



Historical geography II: Traces remain

Cheryl McGeachan

University of Glasgow, UK

Progress in Human Geography

2018, Vol. 42(1) 134–147

© The Author(s) 2016

Reprints and permission:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0309132516651762

journals.sagepub.com/home/phg



Abstract

The second report in this series turns to focus on the trace in relation to life-writing and biography in historical geography and beyond. Through attention to tracing journeys, located moments and listening to the presence of ghosts (Ogborn, 2005), this report seeks to highlight the range of different ways in which historical geographers have explored lives, deaths, and their transient traces through varied biographical terrains. Continuing to draw attention in historical geography to the darkest of histories, this piece will pivot on moments of discovering the dead to showcase the nuanced ways in which historical geography is opening doors into uncharted lives and unspoken histories.

Keywords

archives, biography, death, life-writing, narrative, traces

Whose lives are worth living? Whose lives are worth writing about? Whose lives are worth remembering? (Scarparo, 2005: xi)

The bustling inner city conceals thousands who have simply melted away into that deep, vast picture of transience, struggle and opportunity on show in the metropolis. The lonely sometimes do go unnoticed but usually someone comes knocking for them in the end. (*Herald Scotland*, 2011)

‘Hello, is anybody there?’, bellows an unfamiliar voice from the world outside, the sound reverberating into the concrete walls, passed through to the inside only by ghosts. The flickering white light from the television screen intermittently illuminates the darkened room of forgotten objects. Faded patterned paper clings delicately to presents carefully selected for the unnamed piled neatly on the mould-stained floor. A selection of small black insects climb the inside walls and furiously scour window ledges, looking for an escape. The sound

of drilling from the outside disturbs the hum of the television, and with the subsequent release of the lock the door swings violently open, scattering a shower of accumulated dust into the air. Largely skeletal remains are discovered, entwined with the armchair situated in the centre of the living-room, presents placed next to where fleshy feet once rested. Almost three years of undisturbed decomposition leaves no body tissue intact, but identification can finally be made by comparing dental records with an old holiday photograph showing a young woman smiling in the summer sun.¹

The tragic story of the eventual discovery of Joyce Carol Vincent’s remains three years after

Corresponding author:

Cheryl McGeachan, School of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8QQ, UK.
Email: Cheryl.Mcgeachan@glasgow.ac.uk

her death in a North London bedsit in January 2006 draws attention to the ‘grisly tableau’ presented in the previous report, but turns to focus instead upon the *traces* that remain. Traces can be described as the vestiges or marks of lives once lived and existence once experienced (Nicholl, 2011), scattered across space and time, and their remaining presence is the guiding principle for many archaeologists, crime-scene investigators and, arguably, historical geographers. Media interest in Vincent’s story centred on the grisly discovery of her decomposing remains and the uncomfortable questions raised about (the lack of) society, community and compassion for fellow individuals. Vincent appeared to die alone, unmissed by family and friends, and unchecked by the state and those who walked past her front door in the heart of the UK’s capital city. Uneasy critique fell upon family and their lack of contact, the ‘uncaring’ role of capital enterprises such as the electricity company and housing renters, and the actions of the surrounding community who privately discussed ‘strange smells’ and unexplained absences yet never dared report them (Dawar, 2006). However, the wider question of why nobody appeared to miss Vincent’s presence in the world continues to ripple across places, leaving indelible marks on all who encounter her story.² Anderson (2015: 6) notes that ‘places are constituted by imbroglions of traces’ and therefore should always be understood as ‘ongoing compositions of traces’ (p. 7). Vincent’s story encapsulates this point in miniature by highlighting the many traces – the vestiges or marks of existence – that can be left in place by (cultural) life and the complex, and potentially devastating, effect that uncovering these traces can have on attachments to place (Anderson, 2015: 6). The temporal aspect to traces is significant, for over time the durability of many remnants fades or disappears completely, but some traces in places – visible or otherwise – will always somehow remain.³

The attraction of the trace to historical geographers takes multiple forms and leads into numerous terrains. For many, traces refer to the actual remains of historical evidence: pieces of primary material, remembered detail, marks etched into buildings or tracks left in the landscape. These traces become the historical geographer’s database of past lives, experiences and places, and are therefore often rifled through, sifted, picked over and examined in the finest of detail (see Norcup, 2015a; Moore, 2010; Lorimer, 2009). Yet, as Ogborn (2005: 382) has recognized, a focus on the trace can also bring to the fore moments of movement, negotiation and their residual effects, and therefore ‘might follow individual journeys, demonstrating how both intimate and large-scale histories and geographies intersect in wandering paths and personal transformations’. These moments change the perspective on examining certain time-space collisions, opening up avenues for exploring the patterns of intersection between individual life stories and vast global histories. For Ogborn, in his discussion of Atlantic geographies, thinking through the trace brings him to the door of death because, ‘without a sense of the broader dynamics of life and death in the Atlantic world, such moments of negotiation are meaningless’ (2005: 383). (Mass) murder, suicide, disposal of bodies, warfare, illness, ritual, sacrifice, and remembrance are just some of the ways in which powerful moments of negotiation and (mis)understanding emerge to highlight the transformed nature of lives lived and lives perished. Attention to the past is often attention to the dead and their lingering ‘worldly’ presence, for once death has entered the scene nothing can remain unchanged.⁴

For Ogborn (2005: 383), ‘attending to the trace involves tracing journeys, interpreting located moments of negotiation and listening for the presence of ghosts’, and this report will explore precisely these terrains through attention to biography and life-writing in historical

geography. Inspired by Offen's (2013) passionate call in previous reports for making climate matter, this piece seeks to move between scales and disciplines to consider the wider significance of why using biographical approaches matters to a wider understanding of places and their histories. Continuing to push for a more active engagement in historical geography with the darkest of histories, this piece reports on work that centralizes lives in the midst of struggle, conflict and demise, albeit in a way still open to other points of more joyous departure.⁵ Consideration of lives lived and lost, and the writing of these experiences, is also to turn attention to the ruptures, turning-points and disturbances of history that human beings have encountered, processed, infused with meaning, lived through and died for in certain times and places (Berghahn and Lässig, 2008: 9–10). Beginning with a discussion of tracking traces and tracing journeys through biography and other forms of narrating lives, the next section will highlight how historical geographers have encountered the trace and explored mobile and imperial lives. Attention will then address the turn in historical geography to examining located moments so as to complicate the boundaries of traditional historical narratives, and hence to experimental and imaginative modes of representing lives. Finally, the report will consider the broader ripples that work in biography and life-writing leave in the sub-field, noting the wider questions raised about whose life is worth living, remembering and writing about.

