguing instead that letters and particularly correspondences can create rich fields of auto/biographical insights in sociological research and chart innovative methodological approaches in biographical research and the sociological imagination (see Stanley, 2011, 2015, 2016; Stanley et al., 2012, 2013). In this context she has outlined three analytical planes on which epistolary narratives can be deployed: the dialogical, the perspectival and the emergent. (2004, pp. 202-204) Letters are dialogical, argues Stanley, opening up channels of communication and reciprocity not only between the correspondent parts, but also between the writer of the letter and any reader. (p.202) Their perspectival aspect means 'that their structure and content changes according to the particular recipient and the passing of time.'

(p.203) Finally, in having emergent properties, letters evade 'researcher-determined concerns' (ibid.) and instead display 'their own preoccupations and conventions and indeed their own epistolary ethics.' (ibid.) In this light Stanley has argued that the narrative value of the letter could only emerge as an effect of the exploration and indeed juxtaposition of a wider collection of letters and bodies of correspondence, what she has theorised as 'the epistolarium'. As Stanley (ibid., p.218) has configured the concept:

The idea of the epistolarium can be thought about in (at least) three related ways, with rather different epistemological complexities and consequentialities: as an epistolary record that remains for *post hoc* scrutiny; as "a collection" of the entirety of the surviving correspondences that a particular letter writer was involved in; and as the "ur-letters" produced in transcribing, editing and publishing actual letters (or rather versions of them).

Stanley has performed a meticulous examination of 'the different epistemological complexities and consequentialities' emerging from the analysis of the three versions of the epistolarium as delineated above. What is interesting in her theorisation is her ultimate conclusion that despite the epistemological, ontological and ethical problems emerging in their analysis, collections of letters do have a narrative structure and offer useful and rare insights in the life of the auto/biographical subject. (ibid., p.221)

But how much can letters 'reveal' about the auto/biographical self? Do they have any privileged position as auto/biographical documents? Letters are only fragments of lived experiences: they cannot be brought together by any Aristotelian coherence of beginning, middle and end and they absolutely lack the closure of canonical narratives. Indeed, letters 'reveal' as much as they conceal: they leave traces of ideas, discourses and action, but they can never encompass any 'truth' about who their sender or addressee, 'really were' or how they felt. Then why are letters important in auto/biographical research?

While Stanley (2011) has urged for a robust analytical approach to the use of letters in auto/biographical research in the social sciences, Elizabeth MacArthur (1990) has turned her attention to the analysis of the dynamics of the epistolary form in revealing meaning about subjects and their entanglement in the web of human relations, as well as in the sphere of

action. While written to the moment and of the moment, letters 'privilege the energy that propels them' (p.25) and create meaning by narrating the present without knowing what the future of this narrated present will be, how it will ultimately become past. However, as MacArthur notes, a present that unfolds is narrated differently than a present that has already 'chosen its course' (p.8).

There is indeed a significant difference between lives, unfolded in letters and 'the retrospective teleology' (Brockmeier 2001, 252) of auto/biographical research. Whenever we tell or write a story, including our own life history, the contingencies of life retreat and what emerges is a constructed linearity, an auto/biographical design that was meant to unfold the way it did from the beginning. This difference however and particularly the inability of the epistolary mode to orient the story towards 'the end', deploys a series of 'technologies of autobiography' (Gilmore 1994), a matrix where narratives of truth and experience are knitted together.

Thus, rather than imposing an overarching meaning derived from a central character, letters open up a diversity of perspectives and reveal multiple layers of meanings. Auto/biographical sense in this context emerges as an agglomeration of epistolary stories that are incomplete, irresolute or broken. Yet when brought together, these fragmented stories create a milieu of communication where the silenced, the secret and the unsaid release forces that remind us of the limits of human communication, the inability of language and representation to express the world. But how can these fragmented epistolary stories be brought together in an auto/biographical design and understanding?

When writing letters, correspondents inevitably become components of an epistolary assemblage, they enter 'storyworlds' (Herman, 2002) and start creating plots and characters, of unfolding auto/biographies. But since letters are always fragmented, interrupted and dispersed, who can have access to the overall auto/biographical design in the making?

