

Cyber-Commemoration: Life Writing, Trauma and Memorialisation

Dependent on several collective memories, but masters of none, we are only too aware of the gap between the enormous obligation to remember and the individual's incapacity to do so without the assistance of mechanical reminders, souvenirs and memory sites.¹

In recent years life writing has become one of the most prominent cultural spaces for the articulation of traumatic memories—for instance, narratives of child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, illness, cultural displacement, war/conflict and torture have been published in various life writing forms and media from monographs to websites. Auto/biographical narratives of trauma can be found in a range of non-fictional literatures from poetry and plays to self-help books. Traumatic narratives are a constant presence on television talk shows and current affairs bulletins. Indeed, visual media—particularly film, television and documentary—have played a significant role in representing and defining trauma. Traumatic life narratives are evident in everyday cultural forms, for example, charitable organisations and activists make appeals for their social justice campaigns using photographs and short narratives representing traumatic lives.

As Leigh Gilmore argues, the publication of these traumatic narratives “would be inconceivable were it not for the social and political movements of the past thirty years that have made it possible for a [...] range of people to publish accounts of their life experiences [...] illuminating suppressed histories and creating new emphases”.² Auto/biographical texts have played a significant part in the cultural definition of trauma, for instance, in defining certain cultural events as traumatic and in challenging cultural memory of particular historical events. Auto/biographical writings of trauma are used to legitimate experiences and to mediate the confrontational transmission of personal narratives into public life and socio-cultural history.

In this paper I explore one of the ways in which life narratives of trauma are circulating in contemporary Australian cultural landscapes: through the internet. Using the example of the Bali bombings, I want to consider the role of internet media have played in traumatic remembering and commemoration. Like many (actual)

commemorative sites, these websites foreground life narratives in their representation of the traumatic event: testimonies from first- and second-person witnesses, photographs, poems and letters that assume significance beyond the individual. These narratives function as metonyms for survivors' experiences.

Such websites are memory sites, and the life narratives within them are a "technology" or "system" of memory.³ They may function to confirm "official" or "historical memory"⁴, they may offer "counter" memories, or something different altogether. Whichever way, these life narratives engage in significant cultural memory work, actively shaping perceptions of the past and the present.⁵ One of the features of these sites is their enabling of everyday life narratives, for instance through the contributions of website visitors. In this instance, life narrative provides an opportunity for respondents to negotiate their complex positioning within pluralist cultures.⁶ Visitors to these websites (who might also be referred to as witnesses) play a crucial role in bridging the gaps that exist within history, and in understanding the development of cultural memory. In interacting with these commemorative sites and offering their responses, these witnesses negotiate with history and culture. As John R. Gillis notes, "today everyone is her or his own historian, and this democratization of the past causes some anxiety among professionals".⁷

Another question for this paper is: to what degree might we consider these narratives 'disciplined'? Is "having a say" on these websites (on indeed in commemoration) always empowering? What is it about contemporary culture that causes us to have to authenticate ourselves over and over again? Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub argue that those who witness traumatic narratives are often left "speechless, in search of language" after this witnessing.⁸ Thus the act of writing may be a means of disciplining the witness into a particular type of witnessing that they would not otherwise engage in.

Whichever way we look at this issue, these inventions in life narrative and historical practices raise a number of important issues for scholars today. They raise questions about the social function of commemorative sites and traumatic remembering, and what we are to do with the memories they summon. Also under question is the cultural utility of life narrative and the relationships that exist between these apparently individual traumatic narratives and the communities and institutions

they serve. In this paper I consider the particular dynamics of these narratives and their broader implications for identity construction and for cultural memory.

Dr Kate Douglas

Lecturer, Department of English and Cultural Studies

Flinders University

¹ Gillis, John R. *Commemorations: The Politics of National Identity*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1994.

² Gilmore, Leigh. *The Limits of Autobiography: Trauma and Testimony*. NY: Cornell UP, 2001: 16.

³ “Systems of remembering” can be personal (dreams, family albums, photos, objects, family stories, geneology) or public (documents, historical events, collective rituals) (Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. *Reading Autobiography: A Guide to Interpreting Life Narratives*. Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2001: 20).

⁴ Hamilton, Paula. “The Knife Edge: Debates About Memory and History.” *Memory and History in Twentieth Century Australia*. Eds. Kate Darian-Smith and Paula Hamilton. Oxford: OUP, 1994: 12.

⁵ Cultural memory is the innumerable ways in which so-called individual memory is socially and culturally shaped—for example, by institutions, cultural myths, and traditions.

⁶ Smith, Sidonie and Julia Watson. eds. *Getting a Life—Everyday Uses of Autobiography*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1996: 5.

⁷ Gillis 17.

⁸ Felman, Shoshana, and Dori Laub. *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis, and History*. New York, Routledge, 1992.