I Tracking traces and tracing journeys

In his commentary on the futures of transnational history, Guterl (2013: 130) writes that '[e]very life tells us something new and exciting; every life has consequences for what we can write and imagine'. While historical geography has frequently lent attention to human subjects and their actions, influences and ideas

(see Matless, 2008; Driver and Martins, 2002; Daniels, 1999; Kearns, 1997), a resurgent interest in lives, afterlives and their geographies (Featherstone, 2015; Lorimer, 2015; Forsyth, 2014; Mayhew, 2014; McGeachan, 2014; Legg, 2010; Withers, 2007) has given new insight into how biography and life-writing can illuminate, complicate and potentially obliterate narratives of past lives and places.⁶ Berghahn and Lässig (2008: 20) duly note that:

Biographies, probably more so than most other forms of historical scholarship, sensitize the readers to the fundamental openness of history, its subjective character, to the relativity and limited nature of historical knowledge, and to coincidences and ruptures, but also to limited opportunities and structural limitations in the historical process itself.

The cracks and slippages inherent in otherwise smooth historical narratives are revealed by the centring of lives and experiences. The vast differences between varieties of biographical methods and life-writing used by geographers are plentiful and have been explored in-depth elsewhere (Daniels and Nash, 2004; Lambert and Lester, 2006; Naylor, 2008).⁷ However, no matter what approach is taken the process is always methodologically challenging due to being so reliant on tracking the traces of a life that remain and tacking them back together in understandable and 'honest' formations.⁸

The difficulties of creating biographical portraits from fragments and shards has been discussed in the sub-field (McGeachan et al., 2012; Moore, 2010; Mackenzie, 2007; White, 2004), but recent scholarship on pre-modern lives has cast these challenges in a new light. McDonagh's (2013) geo-biographical perspective on the life and death of Sir Robert Constable, a Yorkshire landowner in pre-Reformation England, brings to the fore an 'encounter with the limits of possibility' (p. 52) in tracing the motivations and personalities of medieval subjects. Through engaging

with unusual biographical sources, in this case equity court records, lives and parts of the lived experience from the pre-modern world reveal themselves that enable a ‘knitting together of the personal and the political, the local and the national, the man and his landscape’ (McDonagh, 2013: 60), which seeks to raise pertinent questions regarding the (dis)connections between the medieval and the modern. Lilley (2011) notes the marginal place of ‘medieval geography’ in current geographical scholarship (see also Jones, 2004), but McDonagh’s inventive attempts to track the limited traces of lives and experiences of people from the medieval period demonstrate ways forward from which this period of study could flourish.⁹

The capacity that writing lives has to represent the past as an elusive and complex terrain is both powerful and challenging. Often in such work a fluid framework is created that highlights subjectivity alongside wider structural, (geo)political and ideological concerns. Several papers in the recent special issue of ‘Historical Geographies of Internationalism, 1900–1950’ in the journal *Political Geography* (see Hodder et al., 2015) use geographical biography to develop the key political-geographical concern of the international, demonstrating an ability to disrupt and dismantle known ways of thinking about internationalist histories (see Featherstone, 2015; Brooks, 2015). Recent research by Barnes and Abrahamsson (2015) into the tangled complicities and moral struggles of Karl and Albrecht Haushofer further emphasizes this claim through a detailed biographical account of father and son to ‘register the changing forms of their complicity with the Nazi state apparatus, and the constraints and tensions that ensued’ (p. 66). Through slowly unfolding Karl and Albrecht’s lives, the authors are able to highlight the multiple struggles of individuals caught up within this deadly regime, the complex relationship between Nazism and academic labour (labour of geographers), and the wider web of familial relations that becomes

entangled into complicity. The overarching purpose is ‘to demonstrate that the line between perpetrators and victims is not always easily drawn’ (Barnes and Abrahamsson, 2015: 73), therefore challenging neatly demarcated borders put in place by previous historical accounts.¹⁰

For Lambert (2014: 30), ‘[t]he trace is a heuristic device, almost a form of qualitative “sampling”, that enables the historian to follow a thread through the labyrinthine complexities of a global empire’. A number of geographers studying the spatialities of the British Empire through a networked approach have written the biographies of mobile imperial figures such as Sir John Pope Hennessy (Lambert, 2014), James MacQueen (Lambert, 2013) and George Arthur (Lester, 2011). Complementary to such work are the biographical portraits focusing on piracy (Hasty, 2012) and servitude on colonies and penal settlements of the empire. Anderson’s highly detailed *Subaltern Lives* (2012) uses fragmentary biographical accounts of convicts, sailors, slaves, indentured labourers, indigenous peoples and convicts to bring to light the history of violence of the colonial regime. The snapshots of lives lived under the imperial regime, such as those of George Morgan, Narain Singh and Edwin Forbes, disclose the human impacts of colonial capitalist labour systems, state violence and the day-to-day experiences of living in servitude. Baigent (2013: 112) notes that Anderson values a geographical method as not just a way to look at imperialism from below, ‘but at a slant’. Indeed, by bringing together the range of globally scattered (archival) traces that remain into fragmentary biographies serves to ‘tell us something about the fundamental nature of imperialism’ (see also Ogborn, 2008). The ‘afterlives’ of such figures are also being explored, such as Baigent’s (2014) consideration of the travelling body of nurse Kate Marsden and the different ways in which bodies, texts and reputations create imagined biographies that fluctuate over space and time. This range of imperial and mobile biographies helps

not only to bring to light the individuals themselves, but also grounds the many ways in which an empire operated at a variety of scales, giving new perspective to how such histories can be written, researched and imagined.