This is where the role of the researcher becomes crucial: as 'an external reader' (Altman, 1982), the researcher can have access to bodies of correspondences and consequently the overall design that they have generated. In this light, letters can be analysed as auto/biographical narratives. Their narrativity, however, can only emerge if they are

theorised 'as units, within a unity.' (Altman 1982, p.167) Auto/biographical sense emerges as an effect of the exploration and indeed juxtaposition of wider collections of letters and bodies of correspondences, what Stanley (2004) has theorised as 'the epistolarium', as already noted above. However, the consideration of the context should not override the analytic attention to each individual letter, subsuming its singularity into the demands of a supposedly overarching structure of the whole. Altman is very careful in keeping the balance between the unit and the unity:

Each individual letter enters into the composition of the whole without losing its identity as a separate entity with recognizable borders. Each letter is defined by the blanc space that surrounds it; each has its characteristic shape and coloration. The letter retains its own unity while remaining a unit within a larger configuration. (1982, p.167)

As I have argued elsewhere in my work (Tamboukou, 2011), it is precisely the singularity of each letter that can carry traces of thoughts, affects, passions and actions that ultimately create the epistolary author as an *assemblage*, a cartography of multiple subject positions. It is in the process of how a subject crystallises as an *assemblage* that the Foucauldian self as an effect of the interweaving of certain historical and cultural practices or *technologies* (Foucault, 1988) has made connections with the Deleuzo-Guattarian conceptualisation of the self as a threshold, a door, a becoming between multiplicities. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988) In this sense each letter becomes a graph of the wandering self, and a part of the wider cartography of the correspondence and its epistolary figures. Further drawing on insights from Hannah Arendt's take of the political as uniqueness and plurality (1998), what I have also argued throughout my work is that letters carry traces of 'deeds and words' and become 'portraits of moments' that condense political action, expose the existential uniqueness of their protagonists and reveal multiple meanings of action and thought. (Tamboukou 2016)

It goes without saying that working with letters as 'documents of life' (Plummer 2001) in auto/biographical research raises a quite complex spectrum of questions around representation, context, truth, power, desire, identity, subjectivity, memory and ethics, questions that are now well identified and richly explored in the field of auto/biographical

narratives. (See Smith and Watson, 2001) However epistolary narratives have their own take on these questions and indeed demand ways of analysis that are particularly oriented to the specificities of their ontological and epistemological nature. It is, I suggest, by working within specific contexts that methodological problems in analysing epistolary narratives can best be addressed as the three contributions in this section lucidly show.

Reflecting on her rich experience of reading letters in archives all over the world Liz Stanley persuasively maintains that the majority of extant letters in archival collections are written by ordinary people dealing with daily activities and 'the business of life'. Stanley is interested in dissecting epistolary practices about the mundane and the ordinary and she does so by looking into white South African letter-writers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The primary concerns of these letters is to keep family relations alive, but also to support and sustain, economic, cultural, political and religious bonds, Stanley argues, but she also notes that each of the three epistolary collections that she considers in her chapter, develops its own writing traits and practices that have to be taken seriously and followed in any form of epistolary analytics. Epistolary writing is not just about the dialogics of the I/you relation, Stanley argues, but much wider and complex when the 'we' is added to create a tripartite schema in the configuration of the epistolary pact.

Erla Hulda Halldórsdóttir is also interested in the ordinariness and situatedness of nineteenth century family letters in Iceland in her research with the epistolarium of Páll Pálsson. Drawing on Cavarero's (2000) theorisation of the unpredictability of life histories Halldórsdóttir looks into the importance of context in shaping the historical evidence of letters and correspondences, particularly considering the role of different spatialities and temporalities in their analysis. Multiple narratives and the gendered nature of epistolary writing are two important themes that emerge from Halldórsdóttir's analysis, her argument being that the auto/biographical element of letters and correspondences emerges and unfolds in the process of reading and understanding letters as unforeseeable relational narratives in becoming.

