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Practicing Collective Biography

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Abstract

Collective biography uses researchers' written memories about a set of experiences as texts for collective analysis. As a feminist approach to research, collective biography draws centrally on the idea that significant memories are critical in the constitution of the self, and maintains that in analyzing memories collectively, researchers can begin to tap into wider social processes and structures. Though rarely used in geography, collective biography could be useful in data collection and analysis for geographers. In this paper, we provide a brief history and description of collective biography. We situate collective biography in relation to life writing methods. We then identify a set of attributes that mark collective biography as a distinct research approach. In closing, we reflect on our experiences working with collective biography.

Collective biography is an approach to research that seeks to address the constitution of the subject. Through a shared analysis of a set of systematically recalled memories, researchers are able to show the effects of structural, systemic, and affective processes on the emergence of particular subjects, such as the neoliberal subject, the gendered subject, and the academic subject (e.g. Davies et al. 2005, 2006; Somerville et al. 2003). The approach as originally developed by feminist sociologist Frigga Haug and her colleagues in Germany during the 1980s focused on memory work (for English translation, see Haug et al. 1999). Women recalled moments in their pasts that brought into focus what type of sexualized subject they were being disciplined to be. Feminist education scholar Bronwyn Davies along with her students and colleagues in Australia extended this methodological work and produced an extensive body of research on neoliberalism and gendered subjectivities (see e.g. Davies and Gannon 2006a). Since the early 2000s, collective biography has further developed using experimental, creative, and poststructural writing practices (e.g. Gale et al. 2012; Gannon et al. 2014; Speedy et al. 2010) and has begun to spread into other disciplines.

But what about geography? Can collective biography provide a way to generate data and conduct analysis to produce more nuanced understandings of the topics in which geographers are interested? Methodologically, what does collective biography offer that other approaches do not? In this paper, we first describe the specifics of collective biography as an approach to research. We next situate collective biography in relation to other qualitative approaches commonly used by geographers with particular attention to the similarities between collective biography and life writing. Then, we discuss nine hallmarks that we have identified with illustrations from our work. We close with suggestions on how to extend collective biography to conceptual interests in space and place, considering its use as a methodology with potential.

Memory Work, the Subject, and Collective Biography

Collective biography is a qualitative, feminist methodology that uses the researchers' own written memories about a set of experiences as texts for collective analysis. Collective biography draws centrally on the idea that significant memories are critical in the constitution of the subject. In analyzing memories together, researchers can begin to tap into wider social, economic, and cultural forces, processes, and power relations that contribute to shaping particular subjectivities. In the practice of collective biography, the biographical aspect of the process draws on people's reflections on experiences in their own lives, while the collective dimension refers to the process through which the memories are written, shared, and analyzed. There is no perfect memory or representation of the past; collective biography is deeply interested in the generation of *truths* as recalled and held by individuals and as subsequently modified and inhabited by members of the research group.

The aim of memory work is to understand the construction of identities, or, in other words, how individuals construct themselves in relationship to the world (Haug et al. 1999, p. 52). Through an investigation of the how and the why of what becomes important in individuals' relationships to social structures, memory work explores gender socialization (Haug et al. 1999, p. 40). There is also a political element to this research methodology for it "intends to intervene and such an intervention implies a demand for emancipation" (Haug 2008, p. 23). Memory work aims to move participants toward freedom in their political consciousness as participants collectively investigate the gaps they observe between their own experiences and structural explanations of social and economic inequality. In this sense, collective biography does not generate knowledge about an individual; rather, collective biography generates knowledge about how an individual is part of the social (Davies and Gannon 2006b, p. 4). Through successive rounds of revisions of these written memories, the group collectively produces data. And through successive rounds of revisions of written memories, memory work uses the data to work towards theorizing the general through the particular, for example, identity, socialization, sexuality, and subjectification (Haug et al. 1999).