All of these works demonstrate how lives can be deployed in spatially complex ways, often using biography strategically to force open new connections between places, people and experiences. However, Legg (2008), in his examination of ambivalent feelings towards the Government of India produced by Arthur Parke Hume, seeks to push the use of biography further by interweaving three biographical approaches to reveal Hume's antagonistic attitude to his employer and its effects on the ground. Drawing from the emergent school of 'new biography' (see Lambert and Lester, 2006), Legg seeks to pull together three approaches to life writing – chronological, analytical and genealogical – that all work differently, although not incompatibly, to uncover particular parts of an individual's life. Traditional biography can often be equated with an unreflective approach to history due to its lack of engagement with critical theory, but Legg's ability to layer biographical approaches demonstrates the diverse insights that can be provided into the contexts and interconnections of global and personal histories. Guteral (2013: 130), when discussing biographical writing by historians of the trans-nation, chimes with Legg and others by stressing that the 'life' in these works reveals something new and exciting 'about the relations of the self to place, time, and space' that must be cultivated further through such innovative biographical ventures.

II Locating moments: historical/fictional lives

Some historical geographers are therefore finding the biographical narrative arc 'from cradle to grave' enabling, but others remain hesitant about turning to the practice of biography.

While some doubt the 'spotlight' model of biographical writing (Thomas, 2004), especially in relation to the 'old white men' tradition, others feel too constrained by its seemingly all-knowing and all-encompassing form. Yet, the recent storying of past lives through certain (geo-)biographical approaches has sought actively to resist these traditions by thinking about located moments. The diverse attempts by geographers to unpick the 'geographies of science' (Naylor, 2010, 2005; Powell, 2007; Livingstone, 2003; Withers, 2002) has led to a variety of lives, spaces and located moments being exposed for reconsideration. Livingstone's (2003) seminal call sparked the examination of a range of sites and spaces connected to the making of science, but also to the lives of its creators. Naylor and Ryan's edited collection *New Spaces of Exploration* (2009) includes essays using a biographical approach to examine fieldwork practices and the 'doing' of exploration in certain times and places. The scientific work of figures such as T. Griffith Taylor, William J. Harding and Robert Falcon Scott is set firmly within the sites and spaces of their lives and their fieldwork experiences, exposing their motivations, 'exploratory impulse' and the limits to scientific knowledge. Similarly, Hasty (2011), in his examination of the pirate ship in the production of William Dampier's scientific travel narratives, shows that Dampier's scientific knowledge was 'inevitably and irrevocably bound in various ways to the ship-centred geography of its production' (p. 42). Livingstone's (2016) recent contribution to examining the historical geography of Darwinism (see also Livingstone, 2014) focuses attention on the reactions to Darwin's theory in Cape Colony during the latter part of the 19th century. From Livingstone's analysis, a 'complex geography of exchange between Europe and the Cape' is uncovered which renders 'local scientific cultures a compound product of both "here" and "there"' (2016: n.p.). Livingstone (2016: n.p.) argues that '[s]cientific knowledge remains one

of the most potent forces on the face of the earth', justifying sustained inquiry into the located moments of its creation, circulation and reception as articulated with the spatial lives of those bound up in its (re)making.¹¹

These previous attempts to tell the geographies of science through a focus on the spatial lives and located moments of its creators is but one way in which historical geography has used the stories of lives to disrupt the boundaries of traditional histories. Benjamin, in his discussion of *Jetztzeit*, writes that history 'is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]'; and for Boscagli the *Jetztzeit* is taken to be 'exactly the moment that cuts through history, the "now" that blasts its continuum open, thus disrupting and contradicting history's claimed completeness' (quoted in Scarparo, 2005: 155). Bressey's (2013a, 2013b) varied attempts to 'read against the grain of the archive' to open up the historical geographies of black women in Victorian London expands how biographical approaches may challenge both the prominent histories told and how many other histories are forgotten. (See also Norcup (2015b) and Maddrell (2009) for similar challenges to writing the history of geography.¹²) Bressey focuses on the places and experiences of integration in England through attention to the relationships formed between white and black women in the workplace and through their families during the 18th, 19th and 20th centuries. By exploring 'the myriad of experiences and geographies of integration created', Bressey (2013b: 542) connects these moments to a broader understanding of women's history. For Bressey (2013b: 553), constructing geographical biographies of these women and families can act as 'an opportunity to integrate them into the histories of migration at a variety of scales . . . and illuminate the pathways that led to settlement and the geographies experienced in those places'.

Feminist historical geographers have given critical attention to the politics and ethics of

archival research, drawing attention to the limits of self-reflexivity, particularly for decolonizing and/or anti-racist work (see Kobayashi, 2003). Similarly to Bressey, de Leeuw (2012) works 'against the archival grain' – with 'the pulse of the archive' – to seek resonances between the colonial work of Alice Ravenhill and the lives and work of extant settler colonists in present-day British Columbia. For de Leeuw (2012: 275), small and intimate biographies act 'as [a] means of more completely understanding the complex, pluralistic, chance-filled, intimate, and personal components that underpin – if not make up – broad systems of power, including colonial power'. Feminist historical research is now demanding that new emphasis be placed on understanding integrated multicultural histories, insisting that emotions and embodied ways of knowing should be meaningfully excavated from the range of archival sources being used and explored (see Evans, 2015).

