Collective Biography

An Introduction

Marnina Gonick and Susanne Gannon

In June 2011, seven feminist academics gathered to spend a week working together on a collective biography workshop in a small resort town, called Hawk's Nest, in New South Wales, Australia. Some of us were senior faculty with prior experience with the methodology of collective biography, others were freshly minted or about to be minted PhDs who were totally new to the research methodology. Some of us knew each other from other contexts, and others were meeting for the first time. We were from five different university institutions, working in a range of fields in schools of Education.

We came together through an International Research Linkage grant from The Association for Canadian Studies in Australia and New Zealand (ACSANZ) awarded to Marnina Gonick, Susanne Gannon, and Jo Lampert. We were interested in exploring questions of girlhood, sexuality and schooling through a Deleuzian framework using collective biography. This is a research methodology developed by Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon (2006) and inspired by the collective memory-work of the feminist sociologist Frigga Haug and her colleagues (1987) in Germany. The method draws on participants' stories of their early memories to analyse processes of gendered subjectification that occur through girlhood and youth. While Haug and her colleagues acknowledged that Foucault's work on the history of sexuality had been amongst the theoretical works they consulted, they were adamant that their project would not be driven by theory. Rather, they agreed that "theoretical questions should only be discussed in the context of the stories themselves if and when they formed a new social relation" (53). This is a point of departure from that method of collective memory-work to more recent iterations of collective biography (Davies and Gannon 2006, 2009). Theoretical resources from poststructural philosophy have

been central to how the method has been developed. Theory is put to work, using embodied memories to work theory into everyday lives, and to work through our everyday lives with theoretical concepts that help us to think differently about how we come into being as gendered, sexualised, racialized, and classed subjects. This differentiates collective biography from more conventional narrative or life history methods that are interested in tracing individual lives and meanings. Rather than being interested in truths of particular individual lives, in collective biography we are interested in examining the ways in which individuals are made social, how we are discursively, affectively, materially constituted in particular moments that are inherently unstable, holding within them slippages, gaps and opportunities for shifting those very discourses and desires that might otherwise appear to hold us captive.

Collective biography is an expressly feminist methodology that values collaboration in the context of academic work that can often be very individualized and isolating. In contrast, in living and working together for a week we made time for walks along the beach and in the early mornings we looked for dolphins jumping through the water. We concocted delicious meals and engaged in lively conversation. We participated in an art-making session, which challenged the rest of the participants to think and work in unaccustomed ways. Even so, despite its collaborative intent, collective biography is not free from the complexities of academic and intellectual life, particularly in the writing phase that can extend well beyond the pleasures of the initial workshop (Davies and Gannon 2006).

As a highly elastic methodology, collective biography is reinvented in each new context, as each new group of researchers/writers works together in particular space(s) and time(s) (Davies and Gannon 2006; Gonick et al. 2011). Here we outline the particular way the Hawk's Nest workshop was organized. This is not the definitive way of doing collective biography, but rather it is what emerged during and after the seven of us shared a holiday house by the ocean.

Prior to our meeting a number of research articles that used a Deleuzian analysis to investigate girlhood and that we found interesting and provocative were distributed to participants to read. The articles were divided thematically and we began each day of the workshop by discussing an article, examining its key points and what arose for us through our readings. We then developed prompts for memories that emerged from the reading. For example, one of our initial prompts inspired by Ringrose's (2011) paper was "Remember a time when you were part of an affective assemblage outside

school that impacted inside school, and that was negative or ‘destroying’ or positive, ‘life-affirming.’” Each participant then told a story drawn from her own girlhood memories. Sometimes one person’s stories elicited someone else’s long-forgotten memory, at other times participants arrived with stories already in mind. As each storyteller shared her memory, the other participants listened intently with what Davies and Gannon (2009) have called a “strategy of attention” (21). The listeners asked questions about things they found intriguing or confusing or wanted more details about. They encouraged the storyteller to provide more of the sensory or visceral or affective or material detail of the moment, so that they could better visualize or recognize it in its resonance and/or dissonance with their own embodied experiences.

After everyone had told at least one story, we spent some time in a quiet space writing up one of our memories. We attempted to write in as much embodied detail as possible and struggled with removing clichés and abstractions and other habituated or over-coded ways of understanding events from the past, and tried to keep the language fresh, precise, and focused. Rather than a lengthy narrative or an explanation of the significance or consequences of something that had happened, we tried to write the stories with a focus on a particular moment within that happening—a vignette of experience that might be contained within a block of time that might be as short as a look or a conversation, or as long as a vacation.

When the stories were written, we returned to the table to read them aloud to the group. Once again, group members listened closely and attentively, providing feedback and further questions about details and gaps, and offering language suggestions. Some stories were revised either during the workshop or after we had returned home. We arranged to have all the final versions of the memory stories circulated to group members.

Before departing from Hawk’s Nest we brainstormed ideas for papers and decided on the themes of the four articles re-united here in this Special Issue of *Girlhood Studies*. Each participant indicated her initial interest in contributing to one or more of the papers and we negotiated lead authors and time-lines for the long-distance writing process. Over time, some configurations of authors shifted from those originally envisaged as various events and shifting interests and commitments had an impact on the capacity of each of us to commit to the further reading, writing and theorizing around the stories.

The result of our collective biography workshop at Hawks Nest is this set of four essays, interlinked by their origins, but also distinct from one

another in their representation of the workshop processes and the particular arguments and use of Deleuzian philosophy to think through girlhood.

The first article, “A Quick Sideways Look and Wild Grin’: Joyful Assemblages in Moments of Girlhood” is co-authored by Susanne Gannon, Kristina Gottschall and Catherine Camden Pratt. It introduces Deleuzian approaches to concept formation and maps potentially joyful spaces where affect and desire move through the social and material spaces of the everyday in stories of girlhood play outdoors.

The second article, “‘The Cyndi Lauper Affect’: Bodies, Girlhood and Popular Culture” is co-authored by Kristina Gottschall, Susanne Gannon, Jo Lampert and Kelli McGraw. This article moves from the familiar focus on media effects and girlhood to look at media affects, as it traces the wild imaginings and flows of desire that are provoked through girls’ interactions with media images and popular culture.

The third article, “Ruptures in the Heterosexual Matrix through Teenage Flows and Multiplicities,” is co-authored by Bronwyn Davies, Marnina Gonick, Kristina Gottschall and Jo Lampert. It contrasts approaches to normative heterosexuality and desire through Butler and Deleuze as it tracks one story through a series of iterations including those produced through an art-making process.

The final article, “Entanglements: Art-making, Becoming Girl, and Collective Biography,” authored by Marnina Gonick, turns directly to the art-making that concluded the Hawks Nest workshop. The article examines two stories and associated artworks to consider how a Deleuzian theoretical framework helps us to understand the art-making processes we took up that enabled further insights into girlhood becomings.

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Workshop Leaders and Co-Editors of this Special Issue

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Marnina Gonick is Canada Research Chair in Gender at Mount St Vincent University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada. She is the author of *Between Femininities: Identity, Ambivalence and the Education of Girls* (2003) and co-author, with Anita Harris and Sinikka Aapola, of *Young Femininity: Girlhood, Power and Social Change* (2004). Her articles have appeared in journals such as *Feminist Media Studies*, *Gender and Education*, and *Journal of Curriculum Theorizing*.

Workshop Participants

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