Collective biography builds on the tradition of memory work. Bronwyn Davies and her collaborators extended memory work by using its principles in a poststructural theoretical context. Rather than reading the challenge of women's experiences bound by social structures in the context of economic and state processes, collective biographers turned to examining the everyday thoughts and practices constitutive of the subject that are usually taken for granted (Davies and Gannon 2006b, p. 4), including topics such as women's and girls' experiences of sexualization, childhood memories of family rituals, performances of masculinity, and the embodiment of neoliberal practices in the academy (Gale and Wyatt 2008; Gannon 2004; Gonick et al. 2011; Zabrodska et al. 2011). These scholars have further challenged the structuralist orientation of the memory work project by taking a "Deleuzian turn" (Davies and Gannon 2009) emphasizing "innovations to the writing/revision process and affective relations of difference" (Gonick et al. 2011, p. 742). In all renditions of memory work and collective biography, the recollection and analysis of memories are central, critical elements that provide pathways for understanding the relationships between individuals' everyday lived experiences and wider social structures. This can be seen in the work of Haug et al., where in the published product, excerpts from the memory writing are shared, edited for anonymity, followed by discussion and analysis in relation to the theme under investigation (see also Kern et al. 2014):

If I didn't have to trail my great, broad square shoulders around with me, if they didn't so obviously invite friendly backslapping, and equally friendly exchanges of anecdotes on the deformities produced by humping coal, then I might be able to do what Ulrike has done – abandon my responsibilities and get married. ... as it is – poor unfortunate that I am – I have to take responsibility for my own happiness.

The extent to which the violence we experience in the process of our development is done to us by ourselves can be shown more clearly by stories of the body than it would be by descriptions of our thoughts, feelings and sensations alone. It is, after all, our bodies that make us unremittably visible. And it is for this reason that they can be perceived so readily as a reminder of the ever-present need to exert control over the process of our entry into society. (Haug et al. 1999: 119)

Our collective biography work together began in 2012 with preliminary discussions, reviews of the literature, and planning. The following May (2013) we held the first in a series of structured, work-intensive retreats in Victoria, BC. This was followed by a retreat near Omaha, NE, in May of 2014, and a virtual retreat in June 2015. We draw on the data generated during the Victoria retreat as well as the writing we have done and our experiences together in and around the retreats throughout the remainder of the paper. Our aim is to illustrate our practice of collective biography so that other geographers can imagine employing this research strategy themselves.

Situating Collective Biography

Collective biography is not a common methodology in feminist geography. Feminist geographers using qualitative methods already have a rich toolkit of approaches, including interviews, focus groups, participant observation, and life writing. All of these approaches investigate human experience, entail reflexivity on the part of the researcher, and attempt to connect individual experiences to social structures. All raise epistemological questions about the relationships among perception, experience, truth, and representation. In many ways, though, collective biography shares its epistemological and ontological orientation most closely with life writing as a methodological approach to data collection and analysis. In the following discussion, we explore these similarities.

The predominant types of life writing used methodologically in feminist geography are autobiography and autoethnography. Autobiography as purposeful story-telling as part of analysis focuses on one's own life and is usually organized around a particular theme (Smith and Watson 2010). Themes vary depending on the purpose of the research itself, as for example, something as general as reflections on careers in geography to something more specific as in subject formation through care of the self or in understanding emotional insecurity (e.g. Bondi 2014; Longhurst 2012; Moss 2001). Autoethnography as a way to organize an author's queries and experiences focuses on a thick description of the context within which the author is but one of the many actors (Ellis 2004). Weaving one's own story alongside those voices, expressions of self, and communities that are part of the research process that includes not only research participants, but also colleagues, supervisors, family members, and friends, offers a richly textured analysis replete with layers of contextual information (e.g. Besio 2005; Cuomo 2013). By providing critical accounts of individual experiences and by recounting events and incidents comprising the research, collective biography highlights both the intricacies of the organization of daily life and the effects of relations of power. Collective biography shares three key epistemological and ontological features with life writing, especially autobiography and autoethnography: an iterative quality in the writing of the texts, a critical reflexivity sensitive to power relations, and an affinity with analyzing processes of subject formation.

The production of any life writing text is inherently and crucially iterative, whether the texts be individualized stories of one's own life (e.g. Moss 2013) or of a group of lives (e.g. Gorman-Murray 2007). The writing involves a continuous practice of moving back and forth between the immediacy of an experience and the context within which the experience takes place. No matter how experience is conceptualized, as constitutive of the subject, as the embodiment

of discursive and material practices, or as a source of knowledge (see Hekman 2010; Hughes 2002; Ramazanoğlu and Holland 2002; Scott 1999), life writing produces close-up depictions of dense networks of relations through which subjects form. Collective biography, too, alternates between one's own life and what shapes one's choices, actions, and movements. The stories generated through this iterative process can be read as micro-scale experiences of macro-scale systems, structures, and processes.