While significant attempts are being made to broaden the cast of characters revealed in the biographical narratives created by historical geographers, concerns over the 'liveliness' of these portraits persist. Virginia Woolf, in her description of Victorian biography, notes that they 'are like wax figures now preserved in Westminster Abbey, that were carried in funeral processions through the street – effigies that have only a smooth superficial likeness to the body in the coffin' (quoted in Atkinson, 2010: 1). However, unlike their Victorian counterparts, a number of historical scholars are now stating that:

What makes biography so curious and endlessly absorbing is that through all the documents and the letters, the context and the witness, the conflicting opinions and the evidence of the work, we keep catching sight of a real body, a physical life. (Lee, 2005: 3)

While such 'real bodies' are instantly engaging, they are inevitably tricky to capture on a page; and Lee (2005: 5) argues that, instead, all

that can be found are ‘body parts ... relics, legends and fragments, with the parts and bits and gaps which are left over after the life has ended’.¹³ The multiple nature of lives lived and the difficulties inherent in trying to craft a solid and embodied figure out of dispersed parts leads to the biographer continuously scratching beneath the surface of their subject’s lives, looking for gaps and slippages (see Weinberg, 1992) or searching for inventive ways in which to (re)tell the stories of a life. Many historians writing biography in the present, therefore, are now experimenting with discontinuous narrative approaches and montages with multiple perspectives (Berghahn and Lässig, 2008: 9–10) in order to bring into view new reflections on lives lived and lost, and to demonstrate further the dialogic relationship between past and present. This trend is certainly being followed in historical geography, with a range of imaginative and creative approaches to biography and life-writing being adopted.

Lorimer (2015), in his consideration of the many lives of W.A. Poucher, insists on a ‘kaleidoscopic configuration’ of his portrait, stressing that biography ‘becomes a spatial formation emerging through the multifarious spaces and landscapes produced in a life’ (p. 52). From discussions of landscape photography to perfumery, physique to masculinity, Lorimer (2015) mounts an imaginative quest to splice together interleaving spaces, sites, moments, events, situations and associations that build to reveal different aspects of one man’s life-world. Never settling too long on one site, place or moment, the narrative is continuously searching and therefore never claiming overall ownership over the ‘life’ presented. Parallels to this imaginative life-writing approach can be found in MacDonald’s (2014) narrative essay detailing the story of the Scottish archaeologist Erskine Beveridge and his family. Through a focus on Beveridge’s house situated on the Hebridean island of North Uist, MacDonald evocatively brings the historical geographies of the

Beveridge family and their home into present conversations relating to land ownership, troubled familial relations and the power of storytelling itself. The family house, a ruin in the present, acts as both a ‘life’ to be discussed and a leaky container to the stories of lives presented, for, although it holds them at bay for a time, these are stories designed to leak into other people and places. Figures such as George Beveridge haunt the overall narrative, and his death marks a pivotal message of the piece which seeks not to lament ruination but instead to attune to the awakened ghosts with the ‘unremarkable sorrows’ (MacDonald, 2015: 487) that they may contain.

Both Lorimer and MacDonald (see also Lorimer, 2013; Cameron, 2012; White, 2004) advocate the power of storytelling in geography, with MacDonald proposing that it is his intention ‘to maintain a *primary* commitment to storytelling as an exemplar of geographical writing’ (2015: 478, emphasis in original). Debates considering both stories within academic geography and geography’s ‘telling-turn’ have recently come to the fore (see Lorimer and Parr, 2014; Daniels and Lorimer, 2012), particularly within cultural geographies, and have raised fresh questions regarding the limits and potential for narrative within the discipline. The pieces previously discussed are works of creative or narrative non-fiction, but the slippages between fiction and non-fiction in the writing of lives seeps into the wider conversations around the construction of such work in a historical framework. Scarparo (2005) discusses this relationship between history and fiction in her study on gendered metafiction, claiming that:

[t]heir [the subject’s] survival in the present depends upon the voices their biographers *invent* for and through them. When these voices engage in a dialogue with those of their creators, biography becomes gendered metafiction and the reader discovers that the biographer, like her elusive subject, is made and not found. (2005: 162, emphasis in original)

While the deliberate construction of the biographical subject and the tricky relationship between subject and author are charted by historical geographers entering creative and imaginative life-writing terrains, the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, slippery as they may be, are seemingly still being maintained. MacDonald (2015: 479) explicitly states that he is not writing fiction and that '[t]he provenance of this story matters to its telling', chiming with other like-minded historical geographers (see Thomas, 2004). Ingrained in the archival traditions of historical geography, MacDonald and Lorimer's work highlights the significance of paying acute attention to traces – *evidence* of marks and vestiges of former presence – in the writing of such stories and the place then afforded such traces in their own disciplinary contexts.

Lorimer (2015: 54) reveals that his uncertainty over the conjoining of writing biography and geography led him to experiment with form and style, and this inclusion of personal detail and often background anecdote is relatively uncommon in geographers' engagement with imaginative life-writing. However, for some historical scholars, and in line with a wider concern in the discipline for placing emotions in research (see Smith et al., 2009), an interest in experimenting with autobiographical approaches is beginning to emerge (Bondi, 2014; Daniels and Nash, 2004). Recent work concerning liminal spaces and intergenerational trauma showcase most profoundly the threading of traces from the past into present-day autobiographical narratives (Alexander, 2016; Fewell, 2016). Barbour (2016), for example, begins with a reflection on her mother's jewellery box and strands of preserved human hair found encased within a small rectangle brooch found within. The uncanny hair works as a symbol for the haunting presence of the dead on the living, and throughout the piece Barbour discusses both the history of silences within the life of her family, especially relating to her grandfather

and his experiences in the First World War, and the untold dark histories that lurk in the corners of the physical and emotional space within families.