Drawing on the epistolaria of two middle-class women in nineteenth century Greece Dimitra Vassiliadou theorises epistolary lives through the lens of 'autopathography' (Cousser 1991),

epistolary writing about bodily, mental and emotional passions and ailments in the form of sadness and melancholia. In doing so she shows how women's letters offer glimpses not just of their personal emotions and suffering, but also about family histories and gender relations of their times and geographies. Moreover, in expressing their emotions through writing letters to their husbands these women articulate their feelings and respond actively to the social and cultural forces that oppress and torture them. Apart from being textual expressions of auto/pathographies their letters can also be read in the light of scriptotherapy (Smith and Watson, 2001), self-healing writing, or writing to become other.

What brings the three contributions together in this section of the Handbook on *Epistolary Lives*, is what I want to call 'epistolary sensibility', an attempt that goes against the dominant trend of using letters as mere 'sources' or 'data' in socio-historical research and analysis. All three contributions recognize the evidentiary value of letters, but they are deeply engaged with pertinent ontological, epistemological and ethical questions revolving around what it is exactly that we do when using letters and correspondences to derive meaning about subjects, their lived experiences and their relation to the world and others. How is this 'epistolary sensibility' to be configured? Drawing on the rich methodological insights that the three contributions offer I will draw a preliminary sketch that can be taken as an initial plane for more epistolary methodologies to emerge and unfold. Thus, epistolary sensibility includes amongst other practices:

- a. striving for understandings that are driven by the letters and collections under investigation
- b. considering the content, form and context of letters and analysing them in their interrelation
- c. taking seriously the I/you/we epistolary relation
- d. considering the problematics of language and translation
- e. avoiding the use [and abuse] of letters as illustrations of auto/biographical analyses, interpretations and theorizations or as captions of images or other visual auto/biographical artefacts and objects
- f. making connections between and amongst letters and collections
- g. re-imagining the extant letters alongside those that were, burnt, lost or destroyed
- h. acknowledging the epistemological gaps of the absent side of correspondence

- i. challenging and interrogating existing archival ordering of letters and correspondences, as well as edited collections of letters
- j. keep excavating the archive for more unearthed, hidden and forgotten letters and correspondences

Apart from their attentiveness to what I have called epistolary sensibility the three contributions of this section respond differently to gender questions in epistolary analyses. Stanley insists that we should not impose contemporary gender binaries in past epistolaria, arguing instead that 'there are no significant differences between letters by males and by females when involved in the same kinds of activities or having the same kind of mind-set'. For Halldórsdóttir, the experiences of 19th century epistolary writers in Iceland are 'highly gendered', particularly in the context of their ordinariness, while Vassiliadou argues that emotions as expressed in 19th century bourgeois women's letters in Greece 'operate across gender lines'. Despite their differences, what all three contributions persuasively show is that the gendering of epistolary writing needs to be problematised, contextualised and situated. Simply put, it should not be taken for granted that 'women' write differently than 'men' or that 'women' are more drawn to the epistolary genre. Gender differences within epistolary writing and indeed within epistolary lives should be mapped within specific social, cultural and political conditions, if our analyses are to add something substantial in the field of auto/biographical research.

'We think in generalities, but we live in detail' (1948, p.26) Alfred North Whitehead has famously noted, importantly adding that 'to make the past live we must perceive it in detail, in addition to generalities' (ibid.) It is precisely the perception and understanding of 'the detail' that letters generously offer in auto/biographical research. But in order to receive and appreciate this gift we need to tend to the reading and analysis of letters with sensibility, patience and attentive care, particularly recognizing the need to see them as 'units within a unity' (Altman 1982), 'documents of life' in their own right and yet entangled in the multiplicity of diverse 'epistolaria' (Stanley 2004), becoming components of 'narrative assemblages' (Tamboukou 2015). What such a nuanced, detailed, but also situated analysis can offer is a feeling of the infinitesimal and incessant processes of life that keep going on,

'the events' that leave traces behind them in novellas, stories, as well as epistolary fragments of lives, the topic of our reflections and discussions in this section.

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