Because life writing locates the researcher at the center of a research project, tensions surrounding the limits of critical reflection, insights into positionality, and understandings of reflexivity are intrinsically bound up in the research process itself (Bondi 2009; Hesse-Biber 2012). Those using life writing are intensely aware of the significance of the reflexive turn in the social sciences and seek to complicate the author's own experiences vis-à-vis the world around her. Collective biography, too, relies on critical reflection, especially in the iterative analytical process that brings talk into data generation and analysis (Kohl and McCutcheon 2015), a process that layers multiple positionings and individual histories of a group of selves into the written memories.

A crucial feature of life writing practices is examining, through narrative, the significant sets of relations that are involved in subject formation. These narratives as life stories assume a clear correspondence between the truth of the story and the life experiences that are part of the story. Thus both the stories and the subject emerging from life writing are scrutinized in the determination of what is true and what is false (Stanley 1992; Ellis 2004, pp. 125 and 175; Davies and Gannon 2006b, p. 12). Yet with other qualitative approaches, truth of the subject is not queried in the same way; there is a distance cultivated through research practices that check the account for its truth. Seeking resonance across a life or among many lives in life writing challenges the assumptions about what counts as truth in any one context. As a type of life writing, collective biography relies on recounting specific memories and then works toward arranging the stories in relationship to each other and to what is going on around them.

Given these similarities with other types of life writing, what can collective biography offer that is different from the life writing methodologies that feminist geographers are already using? A central feature of what distinguishes collective biography is the principle of collective analysis of individual memories. Collective biography takes the iterative process further in that the group discusses each memory as a way to pull out connections between what the individual remembers and the context within which the experience arose. As well, critical reflection within a collective biography approach intensifies as group members pause to traipse through the process that other life writing methods leave to the individual author. Group members scrutinize and examine the memory, the experience, and the context and etch an analytical patina onto the piece of writing itself. This type of collectivity can enrich life writing approaches in feminist geography by taking some of the principles of a feminist methodology further. In the next section, we show how our own use of memory work and collective biography has assisted us in articulating a singular approach to research that emphasizes methodological issues in which feminist geographers have had long-standing interests.

Hallmarks of Collective Biography

For us, both Haug's memory work (Haug et al. 1999) and the poststructural version of collective biography (Davies and Gannon 2006a) have informed our use of collective biography. Experience with the methodology has given us insight into how our practice not only overlaps with life writing but also demonstrates its uniqueness as a distinct type of life writing. Indeed, collective biography is a way to write lives, and these lives are the lives of the researchers. As well, our research interests in knowledge and subject formation positions us among the poststructural

feminists using collective biography. Yet our purpose encompasses more than our own subjectivities for in addition to subject formation, we are interested in affective embodiments, joyful moments in the workplace, and engaging an affirmative politics. We have fashioned a methodology that has worked to advance our interests in feminist geography.

We have identified a set of nine hallmarks that together distinguish our approach to collective biography as a unique process for generating and analyzing data (see Figure 1). Some of these characteristics are drawn from Haug's memory work, some from Davies' collective biography, and some from our own experiences. This particular combination of features is our own. As we describe each hallmark, we talk generally about collective biography as it has been practiced, as well as our own use of the methodology.

In collective biography, researchers generate data by writing out a set of memories from their own experiences (Hallmark #1). Typically, the group comes together in a retreat setting organized around a previously chosen topic. The number of members can vary but at least four people are usually involved. Collaboratively, the group comes up with questions that address

Hallmark	Description
1. Researcher experiences are the sole source of data.	Researchers write memories of their own experiences in response to collectively developed prompt questions. These memories become data for analysis.
2. Collectivity is critical in data collection and analysis.	Although based on individual experiences, the continuous immersion by all researchers into each of the written memories brings multiple layers of input into the memories via discussion, revision, and the write-up.
3. Extensive and even participation of researchers must occur at all stages of research.	All researchers are engaged evenly across the entire research process and are integral to decision-making: All the researchers are the participants; all the participants are the researchers.
4. Critical reflection is integrated into each step of the research process.	Researchers continually query assumptions they bring to the research with regard to their own positioning as researchers, the social relations of knowledge production, and conceptualizations of their topic. They integrate their ongoing, collective assessments into their actions, transforming data and analysis as they make their way through the research process.
5. Data collection and analysis are both iterative.	Group members continually engage with each written memory through subsequent rounds of revision. Collective analysis is ongoing throughout (and after) data collection as the group considers each memory individually and in relation to other memories.
6. Subjectivity and subject formation are central theoretical interests in analysis.	The rich, detailed memories produced through collective biography foster an exploration of the ways in which individuals become who they are and how they come to understand themselves as subjects.
7. Embodiment is foregrounded in data collection.	Collective biography prioritizes bodily sensation and movement as ways of knowing in order to access the lived, corporeal aspects of any one experience.
8. Emotions and affect can be readily accessed through data collection.	Retrieval of specific memories is fueled by what the researcher was feeling at the time. By embracing embodiment as a framing for memories, researchers are able to draw out how emotion and affect work as part of subject formation.
9. Spatial processes and place specificity are both foregrounded and readily accessed through data collection.	Sensitivity to spatiality is heightened through recalling embodied moments. Drawing out affect brings attention to how places and movement come into being, generate meaning, and produce subjects.