Similar secrets haunt the borderlands of Lorimer's (2014) 'suite of stories' stemming from the home of the Mackenzie family, Whitewell. Through an excavation of its 'secret theatre of past relationships', Lorimer (2014: 585) creates a geographical essay of non-fiction that maps the lifelines of the Mackenzie family cross-stitched with personal and local histories of family and place. Yet Lorimer's tale is equally autobiographical, highlighting his own fears and enchantments, noting that 'once you have heard talk of Whitewell, it intrudes, as certain places will . . . it worked itself inside me, taking residence, giving pattern and purpose to thoughts' (2014: 584). These works of creative life-writing are brave attempts to expose a living past, yet the autobiographical and the (socio)historical remain in tension. In part this tension emerges due to the inherent instability of autobiography between 'self and world, literature and history, fact and fiction, subject and object' (Marcus, 1994: 7); and therefore questions still always remain as to whether autobiography in historical geography 'will appear either as a dangerous double agent, moving between these oppositions, or as a magical instrument of reconciliation' (Marcus, 1994: 7).

III Listening to ghosts: echoes/ripples

But maybe we also need to let things spill out over the edges, just for a little while. When that happens, maybe we will see new features of the landscape. All such stories need to be told. All such lives need to be written. (Guterl, 2013: 139)

I want to be forgotten and forgotten. (Karl Haushofer's suicide note, quoted in Barnes and Abrahamsson, 2015: 73)

Scarparo (2005: 159) notes that ‘it is impossible to represent the past as it really was’, for there can be ‘no unmediated recovery, discovery or recreation’ of lives as they once lived and died, and yet it is the very process of retrieval and (partial) reassembly that fascinates many historical geographers in undertaking such biographical work. How approaches rupture previous historical accounts is particularly appealing to historical geographers, as when tracing journeys through imperial and mobile biographies or unpacking located moments in the geographies of science. Creative narrative approaches, as demonstrated previously, are also being used in increasingly inventive ways to showcase the complexity of the traces revealed and to signal new ways of knowing/telling the stories of past lives and geographies. As Guterl (2013) suggests in the opening quotation of this section, there is perhaps a need to allow historical writing on lives to ‘spill over the edges’ in order to illuminate new worlds and experiences, a spillage equally salient for historical geographers.

Returning to an earlier claim inspired by Ogborn (2005), examining the trace in historical geography lies at the door of death for how it can illuminate a broader and more inclusive network of life, and this report has hence found inspiration in the starting-point of recovery after death. Reflecting on Benjamin’s life and method, Arendt writes:

[A]lthough the living is subject to the ruin of the time, the process of decay is at the same time a process of crystallization, that in the depth of the sea, into which sinks and is dissolved what once was alive, some things ‘suffer a sea-change’ and survive in new crystallized forms and shapes that remain immune to the elements, as though they waited only for the pearl diver who one day will come down to them and bring them up into the world of the living. (as quoted in Smith, 2014: preface).¹⁴

In many of the works discussed in this report the historical geographer is acting as the ‘pearl

diver’, rescuing and recovering lives, and their deaths, lost to history’s forces of oblivion. However, the appearance of past lives in new shapes and forms in the present is challenging as it cannot help but change the perspective of ‘now’. Using the process of ‘surrogation’ discussed by Roach, Ogborn (2005: 383) suggests that, ‘whenever there is a sense of something new, there is also the uncanny sense that this is foreshadowed and shaped by those who have passed that way before’. Therefore the acknowledgement of such ghostly presences and the unearthing of their stories have significant consequences for the future direction of research and writing in historical geography.

However, in the quest to track the traces of lives once lived and to create new narratives of the living, the dying and the dead, the ethical questions raised by such an enterprise refuse to be ignored. Returning to the beginning of this report and to Joyce Vincent, it is appropriate to end by considering the ethical dimensions to tracking traces in the reformulation of a life and its death. In hearing about the discovery of Vincent’s remains, film-maker Carol Morley embarked upon a project of recovering her life, from interviewing friends to mapping her movements around the city, eventually creating an imaginative documentary entitled *Dreams of a Life* (2011). Morley (2011: n.p.) stresses that this project stemmed from a deep-rooted desire to tell her story: ‘I couldn’t let her go ... I didn’t want her to be forgotten ... I decided I must make a film about her’ (emphasis added). This was despite no member of Vincent’s family or friends wishing to share their stories and no indication from Joyce that she ever wanted her life, death or afterlife to be repackaged and (re)told.¹⁵ This tension is further articulated, albeit in a different context, through Barnes and Abrahamsson’s (2015) paper where, in the final moments of the piece, they reveal that they have deliberately gone against the above quoted suicidal wishes of Karl Haushofer by forcing his life to be remembered in ways he sought it not to

be. The authors are clear about their reasons for negating Kant's pleas for the catharsis produced from knowing about the difficult moral struggles and tragic tangled complicity faced in the lives revealed, but also because their inquiry can 'deepen, enrich and complicate understanding of the historical experience, without making motives of the complicity appear either simply lurid or base' (Barnes and Abrahamsson, 2015: 73). Pertinent questions are hence raised throughout this work over when, as Cameron (2001) has asked, we should leave the dead alone.

Lorimer and Parr (2014: 544) contend that '[w]e should not assume all geographies and every journey can be storied or, for that matter, should be'. While this remark cautions about *ways* in which lives and their deaths are conveyed, historical geographers are beginning to use biographical methods to push at the boundaries of whose lives, perhaps for some, ought not to be told at all. Hall et al. (2014) powerfully demonstrate this point through their exhaustive work on the legacies of slave-ownership in Britain. Using contextual biographies and 'atomised life stories' of slave owners and their families, the authors enable the 'process of (re)writing slave-ownership back into British history' (Hall et al., 2014: 27). Spatial relations in this study are taken very seriously, with thought constantly given to the intimacies of scale and place in the re-inscribing of slave-ownership into modern British history. Hall et al. (2014: 5) acknowledge the difficulties present in attempting to understand the worlds of slave-owners, stressing:

In focussing on slave-owners, we are inevitably privileging their histories over the histories of the enslaved. We have committed resources to retrieving the histories of the slave-owners – resources that might in theory have been deployed in reconstructing the fragments that remain of the lives of enslaved people, lives often truly lost to history.

