Migration, life narratives, memory and subjectivity: Reflections on an archival project on Irish migration

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Abstract

This article considers three theoretical approaches (late-modern, post-modern and feminist) to the apparent obsession with self-narration and memory in the early twenty-first century as they relate to an archival project on Irish migration. This archival project focused on the life narratives of those who witnessed mass out-migration from 1950s Ireland. The article reflects on the extent to which this project and the motivations of both the researchers and contributors reflect these theoretical accounts of the biographical turn.

Keywords: Life narratives; memory; migration; subjectivity; late modernity

Introduction

Life narratives, as Sally Alexander argues, tell us 'something of what has been forgotten in cultural memory' because they 'always describe or rehearse a history full of affective subjectivity' (1994: 234) They give us access to what Foucault calls 'subjectification': this includes evidence for the ways in which human beings 'turn themselves into subjects and actively initiate their own self-formation into meaning-giving selves' (1982: 208; Rabinow, 1984:12). In addition, they provide clues to the nature of remembering and how it 'binds individuals into subjectivities and collectivities' (Kuhn, 1997). However, in order to remember, it is necessary to locate memories within 'meaningful narrative sequences' (Connerton, 1989: 26). The flux of memories is brought into a meaningful framework through narrative, which also makes events 'memorable over time' and produces a 'shareable world' (Kearney, 2002:3; emphasis in original). Narrative is, therefore, central to memory, subjectivity and community. However, only some narratives are permissible or 'tellable' at specific moments in time (Plummer, 2001: 186). Nearly half a century after the decade of highest out-migration from Ireland in the twentieth century, I directed a life narrative project focusing on how those who stayed experienced the mass emigration of family members and friends and constructed themselves as staying subjects. The aim was to capture experiences of social change during and since this decade as these narratives reflect on the public and private ways in which migration was negotiated at the time and since. These narratives, it was hoped, would reveal the meanings that individuals attributed to the

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events of emigration/staying, thus producing 'both deep and dense under-standings of processes and interactions' and enabling us to 'grasp move-ment through time...but also movement through life course...' (Smart, 2007: 42).

Over 400,000 people emigrated from the Republic of Ireland in the 1950s, about two-thirds of these going to Britain. This out-migration was shaped by and reinforced a social structure that preserved the interests of 'the possessing classes' (secure farming, business, bureaucratic and pro-fessional classes) (Lee, 1989). However, both emigrants and those who benefited from their departure contributed to the reproduction of particular class, gender and familial relations in Ireland. Questions of who stayed and who left, therefore, need to be considered both in relation to the structure of Irish society at the time and how this in turn structured private familial dy-namics of migration. The *Breaking the Silence: Staying 'at home' in an emi-grant society project* (based at the Irish Centre for Migration Studies, Uni-versity College Cork) collected 78 audio and 12 textual life narratives be-tween 2000 and 2002. The goal of the project was to document and archive individual experiences of staying in Ireland in the 1950s, while these experi-ences were still available in living memory. The aim was to record the ways in which individuals accounted for the process, experience and decision making regarding staying or emigrating in this decade and the subsequent implications for the lived life. The target population was people who stayed and who were in the 65-74 age bracket at the time of interview for the pro-ject. Some individuals who emigrated and returned were included because of their particular interest in questions of staying-put and in some cases be-cause they identified themselves as the ones who stayed.

An interview guide was used, which began with each interviewee's time and place of birth, and then loosely directed them through their life course, focusing in detail on their negotiations of staying or emigrating and ending with questions relating to their circumstances at the time of the interview. Although this interview guide influenced the narrative, it was primarily used as a checklist to ensure that certain topics were covered, rather than as a rigidly administered interviewing tool. The interviews usually took place in the interviewee's home and digitally recorded interviews lasted for periods of between one and four hours, with longer interviews taking place over two meetings. The enthusiastic response from potential and actual contributors to this project points to the continuing significance of mid-twentieth-century decisions to emigrate or stay-put in structuring subjectivity in Ireland at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Until recently, most social scientists collected material for the specific purposes of meeting their own research aims. In this archival project, the aim was to produce a university library-based oral archive and an internet