Fig. 1. Hallmarks of collective biography.

the chosen theme. For example, “What is your first memory of being an autonomous subject in a school setting and being deprived of autonomy?” (Davies et al. 2006, p. 18). Our group addressed the theme of joy in academia at our first retreat with the prompt, “Can you recall a joyful moment as a feminist geographer in teaching, publishing, and collaborating” (Kern et al. 2014, p. 6)? In an effort to recall details of place, sensation, and interactions in our work, we drew on creativity exercises from Barry’s (2008) book *What it is*. We used a technique that we came to call “tea sandwiches” and “paninis” (because of the triangular and square shapes on the page; see Figure 2) that grounded us in the specificities of body, feeling, space, and place. We asked ourselves questions like “In this memory what was in front of you, behind you, above you? What did you smell or hear?” We filled out our own tea sandwich and Panini diagrams for each memory. With the diagrams as memory guides, we then wrote our memories as short, detailed moments while trying to avoid interpretation or explanation. Next each member reads the memory aloud. This moment was shared (after its initial writing) in Victoria:

I am sitting on the edge of a double bed in a room at the Holiday Inn. It’s late February, and there is a cold wind blowing snow across my slightly obscured view of the old cathedral. I’m getting ready to spend the day with seven students from my field course. It is our first full day together in the city, and in an hour we are going to take the streetcar to Chinatown. I am feeling a little anxious about this five-day trip, and worrying about details like where we will buy our public transit day passes, whether the restaurant wrote down our lunch reservation, and where we will meet the city planner who is scheduled to take us on a walking tour later that afternoon. I am struggling with knowing that I am in charge of the schedule and can demand my students’ participation in all of our activities, and wanting them to have fun. Hence I have been up for hours, but let them sleep in until ten.

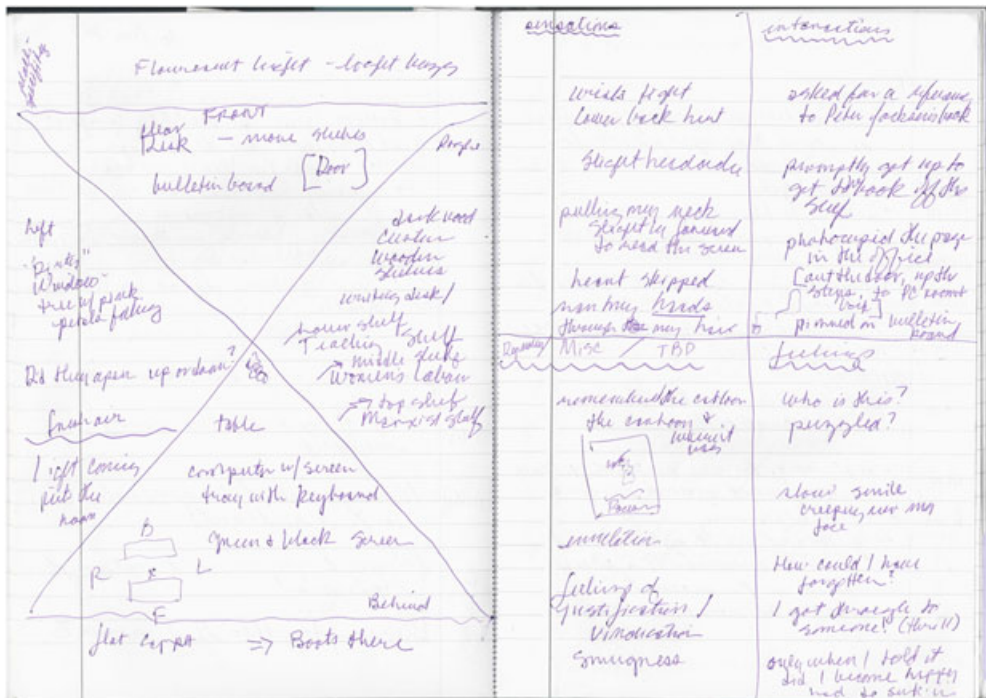


Fig. 2. Example from tea sandwiches and paninis exercise.