In their defence, the authors contend that these slave-owner life stories, and their process

of recovery, matter greatly to our understanding of terrible histories often masked behind contemporary peaceful surfaces. Inquiries into studies of racial violence and genocide (see Mbembe, 2008; Wright, 2011, for discussions about femicide) are, in similar ways to Hall et al. (2014), seeking means to follow traces into the darkest of human histories. Biographical approaches in such work are also being used to permeate the lives of perpetrators, as shown by the work of Barnes and Abrahamsson (2014), and to get inside the hearts, minds and societies of individuals responsible for committing almost unspeakable acts of brutality and violence (see Fulbrook, 2013).¹⁶ As this report has demonstrated, historical geographers are using a range of inventive biographical approaches to uncover lives and their geographies that speak to wider histories of neglect, abuse, enslavement, misunderstanding and abandonment. Questions over whose life matters and therefore whose life should be written about and remembered are more pertinent than ever before in the sub-field. However, as the ghostly presence of past lives continues to whisper through the traces that remain, historical geography appears exceptionally well placed to listen intently, leaving no life unnoticed, no death undisturbed and no door unopened.

Acknowledgements

Thanks to Chris Philo for insightful comments on earlier drafts of this report and for his continued support. Thanks also to Jake Hodder for sharing his reflections on life-writing and biography with me at the Practising Historical Geography Conference 2015, and for sending on such helpful resources. Thanks are also extended to Ian Shaw and David Featherstone for their reading suggestions. I am most grateful to all.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes

1. This passage of creative biographical writing is constructed through a range of media sources discussing the discovery of Joyce Vincent's body and the inquest into her death (*Herald Scotland*, 2011; Morley, 2011; Dawar, 2006; Starkey, 2006).
2. Although not specifically on this topic, the work discussing the geographies of missing people explores this tension between 'being missed' and 'going missing' (Parr et al., 2015; Parr and Stevenson, 2014).
3. This is especially revealing in the literature discussing crime-scene investigations (see McDermid, 2015) and will be further explored in the final report in this series.
4. Death has recently been discussed in-depth in relation to population geography with innovative attention being given to ideas of 'truncated life' (Tyner, 2016).
5. Importantly, this report will not stick to a constrained definition of biography but will instead explore the terrains of biography and life-writing where lives (normally one individual but not necessarily so) are placed as central to the analysis of the work.
6. Although not discussed in this report, an important and longstanding engagement with biography in geography can be seen through *Geographers Biobibliographical Studies*, an annual serial produced on behalf of the International Geographical Union.
7. Different terminologies have been used by geographers to describe their biographical work, such as geo-biography (Lorimer, 2015), geographical biography (McGeachan, 2014) and biogeographies (Patchett et al., 2011). All of these approaches have certain nuances, but terminologies can be slippery, and therefore this report uses the terms stated by the authors in their work.
8. This notion of 'honest' formations will be challenged and discussed in later sections of this paper relating to writing non-fiction.
9. This was also mentioned as a key issue during the plenary discussions at the ICHG 2015. Concerns were specifically raised regarding the coverage given to premodern and early modern periods in publishing.
10. This paper was the inspiration for the focus of this report. A version of this paper was presented at the RGS-IBG in 2014 and consequently moved me to reconsider the core themes of lives and afterlives in historical geography.
11. A significant area of study that crosses into work on the geographies of science and its relationship to biography can be seen in the increased attention given to writing the history of the discipline. While not covered in this report due to a lack of space, a number of historical geographers have been writing and critically reflecting upon the lives of geographers (see Keighren, 2007; Maddrell, 2009; for a more in-depth discussion of this area see Withers, 2007; Naylor, 2008: 267–9; Baigent, 2004). Keighren (forthcoming) provides detailed reflections on progress in biographical writing by historians of geography and geographical knowledge.
12. See also the forthcoming special issue on 'Reparative Histories: Radical Narratives of "Race" and Resistance' in *Race & Class*, edited by Bergin and Rupprecht.
13. It is, of course, noted that individuals do not need to be dead to gain biographical attention, but as Lee (2005: 10) notes, 'what we do with dead bodies is different from what we do with live ones', and due to the framework of this piece most of the attention focuses upon geographical portraits of those no longer living.
14. This quote is used in the preface to Smith's novel *How To Be Both* (2014), which provocatively challenges the conventions of storytelling and biographical writing.
15. There is a certain irony here as I too am retelling the story of Vincent's death without her permission or anyone else's. I hope I have done so with care.
16. Interestingly, Roseman (2013: 457) questions how far the biographical approach can go in penetrating the life-world of the perpetrator for, '[a]s long as the deeds continue morally to appal us, we will continue to set limits on the historian's ability to get inside his or her subject's head'.