based archive.[1] This involved the traditional archiving of the life narratives on CD-Rom with all accompanying documentation and materials for serious academic research purposes and an Internet archive of 50 life-narratives with appropriate copyright permission. While many researchers are now depositing their data in archives, there have been fewer efforts to make the information more accessible to the individuals and communities who have offered their time and thoughts so willingly. The potential audience for an internet-based archive will include family members, relatives, friends as well as unknown web-users. With this in mind, many contributors to the *Breaking the Silence* project requested that edits be made to the published version (the library archive holds the original recordings) and their requests were always followed. For further background to the project and to listen to those life narratives with written permission for publication on the internet see http://migration.ucc.ie/oralarchive/.

My aim in this article is not to discuss the findings from this research but rather to focus on the project of producing an archive of life narratives and what many see as a contemporary obsession with recording, archiving and memorialising. I ask whether this project is symptomatic of our cultural moment and what both my own motivation to set up the project and the enthusiasm of participants to take part can tell us about the memory and life narratives at this time. For example, the project could be seen as in keeping with an intensified interest in the practice of telling, listening to, but perhaps most significantly recording and archiving life narratives as useful modes of historical and experiential reconstruction in a time of rapid change (Perks and Thompson, 1998). As generational memories wane due to the 'speed of technological modernization' (Huyssen 1995, p. 3), the *Breaking the Silence* project could also be seen as creating what Nora (1994) calls *lieux de mémoire* or sites of memory by using digital sound recordings and new technological storage equipment and the Internet to establish an archive of life narratives.

Recent theoretical debates locate this renewal of interest in narrating the self and collective memory within specific theorisations of social change. My aim here is to address three approaches to the theorisation of life narrative and the self that speak to the project of archiving life narratives of migration and staying-put. The first of these is the view of sociologists such as Anthony Giddens (1990) and Ulrich Beck (1992), who regard 'biographical autonomy' as a central characteristic of the late modern self. The second is the argument posited by Andreas Huyssen (1995) and others that fragmented narratives of the self are produced by globalising technologies and postmodern consumer culture. Finally, I examine the assertion that contemporary concerns with memoir and testimony represent a kind of superficial feminised culture.

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[1] The concept of an internet-based archive with an accessible interface was developed by the Director of the Irish Centre for Migration Studies, Piaras MacÉinrí.

Narrating the life and memorialising –symptoms of late modernity

If in modernity 'we are fated to be free' then, in Weberian terms, we become responsible for the consequences of our actions and our life-course has to 'be ordered by ourselves' (Lash and Friedman, 1992:5). Late modernity, identified with Western societies in the latter decades of the twentieth and first decade of the twenty-first century, is characterised by increased individualisation and a fragmentation of traditional categories of belonging. Individualisation, understood as the compulsion to create and manage one's own biography at a time when most aspects of life become options amongst numerous possibilities, is identified by some sociologists as a central feature of contemporary social change (see Bauman 2001 and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The individual is seen as gaining primacy over community with the effect that 'biographical autonomy' becomes the central attribute of the late modern subject. Thus, Giddens argues that the self is a reflexive project in-so-far-as 'we are not what we are but what we make of ourselves', and goes on to claim that because the individual is confronted by rapid social change, personal meaninglessness becomes a problem of late modernity, to which tradition and memory are posited as potential solutions (1991: 5 and 75).

According to this view, the individual is engaged in a constant process of self-monitoring and an integrated sense of self is produced through narrative. As Giddens explains: 'A reflexively ordered narrative of self-identity provides the means of giving coherence to the finite lifespan, given changing external circumstances' (1991: 76 and 215). Furthermore, the perceived decline in the significance of traditional categories of identity such as class, gender, nation and religion and the rules and models that kept these in place, are understood as progressively releasing the individual from external forms of authority which, the argument goes, are being replaced by the authority of the individual who is involved in an ongoing process of self-invention (Adkins, 2002). In the context of late modernity, then, 'the standard biography becomes a chosen biography' (ibid.; see also Beck 1994). As globalisation, consumer culture and individualisation became more characteristic of Irish society in the early 2000s, similar analyses were being applied to 'Celtic Tiger' Irish subjectivities (Coulter, 2003).