Once the initial memory has been read, a collective process of revision and analysis begins (Hallmark #2). Group members respond by asking for clarification, more detail, and greater specificity in order to help eliminate clichés, generalizations, and explanations. The writer considers other members' loving criticism (after Schuurman and Pratt 2002) and, in a second round of writing, makes some changes to the written moment. The second round of changes can be seen here:

I am sitting on the edge of a double bed in a room at the Holiday Inn. It's late February, and there is a cold wind blowing snow across my slightly obscured view of the old cathedral. I'm getting ready to spend the day with seven students from my field course. Last night we travelled sixteen hundred kilometres by air from our town, and this will be ~~It is~~ our first full day together in the city., ~~and~~ In an hour we are going to take the streetcar to Chinatown, and I'm carefully reviewing every step of our itinerary. I have been ~~am feeling a little~~ anxious about this five-day trip since my department head talked me into it last spring. I'm ~~,and~~ worrying about details like where we will buy our public transit day passes, whether the restaurant wrote down our lunch reservation, and where we will meet the city planner who is scheduled to take us on a walking tour later that afternoon. Underneath these logistical concerns, I'm questioning my ability to lead these students through a field course, and deliver a rigorous experiential learning curriculum. I am struggling with knowing that I am in charge of the schedule and can demand my students' participation in all of our activities, and I also wanting them to have fun. Hence I have been up for hours, but let them sleep in until ten.

After this second round of writing, the memories are shared aloud again, and group members listen carefully to others' responses, and revise again. This is our final version of the memory:

I'm sitting on the edge of a double bed in a room at the Holiday Inn. It's late February, and there is a cold wind blowing snow across my slightly obscured view of the old cathedral. I'm getting ready to spend the day with seven students from my field course. Last night we travelled sixteen hundred kilometres by air from our town, and this will be our first full day together in the city. In an hour we're going to take the streetcar to Chinatown, and I'm carefully reviewing every step of our itinerary. I have been anxious about this five-day trip since my department head talked me into it last spring. I'm worrying about details like where we will buy our public transit passes, whether the restaurant wrote down our lunch reservation, and where we will meet the city planner who is scheduled to take us on a walking tour later that afternoon. Underneath these logistical concerns, I'm questioning my ability to lead these students through a field course, and deliver a rigorous experiential learning curriculum. I also want them to have fun. Hence, I have been up for hours, but let them sleep in until ten.

Changes to the initial texts act as interventions and re-position the final memories as work of the group and as collective data. Our process involves giving each final memory a descriptive name and filing them as a set so that they become untethered from any one group member, and available for analysis. As part of our desire to become a collective *we*, we strive to keep all the memories anonymous. Thus, our collective biography entails extensive and even participation (Hallmark #3). All group members are integral to decision-making, beginning with the construction of writing prompts, through reading moments aloud and both soliciting and offering suggestions, to revising in accord with directions and ideas from other participants. The form and process of collective biography feed into one another: all the researchers are participants; all the participants are researchers.

Once all the moments are finalized, the group uses the final memories as data and analyzes them for insights into the formation of subjects. As part of this collective collaboration, critical reflection is integrated into each step of the collective biography project (Hallmark #4). Throughout the research design, implementation, and analysis, all researchers are thinking

and talking about the various assumptions they bring with them to the recollection of the moment, the experience, and to the research project itself. For example, as the memory was read aloud, one of us pictured the teacher surrounded by a messy pile of scattered papers that somehow reflected her anxiety about the trip. Later, as we all got to know each other better, she recognized that this assumption was incorrect as the teacher is neat and organized and would never sit in a pile of clutter. This seemingly small detail illustrates that our readings of the memories are shaped by our own experiences and habits and therefore must themselves be interrogated. Intense scrutiny of the researchers' own positionalities, sets of power relations within which they live and work, and the nature of the research questions themselves contribute to ongoing engagement with how individuals interact with wider social, economic, and cultural forces, processes, and structures.