References

- Alexander D (2016) A tale and its tale. *Emotion, Space and Society* 19: 76–80.
- Anderson C (2012) *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Anderson J (2015) *Understanding Cultural Geography: Places and Traces, 2nd edn.* Oxon: Routledge.
- Atkinson J (2010) *Victorian Biography Reconsidered: A Study of Nineteenth-Century 'Hidden' Lives.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Baigent E (2004) The geography of biography, the biography of geography: Rewriting the *Dictionary of National Biography*. *Journal of Historical Geography* 30: 531–551.
- Baigent E (2013) Review: *Subaltern Lives: Biographies of Colonialism in the Indian Ocean World, 1790–1920*. *Journal of Historical Geography* 40: 111–112.
- Baigent E (2014) Travelling bodies, texts and reputations: The gendered life and afterlife of Kate Marsden and her mission to Siberian lepers in the 1890s. *Studies in Travel Writing* 18(1): 34–56.
- Barbour L (2016) Rodenbach, grandfather and me: Echoes and premonitions of the First World War. *Emotion, Space and Society* 19: 94–102.
- Barnes TJ and Abrahamsson C (2015) Tangled complicities and moral struggles: The Haushofers, father and son, and the spaces of Nazi geopolitics. *Journal of Historical Geography* 47: 64–73.
- Berghahn VR and Lässig S (eds) (2008) *Biography Between Structure and Agency: Central European Lives in International Historiography.* Oxford: Berghahn Books.
- Bondi L (2014) Feeling insecure: A personal account in a psychoanalytic voice. *Social & Cultural Geography* 15(3): 332–350.
- Bressey C (2013a) *Empire, Race and the Politics of Anti-Caste.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Bressey C (2013b) Geographies of belonging: White women and black history. *Women's History Review* 22(4): 541–558.
- Brooks C (2015) The apostle of internationalism: Stephen Duggan and the geopolitics of international education. *Political Geography* 49: 64–73.
- Cameron E (2012) New geographies of story and storytelling. *Progress in Human Geography* 36: 573–592.
- Cameron L (2001) Oral history in the Freud archives: Incidents, ethics and relations. *Historical Geography* 29: 38–44.
- Daniels S (1999) *Humphry Repton: Landscape Gardening and the Geography of Georgian England.* New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Daniels S and Lorimer H (2012) Until the end of days: Narrating landscape and environment. *Cultural Geographies* 19(1): 3–9.
- Daniels S and Nash C (2004) Lifepaths: Geography and biography. *Journal of Historical Geography* 30: 449–458.
- Dawar A (2006) Body of woman left to rot in her flat for two years. *Telegraph*. Available at: <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/1515664/Body-of-woman-left-to-rot-in-her-flat-for-two-years.html> (accessed 16 April 2016).
- De Leeuw S (2012) Alice through the looking glass: Emotion, personal connection, and reading colonial archives along the grain. *Journal of Historical Geography* 38: 273–281.
- Driver F and Martins L (2002) John Septimus Roe and the art of navigation, c. 1815–1830. *History Workshop Journal* 54(1): 144–161.
- Evans SL (2015) 'Not even for fifty new insects': Including women in the history of expeditionary work. Unpublished paper presented at the International Conference of Historical Geographers, Royal Geographical Society (with IBG), London, 5–10 July.
- Featherstone D (2015) Maritime labour and subaltern geographies of internationalism: Black internationalist seafarers' organising in the interwar period. *Political Geography* 49: 7–16.
- Fewell J (2016) Tattered scripts: Stories about the transmission of trauma across generations. *Emotion, Space and Society* 19: 81–86.
- Forsyth I (2014) The practice and poetics of fieldwork: Hugh Cott and the study of camouflage. *Journal of Historical Geography* 43(1): 128–137.
- Fulbrook M (2012) *A Small Town near Auschwitz: Ordinary Nazis and the Holocaust.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Guterl MP (2013) Comment: The futures of transnational history. *American Historical Review* (2013): 130–139.
- Hall C, Draper N, McClelland K, Donington K and Lang R (2014) *Legacies of British Slave-Ownership: Colonial Slavery and the Formation of Victorian Britain.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Hasty W (2011) Piracy and the production of knowledge in the travels of William Dampier, c.1679–1688. *Journal of Historical Geography* 37(1): 40–54.
- Hasty W (2012) 'Decried and Abominated in Every Place': *Space, power and piracy, c.1680–1730.* Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, UK.

- Herald Scotland (2011) A life lived alone in a city of millions. Available at: http://www.heraldsotland.com/arts_ents/13043556.A_life_lived_alone_in_a_city_of_millions/ (accessed 18 April 2016).
- Hodder J, Legg S and Heffernan M (2015) Introduction: Historical geographies of internationalism, 1900–1950. *Political Geography* 49: 1–6.
- Jones R (2004) What time is human geography? *Progress in Human Geography* 28(3): 287–304.
- Kearns G (1997) The imperial subject: Geography and travel in the work of Mary Kingsley and Halford Mackinder. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 22(4): 450–472.
- Keighren IM (2007) Breakfasting with William Morris Davis: Everyday episodes in the history of geography. In: Gagen EA, Lorimer H and Vasudevan A (eds) *Practising the Archive: Reflections on Methods and Practice in Historical Geography* (Historical Geography Research Series no. 40). London: Royal Geographical Society, pp. 47–55.
- Keighren IM (forthcoming) History and philosophy of geography I: Wright's geosophies. *Progress in Human Geography*.
- Lambert D (2013) *Mastering the Niger: James MacQueen's African Geography & the Struggle over Atlantic Slavery*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Lambert D (2014) Reflections on the concept of imperial biographies: The British case. *Geschichte und Gesellschaft* 40: 22–41.
- Lambert D and Lester A (2006) *Colonial Lives Across the British Empire: Imperial Career in the Long Nineteenth Century*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Lee H (2005) *Body Parts: Essays in Life-Writing*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Legg S (2008) Ambivalent improvements: Biography, biopolitics, and colonial Delhi. *Environment and Planning A* 40: 37–56.
- Legg S (2010) An intimate and imperial feminism: Meliscent Shephard and the regulation of prostitution in colonial India. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 28: 68–94.
- Lester A (2011) Personifying colonial governance: George Arthur and the transition from humanitarian to development discourse. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 102: 1468–1488.
- Lilley KD (2011) Geography's medieval history: A neglected enterprise? *Dialogues in Human Geography* 1(2): 147–162.
- Livingstone DN (2003) *Putting Science in Its Place: Geographies of Scientific Knowledge*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Livingstone DN (2014) *Dealing with Darwin: Place, Politics and Rhetoric in Religious Engagements with Evolution*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Livingstone DN (2016) Debating Darwin at the Cape. *Journal of Historical Geography* 52: 1–15.
- Lorimer H (2009) Caught in the nick of time: Archives and fieldwork. In: DeLyser D, Aitken S, Crang MA, Herbert S and McDowell L (eds) *The SAGE Handbook of Qualitative Research in Human Geography*. London: SAGE, pp. 248–273.
- Lorimer H (2013) Scaring crows. *Geographical Review* 103(2): 177–189.
- Lorimer H (2014) Homeland. *Cultural Geographies* 21(4): 583–604.
- Lorimer H (2015) Standards of beauty: Considering the lives of W.A. Poucher. *GeoHumanities* 1(1): 51–79.
- Lorimer H and Parr H (2014) Excursions – telling stories and journeys. *Cultural Geographies* 21(4): 543–547.
- McDermid V (2015) *Forensics: What Bugs, Burns, Prints, DNA and More Tell Us About Crime*. New York: Grove.
- McDonagh B (2013) Fragments from a medieval archive: The life and death of Sir Robert Constable. *Journal of Historical Geography* 42: 50–61.
- MacDonald F (2014) The ruins of Erskine Beveridge. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 39: 477–489.
- McGeachan C (2014) 'The world is full of big bad wolves': Investigating the experimental therapeutic spaces of R. D. Laing and Aaron Esterson. *History of Psychiatry* 25(3): 283–298.
- McGeachan C, Forsyth I and Hasty W (2012) Certain subjects? Working with biography and life-writing in historical geography. *Historical Geography* 40: 169–185.
- Mackenzie FD (2007) The story(ing) of Jessie of Balrarnald: Research encounters of a surprising kind. *Cultural Geographies* 14: 445–452.
- Maddrell A (2009) *Complex Locations: Women's Geographical Work in the UK 1850–1970*. Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Marcus L (1994) *Auto/biographical Discourses: Theory, Criticism, Practice*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Matless D (2008) A geography of ghosts: The spectral landscapes of Mary Butts. *Cultural Geographies* 15(3): 335–358.