The life narratives collected as part of the *Breaking the Silence* project both challenge and support sociological characterisations of chosen biographies and the late-modern self. Some of the narratives of migrants and non-migrants supported what are seen as late-modern reflexively inhabited modes of Irish femininity and masculinity, but legacies of 'traditional' categories of gender and class are also evident in regulating available feminine and masculine selves through these narratives. The 'sedimented habituality' of cultural norms, which are often mediated by particular modes of gender relations, mean that the individual is never a totally free agent but is embedded in cultural history; a product of both continuity and change (Smart,

2007:26). As researcher, I was conscious of a proliferation of repertoires of the self in early twenty-first century Ireland, but I was also conscious that transgenerational family narratives of the life experiences that continued to limit or constrain biography choices. As Smart argues '[t]he repetition of certain stories is a way of "fixing" certain cultural understandings' and despite the speed of social change since the latter decades of the twentieth century, this archive of life narratives is a reminder of the power of memories 'laid down' in childhood and early adulthood and the shadows they cast on both the lived life and narratives of the self (Smart, 2007: 94-5).

Narrating the self and the 'presentism' of postmodern culture

Theorists of postmodernity posit the fragmented, dispersed self as its exemplary subject (Baudrillard, 1994). This is often linked to new modes of remembering. Huyssen argues that in a postmodern world, memory works in fragmentary and chaotic ways, rather than in the consistent mode of memory associated with nation-state modernity. In the Irish context, Roy Foster argues that the memory frame of the national liberation narrative is being replaced by the 'presentism' of memoir, heritage and commemoration culture, practices of remembering which, he argues, involve new modes of memory regulation, including the celebration of only certain forms of memoir and a selective approach to the past (Foster 2001; see also Gray 2002, 2003). The perceived presentism of public culture in early-twenty-first-century Ireland is also associated with the amnesia of televisual instant entertainment and the spread of a consumer culture saturated with images of 'how young Ireland shops, dines and plays' (Coulter 2003: 16 and 13). Indeed, many contributors articulated a wish to contribute to the archive because in their experience younger generations showed disinterest or impatience with the life stories of parents and grandparents. Many also noted that in the drive towards economic development and the dominance of consumer culture, stories of poverty and survival in the past evoked shame and discomfort.

In his discussion of stories and changing modalities of memory, Richard Kearney suggests that in the 'cyber world of the third millennium' we are encountering the end of the story, which is displaced by depthless simulation, chat shows, parody and pastiche (Kearney, 2002). This culture is seen as surrendering the individual to an eternal presentness marked by moments of transience and the instantaneous, so that notions of a unified self and narrativised self-identity have to be revised (Lury, 1998: 106). Kearney argues that a 'vulgarisation' of intimacy and privacy via television chat shows and radio phone-ins means that the human need 'to say something meaningful in a narratively structured way' is being continually undermined (Kearney, 2002:10).

At the same time, however, Kearney is optimistic that new technologies and fragmented modes of remembering, rather than heralding the end of the narrative, will produce new relationships between memory and narrative,

and with them 'alternative possibilities of narration' (2002: 12). George Marcus implies a similar synergy between new technologies and autobiographical genres. He argues that in 'the electronic information age' individual autobiography and personal testimony have gained new significance because they communicate historical experiences in personalised and accessible ways. Collective representations, he argues, are 'most effectively filtered through personal representations' at a time when 'the long-term memory function of orality and story-telling' is being displaced (Marcus, 1992:312). So while postmodern theorists of memory and the self suggest fragmentation, inconsistency and presentism, theorists such as Kearney and Marcus see technologically mediated postmodern societies as holding the potential for new modes of memory, narration and the self to emerge.

By recording life narratives, archiving them for the use of future researchers and publishing those with required consent and copyright on the internet, the *Breaking the Silence* project offered an alternative to media 'sound-bite' culture and a means of overcoming the absence of an audience in the present. The archival project and the technologies of digital recording and archiving enable non-synchronous telling and listening, thus producing otherwise unavailable modes of remembering and telling the self to emerge.

