

Exploring Collective Biography as a Feminist Method

Dayna Prest



BOOK REVIEW

Marnina Gonick and Susanne Gannon (eds). 2015. *Becoming Girl: Collective Biography and the Production of Girlhood* Toronto: Women's Press.



Becoming Girl: Collective Biography and the Production of Girlhood, edited by Marnina Gonick and Susanne Gannon, is an exciting contribution to conversations in girl studies, memory studies, and feminist methodologies. Drawing on post structuralist theories of Deleuze (1998) and Butler (1990, 2009), the chapters of this book explore the production of girlhood through such topics as food, sexuality, popular culture, images, literacy, and trauma. The book is divided into two sections. Drawing on Davies and Gannon (2006), the first section introduces collective biography as a flexible and innovative feminist methodology and engages in discussions about the way we understand memory/remembering and the relationship between the past, present, and future. The chapters in this section ask us to consider collective biography as a methodology that can be endlessly modified and can include the incorporation of arts-based practices and Boalian theatre to explore memories and the effects/affects of memory both in the past and the present. These chapters usefully set up a discussion around the ways in which collective biography may be used to explore embodied experiences; this is then elaborated upon in the second section of the book.

The second section is organized around thematic explorations of the girlhood memories of the authors who worked collaboratively in two separate workshops that took place in Canada and Australia. Although in this review I focus on chapters written by sole authors, most of the chapters are co-written thus demonstrating the collective focus of this methodology. This section also contains two chapters, written separately by Marnina Gonick and Michele Byers respectively that illustrate the use of collective biography in classroom contexts. While each of the chapters in this collection outlines something about the specific process of collective biography used in the context of the two workshops, Gonick's and Byers's chapters outline helpfully



the writing and listening processes of the methodology; participants share stories verbally, listen actively, and question aspects of the story to obtain richer detail so as to explore fully the embodied, affective details of memory. Stories are revised based on the feedback of others, and clichés, explanations, justifications, and rationalizations are eliminated in a practice that Byers calls “careful writing” (211–212). Byers describes her graduate class’s journey of learning about and doing collective biography in a feminist methodologies course. She presents the students’ stories and then analyzes their reflections on each other’s stories around the three key issues of empathy, affect, and memory as well as the underlying notions of resistance and analysis. In incorporating collective biography into her classroom practice, Byers exposed her students to alternative conceptions of what it looks like to do research, of where data might come from, of how they might come to know themselves as scholars and subjects and where they might find possibilities for personal and intellectual growth.

In Gonick’s chapter entitled “The Blank Page: Literacy, Girlhood, and Neoliberalism,” the collective biography stories on becoming literate come out of an exercise in an upper-level undergraduate women’s studies course. In this chapter, Gonick explores the intersections between literacy, neoliberalism, gender, race, and class to demonstrate how classed, raced, and gendered literate subjectivities are connected to the neoliberal social and economic contexts in which we live. In this rendition of the methodology the students were asked to write short reflection pieces on the stories they produced and these are included in Gonick’s analysis of the relations between social difference and literacy. What is revealed is how processes of self-regulation, competitive self-making, and other elements of neoliberal subjectivity are imbricated in learning to write, and how the affective responses to the constraints and possibilities of what it means to write are experienced differently for young women who are positioned differently by race, class, and sexuality. Gonick’s and Byers’s accounts of incorporating collective biography into their classrooms suggest that it offers students a useful opportunity not only to share stories but also to reflect deeply on questions of difference and the ways in which these manifest in the research process.

In drawing on girlhood stories, *Becoming Girl: Collective Biography and the Production of Girlhood* is critically interested in questions of memory. In their introductory chapter Gonick and Gannon outline that it is not so much the truth of the stories that are the focus of the methodology but, rather, the affective quality of them. In both Byers’s previously mentioned chapter and Mythili Rajiva’s chapter, “Trauma and the Girl,” Bergson’s

(1911) theorization of time and memory is used to suggest that memories exist in their own present. They are recalled through a dual process of translation—bringing the past forward in its entirety—and rotation—turning that side of the memory that may prove to be most useful. According to Byers, collective biography asks us to leap into the past with a specific point in mind, but at the same time recognizes that when we leap, it is impossible to predict exactly where we will land or where the leap will lead us. For Rajiva, who invokes theories of traumatic memory, such memories are not actually in the past because they have not yet been completed. Instead, they continue into the present and, according to Griffiths (2005), they exist in two distinct forms—a relentlessly recurring image and the unconscious bodily response to conditions that bear psychic resemblance to the original experience.

“Trauma and the Girl,” written in response to the story called “The Prop” describes a girl witnessing what appeared to be a male teacher’s sexual assault of another girl. Rajiva draws from both Butler (1990, 2009) and Deleuze (1988) to address the pervasive landscape of sexual violence that girls face in their everyday lives and to reflect on the way we define, experience, and bear witness to trauma. For Rajiva, the story illustrates the ‘horizon of violence’ and how the knowledge of the possibility of violence—“it could have been me / it could be me at some point / will I be next?” (151) affects girls’ lived experience. In focusing on ordinary/everyday trauma, Rajiva theorizes the subject position of becoming victim and pushes us to think about the way we understand trauma, the way we write about and discuss trauma, and the importance of including trauma, ordinary/everyday trauma specifically, as a part of girlhood studies. Rajiva raises the question of whether it is dangerous to develop and/or affirm a feminist discourse on the possible victimizations of girls and women. But, as she asks, how might such a discourse help feminists to challenge the post-feminist, neoliberal discourses that shape the way girls experience trauma and are taught to occupy specific subjectivities?

Becoming Girl: Collective Biography and the Production of Girlhood is a response to the affective turn in feminist studies; it seeks to “explore the ontologically shifting space of bodily thresholds, stickiness between and within bodies, and the in-betweenness of processes of being/becoming” (139). As a feminist methodology, collective biography opens up the possibility of exploring those moments and experiences that we struggle to articulate. It can be used to probe feelings or senses that are not easily expressed or discussed and can then take them up as significant data for analysis.

The discussions about collective biography and memory/remembering across the chapters of this book raise questions about the way we understand

and value memory/memories both culturally and as grounds for analysis and the production of knowledge. As such a flexible mode of inquiry, we might ask where else and how else might collective biography be useful to us as feminist scholars interested in bridging embodied experiences/affect/memory with theoretical thinking.

References

- Bergson, Henri. 1911. *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N.M. Paul and Scott Palmer. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Butler, Judith. 1990. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Butler, Judith. 2009. *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* London: Verso.
- Davies, Bronwyn, and Susanne Gannon. 2006. "The Practices of Collective Biography." Pp. 1–15 in *Doing Collective Biography: Investigating the Production of Subjectivity*, ed. Bronwyn Davies and Susanne Gannon. New York: Open University Press.
- Deleuze, Gilles. 1988. *Bergsonism*. New York: Zone Books.
- Griffiths, Jennifer. 2005. "Between Women: Trauma, Witnessing, and the Legacy of Interracial Rape in Robbie McCauley's 'Sally's Rape.'" *Frontiers* 26, no. 3: 1–23.