- Mayhew RJ (2014) *Malthus: The Life and Legacies of an Untimely Prophet*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Mbembe A (2008) Necropolitics. In: Morton S and Bygrave S (eds) *Foucault in an Age of Terror*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 52–82.
- Moore FPL (2010) Tales from the archive: Ethical and methodological issues in historical geography research. *Area* 42(3): 262–270.
- Morley C (2011) Joyce Carol Vincent: How could this young woman lie dead and undiscovered for almost three years? *The Guardian*. Available at: <http://www.theguardian.com/film/2011/oct/09/joyce-vincent-death-mystery-documentary> (accessed 16 April 2016).
- Morley C (2011) *Dreams of a Life*. UK: Dogwoof.
- Naylor S (2005) Introduction: Historical geographies of science – places, contexts, cartographies. *The British Journal for the History of Science* 38: 1–12.
- Naylor S (2008) Historical geography: Geographies and historiographies. *Progress in Human Geography* 32(2): 265–274.
- Naylor S (2010) *Regionalizing Science: Placing Knowledges in Victorian England*. London: Pickering & Chatto.
- Naylor S and Ryan J (eds) (2009) *New Spaces of Discovery: Geographies of Exploration in the Twentieth Century*. London: I.B. Tauris.
- Nicholl C (2011) *Traces Remain: Essays and Explorations*. London: Allen Lane.
- Norcup J (2015a) *Awkward geographies? An historical and cultural geography of the journal Contemporary Issues in Geography and Education (CIGE) (1983–1991)*. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Glasgow, UK.
- Norcup J (2015b) Geography education, grey literature and the geographical canon. *Journal of Historical Geography* 49: 61–74.
- Offen K (2013) Historical geography III: Climate matters. *Progress in Human Geography* 38(3): 476–489.
- Ogborn M (2005) Editorial: Atlantic geographies. *Social & Cultural Geography* 6(3): 379–385.
- Ogborn M (2008) *Global Lives: Britain and the World, 1550–1800*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Parr H and Stevenson O (2014) Sophie’s story: Writing missing journeys. *Cultural Geographies* 21(4): 565–582.
- Parr H, Stevenson O, Fyfe N and Woolnough P (2015) Living absence: The strange geographies of missing people. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 33(2): 191–208.
- Patchett M, Foster K and Lorimer H (2011) The ‘biogeographies’ of a hollowed-eyed harrier. In: Alberti S (ed.) *The Afterlives of Animals: A Museum Menagerie*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.
- Powell RC (2007) Geographies of science: Histories, localities, practices, futures. *Progress in Human Geography* 31: 309–329.
- Roseman M (2013) The lives of others – amid the deaths of others: Biographical approaches to Nazi perpetrators. *Journal of Genocide Research* 15(4): 443–461.
- Scarpato S (2005) *Elusive Subjects: Biography as Gendered Metafiction*. Leicester: Troubador Publishing.
- Smith A (2014) *How To Be Both*. London: Hamish Hamilton.
- Smith M, Davidson J, Cameron L and Bondi L (eds) (2009) *Emotion, Place and Culture*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Starkey J (2006) Woman dead in flat 3 yrs. *The Sun*. Available at: <http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/news/44973/Woman-dead-in-flat-3-yrs.html>. (accessed 14 February 2016).
- Thomas N (2004) Exploring the boundaries of biography: The family and friendship networks of Lady Curzon, Vicereine of India 1898–1905. *Journal of Historical Geography* 30: 496–519.
- Tyner JA (2016) Population geography III: Precarity, dead peasants, and truncated life. *Progress in Human Geography* 40(2): 275–289.
- Weinberg S (1992) *Telling the Untold Story: How Investigative Reporters Are Changing The Craft of Biography*. Columbia: University of Missouri Press.
- White T (2004) Theodore and Brina: An exploration of the myths and secrets of family life, 1851–1998. *Journal of Historical Geography* 30: 520–530.
- Withers C (2002) The geography of scientific knowledge. In: Rupke NA (ed.) *Göttingen and the Development of the Natural Sciences*. Göttingen: Wallstein Verlag, pp. 9–18.
- Withers CWJ (2007) History and philosophy of geography 2004–2005: Biographies, practices, sites. *Progress in Human Geography* 31(1): 67–76.
- Wright MW (2011) Necropolitics, narcopolitics, and femicide: Gendered violence on the Mexico-US border. *Signs* 36(3): 707–731.