Life narration and the 'post-feminist', feminised public sphere

The proliferation of memoirs and media programmes based on personal testimony is also identified with feminine modes of telling and with forms of feminist politics (Summerfield, 2000:106). For example, Nancy K. Miller draws attention to the 'ambiguous back and forth between lives and stories, between experience and history' that has been central to the development of feminism, but which has also, perhaps in less positive ways, fed into 'the evolution of confessional culture in the nineties more generally' (Miller, 2002: xiv). The project of making the private public has, she suggests, contributed to transformations in women's lives since the 1960s, though it is easily denigrated as part of what has developed into a 'climate of over-the-top self-revelation' at the turn of the century (2002:1). Miller argues that autobiography, memoir, confession and life-telling are all genres of our contemporary culture, but that we need to be able to distinguish between the different sites and practices of these genres and their disparate effects. In an attempt to recover some of the potential for what she calls the 'memoir boom', Miller suggests that this should not be understood 'as a proliferation of self-serving representations of individualistic memory but as an aid or a spur to keep cultural memory alive […]. Indeed, the point of memoir […] is to keep alive the notion that experience can take the form of art and that remembering is a guide to living' (Miller, 2002:14).

The proliferation of phone-in radio shows and genre of the 'miserable Irish childhood' memoirs since the 1990s has, on the one hand, contributed to reproducing an ephemeral confessional culture, while on the other hand, opening up important public questions, as for example, in the case of testi-

monies of child physical and sexual abuse in Catholic Church-run residential schools, other church contexts and in families. This archive, which was developed as an archive for future researchers, includes guided life narratives that address migration and staying in Ireland in the 1950s and the impact on the subsequent lived life. The use of new technologies to reach research and wider public audiences and the fieldnotes and archival materials that accompany the library archive reflect the reflexive turn in research methodology and bring together the researchers' drive to know and understand with personal lives as narrated in a specific time/space.

Conclusion

The scholarly codes that shaped the conception and conduct of this project locate it outside of the contemporary confessional genres. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the telling may have been publicly and privately legitimated by a culture saturated by testimonies and narratives of the self. The enthusiasm on the part of the narrators for recorded self narration may not have been so true of 1950s Ireland, or at least the act of narration would be framed differently. However, the project can be seen as simultaneously reinforcing the 'biographical autonomy' that Giddens identifies with late modernity and producing an accessible mode of memory in response to the amnesiac culture discussed by Huyssen. Perhaps most importantly, the project offers the opportunity to scrutinise the presentation and uses of memory and self-narration in early twenty-first-century Ireland.

A sound archive such as this one, which is based on oral narratives, privileges the spoken word above the written word as its evidence or data. The recording itself is the original source and holds a wealth of detail unobtainable from written sources. For example, the accents of the interviewer and interviewee, hesitancies, stresses on certain words or statements, changes in tone, whispered or raised voices, all give more insight into the subject matter and interview dynamics than written words alone can convey. The oral interview, therefore, includes both substantive data and meta-information on the research process itself. As the interviewer and interviewee collaborate in the production of the life story, the conditions of this production are made more accessible by the opportunity to listen to the interviews themselves. Documenting historical and cultural memory brings with it questions, debates and responsibilities regarding process, standards, accessibility, representation and ethics (Gray 2008). The project tracked and recorded as much as possible about the research process and decisions made along the way and included this information and detailed fieldnotes in the library archive (Boole Library, University College Cork). Future researchers will, therefore, be able to locate their analysis in the context of the life story collection and archiving processes.

An archive of life stories embodies social relations and selective memories in its form, content and context of collection. It is evidence of relationships to the past, present and future at a particular moment in time and of-

fers a point of reference with regard to how narratives of migration and stay-ing-put are framed at different points in time and space and through particu-lar contexts and practices of telling. The act of memorialising in narrating, collection and archiving tells us something about the relationship between the self and the social at the time of compilation as well as about the sub-stantive topic of migration. The *Breaking the Silence* archive can be read as evidence of the impetus towards biographical autonomy in late modernity, but also reveals the deeply relational nature of all biographies and the par-ticularly reflexive biographies of those whose lives are lived in a context of mass migration. The multiplicity of stories contained therein will facilitate constant re-interpretation and retellings and as the social context changes, so also will the questions that are brought to bear on these narratives.

Acknowledgements

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