Collective critical reflexivity exemplifies an iterative data collection and analytical process (Hallmark #5). Group members continually engage with each written memory as it evolves through rounds and rounds of revision. Reflecting on both content (topic) of the inquiry and the research process, each member takes notes on each reading (see Figure 3). One of the comments about the final memory from a group member is that the context seemed a bit blurry given that there was no indication as to why this particular field trip would cause anxiety. We then had a discussion as to what types of information are needed in order to understand how the memory is significant in addressing the question. The second version of this final memory shows in part how this group member took up that part of the discussion in revising the written memory. She included comments about pressure from the department, the care she is taking to review the itinerary as she is out of her daily living environment, and her doubts about being an effective teacher. In the third version, inclusion of "our town" emphasizes that she and the students were on this adventure together. Just as in writing the memories, that is, creating the data as data collection, analysis proceeds iteratively – back and forth through experience, understandings of the topic, and tracings of the connections within wider social structures (after Braidotti 2010). Analysis is developed through successive engagements while the group considers each memory as it emerges individually, and then in relation to the others.

Working with rich, detailed memories means that collective biography is particularly useful in investigating and elucidating processes of subjectification: the ways in which individuals become who they are, or how they come to understand themselves as subjects (Hallmark #6). The design of collective biography itself promotes an exploration of subjectivity, as a "process of selving" (Davies and Gannon 2006b, p. 7), that is, how one becomes a subject. Through the writing, sharing, and revising processes, "the stories become documentary materials, created to search out the ways in which social life is made as common sense, fixed, and apparently unchangeable" (Gonick et al. 2011 p. 742). The following final memory, also from the Victoria

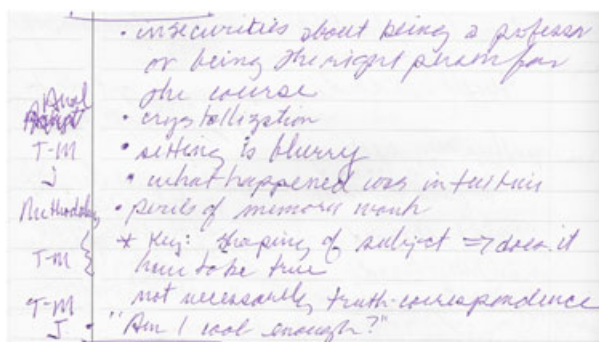


Fig. 3. Example of notes on a reading of a memory.

workshop and written in response to the question, “Can you recall a joyful moment as a feminist geographer in publishing?” illustrates the point:

I step into my home office after work, dropping my purple shoulder bag on the desk and shrugging off my fall coat. The house is quiet, but the cat purrs as he flops on my feet. . . . I pull the day’s mail out of my bag and sort through it. . . . I find a letter addressed to me from Apollo Press. Curious, I tear into the envelope and pull out a single sheet of paper. Numbers, lots of numbers, in rows and columns. . . . Some seem to be about units, others have dollar signs. It’s a bill, I realize. . . . There is a flush creeping up my chest and neck. I fix my gaze on the number at the bottom of the page: \$168.87. I’m shaking a little as it sinks in: my book has not sold, and I owe the publisher money for the copies they have printed. This must have been part of the book contract. . . . It could be worse, I tell myself. It’s not that much money. I take a deep breath and try to push the panicky, queasy feeling down. . . . Folding the paper up, I slip it into a drawer, under other bills and receipts. I crumple the envelope and toss it in the bin. I don’t tell anyone. A week later, I spot an email from the press in my inbox. Even the sight of it makes me hot with embarrassment, sick at my massive failure. . . . “Dear Angelique,” it reads. “Can you please send us your current address? Your royalty cheque was returned to us and we’d like to resend it.” . . . A strangled laugh escapes my mouth, as I sit shaking my head. Since there is in fact no one else there, I do the only thing I can: open Facebook, and type: “Just got a royalty statement for \$168.87! Beers at The Goose are on me tonight.”

A relational notion of self manifests through the writer’s experience of a dramatic change in emotion. Her delight at the royalty cheque is confirmed through sharing the proceeds with her friends. She continues to form a self that is scholarly and successful: She is someone whose book sold well, generating royalties.

As a way to approach subjectification, attention to the ways in which memories are embodied is also central to collective biography (Hallmark #7), and we read this, too, in the excerpt above. Memories form and stick because of how we move and what we feel in the body: flushing and shaking upon realizing that there is a problem, pushing down the panicky, queasy feeling, and laughing as she realizes that she has received good news instead of bad. Collective biography values forms of knowledge that are often dismissed as so-called one-off situations, personal or subjective experiences, or emotional reactions. With its focus on embodiment, collective biography encourages researchers to take their own (seemingly mundane) experiences seriously and use them to explain and interrogate power dynamics and processes, both large and small. Collective biography accesses this process by foregrounding *bodily sensation* as a way of knowing. Proprioceptive input, sensations of pressure and pulling on muscles and joints, as well as feelings in a throat, stomach, or shoulders may anchor recollections.

