

## Contribution Details

EERA Network: 19. Ethnography

Alternative EERA Network: 28. Sociologies of Education

### Electra. A Life Story Told in a Picture.


# 1595

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### Proposal Information

The Spanish Civil War bursts into Electra's life at the age of four, filling her life with pain and fear along with her family and so many other families who experienced abandonment and the flight from their homes and their land towards an uncertain future. We are situated in Alameda, a town in Malaga, Spain. Alameda is a land of peasants, olive trees and esparto grass, which provide a livelihood for its inhabitants. Electra is forced to be called by a safer name when a new government regime comes to power. Her name is struck off a civil register in an attempt to erase her republican history. This event is the trigger for Electra's desire to tell her autobiography. From this moment on, Electra's daughter begins an investigation as a researcher into the formation of her mother's identity through the events she recalls and narrates. How do her circumstances influence the construction of her basic identity? What can we learn about her from her own account? Is the review and reflection of her life relevant to herself? How does the investigation transform the researcher's life? But we are not only talking about the spoken or written account. The reflection that appears in the photographs found on the events experienced provides us with a social, political, demographic, geographical, historical, ethnographic... context, which at the same time completes a story, a narrative in which we can immerse ourselves in a time and events. A photograph found, when Electra is now ninety-two years old, fills her world with memories that uncover a silenced epiphany, the death of her younger sister as a result of famine and disease in wartime.

Perhaps we cannot change our past, but we can reinterpret it. The truth is rarely visible in a war, we only know the versions of some parts of it; but the polyphony of voices that images can provide is invaluable. They are not dynamic, linear stories in time; they are static stories of moments suspended in events that are recorded. These images are guarded, passed on, inherited, contrasted, recovered... they have their own history in themselves. The images that fill Electra's childhood life are very few, but relevant. One of them, raising her fist to the voice of "Cheers comrades", indicated to her by the photographer, tells the key moment for which many other people died. Studying the characters and their relationships gives us an insight into their own history.

The photograph is responsible for reminding us of the exact size of the body he had, of that look that without the image one would end up forgetting. That is why families choose photographs, when they exist, as a place to continue talking to the dead, because the sharpness of the portrait is perceived as the place where conversations with the absent are precisely sharper, more transparent, a direct path towards what is no longer there (Moreno, 2018, in Moreno, 2021: 3).

Through Electra's accounts of her entire history during the war and post-war periods, the readers "see" these narratives through images that are generated in their minds. These images are formed as a result of events experienced by themselves or others, but which have left their mark, resonate and create the imprint of an image that is stored in our archive.

### Methodology or Methods/ Research Instruments or Sources Used

Life histories as a qualitative method take on a predominant role from a research point of view, as they open up numerous possibilities of interpretation. We do not approach life histories from a methodological point of view, but rather from a humanistic point of view. The methodology itself appears to be the result of the experiences gained in the course of the research. In this way, an autoethnography is proposed, where the researcher narrates her immersion in the process.

It is about narrating a methodology, rather than applying methodology to a narrative. How do we arrive at the research, how do we analyse and what do we conclude? What do we value in the research? Kushner (2022), in this regard talks about the importance of not working with a methodology, but learning to think methodologically. He says that in the development of the methodology of a thesis, uncertainties are everywhere. And, therefore, while doing the research, one becomes aware of the methodological steps that are being carried out, of the decisions about choices or rejections, changes of route, deepening... etc. In this way, the aim is to theorise the experience carried out, a "practical theory". In order to theorise the experience, a language is needed, a construction of biographical texts that can later be analysed from different points of view, in order to understand the depth of the story that is being told. Denzin (1989: 7, in Denzin, 2017: 82) expresses thus,

My object is [...] to understand how biographical texts are written and read. I deal with the forms and types of writing activity that lead to the production and analysis of biographical texts. My focus is on the construction or making of biography.

Methodologies must be supportive, but not always as a set path; we must find ways in which both researchers and methodologies evolve, admit new possibilities. But we researchers have a problematic relationship, not with institutions, but "with our apparent inability to define them in such a way that they signify support and freedom, rather than tension and constraint [...] we would have to face dilemmas that are more comfortable for us to set aside..." (Kushner, 2002: 44). Is it us who try to run away from uncomfortable responsibilities and let ourselves be led by the institutions that, for their part, provide us with the necessary scenarios already constructed to facilitate the achievement of their intentionality?

### Conclusions, Expected Outcomes or Findings

From the research on Electra's life story, I write a doctoral thesis on an autoethnography, recounting the lived experience during the research. We come to the following conclusions:

- The value of establishing a view from women in the Spanish Civil War, their work and experiences and how surviving identities are constructed over pain and fear. Subsequently, how gender identities were created in the post-war period, imposed on women in order to

undervalue them and make them submissive to men and the system, thus losing their freedom as human beings.

- The importance of intergenerational dialogue, seen as the genetic memory that is transmitted from each generation to the next, and where in each of them changes are produced in response to what has been adopted or imposed.
- Autoethnography, as a path towards re-visioning, re-reflection and re-knowledge of one's own identity. "To affirm life-research is to recognise that while researching, one lives and transforms oneself" (Gaggini, 2023: 20).
- The value that can be given to serendipity in research. Often that which is not known, that which is missing, the lost memory, is found by causality. It is a discovery made by serendipity as Robert K. Merton liked to say. A good researcher smells that a piece of the puzzle is missing. He/she senses that in order to explain reality there is something that does not fit.
- Openness to images as narratives of life. Sometimes photographs are evidence of the effort to hide a problematic or uncomfortable memory and sometimes they are the justification for showing a memory that gives meaning to the family or to some event on the part of a family member. They are objects from which interpretations are narrated

## References

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## Session Details

### 19 SES 07 A: Paper Session

*Time:* Wednesday, 23/Aug/2023: 3:30pm - 5:00pm

*Session Chair:* Wesley Shumar

*Location:* Hetherington, 129 [Floor 1]

Capacity: 40 persons

Paper Session