Related to embodiment is the emotion of a lived moment (Hallmark #8). In the first excerpted memory, above, all of her feelings are conveyed by her body having been “up for hours,” while in the second, laughing and shaking convey her transition from angst to eagerness. In embracing embodiment as a framing for memories, the written accounts draw out the emotional dimension of the memory, whether there is a feeling of relief, joy, disgust, sorrow, ire, or shame that accompanies shrugging shoulders, subtle facial movements, lumps in the throat, or sensations of heaviness. For example, in other memories from our workshop, this uncontrolled bodily movement reveals a growing confidence: “A smile creeps over my face as I skip; I’m lighter than I normally feel, almost floating down the stairs.” Another example from another one of our final memories shows how unease comes through bodily movement:

As I tug at both ears, I feel the coolness of the metal. I hadn’t realized my hands were so cold. I rub them together, grinding air between them. A bit warmer, but they are still shaking. Deep breath. My chest is tightening. The tip of my sternum is jammed against spine. I guess it is time. I double click the email.

Capturing that moment of intense emotion is crucial in the practice of collective biography for through that fatigue, angst, confidence, unease – and the memories of them – subjects emerge as a way to make sense of the world.

Central to our own practice of collective biography is sensitivity to spatiality and place-making activities (Hallmark #9). Although embodiment and emotion have been explicitly considered as part of memory work since its inception (Haug et al. 1999), space and place have only been implicit. Our use of the tea sandwich draws awareness to the moment spatially – what is to the left, the right, in front, in back, above and below – as well as a description of the elements in the immediate environment – window, lamp, book titles, bulletin board, keyboard, and door (see Figure 2). Our use of the panini assists in sorting out bodily sensations and feelings (the upper left and lower right quadrants). The panini also leaves room for notations of interactions, movements, acts, and events that contextualize what filled the moment (upper right and lower left quadrants). Beginning with an inventory of the immediate environment, bolsters geographers' claims that memories are both spatial and place-based (see Massey 2005). Attention to the space around us actually facilitated our recall of both the embodied and affective aspects of the moment. The sensitivity to space that we brought to the research process even shaped how we wrote our memories: each written memory captured a dimension of spatiality, whether, for example, as part of being in charge of a field course or negotiating work and life in home and public spaces. In our memories, we wrote of walking down hallways and streets, about jumping up and plopping into on chairs, shifting workplaces by taking walks, swims, and trips, and about meeting up with friends and colleagues in offices, street corners, pubs, and cafes. These spatialities are important in understanding how bodies, subjects, and experiences form (Kern et al. 2014; see also Longhurst 2005), particularly in light of what surfaces as mattering in analyzing our own memories.

Reflections

As these hallmarks illustrate, a unique and principal strength lies in the type of data that collective biography produces and what analyses of these data can reveal in terms of the embodied, emotional, spatial, and place-based aspects of subject formation. Although autobiography and autoethnography as types of life writing demand reflection on experiences or events, they do not entail the close, saturated, and in-the-moment re-telling of specific key fragments of life in the way that is vital to collective biography. By asking the researchers to immerse themselves in these memories, and then to share them for collective re-writing and analysis, the collective biography process opens a window into how social and spatial processes are integral to becoming a subject in a given context. Elucidating the effects of opening this window comes with an extended analysis of the final memories, that is, addressing the research question.

Introducing the feminist methodology of collective biography into geography can enrich the array of qualitative methodologies already in use across various sub-disciplines. Collective biography could be used as a stand-alone approach for those research projects where life writing could be used. Or, it could be used alongside more familiar qualitative approaches to data collection and analysis, such as, interviews, participant observation, and focus groups. To date, only researchers using feminist theoretical frameworks have used collective biography, both inside and outside geography. However, the principles upon which this methodology rests – depicted through our set of hallmarks – may overlap with related theoretical approaches. Collective biography may be useful in accessing, for example, multiple systemic oppressions, globalizing geopolitical and economic processes, and more-than-human relations including technologies, animals, plants, and nature. No matter the topic across these critically engaged and reflexive frameworks, we are confident that geographers taking up this research approach will be adept

at drawing out the intricacies of spatialities and the place-specific elements of the memories. A welcome contribution to the literature on, and use of, collective biography would be to explore the embodied and affective experiences of individuals in various places (e.g. travelling through an urban neighborhood after dark, immigrating to a rural community, accessing sexed bathrooms in public spaces, and working in academic institutions), and could contribute to geographic understandings of feelings of being out-of-place socially, legally, culturally, and institutionally.

We see that there is plenty of room for collective biography to grow. The significance of spatial processes and place specificity are often left out of collective biography analyses just as the importance of collective experiences of meaningful moments of subject formation are often left out of geographical work. Yet in the adoption of the methodology, there are some tensions that deserve attention. In our own use of collective biography over the last 3 years, we have encountered challenges that were intrinsic to the approach itself. We identify three and work through how we came to resolve each one.

Practically, the extensive and even collaboration required for collective biography, while extremely rewarding, is a potential obstacle. Although most qualitative approaches to research are time- and labor-intensive, we have found that collective biography places a particular set of demands upon researchers. Not only do writing retreats involve time, organization, and resources, but the emotional requirements of collectively sharing and engaging with memories also necessitate high levels of trust and intimacy that might not be accessible for all groups (Davies and Gannon 2006c; Falconer Al-Hindi et al. forthcoming). Salient differences among group members and within the memories might lead to conflict, issues with rapport, or the need for extra time and care to tease out and engage with respectfully (see Davies and Gannon 2006c; Gonick et al. 2011). The intense engagement with a small number of memories also means that collective biography is better-suited to research projects with fewer participants. At our first retreat, we did not know each other well and, although we had shared initial writings with each other prior to meeting, disclosures in ink differed considerably from disclosures in person. To be part of the project, we thus had to be willing to risk exposing our weaknesses to and being vulnerable with one another. We spent a good deal of time reflecting on our feelings which facilitated our ability to work through moments of discomfort in sharing our memories. At some point, perhaps after the first retreat, we decided to keep our group small and intimate – no one has left, and no one new has joined.

Conceptually, competing commitments may lead to unresolvable tension. Collective biography can only implicate some parts of social structures by showing patterned individual engagements and responses in a context. As part of our goal in the analysis of the final memories, we want to connect these wider social processes to the individual experiences of subjectification. In order to show the formation of subjects, memories must be thickly described and drenched with detail. Yet another goal of our collaboration is to act beyond the individual in a working environment that values, and is indeed predicated upon, that notion of success as an academic is measured through the individual. Thus our theoretical arguments about place specificity may be eclipsed by our choice to privilege the collective by keeping the memories anonymous. Although we can maintain the specifics of embodiment and affect, connections to specific places may have to be stripped away. Our practice thus far in our write ups and presentations has been to cut out identifying elements or replace them with place-neutral descriptions.

Methodologically, the collective and iterative practices built into the methodology may become problematic in unexpected ways. For example, while collective biography is not the only approach that may use a team of researchers, or that may include the researchers' experiences as data (cf. Siltanen et al. 2008), it stands out as a distinct set of research practices involving extensive, even, and continuous collaboration from beginning to end. As a result, reflexivity is

intended to be part of all phases of the research. However, depending on the way in which the group forms, there may be power dynamics that shape the way the group undertakes the work. Being an instructor or senior professor working with students or junior colleagues can set up a situation whereby the collective process appears successful, but when put under scrutiny and subject to *collective* reflection, the unevenness in the practice of power reveals a tension that could actually drive group members away and silence their input. For us, the multiplicity of viewpoints, varied topical interests, and theoretical ideas enrich our collective analysis, and over time, the closeness of the relationships among group members contributes to the richness of the data and the depth of the analysis. We have arranged our interactions around bi-weekly, Skype meetings where we carefully consider everyone's suggestions and insights from each one of us. The process we use is time-consuming and often emotionally draining. Aside from brief catch-ups at the beginning of meetings, we talk only about the work we do together. We work towards consensus on each decision, rather than accede to a hierarchical decision-making process, which continues the reflexive practice of layering analysis.

Our responses to these three challenges arising out of the methodology itself, even though they are potentially limiting, lend credence to the idea that the practice of collective biography has no firm rules (Gonick et al. 2011). Indeed, the specific practices of collective biography within a group seem to be conditional on a variety of things, including, but not limited to: availability of time for even participation; commitment of group members over long periods of time; characteristics of group members in terms of identity and power; commensurability of theoretical frameworks and methodological commitments; processes in place to deal with problems arising within the group; and interest in a particular topic. Such contingency makes each collective biography group inimitable. Yet it is the core principles of memory work and collective biography, manifest in our set of nine hallmarks, that distinguish collective biography as a singular, distinctive methodology.

Short Biography

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Note

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